

You-Attitude: A Linguistic Perspective

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You-attitude is a pedagogically convenient cover term that subsumes considerable complexity, both with respect to the text effects it may include and the text characteristics that create these effects. Some of the insights on politeness, tact, and deference found in the work of Brown and Levinson, Leech, and Fraser and Nolen can help provide guidelines for assessing how important a you-attitude may be in writing about a particular real-world situation, and case grammar and information structure can inform strategies to enhance the expression of a you-attitude. Rather than being a binary variable, you-attitude appears to be gradable, and an informal student assessment of the you-attitude expressed in ten versions of the same passage suggests that the various strategies for enhancing the you-attitude conveyed by a text appear to have a cumulative effect, so that a greater sense of you-attitude is created when more strategies are used.

Key Words You-attitude, linguistics, politeness, case grammar, information structure

IN A SEMINAL ARTICLE for the argument that pragmatics—the branch of linguistics concerned with language use—can enhance our understanding of business communication, Limaye and Cherry (1987) present their aim as follows:

Business communicators speak of persuasion, good-news and bad-news letters, the you-attitude, and goodwill. Pragmatics research supplies more rigorous tools to examine these concepts than the often fuzzy, pop-psychology approach found in business communication literature. This study is a first step toward . . . a 'pragmatic grammar of business communication.' (p. 87)

They propose an effectiveness measure for business letters that is based on the conversation maxims described in Grice (1975) and the politeness principles developed by Lakoff (1973; 1977) and Brown and Levinson (1978). Similarly, Hagge and Kostelnick (1989) complain that "students *aren't* told *how* one uses language

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to be diplomatic or to imply. To make matters worse, many textbooks appear to ignore completely, proscribe, or cover in insufficient detail the very politeness locutions with which linguistic diplomacy is conveyed in the real world" (p. 334). After more than a decade, it is still true that linguistic research has had relatively little impact on business communication research and teaching and we have little explicit advice to offer students on how to achieve qualities such as you-attitude.

My main purpose is to suggest how the teaching of you-attitude can be enhanced by using politeness theories, case grammar, and information structure. This article begins with a review of how you-attitude (or you-perspective) has been defined and discussed in textbooks and articles in business and technical communication. It then explains very briefly the most relevant aspects of the three linguistic theories and indicates where readers could find more discussions of each. Then, using a brief announcement as an example, the article shows how these linguistic theories can be used to first assess the need for a you-attitude and then to inform specific strategies to enhance the expression of a you-attitude. Finally, on the basis of a very informal student assessment, the article suggests that the effect of these strategies appears to be cumulative and accounts in part for what I will argue is the gradability of you-attitude.

Definitions and Studies of You-attitude

The concept of you-attitude appears to have originated in work on advertising during the first decade of the 20th century and was presented as a business writing principle by G. B. Hotchkiss in his 1916 textbook (Hagge, 1989, p. 36). Since then it has become one of the business communication principles that Hagge says are "essentially folkloristic, having passed through the rhetorical tradition without much thought to their real validity" (p. 49).

Textbook treatments of you-attitude are characterized by considerable inconsistency about what the term includes, by vagueness about the means of achieving it, and by an implied claim of binariness. Two fairly traditional, if vague, approaches to you-atti-

tude are exemplified by Sigband (1976), who defines you-attitude as "viewing a situation from the other person's point of view" (p. 161), and by Bowman and Branchaw (1984), who define it as "putting your readers and their problems first" (p. 266). In other words, these approaches see you-attitude as somehow countering the natural, or unmarked tendency to view the world from one's own perspective, but they do not provide guidelines on how such a you-attitude might be expressed in texts.

Various textbook writers have defined the you-attitude so broadly that it seems to include all characteristics of effective business writing. For example, Treece (1980) equates you-attitude with "all of the desirable qualities of communication," including "consideration, courtesy, completeness, conciseness, clearness" (p. 82). And a current very broad definition is provided by Locker (1997), who extends the you-attitude to include such matters as being complete, arranging information to meet the reader's needs, and using headings and lists to help the reader find key points. It seems to me that by expanding the referents of you-attitude too far, however, we lose the benefits of having the separate concept of a you-attitude. We cannot say, for example, that "the document design is very good, the text is very readable, but this document could express more you-attitude."

For me, document design and readability concern how a document looks and how easy a document is to read; these two perspectives view the reader primarily as a text-processor. You-attitude, however, concerns the reader as a participant in a transaction that can be viewed from more than one perspective; it views the reader as one who may be affected by a real-world situation about which a document communicates. In other words, while document design and readability require writers to view a document from the reader's perspective, you-attitude requires writers first to view a real-world situation from the reader's perspective and then to show in the text of the document a sensitivity to the reader's perspective.

Textbooks are even less helpful in being explicit about how a you-attitude can be expressed in a discourse. A particularly poor

example is Batteiger (1985), which suggests that writing with a you-attitude is as simple as using the second person pronoun more often than the first, and will be a natural consequence of understanding the reader's situation. While simply using "you" and "yours" rather than "I" and "mine" will sometimes help to express a you-attitude, it would be both simple-minded and incorrect to equate you-attitude with the dominance of "you" in a text. As Bovee and Thill (1995) say: "It isn't just a matter of using one pronoun as opposed to another; it's a matter of genuine empathy. You can use *you* 25 times in a single page and still ignore your audience's true concerns. In the final analysis, it's the thought that counts, not the pronoun" (p. 145). Mulvihill (1990) also notes that in the student work he has examined, even though the "you" may be there, the you-attitude is not. In fact, most textbooks offer no specific guidelines.

Two notable exceptions are the respected, very successful business writing text by Locker (1997) and the technical writing text by Reep (1997). Obviously, the limited space available for any particular topic in a textbook restricts how much attention that topic can receive, and in turn makes it very difficult for a textbook writer to be as explicit and complete as he or she might prefer to be. Nevertheless, it is interesting that there is little specific overlap in the guidelines of Locker and Reep. Here are Locker's:

1. Focus not on what you do for the reader, but on what the reader receives or can do. In positive or neutral situations, stress what the reader wants to know.
2. Refer to the reader's request or order specifically.
3. Don't talk about your own feelings unless you're sure the reader wants to know how you feel.
4. Don't tell readers how they feel or will react.
5. In positive situations, use *you* more often than *I*. Use *we* when it includes the reader.
6. In negative situations, avoid the word *you*. Protect the reader's ego. Use passive verbs and impersonal expressions to avoid assigning blame (Locker, 1997, p. 34).

Here are Reep's guidelines:

1. Put yourself in your reader's place, and look at the situation from his or her point of view.
2. Emphasize your reader's actions or benefits in a situation.
3. Present information as pleasantly as possible.
4. Offer a helpful suggestion or appreciative comment when possible.
5. Choose words that do not insult or accuse your reader.
6. Choose words that are clear and natural, and avoid old-fashioned or legal-sounding phrases. (Reep, 1997, p. 362)

In addition to not having much overlap, these two sets of guidelines are not as explicit as one might at first think. For example, Locker does not say where and how one should use "you" in positive messages, and Reep does not say what one should do in a text in order to emphasize the reader's actions or benefits. This lack of explicitness may result in part from there being relatively little in the journal literature that relates specifically to the expression of a you-attitude. Several studies—Wells and Spinks (1990), Brockman and Belanger (1993), Shelby and Reinsch (1995)—have examined the general presence or absence of you-attitude in various kinds of letters, but there has been little attention to the text characteristics that express you-attitude. A notable exception is Campbell, Riley, and Parker (1990). Although their paper is limited to discussing the relevance of speech act theory to you-attitude, it does show that "both first and second person pronouns, as well as both subject and non-subject positions, may be exploited to create the you-perspective, depending on the type of speech act and its status as a negative or positive message" (p.198).

Binariness, the final quality of textbook treatments, is implied in the typical in-text examples in which one version is said to have the you-attitude, while the other lacks it, as in Locker (1997):

Lacks you attitude: We are happy to extend you a credit line of \$5000.

You attitude: You can now charge up to \$5000 on your American Express card. (p. 35)

Exercises that direct students to rewrite passages so as to show a you-attitude tend to reinforce this impression of binariness. I will

argue later that it is much more meaningful to consider the you-attitude as a gradable rather than a binary variable. If we emphasize that there are degrees of you-attitude, we can encourage students to use a variety of strategies to enhance the expression of a you-attitude.

Theories of Linguistic Politeness

Although you-attitude is not identical to linguistic politeness, I think that a definition of you-attitude must include some aspects of politeness, and this makes theories of linguistic politeness helpful to discussions of you-attitude. In particular, these theories can help us assess the need for a you-attitude in a specific situation. The generally familiar model of Brown and Levinson (1978; 1987) claims that the need for politeness is determined by what they call the weight of the face-threatening act, which in turn is the simple sum of three factors:

1. The social distance between speaker and hearer
2. The relative power of hearer over speaker
3. The ranking of a particular imposition within a culture (1987, p.76)

I would suggest that the need for a you-attitude also depends on the social distance between speaker and hearer, the relative power of hearer over speaker, and the severity of the imposition. For those unfamiliar with the Brown and Levinson model, very accessible summaries are available in Cherry (1988), Riley (1988), Fraser (1990), Hagge and Kostelnick (1989), and Moore (1990).

Another, less familiar model is that of Leech (1983), which in effect substitutes costs and benefits—in economic, social, or psychological terms—for Brown and Levinson's (1987) much more abstract and difficult to determine weight of the imposition of the act in a culture. For the same speaker and hearer, where distance and the power or authoritative status differences are constant, the key variable in determining weight and the need for tact will then be the cost or benefit. Further, tact (and by extension you-attitude) can be achieved by minimizing and maximizing such vari-

ables as costs and benefits, dispraise and praise, disagreement and agreement, and antipathy and sympathy.

Fraser and Nolen's (1981) work focuses on the distance variable in the weight equation. What they, following Goffman (1971), call deference is "the giving of status and by doing so creating relative symbolic distance between the speaker and the hearer" (1981, p. 97). According to them, "Deference is not the same as politeness,... but the inappropriate use of deference can result in an impolite utterance, just in case the level of status conveyed falls above or below that understood by the two parties" (p. 98).

Case Grammar

Case grammar emphasizes the fact that no matter what syntactic structures one chooses to use to talk about an action, the actual roles of the participants (people, objects, forces, and locations) in that action remain unchanged. This approach to the analysis of sentences assigns to each noun phrase what is called a thematic (or semantic) role, which captures or describes the relationship of that noun phrase to some particular action. For example, if Steve signed the contract with a fountain pen, "Steve" is the agent (the animate doer), "the contract" is the patient (the recipient of the action), and "a fountain pen" is the instrument (what is used to perform an action). As we see in Figure 1, these roles remain unchanged regardless of which noun phrase is assigned the grammatical function of subject or object in a particular sentence. We can also see in Figure 1 how various sentence structures allow us to move the unchanging thematic roles (agent, patient, instrument) to different syntactic positions (subject, direct object, object of the preposition).

The main advantage of the case grammar approach is that it allows the student to break out of the syntactic paradigm and view a situation only in terms of its participants. Once the semantic roles are identified, the writer or speaker can then decide in which syntactic position each participant should best be placed. In the case of expressing more you-attitude, then, the writer can make willful choices about which noun phrase should be placed in

Figure 1
How Case Grammar Analyzes Five Sentences

| | | | |
|---------------------------------|------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| 1. Steve Agent | signed | the contract Patient | with a fountain pen Instrument |
| 2. Steve Agent | used | a fountain pen Instrument | to sign the contract Patient |
| 3. The contract Patient | was signed | with a fountain pen Instrument | by Steve Agent |
| 4. The contract Patient | was signed | | with a fountain pen Instrument |
| 5. The contract Patient | was signed | | |
| 6. A fountain pen Instrument | was used | to sign | the contract Patient |

subject position, and so on. Accessible explanations of thematic roles are available in Brinton (2000), Campbell, Riley, and Parker (1990), Delahunty and Garvey (1994), and Quirk, et al (1985).

Information Structure

Information structure—which had its roots in the work of the Prague School linguists, and was developed further primarily in the work of Halliday (1967; 1985), Chafe (1974; 1976), Dik (1978; 1980), Givon (1979), and Lambrecht (1994)—helps us choose the appropriate sentence structure to convey a you-attitude because it describes the discourse effects of various syntactic choices. As Lambrecht defines it, “Information-structure analysis is centered on the comparison of semantically equivalent but formally and pragmatically divergent sentence pairs, such as active vs. passive, canonical vs. topicalized, canonical vs. clefted or dislocated, subject-accented vs. predicate-accented sentences, etc.” (1994, p. 6). In other words, the study of information structure is concerned with how sentences that have the same semantic “meaning,” but differ in syntactic form, will create different discourse effects.

One of the great difficulties for those who want to apply information structure concepts in their teaching is the sometimes subtle differences in terminology (“given” and “new,” “theme” and “rheme,” “topic” and “comment,” “topic” and “focus”) and conceptualization that different linguists have used. However, while most of these differences have theoretical import in linguistics, they need not be transported into the writing classroom.

Two concepts in information structure that are particularly relevant to the discussion of you-attitude are the concepts of topic and end-focus. The topic of a sentence is defined as what the sentence is about. Although strictly speaking the topic need not be the same as the subject—consider “It is raining,” for example—in English sentences, and particularly in business and technical writing, it is most usual for topics to be subjects. If we return to Figure 1, then, we can say that information structure tells us that the topic of sentences (1) and (2) is “Steve,” the topic of sentences (3), (4), and (5) is “the contract,” and the topic of sentence (6) is “the fountain pen.” Clearly, what the topic is becomes relevant to you-attitude or you-perspective if a sentence includes “I,” “we,” or “you.”

End-focus refers to the concept that the most emphatic position in a sentence is usually the final position (Quirk et al., 1985). In other words, in Figure 1, in sentences (1) and (4), “a fountain pen” is in the most emphatic position, but in (2) and (6) it is “the contract,” in (3) it is “Steve,” and in (5) it is “signed.” This aspect of information structure becomes particularly relevant to you-attitude because it tells us that we can give prominence to one of the participants, to the action, or to a cost or benefit, simply by moving that element to the final position in a sentence.

Vande Kopple (1989) is probably the most useful single writing textbook based on the principles of information structure and it would be a very fine starting point for the teacher unfamiliar with information structure.

Sample Passage

To show how politeness theories, case grammar, and information structure can be applied to the discussion of you-attitude, I have

used as an exercise the following very brief announcement which students are asked to revise so as to increase its you-attitude: "We have decided to cover the parking lot. To offset the cost of construction, we are increasing your monthly rental from \$10 to \$15."

First, we'll look at strategies to increase the you-attitude of the passage and then I will comment on some student rewrites that use some of these strategies.

Our first step is to assess the need for a you-attitude. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), to assess the need for politeness, we should consider the social distance between speaker and hearer, and the relative power of hearer over speaker. In this case we don't have enough information, out of context, to determine the social distance, but we can say that although the power of the landlord will depend on market conditions, normally the landlord (the writer) will have most of the power, while the renter (the reader) can only comply or leave. This suggests that the main factor in determining a need for politeness and hence for a you-attitude is the relative helplessness of the reader.

We can use Leech's Cost-Benefit scale to assess the need for politeness and you-attitude. What are the benefits and costs to the reader/renter? Obviously, the benefit is protection for the reader's car and for the reader; the cost is \$5 per month. We see that the need for politeness and for creating a you-attitude is probably not particularly high.

But how can we apply principles of case grammar and information structure, together with the insights of politeness theories, to enhance the you-attitude of this passage?

There are five interrelated strategies we could use to increase the you-attitude of the first sentence in the passage:

1. The agent, the subject, and the initial element of the sentence, "we," is also the topic, or what the sentence is about. To increase the you-attitude, then, the pronoun "we" will have to be moved out of subject position.
2. A more serious problem in the main clause is the main verb, "have decided." The "perfective" meaning of "decide," reinforced

by the perfective aspect (the “have” form of the verb), emphasizes the reader’s powerlessness because the action expressed in the verb is viewed as already completed. Since the difference in power between the landlord and renter is a main source of the weight of the situation, emphasizing the renter’s powerlessness will only magnify the weight. But since announcements generally presuppose that a decision has been made, we can increase the you-attitude by simply omitting the clause “we have decided.”

3. The benefit to the reader—the covering of the parking lot—is de-emphasized syntactically by being in a non-finite clause: “cover the parking lot.” We should, of course, try to emphasize this benefit, and one way of doing that is to make it a main clause. Should we use the active (“we will cover the parking lot”) or the passive (“the parking lot will be covered”)? Information structure helps us decide that the passive is more suitable. Not only will this allow us to remove the agent, “we,” thereby de-emphasizing the agent’s role in the action, but it will place “the parking lot” (what the reader is most interested in) in the subject and topic position, and it will place “covered” (the benefit) in the emphatic position of end-focus.

4. The original gives no motivation or justification for the decision, so the reader must conclude that the motivation is either a whim or the writer’s self-interest, both of which again emphasize the reader’s powerlessness. Also, the benefits to the reader are implied, rather than being stated. To increase the you-attitude, then, we should state explicitly the benefits to the reader—protection for the reader and her car—and claim that these benefits are the motivation for the construction project. Fraser notes that stating a justification is a strategy for mitigating or reducing the strength of a directive (1980), and although this isn’t strictly speaking a directive, the effect still holds.

5. We can give some prominence to the benefit—the protection—by moving the explicit statement of benefit to the beginning of the sentence.

Combining these five strategies would yield the following revision: “To protect you and your car, the parking lot will be covered.”

The second sentence in the passage is, of course, the bad-news part of the message. The original already uses three strategies to increase the you-attitude:

1. The most obvious strategy is the use of the possessive "your" in "your monthly rental," though since this is in the context of the cost rather than a benefit, its utility is debatable.

2. It states a justification for the increase: "to offset the cost of construction."

3. It impersonalizes the costs through the use of the definite article "the," rather than the possessive "our." This makes the justification less we-centered.

Several additional strategies can be used to decrease the we-attitude and to mitigate the imposition of the second sentence in the passage:

1. The pronoun "we" can be moved out of the position of subject and topic.

2. The main verb in the active, "are increasing," again allows no room for negotiation and thereby stresses the powerlessness of the reader. To de-emphasize the power and agency of the writer—the "we" of the sentence—one can again use the passive: "your monthly rental is being increased." Finally, one can nominalize this clause to "rent increase." Moving from the active to the passive and to the nominalization decreases what Fraser calls immediacy and thereby mitigates the imposition (1980).

3. Instead of noting the resulting total rent after the increase, one could note either the dollar amount of the increase (\$5), or the percentage or fraction of the increase (50% or "half"). Clearly, stating the increase as \$5 would de-emphasize its magnitude and we could, of course, mitigate the force of the bad news further by inserting a modifier ("modest" or "only" or "merely") that emphasizes how small the increase is.

4. To de-emphasize the increase we could also use our knowledge of information structure and move reference to the increase away from the end of the sentence.

5. To de-emphasize the writer's self-interest as justification for the increase, we can focus explicitly on the necessity of the

increase, by saying "will be necessary."

6. We can state regret at the increase by using a word such as "unfortunately."

Combining these strategies would yield the following: "Unfortunately, to offset the cost of construction, a modest rent increase of \$5 a month will be necessary."

Gradability

In the previous section we saw that using different strategies and different combinations of strategies resulted in quite varied versions of the original announcement, which varied also in the degree of you-attitude they expressed. In other words, you-attitude appears to be a gradable, rather than a binary quality. Further, it appears that the effect of the various strategies is cumulative; the more strategies are used, the more you-attitude appears to be created. This is shown very generally in the Appendix, which lists ten student-written versions of the sample passage as they were rank-ordered by 35 other students, who were asked to identify the passages they thought had the most you-attitude, a medium amount of you-attitude, and the least you-attitude. The first passage, 1-1, was ranked highest, with passages 1-2 to 1-4 also receiving high rankings. Passages 1-5 to 1-8 received more modest rankings, and passages 1-9 and 1-10 received the lowest rankings. Obviously, neither I nor the students who ranked the various versions had a precise definition of you-attitude, and for that reason the results of their ranking can only serve as a rough indication of reader response. Nevertheless, generally speaking, the more strategies that were used in a passage, the higher was the ranking.

These results echo those of Fraser and Nolen for deference. They found that English speakers could systematically assign a relative level of deference to sentences used to make requests (1981), and that these assignments appeared to depend on the cumulative effect of linguistic features that determine relative deference. Similarly, Brown and Levinson (1987) also imply that politeness is a gradable quality and that politeness can be increased by compounding various strategies. And finally, Riley

also found that combining several strategies has a cumulative effect on the degree of indirectness (1988).

In discussing you-attitude, then, it appears that we should emphasize its gradability and design exercises that ask students to both express various degrees of you-attitude and recognize various degrees of you-attitude.

Summary

In sum, then, this article leads to the following conclusions.

1. Definitions of you-attitude should exclude readability and document design; only you-attitude is concerned with viewing a real-world situation from the reader's perspective and then preparing a text that conveys a sensitivity to that perspective.

2. We should emphasize that you-attitude is a gradable, not a binary quality. Various strategies for enhancing the you-attitude conveyed by a text appear to have a cumulative effect, so that a greater sense of you-attitude is created when more strategies are used.

3. Some of the insights on politeness, tact, and deference found in the work of Brown and Levinson, Leech, and Fraser and Nolen can enhance our discussions of you-attitude. In particular, they can be very useful in assessing how important a you-attitude may be in a particular situation.

4. Case grammar and information structure can help us be more explicit in our discussions of text strategies that can be used to increase you-attitude.

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APPENDIX**Student Rankings of Revised Passages From Most You-oriented to Least**

1-1 For the convenience of regular parking-lot users like yourself, a new roof covering the parking lot will be built. To offset the cost of construction of this facility, a nominal extra monthly charge of \$5 will be necessary.

1-2 Covered parking is to be installed, to protect you and your car from the harsh winter elements. As a result of this improvement, we foresee an increase in your monthly parking costs of \$5.

1-3 In order to protect your vehicle better from the effects of rain and snow, we have decided to cover the parking lot. To offset the cost of construction, we regretfully must increase the monthly rental from \$10 to \$15.

1-4 In an effort to keep your car dryer and cleaner, the parking lot is being covered. A portion of the cost of these improvement must be reflected in a monthly rental increase of \$5.

1-5 We are covering the parking lot so that your car will be protected against the seasonal elements. We regret that in order to offset the cost of construction, the monthly rental will be increased from \$10 to \$15.

1-6 For your convenience, we have decided to cover the parking lot. To finance this improvement, we are increasing your monthly rental by \$5.

1-7 In order to offset the construction costs to cover the parking lot, we are increasing your monthly rental from \$10 to \$15. We regret any inconvenience this may cause, but believe you will benefit greatly from these improvements.

1-8 We are going to cover the parking lot. These improvements will keep you much drier and safer and your monthly rental will only increase by \$5.

1-9 Your parking area is due to be upgraded by the installation of a roof. To make this possible, it will be necessary to increase your monthly rental from \$10 to \$15.

1-10 We have decided to improve our service by covering the parking lot and we would appreciate it if you could contribute to this construction by paying \$15 instead of \$10.

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