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Abstract:

Online supervision is a relatively recent form of student-teacher interaction, and therefore one for which the rules are still being determined. When in addition this new form of interaction takes place between supervisors and students from different cultural and language backgrounds there is considerable room for misunderstanding. In such an environment supervisors need to take into account affective aspects of this interaction. Previous research has confirmed the importance of the role of affect in PhD supervision but has not investigated the ways in which supervisors take affect into account in practice, especially in their written feedback. In this study the online interaction between an external supervisor working only at a distance with four of his PhD students was recorded. The supervisor's feedback was analysed to determine the types and frequency of affective markers in the comments. The results showed that the supervisor used politeness strategies in just over half of his feedback, through such strategies as minimising imposing forces through clear indication of his opinion (e.g., I think, I believe) and giving reasons or rationale for his suggestions. In addition to suggestive feedback, interactive comments for rapport-building and compliments were observed.

Keywords: supervision, feedback, affect, strategies.

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## **MANAGING AFFECT IN ONLINE SUPERVISION**

### **The use of affective markers in written feedback**

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#### **Abstract**

*Online supervision is a relatively recent form of student-teacher interaction, and therefore one for which the rules are still being determined. When in addition this new form of interaction takes place between supervisors and students from different cultural and language backgrounds there is considerable room for misunderstanding. In such an environment supervisors need to take into account affective aspects of this interaction. Previous research has confirmed the importance of the role of affect in PhD supervision (e.g., Randall & Thornton 2001) but has not widely investigated the ways in which supervisors take affect into account in practice, especially in their written feedback. In this study the online interaction between an external supervisor working only at a distance with four of his PhD students was recorded. The supervisor's feedback was analysed to determine the types and frequency of affective markers in the comments. The results showed that the supervisor used politeness strategies in just over half of his feedback, through such strategies as downtowners and grounders, and also by giving a rationale for his suggestions. In addition to suggestive feedback, interactive comments for rapport-building and compliments were observed.*

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Affective considerations in learning and teaching are often mentioned as one of three traditional categories for learning objectives along with knowledge and skills. Although learning objectives are not officially set for conversations between a PhD supervisor and a student, affect is nevertheless an important consideration. The dialogue between a PhD supervisor and a student is also a learning and teaching context and yet it is not a lesson, and objectives are not officially set. Nevertheless, a supervisor may have some affective objectives. Petty (2004:418) gives semi-humorous examples to illustrate strategies used by a health worker to achieve affective objectives. He classifies these into those he considers 'legitimate' (such as appeals to authority and requests for moderate change) and others that might be considered 'illegitimate' such as confrontation and ridicule. While a comparison between a health worker and a PhD supervisor might seem far-fetched, there is a parallel in that both are trying to guide actions and both include some one-to-one interaction. This study aims to investigate the way one supervisor manages affect in his online interaction with students. The focus is exclusively on a very early stage in the candidature, namely when the candidate works on the research proposal.

#### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

## **Affect and feedback**

For teachers and supervisors, including the supervisor in the present study, an important question is the extent to which they are able to influence affective factors such as motivation, anxiety and empathy as these have been shown to have a great impact on the amount and quality of interaction between teachers and learners (Léger de Saint & Storch 2009). Aoki (1999) addresses the role of affect in teaching, a role which seems to flow also into the supervision process. Amongst other suggestions, she mentions the development of a ‘psychologically secure environment’ (p. 149), a goal that is not easy for the group we are investigating, where learners and supervisors communicate at a distance and where differences in ‘power’ can play an important role. According to Holmes (1995), power can be defined as “the ability of participants to influence one another’s circumstances ...” (p. 17). We were interested to see how this might apply in distance supervision. Given that supervisors have, using this definition, considerable power over their students, unevenness in their relationships can affect their communication. Politeness or deference are considered tactics to guise this unevenness, suggesting that social gaps and status differences can be mitigated through the use of politeness strategies, particularly on the part of the dominant interlocutor. Therefore, the way supervisors interact with students can be an integral part of the supervisor-learner relationship, and potentially impact learners’ feelings and learning outcomes.

More specifically, there is the question of the place of affect in teacher feedback. Negative comments may well have an adverse effect on learners, especially if they are frequent and delivered without hedging. Hyland & Hyland (2006) review the ways in which teachers use mitigation and praise to soften feedback and Hyland (2003), in the context of feedback for second language writers, identifies four mitigation strategies which teachers use in their final comments. In paired comments the teacher combines criticism with praise or a suggestion. Hedged comments use “modal verbs, imprecise quantifiers and usuality devices” as in “There is possibly too much information here”. Personal attribution involves the marker taking the role not of an expert but of an ordinary reader as in “I’m sorry, but when reading this essay I couldn’t see....”. Finally the interrogative form includes an ‘element of doubt or uncertainty’ (p. 191).

Randall and Thornton (2001) address both the affective and factual aspects of feedback (although they refer mainly to teacher-teacher feedback during teacher support of colleagues). They believe that creating an appropriate atmosphere is fundamental if advice is to be “internalised ... and ... put into practice” (p.87). They also note that addressing the listener’s/ reader’s feelings is an important part of an advice session. Randall and Thornton believe that the attention to feelings is fundamental to the other aspect of feedback, which is ‘directing and leading’ (p.107). For them, the area of “providing negative feedback in a non-punitive atmosphere” (p. 113) is not easy. Their examples relate to giving feedback on classroom practice. When advice is given via the computer, attention to feelings is less easy to address.

A number of studies have investigated the use of ‘directives’ as language with directive illocutionary force. For example, Thonus (1999) investigated the use of directives in tutor-tutee interactions in a writing centre. She found that tutors treated NNS differently than NS and for example used fewer mitigation strategies and generally were more direct with NNS, perhaps to ensure clarity or to meet the NNS

students' expectations. Such studies give insight into the linguistic markers teachers use to minimise the potential negative impact of their feedback. However, this kind of study is not common: "evaluation and its realisations in language have tended to be neglected by linguists" (Aijmer, 2005, p.83). It is this line of research we want to extend further by looking at the specific context of PhD supervision.

### **Affect and feedback in PhD supervision**

During the doctoral journey, students work closely with their supervisors, and managing this relationship is considered a crucial skill for successful PhD candidate (Kumar & Stracke, 2007, p. 461). The amount and quality of feedback in PhD supervision has been shown to be a crucial element in the collaboration between student and supervisor (Delamont, Atkinson, & Parry, 1997; Taylor & Beasley 2005). However, as noted earlier, the ways in which this is done has not been widely investigated. Earlier, Knowles (1999) noted that "It is surprising that such an important and routine exchange of information has received so little attention, and yet it may be the main gauge by which both parties measure whether the supervision as a whole is successful or not" (p. 113). An area that has received particularly little attention is that of the role of the way feedback given by the supervisor to the student and how the supervisee manages the feedback. This is important as feedback is not only essential to the supervision process but also a potential source of misunderstanding and demotivation. For example, as Li and Seale (2007) noted, harsh or excessive criticism may cause face-losing conditions for supervisees, a feeling of embarrassment or losing confidence, and even non-completion of PhD study (p. 512). Yet, constructive feedback is necessary, and so feedback, especially of the negative type, needs to be delivered with care.

As Greenhalgh (1992) points out, 'in principle, a supervisor's response to a draft not only delivers a message at the semantic level but also plays out the social relationship between reader and writer, teacher and student' (p. 402). What underlies this social relationship is an unevenness in power, which can be characterized as "the master" and "the learner" relationship (Kumar & Stracke, 2007, p. 462). In this social relationship the role of criticism is both crucial and delicate. "Criticism is...more likely to be well received (and constructively used) if it is clearly made in the context of respect and interest" (Connell, 1985, p. 41). The importance of respect in the relationship between supervisor and student is evident in descriptions of supervisor-student interaction as "critical conversations", which emphasise both its crucial role (to encourage critical reflection) as well as the equality of the partners (Knowles, 1999, p. 114).

Bowe and Martin (2007) summarise a number of areas in which cultures achieve the need to be polite (or to avoid offence, as Thornbury (2005) expresses it). One of these is the choice between directness and indirectness, as well as all the nuances that lie between them. Although the work of Bowe and Martin draws on spoken exchanges, some of their categories point to aspects of email communication which could be examined. Students' perceptions were investigated in a qualitative study by Kumar and Stracke (2007). They analyzed specific functions of written feedback offered by a supervisor on one student's PhD thesis. They identified three general functions of feedback, which are referential, directive and expressive. The referential function of feedback includes editorial or organizational issues, which were relatively

rare in their study. The directive form includes suggestions, questions, and instructions, which enable the supervisee to strengthen the content. Finally, the expressive function consists of praise, criticisms, and the supervisor's opinions. Of these functions, the expressive feedback experienced by the student was reported to be the most beneficial. The supervisee obtained confidence through praise by the supervisor, and even the supervisor's criticism was perceived as constructive by the supervisee, as it eventually led the student to self-regulate his own learning. The results not only show the occurrence of these different functions of the feedback, but empirically suggest the importance of affect in supervisor-supervisee written communication.

The limitation of written feedback becomes crucial, when supervising occurs at a distance. One recent study by Erichsen, Bolliger, and Halupa (2012) surveyed doctoral students' perceptions of and satisfaction with distance supervision, either online or hybrid systems (a mixture of online and face-to-face supervision). The general satisfaction was higher for hybrid supervision, compared to distance or online supervision, and it was reported that the relative dissatisfaction could be partly attributed to the limitations in face-to-face contact, showing the complex relationship in distance supervising. This reflects the challenges of relatively recent, but increasingly common forms of online supervision, where interlocutors cannot rely on non-verbal signals and negative comments may appear particularly harsh. Further, considering that a great deal of student-supervisor interaction is between participants from different cultures, it is easy to see how the delivery of feedback can be challenging.

In summary, there is a large body of research into the role of affect in learning and teaching, and specifically in feedback. Less is known, however, about the role of affect in PhD supervision. The few existing studies on written comments or feedback to supervisees are based on self-report data such as interviews and survey questionnaires, and it has been pointed out that more direct observational data is needed to better understand actual supervising practices (e.g., Delamont et al., 2000; Li & Seale, 2007). The use of politeness strategies or other ways affect is embedded in feedback has been widely investigated in different disciplines including pragmatics in linguistics and language education. However, the ways such pragmatic or social strategies are used in online supervision has been, to our best knowledge, very limited indeed. In this study, we look at the ways in which the "critical conversation" between supervisor and student is maintained and in particular how the supervisor attempts to mitigate the potentially negative impact of his feedback on the student's work by investigating the use of "politeness markers" (Brown and Levison 1987), or the linguistic means by which interlocutors attempt to minimise the impact of potentially face-threatening acts. We will now describe our study.

## THE STUDY

This study examines a text whose topical and semantic coherence arises from the academic context in which it is embedded (Sornig and Haumann, 2000), namely the submission of a research proposal by a student to a supervisor and the latter's response. In this article we do not focus on the content of the interaction, but instead

on the methods employed by the supervisor to manage the affective aspect of providing feedback.

Arnold and Brown (1999), while acknowledging the difficulty of defining affect, use as the basis for their own discussion ‘aspects of emotion, feeling, mood or attitude which condition behaviour’ (p.1). However, they emphasise that ‘the affective side of learning is not in opposition to the cognitive side’ (*ibid*). By this broad definition, any examination of the language of feedback would have to use subjective measures to determine which utterances appealed more to the affective and which to the cognitive aspects of a student’s learning. This means that an investigation of the affective aspect of feedback in supervision would have to look at the ways in which the supervisor’s feedback takes into account the student’s feelings.

One way to do this is to draw on the extensive body of research done on speech acts, and specifically investigations of the ways in which speakers attempt to maintain positive and negative face. Brown and Levinson, in their seminal work on politeness, define positive face as ‘the positive consistent self-image or ‘personality’ (crucially including the desire that this self-image be appreciated and approved of) claimed by interactants’ (1987, p. 61) and negative face as ‘the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, rights to non-distraction, i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition’ (*ibid*). They argue that speakers want to avoid the impact of any act that potentially threatens either the positive or negative face of the interlocutor (an ‘FTA’, or ‘face-threatening act’).

In this study we used these distinctions as the basis for our evaluative framework to investigate the feedback comments given from supervisor to students, and in particular the affective markers - linguistic strategies used to take into account the affective impact of one’s utterances on the interlocutor - used by the supervisor.

Specifically, the study attempted to answer the following questions:

- RQ1. How much of the written feedback in PhD supervision uses affective markers?
- RQ2. What is the range and frequency of the affective markers?
- RQ3. What are some of the contexts in which the affective markers were used?

### **Participants and context**

The data were derived from the interaction between a supervisor (one of the authors of this paper) and four of his students. The students were all in their first year of their doctoral programmes and in the process of completing their research proposals. They were between 25-35 years old, three females and one male. All were advanced L2 speakers of English (the language of the interaction). At the time of the study they were enrolled in four different universities in four different countries.

The supervision took place online through a combination of synchronous communication (using Skype and sometimes instant messaging) and asynchronous communication (using email and through comments inside the documents the students submitted for feedback). The supervisor and students did not meet face-to-face, apart from two brief social meetings with two of the students at conferences.

The supervisor was not involved in the data analysis and was not asked to explain or give background to the recorded interaction.

### **Data collection and analysis**

It was decided to analyse written feedback given during three feedback cycles. By cycles we mean all the suggestions made on one substantially different version of the proposal document. This included subsequent questions and answers between the student and the supervisor as well as minor additions and changes.

Collecting the feedback cycles took approximately three months. The data took the form of emails, written comments in electronic documents, and text chat transcripts. Skype conversations were summarised by the supervisor to provide background information about the interaction, but were not analysed for feedback. The research thus only draws on *written* feedback.

As our unit of analysis we took the written comments made by the supervisor on the students' draft research proposal. We first analysed these comments to identify affective markers, which were defined in this study as any utterance that includes features that function to reduce potential face threats for the interlocutor. To this end we used the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CSARP) Coding Manual, which includes a range of politeness schemes and categories for requests and apologies (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989).

According to Blum-Kulka et al. affective markers can be categorized as either internal or external redressive moves; internal redressive statements adopt linguistic elements within the utterance to mitigate the intrusive force of suggestions, whereas in an external redressive utterance, mitigating statements are presented outside of the suggesting utterance. Some internal redressive categories presented in the manual, such as appealors, cajolers, and subjunctive forms, were removed for analysis, as these were not found in the data (being more typical of oral interaction). Furthermore, two forms that were salient in this study were added: 'using modals' and 'projecting the interlocutor'.

Our coding scheme is included below. Internal redressive statements categorised included:

- (1) subjectivisers: are linguistic devices such as 'I think' and 'In my opinion', emphasizing that the opinion is only on the part of the speaker, mitigating assertive force of the message (e.g., "*I believe it is somewhat related to second one.*")
- (2) past tense modals: In English, past tense modals such as 'could' and 'might' may downgrade the assertive power of the statement (e.g., As I mentioned, you *could* ask them to look at their recordings.")
- (3) Politeness markers: markers such as 'please' soften utterances.
- (4) Downtoners: these are intended to make suggestions to the listener, but using sentential or propositional modifiers such as 'perhaps' (e.g., *Perhaps you could add some more from a portfolio perspective.*)

(5) Projecting the interlocutor : suggestions proposed from the interlocutor's perspective, thus reducing illocutionary power (e.g., "You may want to rephrase this...")

(6) Phrasal modals: can reduce the effects of reinforcement result from suggestions. (e.g., "You'd better move this up to the literature section.")

External addressive moves included:

(1) Grounders: any reasons, explanations or justifications given for suggestions. (e.g., "Think about how you are going to classify the difficulties – *otherwise you won't be able to compare them.*")

(2) External politeness markers: suggestions that request cooperation from the interlocutor. (e.g., "No thoughts here? *How about* the complexity of autonomy.")

(3) Preparators: any moves in which the speaker asks about the potential possibility of carrying out the suggestion, or asks for the interlocutor's permission to make a suggestion in order to prepare the interlocutor for the ensuing suggestion without giving away the content of the speech act. (e.g., "*This may seem like bit picking but it is an important distinction* and you'll need to make it clear.")

(4) Downgrading commitments: modifiers that the speaker employs to minimize the degree of his/her commitment to a suggestion, but placed sentence-externally. (e.g., "Although I don't disagree with the below *it seems to me* that a crucial element is the teacher's view of learning.")

(5) Imposition minimisers: elements through which the speaker tries to reduce the imposition placed on the interlocutor by his/her suggestion. (e.g., "*if you want to avoid this* rather specific term which has a particular meaning you could say 'what strategies do in dealing with their academic writing difficulties?'")

To determine what place affect played in each exchange, two of the researchers initially examined the data separately (the two researchers not involved in the actual supervision) to determine which words or phrases appealed more to the affective than the cognitive side of the interaction. When both parties agreed, these items were immediately included in the data for analysis. When there was disagreement a third party (a colleague) was asked to give an opinion and, where necessary, the two researchers discussed this person's verdict before deciding whether or not to include the item.

The data was first categorized into comments with affective markers and comments without such markers (e.g., bald on record moves). Next, comments with affective

markers were further analyzed for the type of marker used. In cases where different types of markers were simultaneously adopted in one sentence, each instance was counted separately. The range and frequency of each of the markers was then calculated, both for the feedback given to each student, and for all feedback combined.

## RESULTS

Broadly, feedback was categorized into two: a) agreeing with students' opinions, as in compliments such as 'well done' and 'good introduction'; and b) showing disagreement with the students' work and suggesting other options. Most comments showing disagreements or suggestions incorporated various strategies to mitigate their potential affective impact. Our analysis focuses only on b).

The first research question examines the types and proportion of affective markers used in the feedback given to students on their PhD proposal documents. Figure 1 shows the percentage of comments with redressive moves (feedback utterances with affective markers) and bald on record (feedback utterances without such markers) given to each participant (names are pseudonyms) of the study.

**Figure 1. Percentage of feedback with and without redressive form**

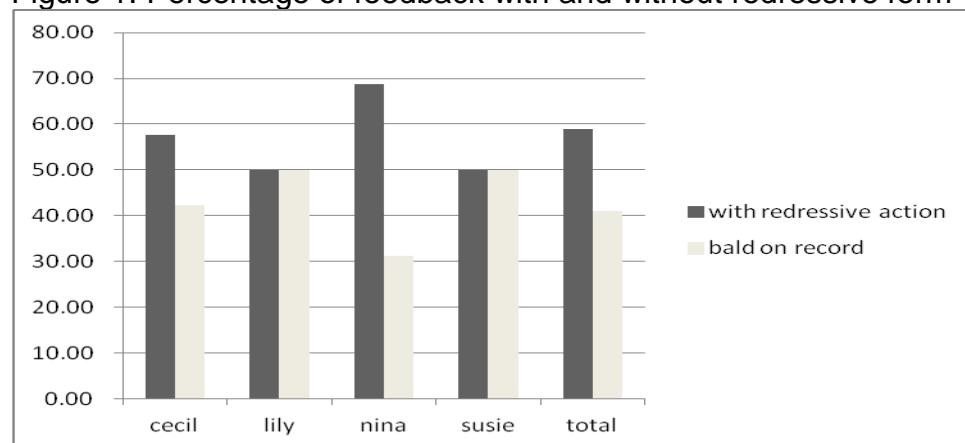


Figure 1 reveals that for two students, feedback was given more in redressive form than bald on record, but for the other two there was no difference. Taking all feedback episodes from the four students together, the percentage of redressive moves taken by the supervisor was 59% and 41% bald on record, indicating that in general the supervisor tended to address feedback slightly more frequently with the use of affective markers than without, in order to reduce potential face threats.

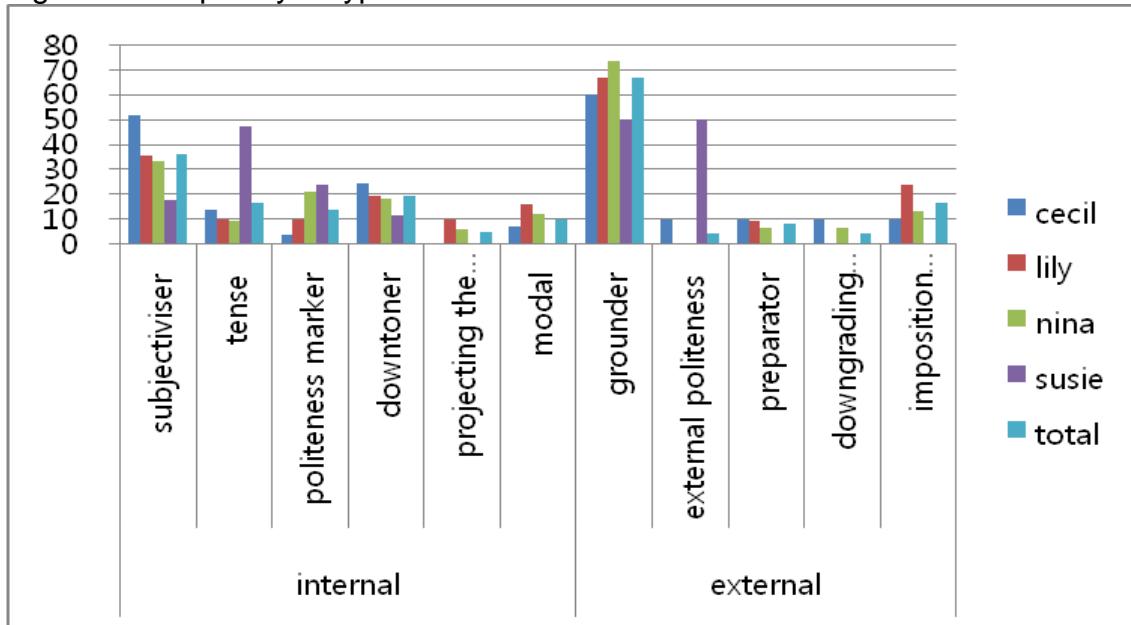
The second research question asked about the range and frequency of the affective markers. Table 1 and Figure 2 summarise the results from our analysis.

Table 1

## Frequency and Distribution of Strategies Adopted in Redressive Moves (percentage)

		<u>Cecil</u>	<u>Lily</u>	<u>Nina</u>	<u>Susie</u>	<u>Total</u>
Internal	Subjectiviser	52	35	33	18	36
	Tense	14	10	9	47	16
	Politeness marker	3	10	21	24	14
	Downtoner	24	19	18	12	19
	Projecting interlocutors	0	10	6	0	5
	Modal	7	16	12	0	10
	Total	100	100	100	100	100
External	Grounder	60	67	73	50	67
	External politeness	10	0	0	50	4
	Preparatory	10	10	7	0	8
	Downgrading commitment	10	0	7	0	4
	Imposition minimiser	10	24	13	0	17
	Total	100	100	100	100	100

Figure 2. Frequency in types of internal and external redressive moves



In terms of the range of redressive moves used, both utterance-internal and utterance-external redressive strategies were adopted. The internal strategies include subjectivisers, past tenses, politeness markers, downturners, projecting the interlocutor, and modals. The external strategies include grounders, external politeness markers, preparators, downgrading commitments, and imposition minimisers.

With regards to the frequency of the redressive types, there were 110 instances of internal redressive moves and only 48 tokens of external redressive moves, indicating that the supervisor adopted more internal, or linguistic elements within suggestive utterances, than external elements such as grounders and external politeness markers.

As for the internal affective markers, subjectivisers such as 'I think' and 'I believe' were the most frequent, followed by downturners (e.g., perhaps, maybe), tense (e.g., might be), and polite markers (e.g., please). The supervisor addressed suggestions with clear indication of his own opinion using expressions like 'to me,' or 'in my opinion', so that students would not be likely to feel too strongly about the suggestion. Sometimes he puts himself into the student's position (e.g. 'I'd really leave out the word 'web 2.0' from your title, if I were you').

There were new categories found in the data, one of which focuses on the student and their wishes, for example by saying 'you may want to include this', 'you may like to' or 'you may wish to', instead of saying 'I want you to do X'. Additionally, colloquial expressions using modals (e.g., 'you'd better') also appeared.

The frequency or distribution of redressive moves given to individual students was not consistent. For example, although subjectivisers were the most frequently addressed to three students, that was not the case for the fourth, for whom

politeness markers were most frequently given to mitigate the impact of the feedback. What this suggests is that there might be some variation in the type of redressive feedback that the supervisor chooses to use depending on the individuals and the different stages in their proposal development.

As for external redressive moves, grounders were the most frequently used (67%). This means that the supervisor tended to give reasons or justifications for his comments. For example, a direct suggestion was given first, followed by the reasons or expected outcomes of that suggestion as in ‘This is not clear. You need to include a description of what kind of treatment both groups get. *That way* the reader can decide if any effects you might find are attributed to your treatment or not’.

Additionally, imposition minimisers were adopted frequently as in ‘if you want to avoid this rather specific term which has a particular meaning, you could say ...’ and ‘This may seem like nit-picking, but it is an important distinction and you’ll need to make it clear which you are referring to’. From these, the supervisor tried not to be too strong in his position, offering choices to students or defending their face in making strong suggestions.

The third research question examined the contexts where different types of affective markers were used. In general, there were two different types of feedback; one related to the content of the writing such as idea development and research design, while the other concerning formal aspects of writing such as grammar, citation, and references. An interesting result is that the supervisor tended to use more direct forms of suggestions in making comments on formal aspects of writing. For example, comments which were bald on record were related to wording, re-ordering structure, or references as in ‘avoid this type of emotional language unless it is a direct quote’, ‘this should go into the ‘academic writing’ section above’, and ‘be careful with your grammar’. On the other hand, comments concerning content/ideas tended to be addressed more indirectly, using subjectivisers (e.g., I believe, in my opinion), by providing reasons for comments (e.g., grounder), or through indirect suggestions (e.g., it’s always good to make a diagram with all the information to make sure it all makes sense’), and in this way protecting face from potentially intrusive or imperative suggestions. Still, some comments on wording or grammar were addressed with redressive moves ranging from internal devices like ‘please’ in ‘please use the paragraph and heading styles’ to external apologies as in ‘Sorry for correcting the odd language mistake – As an editor I can’t help it!’.

There were other friendly comments using emoticons, or through responding, acknowledging, or reinforcing the students’ work. This type of affect intends not to prevent a potential face threatening act, but to establish a friendly mood among interlocutors and to encourage students (e.g., ‘Good introduction’, ‘This is a great rationale for your own study’, or ‘This part seems very helpful as it will give you specific behaviours to look for in the teachers’). This type of comment accounted for less than 10% of all feedback types. However, sometimes, the supervisor gave a positive response to students’ work and then made suggestions for improvement as in ‘You are moving in the right direction but are mixing up different types of studies. We need to be clear on what you are going to do. Here are your options’.

Also, although rare, there were instances that can be considered as ‘threat or warning’. For example, statements such as ‘The quality of these instruments will make or break your study’ suggest a strong position of his opinion, persuading learners even more strongly.

## Discussion and implications

This study investigated how a Phd supervisor used affective and politeness strategies when giving written online feedback on students' doctoral proposals, an area neglected so far (Ajmer 2005). So what do the results tell us? Firstly, they give an interesting picture of the affective aspect of supervision. They show how a supervisor in a ‘master-learner’ relation (Kumar & Stracke 2007) naturally goes about taking the students’ feelings into account in the interaction. In the case of this particular supervisor all four strategies suggested by Hyland (2003) were observed, regardless of whether the purpose of the feedback was referential, directive or expressive (Kumar & Stracke 2007). The most common pattern was to employ redressive moves (59% of the time), showing a considerable affective concern. It is also interesting to observe that most of the redressive actions were made through the use of subjectivisers (e.g., I think) and grounders (e.g., giving reasons). The use of these two strategies seems reasonable in the case of PhD supervision where supervisors offer their opinions but where the students themselves bear the main responsibility for developing their work. Further, regarding the use of grounders, it is likely that suggestions accompanied by a rationale are more persuasive and less affectively charged, thus reducing potential face threats to students. Further, out of a total of 158 redressive actions, the majority (110) were internal, linguistic redressive moves. That means that the supervisor in this study preferred to use politeness stategies to soften his feedback with the use of linguistic devices such as modals or subjectivisers, rather than to reduce the face-threatening situations by contextualising the message with other causal or preparatory statements. Future studies could investigate how internal versus external redressive moves are interpreted by supervisees and this could help supervisors make more deliberate choices. For example, considerable research has demonstrated that indirect speech acts are more difficult for second language learners to understand (see Bardovi-Harlig, 2001, for a review). Thus, supervisors of, in particular, non-native speakers are presented with a dilemma: maintain politeness and risk lowering comprehensibility or increase comprehensibility and risk offending the students (Thonus 1999). Both of these tensions contribute to how the supervisor and student co-construct their roles during the session.

Another finding, perhaps not surprising, was the use of more polite strategies in providing content-related feedback, compared to language mistakes such as spelling, references, citations, and grammar issues. It is expected that any suggestions or comments with no absolute answers tend to take a more indirect and careful approach with the use of affective markers, whereas mere mistakes or mechanical errors are likely to take a more direct approach.

However, as the data showed, the feedback differed between the four students. In particular with one student, the supervisor used more bald on record moves. It would be interesting for future studies to investigate, for example by using stimulated recall

protocols, or by collaborative interpretation of recorded data, the reasons for using particular affective strategies with particular students. It is also important to distinguish between the different types of feedback given for different types of issues; in the results above it was clear that bald on record moves were more common for ‘simple’ language mistakes. Potentially more face-threatening feedback on research ideas drew more on redressive moves.

All this different information slowly builds up a picture of the interaction and the feedback given by the supervisor. This picture has the pedagogical benefit of providing the supervisor with a window into his or her own ways of interacting with the students and to clearly identify the types and amount of feedback given. In this respect our study can be classed as action research: it may influence the supervisor in future interactions. With this knowledge, supervisors can detect patterns in their interaction; do they treat certain students differently? Do they give more or less feedback than they thought? Do they use affective markers more or less than they thought? This information can be particularly helpful for supervisors working in the highly personal and sensitive context of PhD supervision to become more aware of their own approaches, and to then attune these better to their students. We hope that our study has contributed in a small way to an increased understanding of the extremely individual and personal environment of supervision.

### **Conclusion and limitations**

It is important to highlight some limitations in this study. Firstly, and most obviously, only one supervisor was involved. Clearly, it is difficult, even impossible, to generalise from the results as it is likely that each supervisor has his or her own style and uses affective markers in different ways. Having said this, and having experimented with and developed the data collection tools, we do feel that they could be applied with other and larger numbers of supervisors and we would encourage others to make use of our instruments.

A second limitation is that we did not investigate the students’ perspective and did not ask them how they experienced the affective elements in the interaction. Supervisees experience different types of feedback in different ways (cf. Kumar & Stracke 2007). It was our deliberate choice to limit ourselves to the teacher, but we believe with Reid (1999: 304) that the effect of feedback depends on the way it is received and that in order to fully understand the affective impact of the various strategies used by the supervisor, the student voice would need to be included.

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