Chapter 8
Conclusion

To say that complexity is bewildering and incomprehensible is to negate our rational abilities to make sense of the world and act accordingly. As supervisors we can admit our inability to know everything - but also admit that we do know something and then use our knowledge to improve instruction (Glickman, 1981:60).

Overview

This concluding chapter summarises the findings of the inquiry and then returns to the research question posed in Ch. 1, which sought an explanation of the fragility of the supervisory conference. From there, conclusions are drawn about the nature of message risk vis-a-vis supervision. The next section discusses the issue of generalisability, or how far the outcomes are applicable to contexts beyond the one investigated. This leads to a set of recommendations for further research; and culminates in an outline of the application of the research to the domain of supervisor training. The chapter closes with an epilogue.

8.1 Summary of conclusions

Findings from this investigation of TESOL teacher supervision through linguistic, ethnographic and experimental means are synthesised in Exhibit 9.

8.2 Mitigation, fragility and the research question

It is timely now to return to the notion of fragility, introduced in Ch. 1, as a central issue in this inquiry. Mention was made there of the dysphoria, a term borrowed from Goffman (1961) which, it was argued, permeated the speech event of the supervisory conference. The project began with the investigatory intention of uncovering the nature of this dysphoria and understanding how it was operationalised in the text of supervisory talk.

The investigation of redressive face work in supervisory discourse has shown that mitigation is a pervasive feature of supervisors' talk. Investigating mitigation as compromises on clarity
1. Teacher supervision is a face-threatening event requiring that supervisors navigate a delicate path between transactional (instructional) and interpersonal (affective) goals.

2. This navigation tends to reconcile the clash-of-goals through mitigation which, by virtue of its largely spontaneous occurrence below the level of conscious awareness, results in profuse patterns of realisation. These are textualised in configurations of syntactic and semantic mitigation as well as indirectness.

3. While supervisors are sensitive to the clash-of-goals obligated by their role, they are largely unaware of the impact of this on their own language.

4. The fragility or tension characteristic of supervisory conferences derives from the pressure of competing concerns.

5. Excessive mitigation can contribute to the conference’s fragility; while avoidance of face-work can erode the relational quality of participants’ connection. Thus, over-emphasising one goal at the expense of the other is counter-productive to effective practice: a balanced attention to both is needed.

Exhibit 9: Summary of conclusions

has shown how such ‘interactional cruces’ (Candlin, 1987:415) - the cluster of language penumbra adhering to critical incidents - are sites of tension and sources of fragility. Three dimensions of this dysphoria are worthy of mention here: dysphoria at the utterance level of delivery; dysphoria within the parameters of the speech event of the SD; and dysphoria within the institutional context of teacher supervision. Combined, these elements or layers build up a picture of intra-personal and inter-goal conflict (Fig. 9), the outcome of which is a ‘tensioning’ of the interaction (Tracy & Coupland, 1990b:8).

The model posits that, firstly, at the level of the utterance, the dysphoria can be traced to the competing elements of clarity and politeness. The transactional function of language - conveying the message in the clearest, most efficient way - is at odds with the interactional function of language - designed to attend to the face needs of self and other. Thus, mitigation pulls against the tide of clarity and sets up its own counter current which operates by softening the impact of the coming blow, pre-empting potential discord, and repairing any threat to harmony, even at the very moment that the threat is itself posed.

Secondly, at the level of the discourse event, dysphoria is present in the brittle juxtaposition of discoursal power and linguistic restraint. As the pilot study revealed, the institutionally sanctioned role endows supervisors with discoursal power - the right to set the agenda, raise
**Figure 9:** Model of intra-personal and inter-goal conflict in supervision

topics, ask questions, demand answers, steer the course, dominate the proceedings. Yet through the very realisation of these discoursal rights, supervisors activate their own brakes, undercutting their power through palpable restraint in the actual transmission of bad news messages. Discoursal power is their role-given right; but as people in a social event - the face-to-face negotiation of delicate topics - their talk takes on a somewhat different, conciliatory timbre.

This leads logically to the third level of analysis. At the level of institutional context, there is the setting in which the SD occurs and the roles and obligations, as well as expectations and goals, of parties within the institution. In this setting, there is the asymmetrical relation typical of unequal encounter: the supervisor, endowed with positional power and authority, is given licence to pass judgement, including critical comment, on the other party - teacher/novitiate/suppliant - whose in-role presence and behaviour at the meeting lends legitimacy to the supervisor. However - and herein is the ‘tensioning’ - this power is mediated by its very modality (the nature of face-to-face encounter) which imposes its own constraints on supervisors and undercuts their power. There is, then, a tension between the role-based institutional licence given the supervisory position and the individual supervisor’s need to
navigate a manageable, communicative course of dialogue with another human being - an essentially social endeavour. It is as if roles are blind, gross, pre-fabricated and untailored notions - 'public garments' (Strong, 1988:233); while the fine-tuning is achieved by the individual's social self which, being oriented to face management, provides the necessary local-level adjustments.

The discrepancy evoked between the supervisor's institutional self and their personal self is reminiscent of Goffman's (1961) notion of role distance - the divergence between 'virtual' self (formal, obligated, idealised role behaviour) and 'actual' self (the individual's expressive, situated performance of a particular role). This gap between positional and personal selves - a 'wedge ... between doing and being' (Goffman, 1961:108) - is the way in which the individual avoids the annihilation of selfhood that comes from both embracing and being embraced by their role (Burns, 1992). The injected identification achieves a 'double stance' (Goffman, 1961:133), allowing the self-image of the role incumbent to be salvaged. Foreshadowing the politeness theory that was to be inspired by his work, Goffman refers to various linguistic strategies (e.g. explanations, apologies, joking) by which individuals may maintain 'role poise' (1961:105), yet signal that they seek to disqualify what they say as 'sources of definitions' of themselves. It is as if these cues - measures of 'disaffection from, and resistance against, the role' (Burns, 1992:132), in the case of this study, the mitigation - are signs of the real person 'poking through' the fabric of institutional veneer. In this way, the teacher is alerted to the supervisor's disaffection from the more distasteful aspects of their 'rights and obligations set' (Pearson, 1988:73)

Through the thesis, reference has been made to the constraining power of language in face-to-face-encounter - the notion that language is both the master and the servant of the user. Goffman (1959:80) distinguishes between 'script' (the proscribed language of the prototypical, formal, idealised role self) and 'the command of an idiom' (the actual performed or expressed language). In the context of the present study, this realisation or textualisation is mitigation. Interpreting Goffman, Burns comments: 'beyond the "prose" of everyday social action... it is possible to posit a "poetry" of performance' (1992:125). Thus, to borrow Strong's (1988) allusion, supervisory talk is Janus-faced: one face is Machiavellian, anchored in role, dedicated to the propositional content of the message; the other face is Durkheimian, oriented to 'the wider social values which ceremony necessarily celebrates' (1988:233)
8.3 Mitigation, supervision and the notion of message risk

In the speech event with which this study is concerned, mitigation has been conceptualised as anti-clarity: being polite means one will be ‘less straightforward or more complicated’ (Brown, 1980:114). By virtue of being marked linguistic deviations from the Gricean maxims ensuring clear and efficient communication, mitigation bears a potential threat to message transmission, referred to in Ch. 3 as a ‘process’ risk.

Given the instructive goal of supervision, the notion of message risk is highly germane. While it is now understood that mitigation eases the burden of bad news transmission in face-to-face encounter, the question must also be asked: at what price? To what extent does mitigation get in the way of a supervisor’s message? In what manner is the message ‘at risk’?

8.3.1 Caveats in the evaluation of risk

While this study has discovered that mitigation is pervasive in supervisory talk, the issue of correlating degree of mitigation with level of risk is of quite another order. A number of difficulties complicate any easy mapping here. To begin with, quantification is not as easy as assigning a numerical weight to a mitigator in isolation because the impact of mitigation is both collocational and cumulative (Linde, 1988; Penman, 1990). In addition, as Linde’s (1988) study shows, it is extremely difficult to obtain reliable native speaker discrimination of degrees of mitigation, not least because of the need for analysts’ to share the user’s speech community-specific rhetorical conventions.

Aside from matters pertaining to quantification, there is the natural pluralism of language - the fact that variables such as prosodic, kinesic, non-verbal language factors - clearly impact on interpersonal communication (Kendon, 1989; Labov & Fanshel, 1977). Furthermore, there is the recognition that more is going on in the interpersonal relationship of the supervisor and teacher than the SD meeting by itself: there is the context of the meeting, previous shared experiences and the expectations they engender; and other affiliating connections. While this study has made convenient research use of the time/space boundaries of the SD, clearly there is an ‘unboundedness’ here that derives from the fact that the event has both a context and a history which together render it ‘encrusted with past meanings’ (Moerman, 1988:7).
In addition, the fact is that meaning is not a static entity: as language is goal-directed and game-like, meaning is negotiated by participants over time; and therefore what may be unclear one moment may well be disambiguated the next (Aronsson & Rundstrom, 1989). Furthermore, a speaker may take some turns, as well as considerable interlocutor participation, to convey bad tidings: Schegloff (1988a) credits Sacks with the notion that talk can be organised in such a way that the receiver of bad news may turn out to be the one who actually says it. For such reasons, any evaluation of the impact of mitigation on message clarity cannot ignore the ongoing discoursal context of action, nor the cumulative impact of face work (Aronsson & Satterlund-Larsson, 1987; Holtgraves, 1986; Holtgraves, 1992; Penman, 1990). Thus, while the research demands of focus and depth have resulted in this investigation ‘zooming in’ on ‘slices of life’ - i.e. face-threatening snapshots in the discourse of conferences - any attempt at the evaluation of risk outside of a full recognition of its context of operation is considered ill-advised.

8.3.2 Risk scenarios

Notwithstanding these caveats, some predictions about message risk may be sketched broadly. Enough is known about ‘the interaction order’ (Goffman, 1983) to recognise that resources that belong to it may be erroneously imputed to pertain to the messages that pass within it. Goffman contends that interaction constraints ‘transform... activities into performances’ (1959:72), and in so doing, misrepresent. While it can be shown that ‘how delicately or indelicately one is treated during the moment in which bad news is delivered does not speak to the structural significance of the news itself’ (Goffman, 1983:9), the risk is that this equation will be made. Certainly, in the absence of empirical evidence to support the contrary notion (that mitigation has no impact upon message), it would seem that there is sufficient weight in the very construct of mitigation to lend support to the notion of risk - a situation described by Moon et al. (1988:6) as ‘when a supervisor encodes one message, but the .... teacher decodes a very different message’. The form that this risk takes may be speculated upon; and may become the agenda for further research, as discussed below.

8.3.2.1 Message diluted

The risk may be that the critical message can be ‘washed out’ by a ‘bucketful’ of softeners, camouflaging agents and obliqueness. Chapter 5 has detailed the extraordinarily diverse range of linguistic items that serve this purpose.
Corroborating evidence also exists in the research literature. In the instance cited in Ch. 3 (from Roberts’ analysis (1990) of Grimmet and Crehan’s (1990) data, see App. 4), there was a very real risk that the critical point would be diluted to the point of loss; indeed, in that instance, it was salvaged only by the teacher’s perseverance.

That mitigation poses a risk is supported, too, by Linde’s (1988) findings regarding topic-failed speech acts, defined as speech acts which are not taken up topically by the addressee in the interaction. In Linde’s research, mitigation was positively correlated to topic-failed speech events. Likewise, she found that indirect and tentatively expressed suggestions were less likely to be ratified by their addressee.

8.3.2.2 Message gravity distorted

The risk may be of the order of ‘catching’ the experiential gist of the message but missing the degree of gravity that the supervisor attaches to it: thus a teacher may come away from a meeting aware that a problem/issue exists, but unaware of how important the supervisor considers it to be. Evidence from the ethnographic stage of this project suggest that this is a very real issue, of which supervisors are aware, but which they often opt for, deeming it preferable to overt face threat. Experimental support for this notion is mixed: while the quantitative study did not support the notion of gravity distortion, the qualitative evidence suggested that distortion correlated with mitigation to distort the message.

Linguistic evidence, too, is corroborating. Insofar as that the majority of the mitigation is addressed to the teacher’s negative face (App. 20), its impact is to lessen the imposition on teacher’s autonomy. As this is achieved, it inevitably affects the optionality factor: teachers are made to feel that supervisors’ requests for changes in performance are entirely volitional - suggestions rather than directives. At the point at which the teacher is given the option as to whether he or she wants to pursue the issue, the supervisor loses any control over the ultimate import of his or her message or its long-term productivity.

Conversely, the risk may be of the kind posed by the face-threatening nature of hypo-mitigated language. Enough is known about the need for face work to speculate that baldly unredressed language in this context is inherently risky. It is bound up with teachers’ reaction to bad news messages and calls into question issues of rejection, compliance, resistance and demoralisation. Just as Linde’s research attributed the ‘social oil’ (1988:396) of mitigation to
the positive relation between high mitigation and good relations, so too it is posited here that crisply clear negative messages may so neglect face work as to be counter-productive: in, other words, what is the value of getting the message across if it incurs non-compliance or hostility? This negative by-product was supported experimentally (Ch. 7) where a high level of hostility was recorded.

Such is the complexity of language that, on occasion, paradoxically, the presence or absence of mitigation can have the reverse effect of what has been outlined above. For example, an effect of mitigation can be to send a message indicating how serious the face threat is: 'if she feels the need to handle me with kid gloves to that extent, then I must really have done badly'. Part of the message, then, is 'the impression that the criticism-giver is embarrassed and uncomfortable' (Tracy & Eisenberg, 1990/1991:57), and this carries its own warning-bells. Likewise, stating matters baldly in a matter-of-fact manner may trigger the perception that the face threat is non-serious.

8.3.2.3 Message lost

There is the category of pragmatic failure associated with indirectness and exhaustively discussed in Ch. 5. At the level of implicit (unconventional) indirectness, there is a risk that assumptions made about professional knowledge may in fact be falsely premised. Indeed, Zeichner (1992) argues that there is a need for supervisors, in conferences with teachers, to examine explicitly the beliefs and assumptions that underpin their thinking and reasoning in regard to supervision of teaching.

At the level of ambivalence, where speaker meaning is very much 'up for grabs', there is the very great risk of incorrect uptake. In cases where the teacher imputes incorrect meanings to supervisor's ambivalent comments, there is a real possibility that the point of the message may be missed, unwittingly or deliberately. In both cases, then, one is compelled to ask, rhetorically, what is the value of the message qua supervision if the supervisor's intent is opaque to or ignored by the teacher?

An important sub-category here is the case of a criticisms being heard but not acknowledged. This was discussed in the 'Latin American' example (in Ch. 5), where the teacher computes

---

1 I am indebted to Ken Willing for this insight.
the meaning but fails to respond to its (in this case) recognised illocutionary force. The outcome is that it never reaches the status of being overt agenda and, as a result, is never properly discussed. In such a case, where teachers have, in fact, the choice of opting for one of two possible interpretations, it is posited that they are liable to go for the less face-damaging one. Two reasons may be offered in support: firstly, Leech’s Pollyanna Hypothesis (1983:147) according to which people prefer good news to bad news; secondly, because this interpretation is less likely to lead to confrontation, which, in line with the mutuality of face considerations, is something the teacher, like the supervisor, would want to avoid.

8.3.2.4 Message contaminated

It may be that the teacher is able successfully to ‘read’ the mitigation for what it is¹ - i.e. face attendance, unrelated to the experiential message - and yet may emerge from the meeting with a ‘queasy’ feeling of something having been said where the point was missed. In this case, the hearer is unable to impute with surety the connection between locution and illocution. How this feeling of psychological discomfort connects with perception of supervision and likelihood of productive outcomes can only be speculated at this stage. Certainly, there is evidence, outlined in Ch. 7, that hyper-mitigation courts difficulty, largely based on negative perceptions induced in supervisees, where it is more likely to inspire suspicion than trust, and to be less likely to promote productivity. Miller and Steinberg refer to the notion of ‘communication energy’ (1975:292) as the effort expended by communicants in the encoding and decoding processes. They suggest that communication that makes a high energy demand - into which category fall indirect utterances - may lead to vague feelings of discomfort or dissatisfaction.

8.3.2.5 Message unuttered

There is, too, a whole category of pragmatic choice that has remained unexamined - criticisms that the supervisor chose not to say, not even indirectly. This option - ‘opting out’ (Bonikowska, 1985) - presents formidable problems of access and analysis for the researcher; yet is no less real for being inaccessible (Larson, 1986). As was seen in Ch. 6, the option of ‘not saying’ is a very real one for supervisors. Thus the threat of negative face attack may be so great as to deter a supervisor from uttering the FTA. Here the message is lost because it has failed to reach the point of utterance.

One is left, then, with a construct of message risk that arises from the framework of politeness theory on which this study is predicated. While it is not possible, on the grounds presented, to predict in either qualitative or quantitative terms the exact terms of risk, it is feasible to point in general terms to its probability. This, however, is not insubstantial for, at the very least, it sounds a caution. It also stimulates the quest for alternative ways of doing things so as, perhaps, to achieve one’s goals yet with reduced hazard. How this caution and search for alternatives translates into applied outcomes is taken up in section 8.6, below.

8.4 Relatability

With regard to external validity, or the generalisability of the research findings, there is no claim being made that the outcomes of the present study are automatically transferable to the supervisor population at large. Qualitative research, as discussed in Ch. 4, is inherently particularistic, deriving validity and strength from its explication of a phenomenon in its context of operation. By virtue of this, it lacks a mechanism for generalisation (Eisner, 1985).

The inspiration for the present investigation arose from particular dilemmas encountered in professional practice in a particular domain - the ‘dysphoria’ of supervisory conferences in TESOL teacher education. The aim was exploratory: to investigate a particular event so as to better understand its workings and so as, ultimately, to improve professional practice in the field that provided both the problem and the data. Within the boundaries of this stipulated domain, care was taken to cast a wide net by considering TESOL supervision in a diverse range of settings and sites so as to shore up internal validity, wherein resides the strength of naturalistic inquiry. At the conclusion, it can be said with reasonable confidence that these outcomes appear to paint a true picture of Adult TESOL-specific supervision in the decade 1983-93. Tabachnik (1989), citing Cronback (1975), cautions that the very nature of social life - the embeddedness and fluidity of social events - means that generalisations, by very definition, carry the seeds of their own decay. However, certainly in regard to the TESOL environment, it is suggested that ‘the general resides in the particular... what one learns from a particular, one applies to other situations subsequently encountered’ (Eisner, 1985:193).

Outside of the domain specific to the study, there is the issue of wider generalisability. In this regard, Tabachnick writes (1989:162):
Naturalistic studies can illuminate the meanings... within a particular context and provide insights to a reader who can recognise possibilities for using the data to explain behaviour in another context.

Relatability is centred in methodological considerations - the extent to which the explication of the research lends itself capable of comparability. In this study, the aim has been to cover the particular problem and data corpus in so systematic and explicit a manner that those seeking to establish 'a degree of fit' (Guba & Lincoln, 1983:119) across groups and settings may proceed with assurance. To do so, they must be able to assess the research site for its comparability, for the probable impact of the researcher on outcomes, for unique historical circumstances pertaining to particular groups, and for the extent to which constructs are unique to one group or externally comparable (Nunan, 1992a). It is hoped that the present study is sufficiently thorough and explicit to furnish those bearing the 'burden of synthesis' (Guba & Lincoln, 1983:117) with a basis for 'relatability' (Bassey, 1981:85).

Beyond the TESOL domain, it is possible, too, that by providing a starting point for further research, the study offers some initial insights into 'the supervisory encounter' as a generic construct. An important step here is the exposure of patterns of linguistic behaviour and ethnographic perspectives which suggest that the problem is situated in definable types of encounters and in institutional behaviour; and is not a function of the idiosyncratic conduct of individuals. Certainly, it would seem that, from the point of view of supervision, there are some universal and pertinent facets in communication, such as face work, even if the configurations of their realisation are constrained by local conditions. These latter dictate that sweeping claims to universality be sobered by caveats deriving, in the main, from sociocultural conventions and speech event-specific discourse conditions.

8.5 Recommendations for further research

In a narrow sense, a research project may be deemed complete insofar as and at the point when, it satisfactorily affords answers to questions posed at the outset. However, in the wider sense in which studies seeking resolution to essentially human issues are restlessly open-ended, qualitative research may be considered permanently unfinished: as some questions are answered, so are others raised.

Some suggestions for further research emanating from this project are outlined below.
• Beyond TESOL

The present study has used a corpus of supervisors predominantly from the Adult TESOL domain, but also including some upper secondary ESOL teachers. Various reasons have been advanced that may account for the preponderance of mitigation in these supervisors’ talk. It would be of value to know how generalisable the findings are to other domains of educational supervision: for example, with other subject disciplines (beyond language teaching) and other learner categories (e.g. primary and secondary). It would also be valuable to know whether these findings are generalisable to non-educational supervision contexts, such as management and industrial settings - in Cervi’s words (1991:119), ‘areas where people are trained by means of an interactive process’. Broadly, then, how generalisable is the thesis of a supervisory clash-of-goals? How do different speech communities and environments put their particular stamp on the reconciliation of this conflict?

• Message distortion

This study has indicated that hyper-attention to face work poses a potential threat to clarity. It would be of value to refine our understanding of the correlation between, for example, level of indirectness or degree of mitigation and message distortion. Further research - along the lines of that by Linde (1988) and Goguen and Linde (1983) - into the link between mitigation and failed speech events - may assist in developing a more measurable quantitative index.

• Configuration of positive and negative politeness

A valuable pursuit that arises from this study is the differential distribution of mitigation strategies addressed to positive and negative face. While this study has revealed a preponderance of orientation toward negative face, it would be of value to understand the configurations as they are played out through the speech event as a whole. Where, for example, in the generic staging of the SD, is the greatest energy in face work invested? What patterns of distribution operate through the SD? It would also be interesting to compare patterns of positive and negative face work across pre-service and in-service contexts. Such inquiries may lead to a clearer understanding of how multiple goals are pursued, realised and resolved in discourse. It may also lead more judicious decision-making: is there an ‘optimum’ blend of positive and negative strategies? What considerations need to be ‘factored’ into the selection process?
• The SD as genre

This study has treated the SD as a particular speech event within the conceptual framework of politeness theory, leading to a focus on criticism as a particularly threatening and domain-specific speech act. Emerging from this has been the pivotal clash of interests between the ideational and interpersonal functions of language at the point of the critical FTA. It would be of value for future research to consider the SD as a genre in systemic terms with the aim of producing an in-depth linguistic description of the functional stages of the conference. A systemic-functional analysis could offer helpful insights into how the opposing tensions are realised through the entire conference.

• The face factor at the above-the-utterance level

This study has preferred an approach that centres on actors’ intentions rather than the ‘traffic of syntax’ through the organisation of turns, which is rather the pursuit of the CA school (Schegloff, 1988b). Despite the differences between the two approaches (discussed in Ch. 2), it would seem that each may benefit from the other’s insights. Certainly, it would be of value to adopt some CA tools to investigate further how criticisms are taken up by supervisees in ongoing discourse. How, for example, is a response ‘pursued’ (Pomerantz, 1984a; Waite, i.p.). In other words, what happens, in the discourse, to the FTA once it is delivered? What is its perlocutionary effect (Austin, 1962)?

For example, research in discourse in medical settings (Aronsson & Satterlund-Larsson, 1987) has shown how the pragmatic ambivalence of attention-indicators given out by recipients of FTAs may mask disagreement and non-compliance. It would certainly benefit the understanding of supervision to know where supervisory instructive messages and requests for actions ‘end up’. As Labov and Fanshel wrote of their domain: ‘if the therapist knew just what prevented the patient from following the suggestions that are generally agreed to, then the problem of therapy would be solved’ (1977:111). Supervision is not altogether different.

A valuable marriage of politeness theory and CA is suggested by Bayraktaroglu (1991) who seeks to uncover how face is redressed over stretches of talk. An initial step might be a flow-chart schema of the critical FTA in supervision contexts, along the lines of Abadi’s (1990) for political apologies.
The receiving of face threat

In addition, while this study has focussed on face, primarily from the point of view of those who threaten it, insight may be gained by switching the linguistic focus to the receiver of face threat. In the current study, perceptions of mitigation were explored experimentally (Ch. 7). However, a more qualitative approach, such as a diary study (Bailey, 1990) mapping a supervisee’s perceptions over time - comparable to diary studies conducted in second language acquisition research (Bailey, 1985; Bailey & Ochsner, 1983) - may enhance understanding of how supervisees resolve their own particular clash-of-goals: the need for instructive, critical guidance alongside the need for validation.

Supervisor training

Another major issue, pertinent to the applied outcomes of this study, is supervisor training (see also 8.6, below). Given that most politeness behaviour happens below the conscious level of awareness, it would be of value to know what effect, in both the short and long term, might be achieved through raising supervisors’ awareness of politeness theory and training in specific politeness strategies. Given Sergiovanni’s (1985) admonitions about ‘mindscape’ differences between researchers and practising professionals, how amenable are they to this kind of exposure? How ‘flexible’ (Grimmet, 1983; Grimmet & Housego, 1983) are they in the language they use to achieve supervision? What impact does training have on their patterns of talk? What reduction of emotional angst (Kremer-Hayon, 1987) can be achieved by reducing their reliance on social skills?

In regard to supervisors’ mental processes, it would be of value to explore the twin notions of espoused theory and theory-in-use (Argyris & Schon, 1974) as they apply to supervisors (App. 29).

Supervisee preparation for feedback

Further to understanding supervisee responses, an interesting investigation may be in the area of supervisee preparation. After all, in influencing the speech event so as to bring about improvements, there are two key players - the supervisor and the supervisee. In regard to the latter, Neumann (1992) offers a set of guidelines to prepare those on the receiving end of feedback. These seem capable of defusing the volatility of the situation, reducing the teacher’s
powerlessness, enabling teachers better to unpack supervisor meaning, and maximising
potential gain. In addition, supervisee preparation for feedback may benefit from insights
drawn from research: for example, Tesser and Rosen (1975) have pointed to the disturbing
implications of the MUM effect in the communication of negative messages: the very person
who needs most to know may be the one least likely to be told. The notion was put forward
(Conlee & Tesser, 1973) that recipients of feedback ought to make their desires about feedback
known, since not doing so may lead to erroneous assumptions being made about their tacit
wishes. The present research would support this notion: in the absence of preferences being
made explicit, the normal face constraints on direct communication are likely to impact on the
transmission of negative messages. What is needed, too, is research into the impact of
supervisee preparation on supervisory encounters.

- Correlating mitigation to individual and social variables

An interesting area of research worthy of pursuit would be to investigate individual differences
in speech act use and the connections between these differences and other social variables.
For example, what makes an individual tend towards a particular degree of mitigation in their
language? Factors that may be relevant here may include age, gender, culture, degree of
supervisory experience and perhaps idiolectal features.

In regard to gender, existing work in gender-in-conversation and the relationship with
politeness theory is not insubstantial (Brown, 1980; Crosby & Nyquist, 1977; Holmes, 1993,
and references contained therein; Holtgraves, 1991; Kendall, 1994; Lakoff, 1976; Rundquist,
1992; Sheldon, 1992; Stevenson & San Miguel, 1992; Tannen, 1990; Tracy & Eisenberg,
1990/1991, and references contained therein). The tendency to mitigate may, to some extent,
either quantitatively or qualitatively, align with gender. It would be of value to know how
gender interacts with other variables in supervisory dyads1. Are women supervisors more
mitigating than male? Does the gender of the supervisee make an impact here? If females are
more mitigating, are they also more conciliatory and interpersonally successful (Sheldon,
1992)? Can something be learned here, and then applied to other settings, of a successful
blend of clarity and face work?

1 However, as supervisory placements are usually governed by the demands of expediency
(Zeichner, 1993), it is unlikely that even research findings will make a large impact here.
The impact of politeness in cross-cultural communication contexts has been the subject of many studies (Blum-Kulka & Olshtain, 1984; House & Kasper, 1981; Tannen, 1981). In particular, there have been many investigations into ‘prejudices’ e.g. where a particular ethnic/national/cultural group is perceived of as ‘too’ direct or rude or blunt (House & Kasper, 1981; Scarcella, 1979; Tanaka, 1986; Tanaka & Kawade, 1982; Walters, 1980; Zhong, 1982). The difficulties that this poses in native/non-native discourse in the workplace and elsewhere have been explored (Gumperz, Jupp & Roberts, 1979; Roberts, Davies & Jupp, 1992; Thomas, 1983; Scollon & Scollon, 1983; Willing, 1992). Indeed, what Leech calls ‘socio-pragmatics’ (1983:80) and Thomas calls ‘socio-pragmatic failure’ (1983:91) seems set to become a chief concern of pragmatics. In theory at least, if more were known about such issues, better matching of supervisory dyads might be possible. This is particularly valuable to the field of language teaching (both TESOL and LOTE) which attract high NESB participant rates.

- Research into praise

Understanding of face work in supervision would benefit from a closer understanding of how praise - the apparent converse of criticism - operates in the discourse. Some tangential findings in this study (App. 21) suggest that other investigators may be rewarded by similarly unpacking the speech act of praise; as well as studying patterns of inter-relationship of praise and criticism in feedback.

8.6 Application

8.6.1 A domain-specific outcome

The present inquiry has revealed that supervisors engage in profuse mitigation in an angst-driven pursuit of a resolution to a recurring dilemma. Two points emerge here. The first concerns the fact that a heavy and unthinking reliance on mitigation, while understandable as a response to face-to-face encounter, adds up to an inappropriate reliance on social skills in the achievement of a professional goal. This research has shown that there may be a more judicious path to the satisfactory reconciliation of supervisors’ dilemma, a path which would involve an awareness of face strategies in interaction and a conscious and selective, rather than unwitting or stochastic use of these. Schegloff (1988a:455) suggests that those whose professional role encompasses ‘special’ occasions for telling bad news - and clearly,
supervisors qualify here - may benefit from understanding how such activities operate in conversation. Similarly, arguing the case for an emphasis on training supervisors’ conferring skills, McNerney and Francis point to the need for supervisors to ‘realise how and why they behave as they do in conferences’ (1986:197). Related to this is Roberts’ notion of supervisory ‘communicative competence’ (1990:33). This may be linked to Weimann’s (1977, cited by Lustig & King, 1980:75) definition of communicative competence as

the ability of an interactant to choose among available communicative behaviours in order (to) successfully accomplish his [sic] own interpersonal goals during an encounter while maintaining the face and line of... fellow interactants within the constraints of the situation.

There is a need, too, for the supervisory dilemma to be recognised as institutionally role-based rather than individual or idiosyncratic. Within such a frame, patterns in the data are able to be interpreted meaningfully as routinised ways of resolving institutional interactional dilemmas (Adelsward, 1994). Exploring the issue of co-operation in institutional contexts, Sarangi and Slembruck make the point that ‘the determinants of discourse lie far beyond the individual speaker-hearer relationship in the immediate situational context’ (1992:142). There is merit, then, in interpreting the discourse of the SD from the outside - as a pattern of a public event rather than as a idiosyncratic, private, mental process (Craig, 1990; Bavelas et al. 1990a). This view places the source of goals in the situation rather than in the person (Craig, 1990); and views mitigation as a response to goal conflict. It is hoped that the present inquiry will be of service by adding to the compendium of knowledge and skills intrinsic to effective supervisory practice.

The second point, which is related, is that the process of navigating unchartered waters is, for the practitioners, stressful, taxing and often unsatisfying. Linguistic evidence of pervasive energy expended in face work (Ch. 5), combined with repeated mention on interview (Ch. 6) corroborates Kremer-Hayon’s (1987) findings that supervisors are often negatively preoccupied and emotionally debilitated by the dilemmas of their role and that these perceptions happen with both intensity and frequency. In the words of one informant (#12), feeding back is ‘an emotional roller-coast’ not helped by ‘coming at the situation from the point of feelings’.

On the positive side, it would seem that both of these issues - judicious choices of strategies and personal stress - may be addressed through supervisory training. The primary suggestion is that a domain-specific set of strategic skills exists, drawn from the conceptual framework of
politeness theory, that will help prepare supervisors to be more effective practitioners. Just as Robins and Wolf (1988) draw domain-specific applications from politeness theory to face-to-face encounters in a medical setting (showing that 'culturally appropriate' may not mean 'therapeutic'), so too it is argued here that supervisor-specific applications (see below) can be drawn from the present inquiry that will benefit professional practice. Certainly, this study has shown that a default-like falling back on the social skills that supervisors may happen (or happen not) to have is inadequate to the task. While it is unlikely that the relationship between face work and effective practice is either simple or neat - 'straightforward and linear' (Goldsmith 1992:282) - it is likely that an understanding of the 'microdynamics' (Goldsmith, 1992: 280) of relational processes will be fruitful.

8.6.2 Curricular applications in supervisor training

As a way of conceptualising teacher education, McNerney and Francis (1986:197) suggest that teaching behaviour (B) is a function of the person (P) serving as teacher, the environment (E) designed to support that teacher, and the task (T) the teacher sets out to achieve: B = (f) P, E, T. Of these components, they contend, the environment is the one over which supervisors are most able to exert influence; and is 'defined in large measure by supervisors' words and phrases' (1986:198). This approach is consonant with the premise of the present inquiry which views supervision as indistinguishable from the talk which realises it.

If the environment is the component over which supervisors have the most control, and if that control is realised in the main through language, it is fitting therefore to suggest, as do McNerney and Francis, that supervisors 'behave with some reasonable sense of the potential impact of their words on teachers' (1986:198). It is suggested here, at the conclusion of this study of supervisor language, that to assist supervisors gain greater insight into their language, a training curriculum (Exhibit 10) that includes politeness theory would be advantageous.

8.7 Epilogue

Regrettably, there is no quick and easy 'fix' - or 'artful match' (Goldsmith, 1992: 282) - that could lead to the production of a handy manual of the 'supervision: how-to-do-it' kind. Indeed, to seek a 'one-size-fits-all' solution is to ignore contextual particularities and hence to deny the intrinsic pluralism of supervision (Waite, 1992b; Zahorik, 1988). This study
While eschewing 'finite prescriptions for practice' (Roberts, 1994: 153), supervisors would gain from:

- an understanding of politeness theory and strategic interaction: this may provide a conceptual framework for interpreting their own language as the medium through which their roles and obligations are realised;
- an awareness of the range, type and variable functioning of politeness strategies, especially mitigation, and their differential appeals to positive and negative face;
- domain-specific supervisory skills training. This should emphasise:
  a) the need, given the context of face threat, to prioritise and limit the number of FTAs delivered;
  b) concept checking strategies for ensuring that propositional messages have been appropriately 'unpacked';
  c) practice in strategies of minimal mitigation, avoidance of severely mitigated language e.g. extreme indirectness, or its use counter-balanced by judicious checking;
  d) training in particular face work strategies that provide minimal tensions with the clarity goal e.g. above-the-utterance mitigation, preference for face work addressed to positive face and negative politeness in combination with concept checking.

Exhibit 10: Applications to supervisor training

Corroborates Linde's (1988) conclusions which similarly cautioned against simplistic reductions of natural linguistic and social complexities. While acknowledging that mitigation militates against the successful communication of message, she also argues that it is essential to it, being crucial to establishing and maintaining relational harmony and equilibrium.

That relational success is a *sine qua non* of most human enterprise, including supervision, is confirmed by the present study. The exposure of mitigation in supervisory discourse is testimony indeed to Pfeiffer and Dunlap's contention that 'the conference itself is a relationship' (1982:61). Yet, the transactional goal of instructive help is as central and as undeniable. Thus the conclusion is that a felicitous blend of relational and propositional needs must be addressed. As a consequence, the present findings do not suggest that training in Gricean directness or assertiveness (Gervasio, 1987) will resolve the dilemma faced by supervisors; nor that supervisors need to be trained as counsellors. Neither removing nor augmenting the mitigation will resolve the dilemma, for supervision is neither a matter of clear speaking nor a matter of engagement in face work, but is indeed both. If this inquiry is to
make a contribution, it is in the order of peeling back the skin of supervision and exposing the nerves: an awareness of the ‘exquisite complexity’ (Tabachnick, 1989:162) of the subject, rather than the generation of formulaic answers. In Penman’s words, ‘that it is complex and uncertain is only in keeping with the reality’ (1990:37).

Ultimately, ‘to criticise well is to make a situated judgement about which general principles apply in the particular case’ (Tracy et al. 1987:58). To acknowledge this is to recognise that limits exist to the application of conventional wisdom as well as to empirical findings. In the end, effective supervision is, *inter alia*, a matter of successful communicative practice, where guidance may be given but where an element of the art form remains. In the final analysis, good supervision, like good teaching, is a matter of intelligent, informed and judicious decision-making.
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot *Little Gidding*
This is a glossary of terms used through the thesis.

**Clarity**
Speakers' adherence to the Gricean maxims of conversation with the consequence of being maximally clear, efficient and economical in their communication.

**Co-operative Principle (CP)**
An underlying assumption that participants in conversation are oriented towards co-operation.

**Co-text**
The stretch of discourse in which a particular utterance is embedded; in this study, the co-text refers to the language adjoining and surrounding the FTA.

**Conversational implicature**
The use of the conversational maxims and breaches thereof to imply meaning.

**Direct speech act**
An utterance in which the propositional content (locution or surface meaning) is consistent with what the speaker intends to accomplish (speaker meaning).

**Face**
The public, socially-valued image of self which participants in an encounter claim for themselves and each other.

**Face-threatening act (FTA)**
A communicative act which runs contrary to the face needs of speaker or hearer.

**Felicity conditions**
The conditions of appropriateness, as distinct from truth content, that are required to elucidate the meaning of speech acts.

**Goal**
The end to which one or more participants engaged in a discourse orient their linguistic and/or non-linguistic strategies.

**Illocution / illocutionary force**
The functional intention of the speaker in performing a locution.

**Illocutionary force indicating device (IFID)**
A device used in utterances to convey the speaker's illocutionary force.
Indirect speech act
A speech act which is performed incongruently i.e. where there is a discrepancy between the locution and illocution.

Interational / Interpersonal / Relational
The function that language serves in the expression and maintenance of social relations and personal attitudes.

Locution
The act of uttering a proposition with a particular sense or meaning.

Marked usage
Elements in language which depart from the usual, basic, neutral or natural (i.e. unmarked) usage.

Maxim
A tacit ‘rule’ about conversation (postulated by Grice, 1975) which influences the form and explains the coherence of conversational exchanges.

Mitigation
A speaker’s deliberate attenuation of illocutionary force so as to take account of participants’ face needs.

Modality
The expression of modal meaning which pertains to the user’s attitude toward the propositional content or the interactional context of the utterance.

Negative face
A speaker or hearer’s desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition.

Negative politeness
A speaker’s orientation toward the negative face needs of the hearer.

Off-record
An utterance in which the communicative intention behind the act is in any way less than unambiguously clear.

On-record
An utterance in which the communicative intention behind the act is unambiguously clear.

Performativity
A speech act whose meaning is identified with the performance of the action.

Perlocution / perlocutionary force
An utterance seen from the point of view of its consequences.

Politeness
A speaker’s strategic orientation towards the hearer’s face needs.

Positive face
A speaker or hearer’s desire to have their own needs regarded as worthy of approval.
Glossary

Positive politeness
A speaker’s orientation toward the positive face needs of the hearer.

Pragmatics
The branch within linguistics which holds that a complete account of meaning requires consideration of use, users and their intentions; the study of the impact of context on language.

Pragmatic meaning / pragmatic force
A speaker’s intention in a particular context: the effect a speaker intends to produce in the hearer by virtue of the hearer’s recognition of this intention.

Proposition
The representative content conveyed by a sentence or utterance.

Redressive action
Language that ‘gives’ face by counteracting the potential damage caused by a face-threatening act.

Relational
see Interactional

Sincerity rules
A set of felicity conditions which specify the circumstances that must obtain if a speech act is to be performed sincerely.

Speech act
An utterance as a functional unit in communication, equivalent to the intention of the user.

Speech act theory
The study of illocutionary acts, or what something means in action, involving a tri-partite distinction between locution, illocution and perlocution.

Transactional
The representative function that language serves in the expression of propositional or content meaning.

Unmarked usage
Elements in language which are usual, basic, neutral or natural (i.e. not marked).