The art of the unsaid

Exploring the use of hedging strategies in a cross-cultural perspective

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Talking points

- The topic of my PhD project   What
- The relevance of this topic   Why
- Methodology   How

- Preliminary work

Overall objective of PhD

To provide more insight into hedging as an aspect of pragmatic competence and as a negative politeness tool

by studying the use of hedging strategies by native speakers of Norwegian, native speakers of English and Norwegian learners of English

in spoken corpora

to ultimately avoid communicative failure when e.g. performing a face-threatening act (FTA)

Hedging in a cross-cultural perspective

- Pragmatic competence is "the ability to use language effectively in order to achieve a specific purpose and to understand language in context" (Thomas, 1983)

- Pragmatic competence is a prerequisite for successful communication and hedging is an element of pragmatic competence

- Hedging "reduces the force or truth of an utterance and thus reduces the risk a speaker runs when uttering a strong or firm assertion or other speech act" (Kaltenböck, Mihatsch & Schneider, 2010)

- Learners may produce "grammatically flawless speech that nonetheless fails to achieve its communicative aims" (Fraser, 2010: 15)

- Native speakers of a language are often less tolerant of pragmatic errors than grammatical errors (Tanaka, 1997 in Paltridge, 2012)

- The appropriate or inappropriate use of hedging strategies can shed light on learners' pragmatic competence
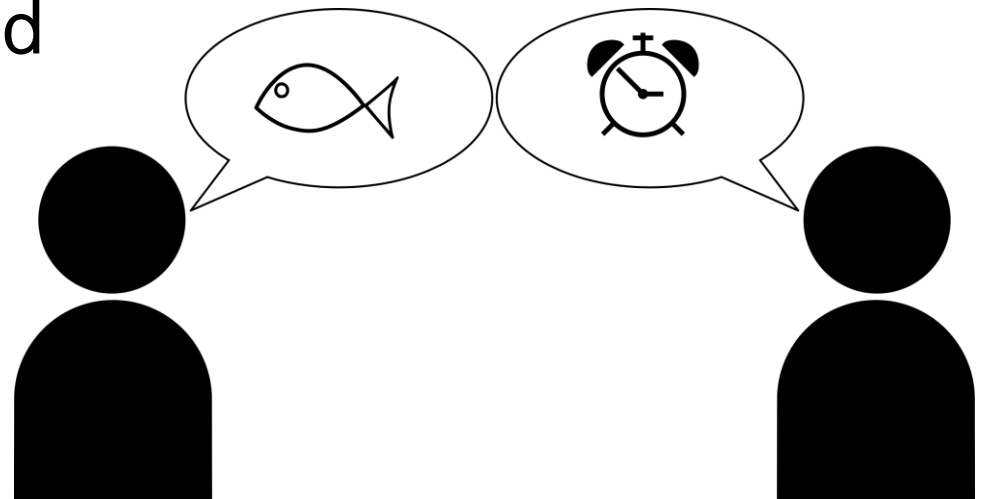
The motivation behind hedging

Slight bow
15 degree

Salute
30 degree

Respectful bow
45 degree
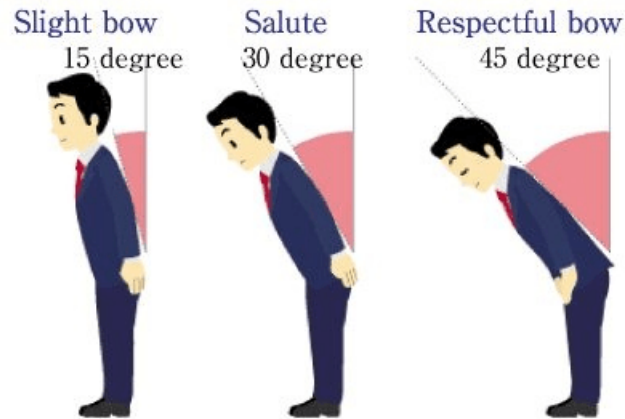
- One primary motivation for using hedging strategies is politeness (Markkanen & Schröder, 1997)

- Hedging can be seen as a negative politeness strategy addressing the hearer's negative face wants, i.e. his/her right not to be imposed on (Brown & Levinson, 1987)

Hedging in this study
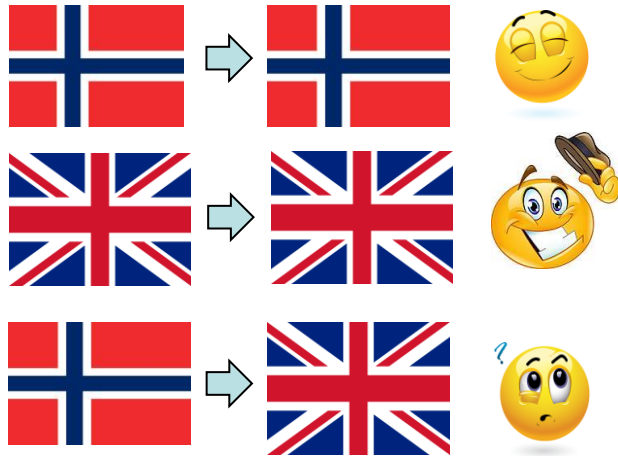
As hedging successfully requires a degree of sophistication even in one's mother tongue, it is no wonder that it can cause problems for language learners (Markkanen & Schröder, 1997)

Research questions

- RQ1: What type of hedging strategies (if any) does native speakers of Norwegian, native speakers of English and Norwegian learners of English use in a face-threatening context?

- RQ2: Are hedging strategies attenuating the illocutionary force more frequent than other strategies in spoken language?

- RQ3: Do hedging strategies of Norwegian learners of English differ from those of native speakers of English and do instances of pragmatic (pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic) transfer occur?

Corpora

Norwegian corpora:

- Norwegian Speech Corpus - the Oslo part
- Nordic Dialect Corpus (the Norwegian part)

English corpora:

- British National Corpus (BNC2014) (to be released 25 September)
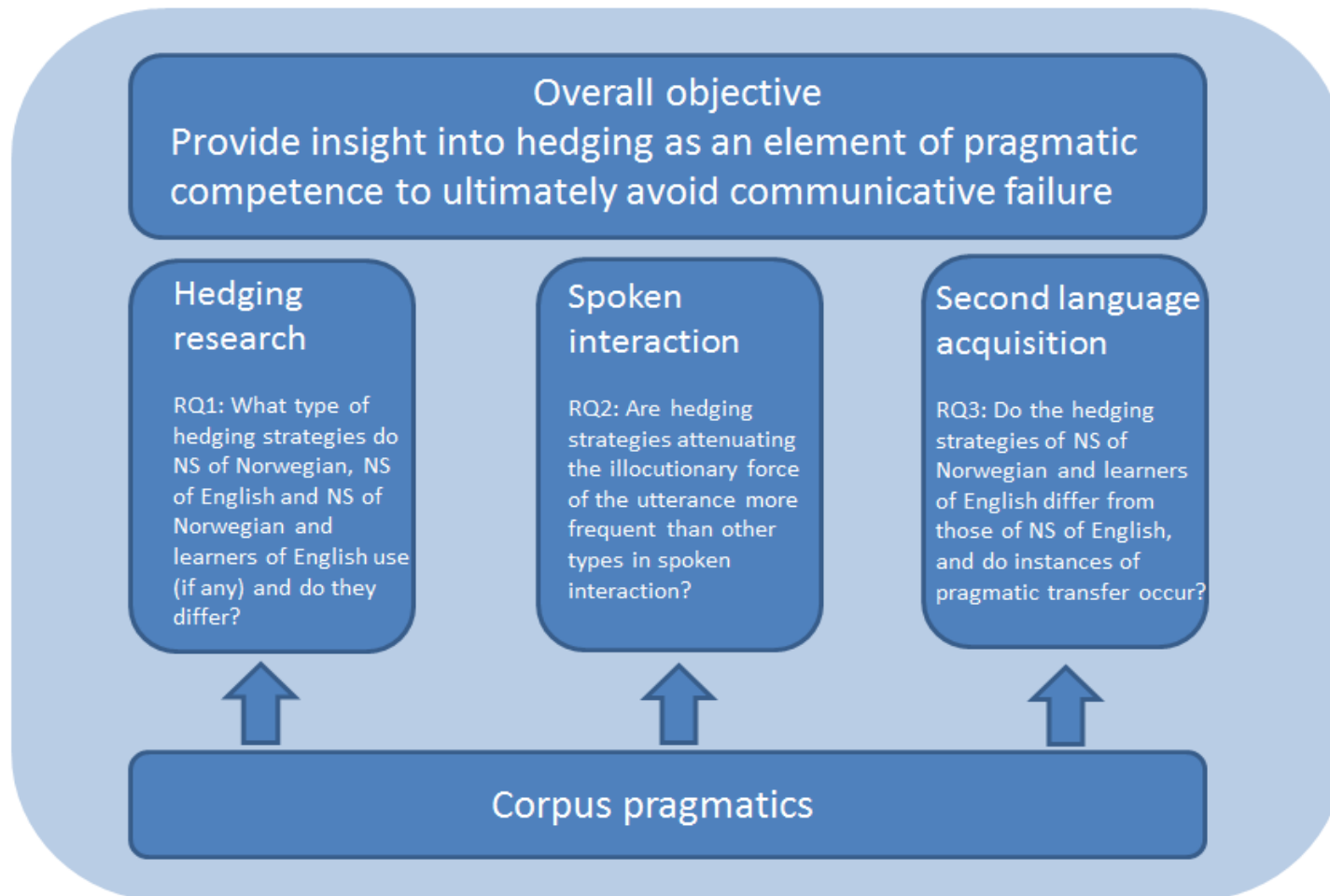- LOCNEC

Learner corpus:

- Louvain International Database of Spoken English Interlanguage LINDSEI

Why study hedging?

- There is a need for such studies in light of recent developments (Romero-Trillo, 2014)

- There is a need for studies on spoken language (Adolphs & Carter, 2013)

- Personal motivation: interest in interpersonal aspects of language and communication across cultures

In summary

Overall objective
Provide insight into hedging as an element of pragmatic competence to ultimately avoid communicative failure

Hedging research

RQ1: What type of hedging strategies do NS of Norwegian, NS of English and NS of Norwegian and learners of English use (if any) and do they differ?

Spoken interaction

RQ2: Are hedging strategies attenuating the illocutionary force of the utterance more frequent than other types in spoken interaction?

Second language acquisition

RQ3: Do the hedging strategies of NS of Norwegian and learners of English differ from those of NS of English, and do instances of pragmatic transfer occur?

Corpus pragmatics

How to get started

- Hedging strategies can be anything or nothing

- How do you search for anything or nothing in a corpus?
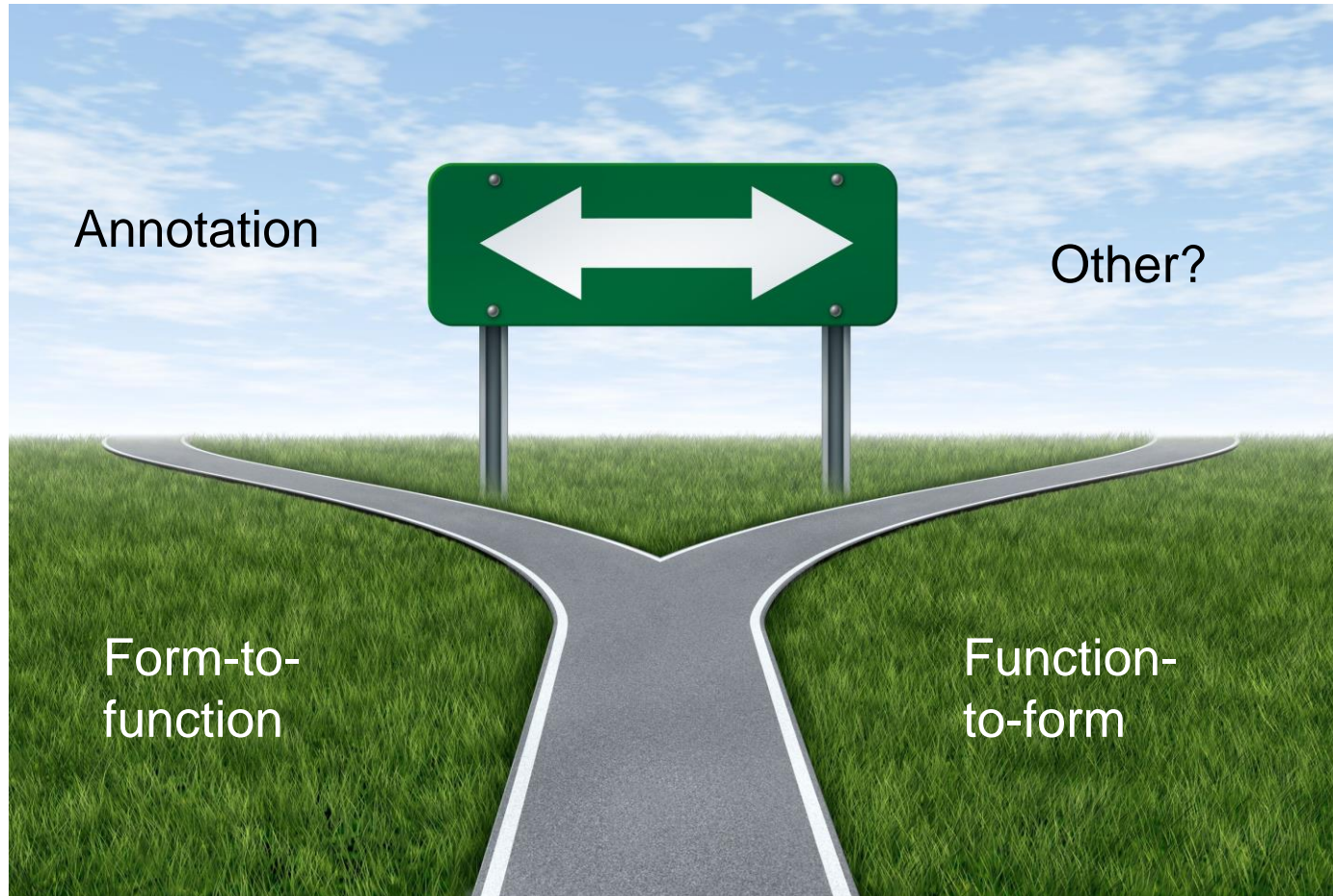
Form-to-function vs. Function-to-form

Starting with a lexical item [...] is relatively straightforward, at least initially, because one can be fairly sure of capturing all the tokens [...]. Starting with a functional category, in contrast, means searching for the grammatical and pragmatic literature as well as racking one's brains in order to come up with a list of possible realizations (Swales in Adolphs, 2008:9)

Function-to-form

Advantages:

- Possibly better to capture cross-cultural variation
- Capture strategies that stretch beyond a word or a phrase. One of the main challenges in the area of corpus-based pragmatics is to define a unit of analysis (Adolphs, 2008:135)

Disadvantages:

- The function cannot be retrieved, you still have to rely on surface forms/orbiting forms or conventional realizations (Aijmer & Rühlemann, 2015)
- Running the risk of not finding what you are looking for

Possible (partial) remedy?

- Interpret the concept of *orbiting forms* as widely as possible

Rejections as a framing device

- Rejection is, through its very nature, a face-threatening act and performing it without any kind of redress could have negative consequences

- Taxonomy for refusals → direct and indirect
(Beebe, Takahashi & Uliss-Weltz, 1990)

- Two types of direct strategies:

    1. «no», «I refuse»

    2. Negative willingness/ability (e.g. «I can't, I won't, I don't think so»)

- Rejecting/refusing sth., e.g. a request for information, is a face-threatening act (Brown & Levinson, 1978/89)

boemlo_01um	em #	nei	# det er vel egentlig ikke det # alle rubberne farer jo på yrkesskolen så det er jo <boemlo_02uk> * (uninterpretable)
[name of source]	um #	no	# it is well not really that # all of the rough lot go [pragmatic particle] to vocational college, so it is [pragmatic particle] [name] [uninterpretable]

KB1 1675		No,	it's not er, it's so much [pause] I mean, he's at work all day, [unclear] and he works all bloody hours that God sent, when they want, when they got down,

Example 1 from the Nordic dialect corpus (Norwegian part)
Example 2 from BNC spoken (dialogue, conversation)

*Da vi lette etter hunden
fant vi den ikke
hverken ute eller inne.
Da vi lette etter lykken
fant vi hunden
under trappen.*
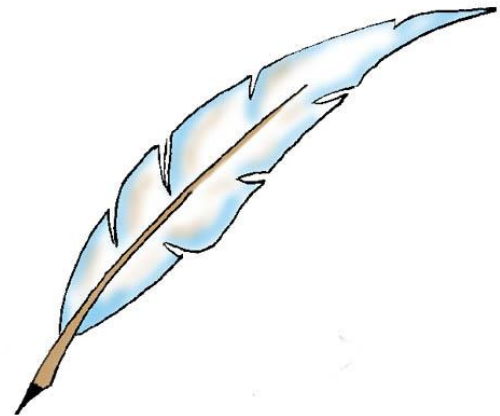
Preliminary work – collocations with «nei»

Word	With	Relation	Place
JO	NEI	2.559	14
SÅNN	NEI	2.511	23
BARE	NEI	3.183	25
VEL	NEI	2.939	32
ALTSÅ	NEI	2.735	49
DET ER JO	NEI		3
NEI JEG TROR	NEI		41

Examples from the Nordic Dialect Corpus (Norwegian part), genre: conversation between strangers (span: 5 L/R)

Collocations with «no»

Word	With	Log-likelihood	Place
just	no	76.4257	23
think	no	67.5938	25
afraid	no	29.8578	38
mean	no	40.2449	34
oh	no	1056.9895	7

Examples from BNC spoken conversation (span: 5 L/R)

The next step

- Theoretical overview of research on spoken language/spoken corpora and SLA

- Decide on search parameters to get as comparable data as possible in all corpora

- Explore how to capture strategies that stretch across segments, turns, etc.

Thank you for your attention

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