**Hedges, Euphemisms, Apologies, and Requests:**

**Language for Politeness**

Not all of our language is direct. Consider common exchanges at a restaurant:

“*So have you had a chance to look over the menu?*” the waitress might ask at the beginning of the meal. “*What do you want?*” would be, of course, far too blunt. Similarly, the waitress could say “*I’ll just put the check here on the table for whenever you’re ready*” at the end of the meal; she would never say, “*You need to pay now*.” In fact, a lot of our language is made up of similar language for politeness. This may be different (in some cases) from how you would speak to someone in your native culture. Pay attention to these differences; speaking like an American would, could save you from being misunderstood or creating a difficult situation.

1. **The Hedge**

The Hedge “*I’d really like to come to the party on Saturday, but I’m not sure if I can*,” means “*I probably won’t be there*.” The speaker needs to respond to this invitation but doesn’t want to give a direct “yes” or “no” and instead hedges, or approaches the invitation indirectly, to avoid offending the host or committing himself to coming when he can’t.

1. **Euphemism**

Euphemism is the “pretty language” we use to cover up a sensitive matter: “*a little heavy*,” for “*fat*,” for example, and “*mature*” for “*old*.” Because euphemisms are very indirect and an attempt to in some way evade the truth, they can be confusing for even native speakers. There are sensitive and even “taboo” (unspeakable) topics of American culture--death, aging, weight—and some of the common euphemisms for them. Usually, the more sensitive the topic, the more euphemisms it will have; think of how many alternate ways we have to say “*to die*”: “*passed away*,” “*bought the farm*,” “*kicked the bucket*,” “*went to heaven*,” and so on.

1. **The Apology or Pseudo-apology**

The Apology or Pseudo-apology: “*I’m sorry I’m late. Traffic is miserable*,” or similar apology with an excuse is necessary for such minor transgressions as lateness. In contrast, a “pseudo-apology” is often used as an expression of sympathy: “*I’m sorry to hear about your father’s death*.” This is obviously not actually an apology but an expression of sympathy, and mistaking its function can lead to some rather comical exchanges: e.g., “*It’s okay; it’s not your fault*.”

1. **Requests**

All languages have some way, and usually many ways, of asking for help: all of us do this, of various people, and over different things, sometimes just in the course of a day. So there are many ways to ask for help. Generally speaking, the closer the relationship and/or the smaller the request, the less formal and polite the language. As the favor grows bigger and/or the relationship more distant, the more polite the language. For example, I might say to my brother, “*Hey, lend me a quarter for the parking meter, please*?” but to a board of directors of a foundation, I would say, “*I sincerely request that you seriously consider funding this worthy program…*” Switching the two levels of formality and politeness in these examples would be completely inappropriate.

1. **Terms of Address**

“*Sir*,” “*Ma’am*,” and “*Miss*”: When is it polite to use these, if at all? “*Sir*” is used with adult males; “*Ma’am*” is used for an adult female; “*miss*” usually for a teenager or young adult. These are used when the addressee’s name is not known: e.g., “*Sir, would you have the time?*” They are also used for customers and clients: e.g., “*What can I get for you, Ma’am?*” Some interesting notes on terms of address: “*Lady*” in American culture is not polite when used as a means of address; rather it is a dishonorific, as in “*Lady, move your car*.” “*Boy*” as a term of address for male service people, especially African American ones, has long fallen out of use in the United States, seen rightly as racist. However, “*girl*” is still heard to refer to, not address, female service people, such as waiters, no matter the age of the person: e.g., “*I already gave my order to the girl*,” when “*the girl*” might be sixty years old. But this, too, is considered inappropriate.

Because the whole point of the language of politeness is often to cover up an ugly reality, such as death or the need for money, understanding it can be difficult, even to native speakers.

However, understanding how to use these various language functions of hedges, euphemisms, and apologies is necessary to navigate successfully in English.

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