

# *Dominance in academic writing tutorials: gender, language proficiency, and the offering of suggestions*



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**ABSTRACT.** This article investigates tutor dominance in academic writing tutorials within the framework of institutional discourse. Tutor gender and tutee gender and language proficiency, as well as the interaction of the three, are considered as exponents of interactant dominance. Pragmatic measures of tutor dominance selected are frequency of directives, directive type, and mitigation strategies. Analysis indicates that these features of tutors' speech remain relatively constant in interactions with male and female tutees or with native and nonnative speakers of English. These results suggest that institutional context outweighs gender and language proficiency in the definition of participant roles and the sanctioning of tutor dominance behaviors.

**KEY WORDS:** *dominance, gender, institutional discourse, mitigation, NS–NNS discourse, pragmatics, suggestions*

S: *Do you know it takes forever to get an appointment with you?*  
 T: *Really? I guess I'm just in some strange demand . . .*

## *Academic writing tutorials as institutional discourse*

Academic writing tutorials are interactions between students and tutors in centers established by colleges and universities to provide assistance with writing across the curriculum. Whether housed in a single university department or sponsored by a campuswide writing program, whether staffed by paid professional tutors, graduate students on stipend, or undergraduate peer tutors, whether serving undergraduates and graduate students on an appointment-only

or on a walk-in basis, writing centers have as their basic mission helping students become better writers. These centers have experienced growth and expansion, gaining recognition and prestige within the academy and developing theories and scholarship commensurate with their institutional standing.

Writing tutorials are framed here as *institutional discourse* (Agar, 1985). Drew and Heritage (1992), Schegloff (1992), and Zimmerman and Boden (1991) contrasted institutional discourse with 'mundane' interaction. Due to unequal status, the institutional representative takes the role of the questioner, controlling both topic and interaction. Turns tend to be short, and conversations operate within institutional time constraints that promote efficiency and economy within a 'discourse ecology'. In its most critical sense, institutional discourse permits agents of social control to preserve the status quo (Fisher, 1984).

The language of writing tutorials is far less routinized, 'scripted', or predictable than the institutional discourse of the classroom, courtroom, and news interviews (Heritage, 1989; Heritage and Greatbatch, 1991; Lind and O'Barr, 1979). The structure is similar to that of medical consultations (Ten Have, 1989), including diagnosis + directive + report writing phases (Thonus, 1995a). Tutorials also feature a dispreference for patient- (tutee-)initiated utterances (Frankel, 1990). However, the writing tutor possesses considerably less authority and social status vis-à-vis the tutee than the physician does vis-à-vis the patient, and for this reason, comparison with another genre, the psychotherapy interview, is more promising. Like psychotherapy sessions, writing tutorials bear some social stigma (Labov and Fanshel, 1977), feature nonreciprocity/nonegalitarianism (Ferrara, 1994), and assume covert adversariality (Lakoff, 1990). In tutorials and in psychotherapy interviews, but not in medical consultations, 'authoritative answers tend to be refused and expertise denied' (Ten Have, 1989: 128).

In university settings, writing tutorials resemble *academic advising sessions* (Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford, 1990, 1991, 1993a, 1993b, 1996; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig, 1992) and *academic counseling interviews* (He, 1993a, 1993b; 1994, 1995). Advising sessions pair professors with students needing to negotiate course selection and learn institutional rules. Counseling interviews pair full-time counselors or part-time graduate-student interns with undergraduates seeking information about university regulations, immigration status, degree programs, academic majors, or graduate or professional-school applications. Academic advisors and counselors seek to uphold and transmit institutional rules. In addition, academic advisors, in their classroom incarnations as professors, transmit discipline- and course-specific rules in interaction; as colleagues-in-information of their graduate student 'apprentices', they uphold the rules of the 'Discourse' of academe (Rudolph, 1994). Tutorials also resemble *writing conferences*, discussions between writing instructors and their students in which a tutor-tutee relationship is approximated. Walker and Elias (1987) and Ulichny and Watson Gegeo (1989) noted that despite the best of intentions, instructor 'tutors' directed the form, content, and distribution of discourse, producing a

*dominant interpretive framework* enacting their ‘authority and control of knowledge and communication’ (Ulichny and Watson-Gegeo, 1989: 312).

Writing tutorials differ from these interactions in that tutors uphold broadly constituted principles (e.g. ‘good writing’) and are required to be neutral with respect to ‘higher’ rules and discourses. They are forbidden from evaluating assignments posed by students’ instructors and at the same time from hazarding a guess as to these instructors’ ultimate evaluations of student writing. The advice they give is locally constituted, focused on a particular piece of writing or on skills to be applied to other writing tasks.

In medical consultations, in psychotherapy interviews, in academic advising and counseling sessions, and in writing conferences the institutional representative retains higher status than the client. In writing tutorials, however, the a priori rights and actual practice of the institutional representative to control topic and interaction and to constrain the conversational contributions of the tutee have been disputed. Tutor training guides (Harris 1982, 1986; Meyer and Smith, 1987) promote the notions that tutors and tutees are of equal status and that tutees have the right and obligation to ‘call the shots’. The following excerpt from *The Writing Tutorial Services Guide to Tutoring* (Indiana University) distills this approach:

*It is important that you COACH and not fix. . . . Coaching is more demanding of all concerned. Tutors must keep silent when they are bursting to tell students how to approach an issue or solve a problem. Students learn more when they shoulder more of the responsibility for their educations. To accomplish this, use the Socratic method by asking thoughtful, challenging, and polite questions . . . Nudge, don’t push – let the student do most of the work. (pp. 2–3)*

The quasi-instructional setting of the tutorial coupled with the directive to coach from the sidelines creates a cognitive dissonance for tutors, who are students at the same university and often in the same departments as their tutees yet are paid to assist them with their writing without imposing their own evaluations of student texts. Tutors seek to ‘do a good job’ so that students receive positive feedback from their instructors and return for further tutoring help (an indication of success to the tutors’ supervisor that they are fulfilling their duties). The writing center, in turn, must justify its existence to departmental or university administration to merit continued funding. It is within this institutional context that tutor dominance is likely to emerge, creating a rift between writing center theory (tutors and tutees are of equal status) and writing center practice (tutors are dominant institutional representatives).

### *Dominance in institutional discourse*

Dominance has been investigated in interactional behavior by linguists, anthropologists, conversation analysts, and by specialists in speech communication and pragmatics. According to Linell et al. (1988),

Dominance is inherently a quantitatively oriented concept; it is a question of having a large proportion of the ground at one's disposal, of getting more of the goods and services available in the interaction. . . The dominant party is the one who manages to direct and control the other party's actions to the greatest extent and who also avoids being directed or controlled in his [sic] own interactive behavior. (pp. 415–16)

It is impossible to define dominance without invoking the construct *power* (Liska, 1990, 1992; Ng and Bradac, 1993). According to Holmes (1995), 'Power refers to the ability of participants to influence one another's circumstances . . . Power in a relationship [is] the degree to which one person can impose their plans and evaluations at the expense of other people's' (p. 17). Van Dijk (1993) interpreted dominance as the *negative* imposition of power: 'What is involved in dominance are questionable *conditions* of legitimacy or acceptability, including what is usually called 'abuse' of power, and especially also possibly negative *effects* of the exercise of power, namely social inequality' (p. 250).

Dominant individuals and groups possess functional access to power through control over properties of discourse such as turn-taking, topic selection, and style. Linell (1990) posited a direct correlation between dominance and measures such as time at talk and control of initiative–response sequences: '*Dominance* [refers to] various more or less visible (manifest) dimensions or structures in dialogue and discourse. *Power* can arguably be conceived of as more abstract than dominance and as involving an invisible (latent) microstructure' (p. 157). At times dominance is jointly produced by the dominator and the dominated, although there is a distinct difference between being constrained in one's conversational contributions and being prevented from participating altogether (Drew, 1991).

### *Dominance and politeness*

Theories of politeness have paid differential attention to notions of power and dominance and their link to the way interlocutors negotiate interactions. Liska (1990) argued that one of the guises dominance assumes is politeness: 'Fundamentally, politeness and deference are optimal strategies for securing cooperation with minimal distress to all involved' (p. 86). Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) viewed linguistic politeness as a universal of (cooperative) human interaction, in the tradition of Grice (1975). In keeping with the Cooperative Principle, an interactant may employ a face-threatening act (FTA), choosing to perform it off record, 'baldly' on record (without redressive action), or on record (with redressive action), modified by positive politeness strategies, which redress threats to *positive face* ('the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others'), or negative politeness strategies, which redress threats to *negative face* ('the want of every "competent adult member" that his actions be unimpeded by others') (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 62).

Brown and Levinson's original conceptualization of politeness (1978) proposed a linear relationship between social power or distance and the degree of

imposition of an FTA. By 1987, they viewed this stance as overly simplistic but nevertheless maintained the notion that as social distance increases, support for positive face (solidarity and approbation) decreases, while support for negative face (tact) increases. Lim and Bowers (1991) disagreed, contending that 'the right to perform a particular act is a much more important predictor of facework than is the absolute level of face threat' (p. 448). More specifically, as a speaker's right to impose upon another decreases, his or her use of tact increases.

In the politeness theory of Leech (1983), power is also a preliminary rather than a corollary to speech acts; that is, power is in a speech situation before it is in a speech act. Whereas Brown and Levinson's Cooperative Principle mediates between the sense of an utterance and its force, Leech's Politeness Principle 'maintains the social equilibrium and the friendly relations which enable us to assume that our interlocutors are being cooperative in the first place' (p. 82). The element of power is evident in four varieties of illocutionary function, a pairing of speech acts with social goals: competitive, convivial, collaborative, and conflictive.

Wolfson (1988) combined power with social distance in a theory of politeness termed 'the bulge'. Concurring with Lim and Bowers, this theory predicts that a nonlinear relationship obtains between power and social distance. Wolfson's studies found more negotiation of speaker rights or obligations to perform speech acts among nonintimate status equals than among either intimates or status unequals. That is, 'the more status and social distance are seen as fixed, the easier it is for speakers to know what to expect of one another' (p. 33). Bardovi-Harlig and Hartford (1993a) found that 'the bulge' best explained the behavior of graduate student advisees in their interactions with academic advisors. Because their status was closer to that of the faculty advisors than that of undergraduate advisees, graduate students' rights and obligations were more vague, causing them to negotiate with their advisors and employ status-preserving strategies.

Whether power is preliminary or corollary to speech act selection, whether politeness is an instrument of dominance and power discrepancy, a move towards greater social distance, or an instrument of solidarity and greater equilibrium of power, a move towards social intimacy, remains to be determined for various institutional discourse settings, including academic writing tutorials.

### *Gender and language proficiency in institutional discourse*

Besides institutionally conferred status, two additional variables, gender and language proficiency, may influence interlocutor dominance and politeness behavior. Gender has figured prominently in investigations of conversational interactions in institutional settings. One research tradition, the 'dominance approach', is based on the view that language encodes and perpetuates social status relationships (Kramarae, 1992). As males are accorded more power in our society, it is claimed that their language reflects and imposes that power differential. Aries (1987) termed it the *deficit* position, in that male speech is taken to be the norm, with female speech its deficient, powerless variant (Liska, 1992). The

'cultural approach' to language and gender, first developed by Maltz and Borker (1982), maintains that males and females are members of different speech communities; therefore, linguistic means used by each sex can serve either the aims of dominance or solidarity. This approach challenges the notion that 'powerless' speech is strictly related to gender (O'Barr and Atkins, 1980; Tannen, 1993). However, this 'anti-power based' view of gender differences in conversation has itself been called into question, particularly in cross-ethnic contexts (Uchida, 1992). A third approach to gendered language (Giles et al., 1991; Liska, 1992) contends that dominance resides in situations, not in people. Within this approach, speech accommodation researchers such as Bilous and Krauss (1988) found that in terms of time at talk, utterance length, interruptions, and pauses, both males and females converged towards the behavior of their interlocutors regardless of pairing.

As a rule, investigations of gendered language in institutional contexts have begun with the assumption of male dominance. Although some of these studies were carried out in group rather than dyadic contexts, their results were strikingly similar: The effect of status was judged greater than that of gender (Johnson, 1994, on manager–employee interaction; West, 1984, 1990, on doctor–patient interaction). In educational contexts, female institutional representatives, though judged less dominant than their male counterparts in terms of time at talk, share of speaking turns, and interruptions made and received, were still found more dominant than either their male or female student interlocutors (Beattie, 1981; and Craig and Pitts, 1990, on tutor– or teacher–student interaction).

Thomas (1994) labeled native-speaker (NS)–nonnative speaker (NNS) conversations 'unequal encounters'. Language proficiency has been found to impact status perceptions even when the NNS takes on a higher-status institutional role than the NS of English. Tyler and Davies (1990) studied an exchange between a Korean international teaching assistant (ITA) and an American student, who was observed challenging a key determinant of her teacher's institutional role, knowledge of requirements for an assignment. Evidently, the ITA's classification as a NNS of English diminished his status in the eyes of the student, permitting the provocation to occur. Tyler (1995) analyzed a conversation between a NNS computer science tutor and a NS tutee in which the initial interpretations of role and status were mismatched, leading to mismatches in discourse management strategies and the final judgment of both the tutor and tutee that the other was 'uncooperative'.

In NS–NNS conversations, NSs may resort to 'foreigner talk' (Ferguson, 1975), a simplified form of speech they believe NNSs will be able to understand. The quantity and elaboration of foreigner talk varies according to the perceived linguistic level of the NNS, and Valdman (1981) correlated NS foreigner talk with the perceived lower status of the NNS. In addition to syntactic and lexical simplifications, NSs modify discourse features of their speech, including the functions and frequency of questions as comprehension checks and clarification requests, topic-initiating vs topic-continuing moves, repetition, expansion, and restate-

ment (Long, 1983). Functionally, the use of foreigner talk has been argued to create both positive conditions (Chaudron, 1988) and negative conditions (Verplaetse, 1995) for NNS access to interaction and second language acquisition through positive input.

Only rarely have both gender and language proficiency been investigated in a single study. Zimin (1981) found in a controlled experiment with 10 NSs and 20 NNSs in an academic setting that female addressees elicited somewhat more polite speech acts than male addressees. However, the language proficiency of the speaker (NS vs NNS) was not found to influence politeness behavior.

Thonus (1995b) investigated the link between language proficiency and tutor dominance in writing tutorials with NSs and NNSs of English. She hypothesized that although tutors would attempt to minimize the status-threatening nature of suggestions by framing them as questions and indirect statements or by adding mitigators, they would show less regard for the negative face of their NNS students than of their NS students. Results supported this prediction: two-thirds of the suggestions in the data set were made to NNSs, and tutors were more likely to mitigate suggestions with NS tutees. In addition, 'stronger' modals *could*, *can*, *want to*, and *need to* appeared more often in suggestions to NNSs. To investigate the link between gender and tutor dominance behavior, Thonus (1996) examined NS-NS writing tutorials, hypothesizing that male tutors would (a) spend more time at talk; (b) interrupt more frequently at turn transitions; (c) offer their students more suggestions; and (d) choose more direct suggestion types and produce fewer mitigated suggestions (i.e. be less polite). The hypothesis of male dominance was not supported; that is, only small variations between male and female tutors' interactional and pragmatic behavior were evident.

### *The research study*

To compare the effects of gender and language-proficiency variables on tutor dominance behavior in a single study, a sample of 16 tutorials held at Writing Tutorial Services (WTS), Indiana University, Bloomington was examined (Table 1). The following research questions guided the study:

- (1) *Language proficiency of the tutee*: Does interaction differ in tutorials with native and nonnative speakers of English? Can the distinction between these interactional types be quantified, or is it rather qualified?
- (2) *Gender of the tutor and tutee*: Is there a difference between the interaction of same- and mixed-gender dyads in tutorials? Can any differences be explained solely on the basis of gender, or is institutionally conferred power more consequential?
- (3) *Interaction between gender and language proficiency*: Does the gender of the tutor interact in any way with the language proficiency or gender of the student to increase or reduce tutor dominance as expressed in the frequency, type, and mitigation of suggestions?

TABLE 1. *Tutor and student information*

<i>Tutor</i>	<i>Tutor Major</i>	<i>Student</i>	<i>Paper content area</i>
1 (M)	English	NSF	Biology
		NNSF	English (composition)
2 (M)	English	NNSM ®	Japanese literature
		NSF ®	English (composition)
		NNSM ®	Business
		NNSF ®	Journalism
3 (F)	History	NNSM ®	Business
		NSF	Political science
		NNSM ®	Anthropology
		NNSF	Sociology
4 (F)	English	NNSM	History
		NSF	Comparative literature
		NNSM	English (composition)
		NNSF	Education
		NNSM	Library science

®, Repeat visit (student had previously met with the same tutor); NS, native speaker; NNS, nonnative speaker; F, female; M, male.

Table 1 displays information on the two male and two female tutors and their tutees, female and male native speakers (NSF and NSM) and nonnative speakers (NNSF and NNSM) of English, as well as the content areas of student papers. Both male tutors and one of the female tutors were graduate students in the Department of English; the other female tutor was taking graduate work in the Department of History. Each tutor had at least 2 years' experience on the job. All had been assigned to certain 'discipline-specific' tutor groups responsible for assisting students from courses that had made special arrangements with WTS for tutorial assistance. However, given the burgeoning demand for WTS services, especially among international students at the university, all of the tutors had worked with tutees outside of their chosen academic fields and even outside of their assigned discipline-specific cluster of courses.

Tutees had previously phoned to make appointments with the WTS secretary. Upon arriving at the center, they were asked to sign consent forms permitting their tutorials to be audiotaped in the ongoing evaluation and training of tutors. Tutors then greeted their tutees and asked permission to photocopy assignment sheets or rough drafts the students had brought. Tutorials varied in length from 20 to more than 50 minutes. Each was taped, transcribed in its entirety, and coded for analysis. Transcripts were structured in what Edwards (1993) terms 'vertical format', displaying the temporal sequencing of interaction including

overlaps ([]) and interruptions at turn transitions. Backchannels (*uh-huh, o.k., yeah*) were inserted as ‘real time’ representations of comments one speaker makes while the other holds the floor. ‘Nonutterance’ contributions, such as pauses [(.) or (2s)], ((laugh)), or ((cough)), were also included.

Directive suggestions are of interest in academic writing tutorials because of the window they provide into the perceived status and dominance of the participants, the tutor-advisor and the tutee-advisee. Fitch (1994) set forth several reasons for singling out directives, including suggestions, as an object of study in social settings:

The varied possibilities for formulation of directives serve as a relational indicator on an interpersonal level in that they are central to relational definition, acting as an index to the goods and services that interactants routinely expect to be provided by others as a constitutive element of a particular relationship. More specifically, because compelling the actions of another implies power or rights to do so, directive performance is a sensitive – if enormously complicated – reflection of power relationships between individuals. (p. 53)

As requests by the speaker that the addressee do something of benefit to the addressee (Geis, 1995), suggestions differ from *orders* in that the speaker is not as concerned whether the action bidden is actually carried out (Green, 1975). Suggestions are socially distributed as need statements, imperatives, imbedded imperatives, permission directives, question directives, and hints (Ervin-Tripp, 1976). In terms of speech act theory as enunciated by Searle (1975), suggestions may code as indirect speech acts, which contain illocutionary force indicators for one act (e.g. a question for information = *What do you think about changing that sentence?*), uttered to perform an entirely different illocutionary act (e.g. a suggestion). Through Gricean conversational implicature, these become conventionalized as conversational functions. Because suggestions classify as FTAs and violate, at least in theory, the equal status expectations created by the tutorial ethos, tutors may be uneasy with their *de facto* higher status and seek to ‘soften’ their contributions through conventional negative politeness formulae and mitigators.

According to Thonus (1995a), suggestions are offered by tutors to tutees during the directive phase of the tutorial. They are embedded into tight evaluation–suggestion sequences, which contribute to what Agar termed the *discourse ecology* of the institutional encounter, the much-desired efficiency governed by *chronos*, not *kairos* time (Fiksdal, 1990; Hartford and Bardovi-Harlig, 1992):

- (1) Tutor evaluation of global or specific problems
- (2) Student acceptance or rejection of the evaluation (verbal or tacit)
- (3) Tutor suggestion (occasionally substituted or augmented by student suggestion)
- (4) Student acceptance (or rejection) of the suggestion

When a tutor offers a suggestion, it is most often accepted; only rarely will a tutee deflect it, question it, or reject it outright.

TABLE 2. *Tutor suggestions per turn*

<i>Participants</i>	<i>Turns</i>	<i>Suggestions</i>	<i>Suggestions/turn</i>
Tutor 1 mean	395	193	0.49
Tutor 2 mean	488	212	0.43
Tutor 3 mean	430	241	0.56
Tutor 4 mean	451	262	0.58
NS tutees	848	468	0.55
NNS tutees	916	440	0.48
Male tutors	883	405	0.46
Female tutors	881	503	0.57
Male tutees	816	487	0.60
Female tutees	948	421	0.44
Overall mean	1764	908	0.51

### *Frequency of suggestions*

In each tutorial, tutor suggestions were coded and summed, and frequency calculated as the number of suggestions divided by the number of turns. Table 2 shows individual tutor and group means. Tutor 4 (the most voluble and also the most frequent interrupter) offered the most suggestions to her tutees, at a mean rate of 0.58 per turn. Her tutorial with NSM, for example, registered an average of one suggestion for each of the 88 turns (one of the shortest of the 16 tutorials). This excerpt illustrates the high frequency of suggestions (italicized) in that tutorial:

#### (1)

- T: Let's see. Well, in some ways you're saying that he's doing much the same as Walter has done (.) providing with this, with information about his father, too.
- S: So I could relate him to Walter?
- T: Yeah, exactly. 'Like Walter... ' Yeah. (.) Good point. (4s). *Yeah, that's a really good point that you should think about. What you did there was you thought about the relationship between Andrew and Walter were. And that relationship that you've just described is one of similarity. So to describe that similarity you'd say, 'Like Walter', right? And that's the thing, the kind of thing that I think you could use in writing transitions. Consider what the paragraph before has done, and then think about what the paragraph you've just, that's you're going, about to write, is going to do, and then think: 'Are they similar? Are they different? Is there a cause and effect?'* Whatever the relationship is, it'll help you write the transition at the beginning of this one. O.K. um so yeah, you talk about, and this Andrew, weird guy, ((laugh)) [sort of, fairly religious it sounds
- S: [yeah
- T: like, um
- S: See, what's interesting about this is Andrew, he's not very old, maybe he's in his twenties, [he's
- T: [Oh, I can see, yeah.
- S: He's struggling throughout the book. He doesn't really believe in God. And this is
- T: Ah!

- S: like  
 T: How interesting!  
 S: Very profound [experience].  
 T: [Yes, right, very spiritual at least. *Yeah, I think you could make that more clear. . .*  
 (Tutor 4 with NSM, Turns 67–68)

Group means show that female tutors made more suggestions per turn than male tutors, and NS tutees and male tutees received more suggestions from their tutors than did NNS tutees and female tutees, irrespective of tutor gender. For example, Tutor 2 offered twice as many suggestions to his NSF tutee as to his NNSF tutee (88 vs 43) in tutorials with exactly the same number of turns (140). And Tutor 3's NNSM tutee received more than twice as many suggestions (0.70 per turn) as her NNSF client (0.29 per turn). However, no accommodation pattern in mixed- vs same-gender dyads was detected.

### *Suggestion type*

Ten suggestion types, consisting of five suggestion formulae arranged according to increasing illocutionary force, plus or minus mitigation, were coded in the transcripts. The pairing of suggestion formula with mitigation strategy (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Fraser and Nolen, 1981; Holmes, 1984) created a veritable

TABLE 3. *Tutor suggestion types (Tutor 2 with NSF)*

- 
1. Indirect (mitigated):  
*I think that by talking about this as a screen version, that will help to make a transition between this and this.*
  2. Indirect (unmitigated):  
*And, and no quotes for titles of a movie or books, no quotes.*
  3. Interrogative (M):  
*Why don't you go ahead and write what you just said, maybe on the back of this sheet right here?*
  4. Interrogative (U):  
*So how would you link those, how would you link that in one sentence?*
  5. 1p Modal (M):  
*But if you think they're really part of the same point, I would, I would keep them together.*
  6. 1p Modal (U):  
*O.K. now we need a transition between this paragraph and the next paragraph.*
  7. 2p Modal (M):  
*Um or you could just say, 'and the late nineteen hundreds', something like that.*
  8. 2p Modal (U):  
*And then you can talk about it like that.*
  9. Imperative (M):  
*And then just write down the points that you made from each of them, O.K.?*
  10. Imperative (U):  
*Start something like that.*
-

banquet of pragmatic choices for tutors, from mitigated indirect suggestions to unmitigated imperatives. Table 3 shows examples of each of the 10 resulting types from the tutorial between Tutor 2 and NSE. Modal suggestions were differentiated according to person (1p vs 2p), and illocutionary force-indicating devices (IFIDs), such as *I suggest. . .* or *My advice to you is. . .* were also coded. The utterance of IFIDs constitutes the direct performance of an illocutionary act (Searle 1975, 1989), and for this reason Thomas (1994) noted that IFIDs are pragmatically marked '+power', costly to the speaker and risky for the hearer.

Distributions of these suggestion types in individual tutorials show that 2p modals were offered more frequently than any other type (varying between 34% and 67% of total suggestions), whereas imperatives (7–47%) and 1p modals (3–34%) followed in second and third places, respectively. The notable exception to this pattern was Tutor 3 with NNSE, in which more imperative suggestions were offered than any other type. These are italicized in an excerpt from that tutorial:

## (2)

- T: O.K. One of the things that you might want to do is um is to go through the paper  
 S: uh-huh  
 T: and *get to the point*. In fact, this might be where, where you talk about the difference in male–female sphere, the difference between the two. *Just read that section of your paper*, and  
 S: uh-huh  
 T: you, and *you take out a sheet of paper and say, 'All right, here's what I want to say for Morisot. [Here's what I want to say for Cassatt.] Um (.) and then see that you're organizing this,*  
 S: [uh-huh uh-huh  
 T: and you're stating very clearly how Morisot's paintings depict this feeling of being  
 S: uh-huh  
 T: trapped. *But clarify her way of presenting it or ill[st]rating it so that*  
 S: uh-huh [uh-huh uh-huh  
 T: when the reader moves on to [Cassatt, they understand why 'Susan on the Balcony' is, is slightly  
 S: [uh-huh  
 T: different. The woman is still trapped, but (.) [Cassatt is portraying her or illustrating  
 S: uh-huh [uh-huh  
 T: that idea in a different way. O.K.?  
 S: Yes. . .  
 (Tutor 3 with NNSE, Turn 100)

Table 4 displays the distribution of suggestion types by group, specifying for mitigated (M) and unmitigated (U) form. The individual frequency ranking of 2p modal > imperative > 1p modal was mimicked by group behavior, with 2p modals responsible for a full 50 percent of all suggestion types. Whereas indirect and 2p modal suggestions were more often mitigated than unmitigated, the reverse was true for interrogatives, 1p modals, and imperatives. The distinction between mitigated and unmitigated forms was greatest in 2p modal and imperative suggestions. In the case of male tutors, for example, in the 2p modal category, mitigated suggestions outnumbered unmitigated by more than 2 to 1. This same spread was found in the opposite direction, for example, in the case of imperatives

TABLE 4. Suggestion types and distributions

Suggestion type	Mitigation	NS tutees	NNS tutees	Male tutors	Female tutors	Male tutees	Female tutees	Overall mean
<i>n</i>	M / U	480	441	404	517	488	433	2763
Indirect	M	38 (8%)	27 (6%)	30 (7%)	35 (7%)	38 (8%)	27 (6%)	195 (7%)
	U	14 (3%)	15 (3%)	16 (4%)	13 (2%)	15 (3%)	14 (3%)	87 (3%)
Interrogative	M	14 (3%)	2 (0%)	11 (3%)	5 (1%)	4 (1%)	12 (3%)	48 (2%)
	U	20 (4%)	9 (2%)	15 (4%)	14 (3%)	8 (2%)	21 (5%)	87 (3%)
1p Modal	M	23 (5%)	33 (8%)	24 (6%)	32 (6%)	25 (5%)	31 (7%)	168 (6%)
	U	28 (6%)	52 (12%)	42 (10%)	38 (7%)	39 (8%)	41 (10%)	240 (8%)
2p Modal	M	146 (30%)	126 (29%)	126 (31%)	146 (28%)	156 (32%)	116 (27%)	816 (30%)
	U	94 (20%)	90 (20%)	52 (13%)	132 (26%)	104 (21%)	80 (18%)	552 (20%)
Imperative	M	40 (8%)	21 (5%)	31 (8%)	30 (6%)	29 (6%)	32 (7%)	183 (7%)
	U	63 (13%)	66 (15%)	57 (14%)	72 (14%)	70 (14%)	59 (14%)	387 (14%)

offered by female tutors. NNS tutees were slightly less likely to receive mitigated imperatives than their NS peers. Tutor use of IFIDs was slight: Only 13 appeared in the entire corpus of 908 suggestions (1.3%). However, distribution was affected by gender: Of the 13, 10 were offered by male Tutors 1 and 2, and eight were received by female tutees (e.g. the directive underscored by *So what I'm suggesting is. . .* in excerpt 3 below).

Table 5 shows the ratio of mitigated to unmitigated suggestions in the tutorials. The highest ratios of multiply-mitigated suggestions occurred in tutorials led by males (Tutors 1 and 2) with NSs (Tutor 1 with NSF, Tutor 2 with NSM). NS tutees and male tutees were offered more mitigated than unmitigated suggestions, in contrast to NNS and female tutees, who received fewer or equal numbers of mitigated than unmitigated suggestions. For male tutees, an accommodation effect may be seen in the larger ratio of mitigated to unmitigated suggestions in mixed- vs same-gender dyads; that is, male tutees were more likely to receive mitigated suggestions from female tutors. No accommodation pattern for female tutees was evident. A gender disparity is reflected in the ratio difference between male and female tutor mitigation patterns, 1.2:1 compared to 1:1.1. Whereas male Tutors 1 and 2 tended to offer more mitigated than unmitigated suggestions to their tutees (e.g. Tutor 1 with NSF and NSM, Tutor 2 with NSF and NSM), female Tutor 3 consistently offered more unmitigated suggestions and Tutor 4 only slightly more mitigated suggestions. The contrast between Tutor 1's behavior and that of Tutor 3 is illustrated in excerpts (3) and (4), respectively (suggestions in italics, mitigations in boldface type).

### (3)

T: O.K. So really the topic of this paragraph is her (.) mixed feelings?

S: Uh-huh, right.

T: ***In that case, I think*** it would be effective for you to start your paragraph with a statement about

TABLE 5. *Mitigated and unmitigated suggestions in tutorials*

Participants	Suggestions	Mitigated	Unmitigated	Ratio (M : U)
Tutor 1 mean	191	109	82	1.3 : 1
Tutor 2 mean	213	113	100	1.1 : 1
Tutor 3 mean	232	94	138	1 : 1.5
Tutor 4 mean	285	154	131	1.1 : 1
NS tutees	480	261	219	1.2 : 1
NNS tutees	441	209	232	1 : 1.1
Male tutors	404	222	182	1.2 : 1
Female tutors	517	248	269	1 : 1.1
Male tutees	488	252	236	1.1 : 1
Female tutees	433	218	215	1 : 1
Overall mean	921	470	451	1 : 1

that. **In other words**, think of the, the topic sentences of your paragraphs as being not (.) references to the plot but references to the significance of that plot for your thesis, for

S: uh-huh

T: your [argument.

S: [O.K. So just these are all first excerpt, so I should mention here again, o.k.?

T: right Right.

S: Right?

T: **So what I'm suggesting is** not only when you begin your discussion of each episode, but

S: uh-huh

T: also in the paragraphs within the discussion of each episode, you need to start with a um sentence that addresses your argument, the significance of what you're talking about. Does that make

S: all right o.k.

T: sense?

S: Uh-huh... (Tutor 1 with NNSF, Turns 33–6)

Tutor 1's mitigation of directive suggestions is seen not only in phrases such as *I think* and *In other words*, but also in his hesitation (.), confirmation question (*Does that make sense?*) and paraphrasing of key terms (*your main point... your thesis... your argument* and *your argument... the significance of what you're talking about*). Lest these techniques be viewed as idiosyncratic or mistaken for those of 'foreigner talk', note how his male colleague Tutor 2 behaved with an NSF tutee:

(4)

T: Right, so how are you going to get a connection between, [how are you going to get a transition

S: [((sigh))

T: between Dever and Tannen?

S: Um well (.)

T: What do you think you, you would tell your reader?

S: The other article that I was talking about before, Um (.) 'Tannen, who looks at it from a different, completely different point of view'

T: O.K. **So maybe** one thing you could do is say, 'Where Dever claims X, right, Tannen, Deborah Tannen claims (.) Y,' **right?** That's a second way. I'll let you write that down, and then I'll sort of take that apart. . . .

- S: Maybe I can do that some[how].
- T: [Maybe you can (.) maybe you can think of your conclusion as answering the final question, 'So what does all this mean?' (3s) So what is the significance of all this? (7s)
- S: O.K. . . . (Tutor 2 with NSF, Turns 127–9; 132–3)

The mitigator *maybe*, the confirmation question *right?* and the paraphrase *So what does all this mean?* . . . *So what is the significance of all this?* suggest that male interactional dominance as encoded by unmitigated directives is not evidenced in these data.

In the following excerpt, Tutor 3's use of imperatives (*Forget about physical defects*) and the strongest of 2p modals (*You have to make sure your comparisons are strong*), coupled with the authoritative *I need to know what sort of religious problems Pericles faced in Ath(ens)* illustrate how a female tutor can enact interactional dominance. The phrase *So if you want to do this paper* is clearly not a mitigation of her stream of directives; rather, it resembles a challenge or a threat:

(5)

- T: So does the Civil Rights Act allow um people who did not have the right to political office (.) get a political office?
- S: Actually, didn't vote. They couldn't vote because they have to pass the some kind of intelligence test there's the exam in the South. And there's also Jim Crow laws. And just
- T: uh-huh uh-huh
- S: Kennedy wanted to (.) eliminate those (.) discriminations.
- T: O.K. Do you see that there's some stuff that's not, that's missing here?
- S: Yeah, a lot of.
- T: To, to make the [read-
- S: [Yeah, I just, yeah, O.K. There I have, but at the time I wrote this paper, I didn't want to make an argument about Kennedys, because this is not Kennedy's paper. [I just
- T: [No, but that's what your title is. But that's what your title is. Pericles and Kennedy (3s). So there's, and I understand your concern, because this is ancient civilizations, and so I really should see a lot more about Pericles, but because you're doing a comparison, *you have to make sure your comparisons are very strong*. And since you only pro-, provide a little about Kennedy, and some of it's not cited and some of it may not be true, um it, it doesn't make your argument strong (.) **So if you want to do this paper, go ahead**
- S: uh-huh
- T: *and talk about their speeches, talk about their family background, and talk about how they tried to give citizens more political power. Forget about physical defects. Forget about um if you want to address that Kennedy was Catholic, then I need to know what sort of religious problems Pericles faced [in Ath –*
- S: [No, I can, no I just say about religion was (.) I thought I could the religious argument about the Kennedys' background . . . (Tutor 3 with NNSM, Turns 81–4)

### Mitigation strategy

Mitigation strategies used by tutors were labeled according to the CCSARP coding manual (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989). Table 6 presents these and provides examples of each from the transcripts. In addition to clause-external mitigators, syntactic downgraders, and lexical-phrasal downgraders, upgraders such as *really*, *very*, and *always*, which aggravate rather than mitigate utterances, were counted. Multiple mitigations of single suggestions were also noted.

TABLE 6. Tutor mitigation strategies

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1. Alerter	<i>It seems like you've got to make a stand, <b>my friend</b>.</i> (Tutor 2 with NSM)
2. Polite marker	<i>Should you, should you put a reference to the graph, <b>do you think</b>?</i> (Tutor 1 with NSF)
3. Aspect	<i>And <b>I was wondering</b>, maybe, maybe you need to qualify that a little bit.</i> (Tutor 1 with NNSM)
4. Conditional	<i>You could say, <b>if you wanted to</b>, 'an important part of any language'.</i> (Tutor 4 with NNSF)
5. Appealer	<i>Um and again, this is because you've been using the future tense throughout, you will want to use that tense there, <b>right</b>?</i> (Tutor 2 with NNSM)
6. Cajoler	<i><b>Well</b>, I think you probably should mention the, the number of people.</i> (Tutor 3 with NSM)
7. Hedge	<i>And maybe, maybe the thing for you to do, <b>at least at this point</b>, is be consistent.</i> (Tutor 1 with NNSF)
8. Downgrader	<i>Or <b>maybe</b> just put that, that part of the Miller Test up front.</i> (Tutor 3 with NSF)
9. Subjectivizer	<i><b>I mean</b>, we'll just, I'll just make a copy of this.</i> (Tutor 2 with NNSM)
10. Understater	<i>I think you're right that you could work <b>a little bit</b> on your topic sentence.</i> (Tutor 4 with NSM)
11. Upgrader	<i>And you need, you need to <b>really</b> hit on your arguments <b>much more</b> strongly than you are.</i> (Tutor 3 with NNSF)

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Table 7 shows the distribution of these mitigation strategies in the tutorials. Choice of mitigation strategy varied little across the six categories: Subjectivizers, hedges, and downgraders were ranked first, second, and third in frequency regard-

TABLE 7. Mitigation strategy and distribution

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Mitigation strategy	NS tutees	NNS tutees	Male tutors	Female tutors	Male tutees	Female tutees	Overall mean
Alerter	1 (0%)	–	1 (0%)	–	1 (0%)	–	3 (0%)
Politeness	6 (1%)	–	4 (1%)	2 (0%)	2 (1%)	4 (1%)	18 (1%)
Aspect	5 (1%)	1 (0%)	6 (2%)	–	1 (0%)	5 (2%)	18 (1%)
Conditional	19 (5%)	26 (9%)	14 (4%)	31 (9%)	31 (8%)	14 (4%)	135 (6%)
Appealer	33 (8%)	23 (8%)	20 (6%)	39 (11%)	32 (9%)	27 (8%)	174 (9%)
Cajoler	54 (13%)	19 (7%)	45 (13%)	28 (8%)	41 (11%)	32 (10%)	219 (10%)
Hedge	74 (18%)	65 (23%)	54 (16%)	85 (23%)	69 (18%)	70 (21%)	417 (20%)
Downgrader	55 (13%)	34 (12%)	57 (17%)	32 (9%)	39 (10%)	50 (15%)	267 (13%)
Subjectivizer	118 (29%)	80 (28%)	102 (30%)	96 (26%)	105 (28%)	93 (28%)	594 (28%)
Understater	26 (6%)	24 (8%)	25 (7%)	25 (7%)	32 (9%)	18 (6%)	150 (7%)
(Upgrader)	23 (6%)	14 (5%)	11 (3%)	26 (7%)	22 (6%)	15 (5%)	111 (5%)
Total	414	286	339	364	375	328	2106

---

less of tutor or tutee gender or tutee language proficiency. Tutors demonstrated a good deal of individual variation within a limited range. Some did not make use of the entire range of mitigation strategies; this is true even in tutorials with the largest mitigation counts (Tutor 2 with NSF, Tutor 3 with NSM). The majority of the tutors mitigated their suggestions with subjectivizers, as illustrated in this excerpt:

(6)

S: Do you think that this is unnecessary to even talk about it?

T: Oh, yeah, definitely. *I think it's really important.*

S: Oh, you do think

T: Oh, yeah, definitely. So you do think

S: No, no, no, this whole sentence, like

T: oh!

S: Is this necessary?

T: ***I think*** that if you want to, yeah, ***I mean I think*** it's an interesting point. It just needs to be explained in relation to what's come before. . . (Tutor 4 with NSM, Turns 53–5)

Hedges such as *just* and *even* were preferred by Tutor 2 with NSF, Tutor 3 with NNSF, and Tutor 4 with NNSM. Tutor 2 with NSM used cajolers (*you know?*) more than any other strategy, and Tutor 3 with NNSM appealers (*You know what I'm saying?*). Only the male tutors used politeness mitigations (*Do you think? This is up to you*). Other than this, no preference linked to tutor or tutee gender or to tutee language proficiency emerged in the data.

## Discussion

The finding that female tutors make more suggestions is consistent with previous studies of this context. The spread between suggestions per turn to NS vs NNS tutees is broader here than in Thonus (1995b), but the inverse relationship between number of suggestions per turn and total number of turns (tutorial length) was sustained across all three tutorial studies. The finding that male NSs received more suggestions than other tutees implies that the offering of suggestions may be an expression of solidarity rather than dominance, if NS males are considered more powerful (and thus more deserving of assistance) than NNS males, or NS or NNS females.

Ranking of suggestion types proved consistent with previous research. Findings for the mitigation of suggestions, in which female tutors were more likely to offer unmitigated suggestions, and NNS and female tutees to receive fewer or equal numbers of mitigated than unmitigated suggestions, were consistent with the 1996 study results. However, the present research did not find that male tutors were more likely to use imperatives than female tutors were (Thonus, 1996), or that tutors of either gender were more inclined to use imperatives with NSs than with NNSs (Thonus, 1995b) or with male than with female tutees (Thonus, 1996). The lack of differentiation in suggestion types may be explained by the ambiguous role of

writing tutors. Like He's (1994) academic counselors, they have a dual institutional mandate, that of 'someone who assumes the authoritative voice of the institution, but also someone whose professional duty is to inform and not to dictate' (p. 517). As in He's study, no clear correlation was found between suggestion type and status of the giver or receiver of advice.

Compared with previous studies of the same context, the distribution of mitigation strategies showed some disparity (e.g. the observation in the 1996 study that female tutors used more subjectivizers than their male counterparts was not corroborated here), but overall figures were remarkably similar. That is, if frequency and selection of mitigation strategy are considered indices of politeness, neither male nor female tutors could be labeled more or less polite.

Despite the overwhelming evidence in this study that institutional status is a greater determinant of dominance than gender (i.e. female tutors offered more suggestions and more unmitigated suggestions than their male colleagues), some gender effects remain. Cross-gender accommodation was seen in the mitigated–unmitigated suggestion ratio of female tutors, parallels also found by Gass and Varonis (1988). Females tended to mitigate their suggestions more frequently in mixed- than in same-gender dyads. Regarding language proficiency, results suggest that NNSs are slightly less likely to receive polite (=mitigated) suggestions than their NS counterparts. Banerjee and Carrell (1987), Hinkel (1994), and Young (1992) noted that this may have more to do with the recipient than with the giver of FTAs. Specifically, NNSs may not be aware of the negative politeness impact of advice-giving in English, and, consonant with their L1 cultural rules of pragmatics, more open to receiving face-threatening suggestions as well as giving them.

*Chronos* time pressure appeared to increase tutor dominance. That is, some of the shortest tutorials evidenced the greatest number of suggestions per turn (Tutor 1 with NNSM, Tutor 3 with NSM; cf. Tutor 1 with NSF, Tutor 4 with NNSF). Perhaps the need to finish a tutorial quickly increases the tutor's propensity to 'pull rank'. However, the effect of 'repeat tutorials' on tutor dominance behavior was negligible. Apparently, personal familiarity does not breed contempt, nor does familiarity with NNSs or lack thereof bring anything to bear on the frequency, type, or mitigation of suggestions. Gass and Varonis (1984) demonstrated that familiarity with NNS speech in general aids NS interpretation. Although none of the four tutors had been trained as an ESL instructor or assigned to tutor NNS students at WTS, all had attended one or more ESL tutoring workshops organized by the author, and all had previously tutored NNSs, particularly in their areas of subject expertise.

The conventional wisdom that subject-area expertise results in greater interactional dominance or that lower-status participants (specifically NNSs) are consistently viewed as less expert has been challenged by Zuengler (1987), who concluded that ethnolinguistic (group) status may carry more weight than task expertise. Nonetheless, Zuengler (1989) and Zuengler and Bent (1991) found that superior subject-area expertise on the part of NNSs motivated their perceived

higher status. Woken and Swales (1989) also found that institutional role superseded language proficiency in defining status of NNS computer science instructors. With respect to subject-area familiarity and expertise and to its effects on tutor dominance in these tutorials, the only consequence was in the frequency of suggestions, not their type or mitigation. Tutorials with student paper content area within the tutor's major area of expertise consistently registered the most suggestions per turn of any of the four tutorials given by that tutor (see Tutor 1 with NNSM; Tutor 2 with NSF; Tutor 3 with NNSM; and Tutor 4 with NSM). The data show that tutors, on the whole, were not shy about assuming an expert role (7) or about admitting their lack of expertise at critical junctures (8 and 9):

**(7)**

*I use Chicago Style, and I'm in history, but there are plenty of historians who use this parenthetical style.* (Tutor 3 with NNSM)

**(8)**

*I mean, I'm not in this field, so I don't even know really what an assertion in this field is.* (Tutor 4 with NNSF)

**(9)**

*Well, I'm going to mark the things that I don't understand, and it may be that they're perfectly clear (.) in your class because you guys probably know more about biology than I do . . .* (Tutor 1 with NSF)

They also deferred to instructors and their expertise, consistent with their role as tutors. However, this occurred most often in tutorials in subject areas in which tutors were not expert.

Only *tutor* suggestions were considered in this study; therefore, the distribution and form of *student* self-suggestions such as those in the following excerpts were not taken into account:

**(10)**

T: This I think is a little awkward. 'This is backwards from the results that were obtained according to our

S: *Should I just put 'this is the opposite'?*

T: Yeah, I think that's better. . . (Tutor 1 with NSF, Turn 141)

**(11)**

S: *Um I'm going to take out this sentence.*

T: You're going to take it out? O.K.

S: Because I think it doesn't fit, I mean, into the picture . . . (Tutor 2 with NNSM, Turn 28)

Moreover, the narrow focus on single utterances by the most 'powerful' person in this interaction, the tutor, may have obscured what Fitch (1994) terms 'co-constructed' directives: 'to compel the actions of another requires collaboration from both sides' (p. 83).

## Conclusion

In this small, controlled study, tutor and student gender and student language proficiency were correlated with pragmatic features of tutorial conversation. Results indicate that institutional context is more determinant of tutor behavior than either tutor or tutee attributes. For example, in no tutorial did a tutee consistently dominate or unwaveringly reject the advice of his or her tutor, irrespective of language proficiency. In no tutorial did a dominant male tutor offer a NNS (nonproficient) female (powerless) tutee unmitigated imperative suggestions. In fact, tutor dominance behavior as expressed in the selection, mitigation, and frequency of suggestions was found to be nearly uniform, which is what one might expect if institutionally conferred status was more consequential than the status afforded by gender. Tutee reception of and response to such suggestions was also relatively homogeneous (with the possible exception of male NS tutees), implying that differing gender and language proficiency did not significantly vary their characterization as lower-status discourse participants.

This study supports the notion that dominance and its polite expression reside in speech situations which confer status and authority on institutional representatives. Agar (1985) affirmed the intractability of institutional discourse roles: 'An institutional representative who wants to hand control over to the client [cannot] afford to do so' (p. 157). Because of its attention to systems rather than individuals, and its emphasis on efficiency, economy, time, and knowledge, the writing tutorial situation as institution constrains movements of tutors from dominance to collaboration and of tutees from powerlessness to authority.

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