Epistemic downgrading in Cantonese Conversations

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The study

• Recent works on epistemicity have focused on how speakers negotiate their epistemic stance in a conversation, i.e. how they can convey neutrality, engagement or detachment toward an utterance (see Fox 2001; Kim 2005, 2011).

• This study focuses on how native speakers of Cantonese use different strategies to modulate, in particular downgrade, the epistemic strength of their claims in response to the disaffiliative responses from their addressee(s).

• This study also shows that these strategies are used for politeness reasons – to address the “face” of both the speaker and the addresses.
The Politeness Theory

• Politeness can be manifested through:
  a/ various general social behavior;
  b/ various linguistic means.

• Adopting a face-saving approach to politeness phenomenon, Brown and Levinson’s (1987[1978]) is regarded as the most influential and best known in the study of politeness.

• politeness = trade in a commodity called ‘face’
‘Face’

‘Face’ = a universal notion; a public self-image that every member of a society wants to claim for him/herself (Brown and Levinson 1987[1978]: 61)

→ something comparable to self-esteem

‘And, since face is so vulnerable, and since most participants will defend their face if threatened, the assumption is made that it is generally in everyone’s best interest to maintain each other’s face and to act in such ways that others are made aware that this is one’s intention’ (Fraser 1990: 229)

• Being polite = considering people’s ‘face’!

• We often do some repair work to defend our face when we are being challenged!
Politeness strategies

- Brown and Levinson have listed a number of politeness strategies that are available in our daily interactions (1987[1978]: 102; 131):

  ➔ Negative Politeness

  Be conventionally indirect

  Question, hedge

  Be pessimistic

  Minimize imposition

  Apologize

  Impersonalize

  State the imposition as a general rule
Positive Politeness
Notice/attend to hearer’s wants
Exaggerate interest/approval
Intensify interest
Use in-group identity markers
Seek agreement
Avoid disagreement
Presuppose/assert common ground
Offer, promise
Be optimistic
Include speaker and hearer in the activity
Give reasons
Give gifts to hearer (goods sympathy, etc.)

The list here is not exhaustive
Data

- 20 interview recordings involving description of pictures of different attractions (15mins each on average)
- Interview data of this kind is particularly useful in seeing how epistemic downgrading is done as a power asymmetry is often involved:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>interviewer</th>
<th>vs.</th>
<th>Interviewee</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>more information</td>
<td>less information</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>more control/power</td>
<td>less control/power</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
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- When the interviewee is challenged by the interviewer, who has more information, the interviewee can make use of a wide range of strategies to downgrade their claims.
- This epistemic downgrading is often accompanied by a lot of politeness work – to address the ‘face’ needs of both parties.
  (we don’t want to lose ‘face’, and at the same time, we don’t want to damage others’ ‘face’!)
Downgrading strategies

• Our data reveals that speakers make use of a range of strategies to downgrade their assertions when their claims are queried or challenged, including:

1. **Epistemic modals** (e.g. `jing1goi1 ‘should’, ho2nang4 ‘may/might’)  
2. **Epistemic adverbials** for a revised conclusion (e.g. `kei4sat6 ‘in fact’, si6sat6soeng6 ‘in fact’)  
3. **Evidentials**  
   1. explicit evidentials (e.g. `ngo5 gu2 ‘I guess’, ngo5 gok3dak1 ‘I feel’, ngo5 nam2 ‘I think’)  
   2. implicit evidentials (e.g. `hou2ci3 ‘seems’, jau5 ho2nang4 ‘likely’)  
4. **Sentence final particles** with weak epistemic strength (e.g. `ge2, gwaa3, za1maa3)  
5. **Discourse-pragmatic strategies** (e.g. keep silent, provide a reason, replace a specific claim with a more general one, offer a revised conclusion, etc.)
Examples

• Please refer to the separate handout
Summary & Conclusion

• During a conversation, participants continuously attempt to find common ground.

• As they co-construct the conversation to reach common ground, a wide range of epistemic upgrading and downgrading strategies are often used. In this study, we have particularly focused on those downgrading strategies.

• From the examples, often we see that multiple types of strategies are being deployed within a single utterance.

• The use of these strategies forms an essential part of politeness in social interactions.
References


Acknowledgments

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THANK YOU
Informant 1: Travel_name (10:28-10:59)

Example (1)

01 IR: 其實 我 覺得 呢 個 都 似 德國

gei4sat6 ngo5 gok3dak1 ni1 go3 dou1 ci5 Dak1Gwok3. (0.1)

Actually 1SG think DEM CL also be.like Germany

‘Actually I think this one also looks like Germany.’

02 你 覺得 呢

nei5 gok3dak1 ne1.

you think SFP

‘What do you think?’

03 IE: 我 覺得 嘛 但 係 點 解 唔 可 係 係 係 係 法國 呢

ngo5 gwok3dak1:(.) waa6 daan6hai6(.) dim2gaai2 m4 ho2ji3 hai6 Faat3Gwok3 ne1?

1SG think INTERJ but why NEG can be France SFP

‘I think... Wow, but why can’t (it) be France?’

04 IR: 點解 係 法國 啊

dim2gaai2 [hai6 Faat3Gwok3 aa3]?

Why be France SFP

‘Why (it) is France?’

05 IE: 都 似 法國 喲

[ dou1 ci5 Faat3Gwok3 wo3].

also be.like France SFP

‘It also looks like France.’

06 IR: 你 覺得 似 法國

nei5 gok3dak1 ci5 Faat3Gwok3.

2SG think be.like France
'You think (it) looks like France.'

07 IE: 法國 好多 嗎 嗎 e4

Faat3Gwok3 [hou2 do1 go2 di1] e4=
France very many DEM some

'In France, there are many'

08 IR: 點解 似 法國 啊

[dim2gaai2 ci5 Faat3Gwok3 aa3]?
why be.like France SFP

'Why do (you) think (it) is France?'

09 IE: 嘀一嘀 偏偏 嗎地方 會有 會有 嘀

hai2 yat1di1: pin1pik1 ge3 dei6fong1 wui3 jau5(.) jau5 yat1di1=
at some remote ATTR place would have some

'In some remote places, there would be some'

10 大屋 嘀度 嘀樣 架嘅

=daai6 nguk1 hai2-dou6 gam2 joeng2 gaa1 maa3.
bighouse be-there such way SFP SFP

'big houses at there in such a way'

11 有呢嘅 有啲 高階 嘀樣 嘅

jau5 ni1 di1(.) jau5 di1 gou1-toi4 gam2 joeng2 lo1.
have DEM CL DEM CL high-terrace such way SFP

'(they) have some high terraces in such a way.'
12 係咪 高檯 喺架 呢啲
hai6-mai6 gou1-toi4 lei4 gaa3 ni1 di1.
be-not.be high-terrace come SFP DEM CL
‘Are they high terraces?’

13 定係圍牆 喔 喔
ding6hai6 wai4coeng4 lei4 gaa3.
or wall come SFP
‘Or are they the walls?’

14 IR: 唔…唔知 喔係咪樓梯 喪呢 啊
m6:: m4 zi1 wo3 hai6-mai6( ) lau4tai1 lai4 gaa3 zaa3 maa5=
NEG know SFP be-not.be stair come SFP SFP SFP
‘Hmm… Don’t know, aren’t they the stairs’

15 即係行上去嘅樣
zik1hai6 haang4 soeng5 heoi3 gam2 moeng2.
that.be walk up go such way
‘that is, to walk up (there) in such a way.’

15 IE: 唔知 啊
ngo5 m4 zi1 aa.
NEG know SFP
‘I don’t know.’
17 IE: 係一個高嘅地方，跟住有間屋度嘅。

hai6 yat1 go3 gou1 ge2 dei6fong1 gan1zyu6 jau5 gaan1 nguk1 hai2 do6 lo1.

COP one CL high ATTR place then have CL house at there SFP

'(it) is a place (situated at) a high position, and then there is a house at there.'

18 IR: 哦

[o5].

PRT

'Oh.'

19 IE: 大宅咁樣

[daai6 zak2 gam2 jeong2].

Big house such way

'Like a big house'
Informant 1: Travel_name (5:22-06:01)

Example (2)

01 IR: 呢 一 個 你 估 唔 估 到 係 邊 度

\(gam2 (.) nei1 \ jat1 \ go3 \ nei5 \ gu2 \ m4 \ gu2 \ dou2 \ hai6 \ bin1dou6.\)

then DEM one CL 2SG guess NEG guess arrive COP where

‘For this one can you guess where is it’

02 IE: 呢 個 啊

\(ni1 \ go3 \ aa4.\)

DEM CL SFP

03 呢個 好 難 估 喔

\(ni1 \ go3 \ hao2 \ naan4 \ gu2 \ wo3. (0.2)\)

DEM CL very difficult guess SFP

04 中國 嘿

\(hai6 \ Zung1Gwok3 \ lo1 \ heh\)

COP China SFP

‘This one… This one is very difficult to guess… (It) is China.’

05 IR: 呀 點 解 覺 得 係 中國 嘿

\(Zung1Gwok3 \ aa4 \ dim2goai2 \ gok3dak1 \ hai6 \ Zung1Gwok3 \ ge2?\)

China SFP why think COP China SFP

‘China, how come you think this is China?’

06 IE: (原因省略) 應該 係 中國 嘿

\(jing1goi1 \ hai6 \ Zung1Gwok3 \ ge3.\)

(explanation omitted) should COP China SFP

‘it should be China.’
07 IR: 係 咦

hai6 me1?
COP Q
‘Really?’

08 IE: 係 啊

hai6 aa3.
COP SFP
‘Yes.’

09 IR: 但 係 話 其實 亞洲 好多 地方 呢 都會

daan6hai6 e6 kei4sat6 aa3zau1 hou2 do1 dei6fong1 ne1 dou1 wui3(.)=
but PRT actually Asia very many place PRT also would

10 有 咪 類似 中國 建 築 個 喏
= jau5 di1 lei3ci3 Zung1Gwok3(.) [ge3 gin3zuk1] go3 wo3.
have some similar China ATTR architecture SFP SFP
‘But actually many Asian countries also have architecture similar to those in China’

11 IE: 係 啊

[hai6 aa.]
COP SFP
‘Yes.’

12 啥 你 又 講 得 咦
Gam2 nei5 jau6 gong2 dak1 aam1=
Then 2SG also say PRT right
‘Well you are right.’
13 IR: 係 嘢

[hai6 lo1].
COP SFP
'Yes'

Travel_name (08:02-08:35)

Example (3)

01 IE: 呢 呢 呢 個 設計 似 古堡
ni1(.) ni1(.) ni1 go3 cit3gai3 ci3 gu2bou2.
DEM DEM DEM CL design (be.)like castle
'This one looks like a (German) castle'

02 IR: 但係 呢 你 睇 咁 呢 有 呢 咁 一個 個
daan6hai6 ne1 nei5 tai2 haa5 keoi5 ne1 jau5 ni1 di1 jat1 go3 go3=
but SFP 2SG see PRT 3SG SFP have DEM some one CL CL

03 尖 尖 啥 啥 呢 其 實 係 啥 似 咁 似 咁
=zi1 zim1 go2 di1 [ne1] kei4sat6 hai6 di1 ci5 hai6 di1=
sharp sharp DEM some SFP actually COP some be.like COP some

04 IE:

[haa6].
PRT
'Em.'

05 IR: 天主教式 喔 喔 建築
tin1zyu2gaau3 sik1 go2 di1 gin3zuk1
Catholic style DEM some architecture
'But if you look at it, it has some sharp things. Actually this one is...this looks like those Catholic architectures'

06 IE: 咻 咻 你 又 講 講 咻 又 好似係

ji2(.) gam2 neii5 jau6(.) gong2 gong2 haa5(.) jau6 hou2 ci3 hai6(.)=
PRT so 2SG both- say say PRT -and be.like COP

07 但 係 佢 佢 都無 十字架

=daan6 hai6 keoi5 duo1 mou5(.) sap6 zi6 gaa2::
but 3SG also NEG cross

‘Well after hearing what you said it seems like – but it doesn’t have a cross’

08 IR: 咻 佢 啻 一 定 要 咻 呢 個 位 瞧 到

gam2 keoi5: m4 jat1 ding6 jiu3 hai6 neii1 go3 wai2 tai2 dou2=
Then 3SG NEG sure need at DEM CL position see PRT

09 十 字 架 嘢 嘢

sap6 zi6 gaa2 geii3 zei1.
cross SFP SFP

10 但 係 我 覺 得 呢 個 位 似 嘢(

daan6 hai6 ngo5 gok3 dak1 neii1 go3 wai2 ci3 loi1
but 1SG think DEM CL position be.like SFP

11 你 覺 得 呢

neii5 gok3 dak1 neii1?
2SG think Q

‘Well but the cross doesn’t need to be seen from here, but I think it looks like (a catholic architecture) from this angle, what do you think?’
hm... I think... not so ... it does look like (a catholic architecture) but if you go back to the picture I would still think that this architecture looks like a German castle more'

Travel_Informant 20_02:17-03:03
Example 4

01 IR: 点解 覺得 都像 故宮 呢

Why do (you) think (this) is also Forbidden City?

02 又或者 點解 你 覺得 像 中國 先

Or perhaps, why do you think it is China?

03 IE: 哦 因為 但有 呢啲 中 文 字 嘅 雕刻 啥度

because 3SG have DEM CL Chinese word ATTR sculpture at there
閱讀自然文本如下：

例5

Travel_Informant 20_07:55-08:32

Example 5

01 IR: 你覺得這好像中國

gam2 nei5 gok3dak1 hai6 ci3 Zung1Gwok3.

So 2SG think COP be.like China

‘So do you think it seems like China?’

02 IE: 你

hai6$ hai6$.

COP COP

‘Yes, yes.’

03 IR: 點解似中國啊

dim2gaai2 ci3 Zung1Gwok3 aa3?

挑战

offer an explanation

minimize imposition

use of epistemic verb/modal

- Mitigate/stepping down

minimize imposition

very sure that’s China
Why do you think it seems like China?

Why do you think it seems like China?

That is, this (kind of) architecture has the sense of those temples or courtyards.

That is, this (kind of) architecture has the sense of those temples or courtyards.

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That is, this (kind of) architecture has the sense of those temples or courtyards.
So why 2SG NEG would think COP DEM CL place Q
'So why don’t you think (this one) belongs to those (Southeast Asian) places?'

14 IE: 唔 點 解 啊
m3: dim2gaai2 aa4?(0.2)
PRT why SFP
'Hmm... why?'

15 我 都 其 實 都 可 能 像 先 入 為 主 啊
ngo5 dou1=kei4sat6 dou1 ho2nang4 hai6 sin1$jap6$wai4$zyu2$ aa3 heh
1SG also actually also maybe COP prejudiced.first.impressions SFP
'Actually I also maybe be prejudiced by my first impressions.'

Informant 6 (01:49-02:19)
Example 6

01 IR: 你 估 下
nei5 gu2 haa5.
2SG guess PRT
'You guess.'

02 邊 個 國 家 啊 你 覺 得?
bin1 go3 gwok3gaa1 aa3 nei5 gok3dak1
which CL country PRT 2SG think
'Which country do you think (it is).getConfig()'

03 IE: 邊 個 國 家 啊
bin1 go3 gwok3gaa1 aa4?
which CL country SFP
'Which country?'

04 嗯 又 有 中 文 字 個 喔
naa4 jau6 jau5 zung1man2 zii6 go3 wo3.
PRT also have Chinese character SFP SFP
'Um, there are also Chinese characters.'

05 IR: 係 啊
haai6 aa3.
'Yes.'
There are Chinese characters... (So) I guess (it) is... I guess (it) is also China.'

‘But aren’t there also many places which contain Chinese characters?’

'It needs not be China for sure.'

'You are right.'

'But you still think it is China.'
IR: 呀 呀
haa6 haa6.
PRT PRT
'Hmmms.'

IE: 即係 可以 喺 em6
ze1 () ho2ji6 hai2 em6=
that.COP can at

即係 雖然 話 好多
zik1hai6 seoi1jin4 waa6 hou2 do1=
that.COP although say very many

每 個 國家 都會 有 漢字
mui5 go3 gwok3gaa1 dou1 wui3 jau5 hon3 zi6=
every CL country also would have Chinese character

但係 你話 一塊地磚 都有個漢字 呢
daan6hai6 nei5 waa6() jat1 faai3 dei6zyun1 dou1 jau5 go3 hon3 zi6 ne1=
but 2SG say one CL ground.tile also have CL Chinese character SFP

就如果 喺 外國 黎 講係 比較 少有嘅
zau6 jyu4gwo2 hai2 ngoi6gwok3 lai4 gong2 hai6 bei2gaau3 su2 jau5 ge3.
then if at foreign.country come say COP relative seldom have SFP
'That is, although many...every country would also have Chinese characters, it is seldom to find Chinese characters even on the tile of the ground in foreign countries.'

IR: 唔
m3.

IE: 我 相信 係 中國 嘅 都係
ngo5 soeng1seon3() hai6 Zung1Gwok3 lo1 dou1 hai6.
1SG believe COP China SFP also COP
'I believe (it) is also China.'