

Unit 4 Language strategies for awkward situations

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some time ago I was in a bicycle shop / looking for a new lock for my bicycle / the shopkeeper / showed me several / patiently explaining their advantages and disadvantages / none of them was quite what I wanted and eventually I said to the shopkeeper / 'I'll think about it / thanks very much' / and left the shop / why did I say 'I'll think about it'? / not something more straightforward like / 'none of these is right' / 'they're too big' / 'they're too small' / 'they're too expensive' / 'I'll go elsewhere' /

I think there are two reasons why I chose to say 'I'll think about it' / the first is I didn't want the shopkeeper to feel that his products were not valued or that his time had been wasted / second / is that I didn't want to be the object of his possible annoyance or irritation / in other words / I didn't want him to feel bad / and I didn't want me to feel bad /

we have words for this general behaviour pattern of not wanting ourselves or other people to feel bad as a result of / the interactions that we have with other people / we talk about tact / which is defined in the Collins Concise Dictionary as 'the sense of what is fitting and considerate in dealing with others so as to avoid causing offence' / or we might equally call this / as many people do / *politeness behaviour* / now notice that the definition of tact talks about avoiding giving offence / it is not talking about something positive that we do in order to make people feel better than they otherwise would / so here **we are not talking about** the kind of behaviour we / get into when for example we console a friend whose cat has just been run over / or compliment our partner on a very well-cooked meal / **we are not trying here to** positively make people feel better / but trying /

to / avoid them feeling bad / so this is a negative kind of behaviour that I'm talking about / but the fact that it's negative **doesn't mean that it's not** terribly important / it is / extremely important / it is essential / to our self-preservation and to social cohesion / and for this reason avoidance behaviour is of great interest to / many different kinds of scholars / for example it's of interest to / biologists / uh who study avoidance behaviour as part of an animal's behaviour patterns / of aggression and defence / for example / uh patterns of fleeing or freezing / or producing various protective responses / we all know that when we walk through / uh Trafalgar Square the pigeons automatically fly away as our feet approach them / um we've all seen puppies who roll over on their backs and wave their tails between their legs / um when a larger dog comes along and takes an interest in them / uh some of us may have seen what a centipede does when you touch it / it rolls up in a tight coil / thereby protecting itself from possible harm / now human beings do the same kind of thing but they do it in a more / sophisticated uh way probably / and for this reason sociologists, psychologists and social psychologists uh take a great interest in avoidance behaviour / they see it as part of the means we use for maintaining good social relationships and our own and others' face / *face* has been defined as 'a person's sense of self, of public self-image' / linguists too take an interest in this kind of behaviour / because they're interested in the communication tactics and the language forms employed to avoid conflict / and maintain face / it has been said / by the linguist Jenny Thomas / that 'simply by speaking we trespass on another's space' / so linguists are interested in what language means we use to mitigate the