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<td>引用</td>
<td>近藤久美子:英語学英米文学論集(奈良女子大学英語英文学会) 第37号 pp.42-56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>発行日</td>
<td>2011-03-31</td>
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<td>ディスクリプション</td>
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<td>URL</td>
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The Functions of *You Know* as Politeness Strategies

Kumiko Kondo

1. Introduction

*You know* has been regarded as a linguistic hedging device, which is apparently a redundant expression. In some cases, it is said that *you know* should not be used often because it gives the addressee unpleasant feelings. However, *you know* is used most frequently in informal and in spoken situations, and it seems functional for participants in interactions.

Östman (1981) is famous for her exploration of various functions of *you know*. She argues that *you know* is a linguistic expression which clearly illustrates the fact that language conveys meaning at a number of different levels simultaneously or expresses several functions at once. The example (1) illustrates *you know* serving several functions simultaneously:

(1) *You know*, ma’am, if you weren’t a lady, I’d punch you right in your face.

(Östman 1981:20)

In this case, she says that *you know* serves different functions simultaneously, such as drawing attention to the speaker, softening an aggressive expression and so on. Holmes (1986) argues from a perspective similar to Östman (1981). She adds more detailed analyses of *you know*, considering not only the context of an utterance but also linguistic features, such as intonation and syntactic position. She divides *you know* into two broad categories based on a scale of the speaker’s certainty. On the basis of their studies, I examine the functions of *you know* by considering the degree of speaker certainty and its effectiveness in relation to strategies of politeness.

This paper consists of two parts. First, in section 2, I am going to introduce the functions of *you know* suggested by Holmes (1986), adding some detailed explanations in relation to politeness strategies. While considering the functions
of *you know* in previous studies, section 3 discusses room for improvement. Finally I propose an additional category for Holmes.

2. Previous Studies on *You Know*

In this section I examine the analysis of *you know* by Holmes (1986). Holmes defines *you know* as a pragmatic expression as Östman (1981) does, and she demonstrates specific functions of *you know* in addition to its general functions. First, I show the general functions of *you know* by Holmes (1986), and then I introduce politeness strategies suggested by Brown & Levinson (1978). Finally I show the categorization of *you know* by Holmes (1986) in relation to politeness strategies.

2.1. General Functions of *You Know*

Holmes (1986) focuses on the diversity of forms and functions of *you know*. Before her specific analysis of *you know*, she shows what unifies different instances of *you know*. First, at the level of discourse, Holmes (1986) argues that the occurrences of *you know* always serve an “intertextual coherence function” (Holmes 1986:16), tying participants together in many ways. In this case, she says that *you know* serves to claim a “turn” for the speaker; it asks for feedback, or yields the floor to the addressee. The following serves as an example of its “turn-taking function” (Holmes 1986:6):

(2) [A boy talks with his friend who is an inventor and is called Doc. The inventor has a dog whose name is Einstein]

Boy : Where’s Einstein? Is he with you?
Inventor: Yeah, he’s right here.

Boy : *You know*, Doc, you left your equipment on all week.

(*Back to the Future*)

In (2), a boy and an inventor talk about the dog, and then the topic is shifted to the inventor’s equipment after *you know* occurs. In this case, *you know* indicates that a new idea has just entered the speaker’s mind and it will then be introduced.
It also demands attention from the addressee, acting as a prestarter which gets the floor.

Second, all instances of you know quite clearly function as “verbal filler” (Brown 1977:102). This use of you know gives the speaker linguistic planning time. The example (3) illustrates a typical example:

(3) [Male television interviewer]

The money seems to be going for basics rather than for things like you know extra equipment.  (Holmes 1986:10)

In this case, the speaker uses you know in order to have the time for searching for the appropriate lexical items. You know also serves to keep attention from the addressee and fulfill the pause in the interaction.

Moreover, Holmes argues that all instances of you know function as alluding to the relevant knowledge of the addressee. She says that this may be genuinely mutual knowledge or knowledge which the speaker wants the addressee to presuppose or accept, regardless of his or her actual knowledge. (4) provides a typical example:

(4) [Woman to husband introducing a narrative at dinner party]

Well you know we went to Sally's that night.  (Holmes 1986:8)

In (4), you know serves to introduce their mutual knowledge that they went to Sally’s. Although this use of you know is apparently redundant, it serves a reminder function which alludes to mutual knowledge in the interaction.

As shown above, Holmes (1986) suggests three general functions of you know: an intertextual coherence function, verbal fillers and a function of alluding to relevant knowledge. Considering these general functions of you know, we find that you know serves several functions simultaneously in the interaction.

2.2. Specific Analysis of You Know Related to Politeness Strategies

Beyond that level of analysis as shown above, Holmes (1986) shows more
specific analysis of *you know*. She demonstrates two broad categories of *you know*, focusing on the degree of the speaker’s certainty in relation to politeness strategies. First, I describe the politeness strategies of Brown and Levinson (1978), and then I show two broad categories suggested by Holmes (1986). Here, I will add some detailed explanations in her study because she just explains briefly functions of *you know* in relation to politeness. Finally, I show the room for discussion.

### 2.2.1. Politeness Strategies by Brown & Levinson (1978)

Brown and Levinson (1978) are famous for their studies on politeness. They suggest the notion of “face”, which is derived from that of Goffman (1967). They make the following assumptions about face: it is the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself, and it consists of two related aspects. One is “positive face”, which is the desire to be approved of, liked, and understood by others. The other is “negative face”, which is the basic claim to territories, personal preserves, and rights to non-distraction by others. They argue that certain kinds of acts intrinsically threaten face in interactions. These ‘face threatening acts’ are referred to as FTAs, and people seek to avoid FTAs by employing some strategies to minimize the threat. They suggest five possible strategies for FTAs: baldly on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, off record, and do not do FTAs. Among these strategies, I focus on positive politeness and negative politeness, which are both related to this paper.

Brown and Levinson (1978) suggest that positive politeness is oriented toward the addressee’s positive face. Positive face is the want to be approved of by others, which means that his wants, actions, or values are thought of as desirable by others. Therefore, the speaker strives to show that his desire is in some respects similar to the addressee’s as a positive politeness strategy. They suggest three main strategies for positive politeness: exaggerating commonness, stressing that the speaker and the addressee are cooperatively involved in the relevant activity, and giving gifts such as understanding and cooperation to the addressee. The following provides an example of positive politeness:
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(5) Well I was watching *High Life* last night and ...  

(Brown & Levinson 1978: 124)

In this situation, the speaker presupposes that the addressee knows *High Life* which is a TV program, showing that they share common association. Such an assumption by the speaker may operate as expressing good intentions to the addressee, and it indicates that the speaker and the addressee are on common ground. Thus, in (5), the speaker reinforces the addressee’s positive face by indicating commonness between the speaker and the addressee.

On the other hand, Brown & Levinson say that negative politeness is partially oriented toward satisfying the addressee’s negative face, which wants to maintain claims of territory and self determination. Thus, negative politeness essentially avoids invading the addressee’s territory or interfering with the addressee’s freedom of self-determination. They argue that negative face is redressed with apologies for interfering, with hedges on the illocutionary force of the act, with impersonalizing mechanisms and with other softening mechanisms. (6) provides a good example of negative politeness:

(6) [This is the passage which is taken from the letter. The sender apologizes for having canceled the appointment]  

I am sorry I missed you today.  

(Thomas 2001: 188)

In this situation, the sender realizes that he has threatened the receiver’s negative face in that he canceled the appointment, and he admits his impingement with the expression “I am sorry”. He strives to redress the addressee’s negative face, which claims for personal preserves by apologizing. Apologizing can indicate that the sender is reluctant to threaten the receiver’s negative face and thereby partially redress that impingement. It also can be compensation for his rudeness. Thus, in this situation, the sender redresses the receiver’s negative face by apologizing as negative politeness.

As shown above, Brown and Levinson demonstrate the concept of politeness with the notion of face, and they suggest five possible politeness strategies
concerning FTAs. In the next subsection, I will show two broad categories of *you know* by Holmes (1986) in relation to their politeness strategies.

### 2.2.2. Categorization of *You Know* by Holmes (1986)

In previous subsection, I showed general functions of *you know* suggested by Holmes (1986). Beyond that level of analysis, she argues that we can divide *you know* into two broad categories considering the degree of speaker certainty. One is expressing speaker certainty concerning the addressee’s relevant background knowledge and anticipated response. The other is expressing both addressee-oriented uncertainty and message-oriented uncertainty. She identifies these two broad categories as “positive politeness” and “negative politeness” respectively. Within each of these categories, a number of subcategories are established, which are described below.

First, Holmes (1986) argues that there are functions of *you know* as expressing speaker certainty concerning the addressee’s relevant background knowledge and the anticipated response. This category has three subcategories; “conjoint knowledge”, “emphatic” and “attributive”. Holmes argues that when *you know* functions as “conjoint knowledge”, it introduces what he or she regards as incontestable mutual knowledge, in order to refer to the fact that the speaker knows the addressee already knows the information being asserted. (4) is a typical example, which I have already shown in the previous subsection:

(4) [Woman to husband introducing a narrative at dinner party]

Well *you know* we went to Sally’s that night.  

(Holmes 1986:8)

In (4), the speaker introduces the information that they went to Sally’s, to refer to the fact that the speaker knows the addressee already knows that information. *You know* serves a relevant backgrounding or reminder function. In this case, *you know* works as positive politeness which reinforces the addressee’s positive face indicating that they are on a common ground.

Another subcategory is “emphatic”. Holmes says that instances of *you know* in this category intensify the strength of the speech act and stress the speaker’s
confidence. Hence, they reassure the validity of the proposition being asserted to the addressee. Unlike the conjoint knowledge function, there is no assumption that the addressee knows the information being asserted:

(7) [Young woman to flatmate discussing smoking]

It is worse than eating you know. (Holmes 1986:8)

In (7), the speaker is certain that smoking is worse than eating, and she is confident that the addressee agrees with her. Thus, the speaker positively reassures the validity of the proposition, which implies that they on a common ground. From this point of view, we find that you know works as positive politeness.

The last subcategory is “attributive” in which you know expresses the speaker’s certainty about the validity of the proposition. In this case, you know also expresses that the speaker is confident that the addressee knows the kind of thing being asserted, as a result of past experience. (8) is a typical example:

(8) [Radio interviewee describing past experience]

And that way we’d get rid of exploitation of man by man all that stuff you know you’ve heard it before. (Holmes 1986:9)

In (8), you know expresses the speaker’s certainty concerning the validity of the proposition, and it also expresses the speaker’s confidence that the addressee has heard that kind of thing before, and he or she thus knows it. In this situation, you know works as positive politeness in that the speaker credits the addressee with background knowledge and confidently anticipates agreement from the addressee. Such an assumption conveys the speaker’s good intention to the addressee that the speaker and the addressee share common ground.

As shown above, instances of you know in this category express the speaker’s certainty or confidence regarding the addressee’s relevant background knowledge or the validity of the proposition. There are three subcategories in this category: “conjoint knowledge”, “emphatic” and “attributive”. Holmes says that all
instances of *you know* in this category function as positive politeness.

The second category is expressing the speaker’s uncertainty, which Holmes calls negative politeness in Brown and Levinson’s term. There are two subcategories in this category: one is expressing addressee-oriented uncertainty, and the other is message-oriented uncertainty. She argues that the addressee-oriented uncertainty is the function as “appealing”. In this category, *you know* serves to appeal for reassurance from the addressee in the context of an account of embarrassing experiences, or the sharing of very personal information or feelings. The following serves as an example:

(9) [Young woman to close friend]

And it was quite well it was it was all very embarrassing *you know*.

(Holmes 1986:10)

In (9) the speaker realizes that she threatens the addressee’s negative face. In this situation, she asks the addressee to accept or presuppose her embarrassing experience, which means that she imposes her wants on the addressee. Thus, the speaker is uncertain about the addressee’s attitude and anticipated response, and she appeals for explicit feedback from the addressee. In this situation, *you know* serves an apologetic function as negative politeness.

In other cases, Holmes argues that *you know* requests reassurance or agreement from the addressee in the context where the speaker makes a negatively affective or critical comment to the addressee. She says that a negative comment which is not toward the addressee can always be a threat to the addressee because it can affect the fabric of the addressee’s social relationships. (10) provides a typical example:

(10) [Young man describing work supervisor to flat mates]

But if a person is as blunt and as abrupt as C is *you know* they can make it quite unpleasant for you.

(Holmes 1986:10)

In (10), the speaker wants to share the negative comment with the addressee.
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The speaker realizes that he impinges on the addressee’s negative face in that he imposes his wants on the addressee, and hence he is uncertain about the addressee’s attitude and anticipated response. In this situation, *you know* serves to appeal for reassurance or sympathetic response from the addressee. It also functions as attenuating or softening negative effects, which modifies the force of the speech act as negative politeness.

The other subcategory is “linguistic imprecision”, which derives from message-oriented uncertainty. Holmes argues that the speaker is aware that the utterance is not encoded precisely, and *you know* is used as an appeal for tolerance while the speaker searches for the appropriate lexical item in (3), introduces more specific information in (11), or recasts the utterance after a false start in (12):

(3) [Male television interviewer]

The money seems to be going for basics rather than for things like *you know* extra equipment. (Holmes 1986:11)

(11) [Young man in discussing group]

I think they’re some of the senior children *you know* like prefects. (*ibid.*)

(12) [Young man in discussing with flat mates]

I mean look what Travolta as a as *you know* he’s not a pretty face or anything. (*ibid.*)

Holmes identifies (3) as “Signalling lexical imprecision”, (11) as “Introducing qualifying information”, and (12) as “Indicating false start”. In these examples, the speaker realizes that he threatens the addressee’s negative face, in that the speaker appeals for tolerance to the addressee while he or she encodes the proposition. Thus, the speaker uses *you know* to express an apologetic feeling as negative politeness.

As shown above, instances of *you know* in this category express the speaker’s uncertainty in regard to the addressee’s attitude and anticipated response, or linguistic encoding. There are two subcategories in this category: appealing and linguistic imprecision. In this category, *you know* expresses a mitigating, apologetic and attenuating function as negative politeness.
As I mentioned above, Holmes (1986) analyzes the functions of *you know* based on the scale of speaker certainty and she suggests two broad categories: positive politeness and negative politeness. She says that these categories of *you know* are inevitably somewhat artificial, and there are some examples which fit into more than one category. Figure 1 describes the categorization of *you know* by Holmes:

Expressing certainty   Positive politeness
- Conjoint knowledge
- Emphatic
- Attributive

Expressing uncertainty   Negative politeness
- Addressee-oriented uncertainty   Appealing
- Message-oriented uncertainty   Linguistic imprecision
  - Signaling lexical imprecision
  - Introducing qualifying information
  - Indicating false start

**Figure 1: Categorization of You Know by Holmes (1986)**

### 2.2.3 Room for Discussion in Holmes (1986)

In the previous subsection, I introduced the categorization of *you know* by Holmes (1986). However, there are some instances of *you know* which cannot be explained by Holmes (1986). (13) is a notable example:

(13) [A woman talks with her son who failed in the speech contest]

Woman: You all right?
Son   : I'm cool.
Woman: *You know,* I am really sorry about all this. (*Maid in Manhattan*)

In (13), the speaker realizes that she threatens the addressee’s negative face, which wants not to be imposed on or invaded by others. The speaker wants the
addressee to accept or presuppose her personal feeling that she really worries about the addressee, which means that she imposes her wants on the addressee. Therefore, the speaker is uncertain not about linguistic encoding, but about the addressee’s anticipated response and attitude. From this point of view, the instance of *you know* in (13) cannot be categorized into the linguistic imprecision but rather the appealing function. However, in this situation, though the speaker is uncertain concerning the addressee’s attitude and anticipated response, she does not keenly appeal for the explicit feedback from the addressee, which is different from the characteristic of the appealing function.

As shown above, there are instances of *you know* which do not appeal for reassurance or agreement from the addressee even though *you know* expresses the speaker’s addressee-oriented uncertainty. From this point of view, we can say that there is room for improvement in Holmes (1986). In the next section, I will examine the additional function of *you know*, in relation to politeness strategies.

3. **The Function of You Know in Politeness Strategies**

In the previous section, I examined the categorization of *you know* by Holmes (1986) based on the degree of speaker certainty. However, there are instances of *you know* which cannot be explained by Holmes (1986). In this section, I examine an additional function of *you know* to Holmes (1986), and then I show the categorization of *you know* in relation to politeness strategies.

3.1. **The Function of You Know as Conveying Sympathy**

There are some instances of *you know* that do not keenly appeal for the explicit feedback from the addressee, even though the speaker is uncertain concerning the addressee’s attitude and anticipated response. I call this function of *you know* “conveying sympathy”, and I demonstrate in the following subsections.

3.1.1. **Conveying Sympathy**

Consider (13) again as an example of conveying sympathy:
(13) [A woman talks with her son who failed in the speech contest]

Woman: You all right?
Son   : I’m cool.
Woman: You know, I am really sorry about all this.  (Maid in Manhattan)

The speaker realizes that she imposes her personal feeling on the addressee, which threatens the addressee’s negative face. Thereby, the speaker strives to redress the addressee’s negative face by using you know as an apologetic function. In this situation, the speaker feels uncertainty about the addressee’s attitude and anticipated response because of her FTAs. However, in contrast to the appealing function of you know, the speaker does not keenly appeal for the addressee’s explicit feedback but rather conveys some sympathetic feeling to the addressee, which is a remarkable characteristic of this category. Here, the speaker conveys that she really worries about the addressee and feels pity for his failure in the speech contest.

Another example is described below:

(14) [Doctor talks with his patient whose liver function has declined]

Doctor: I, if you were an alcoholic, I would say, you know, you’re gonna die.  (Super Size Me)

In (14), the speaker threatens the addressee’s negative face, in that he refers to the addressee’s personal information negatively. The speaker realizes that his negative comment is a threat to the addressee, and thereby the speaker uses you know as negative politeness. You know serves to attenuate and mitigate the negative effects, which redresses the force of the speech act. Here, you know softens the negative comment that the addressee is going to die. In the same way as in (13), you know in (14) does not keenly appeal for reassurance or agreement from the addressee, though it expresses the speaker’s uncertainty in regard to the addressee. In this situation, you know mainly serves to convey sympathy from the speaker to the addressee. The speaker expresses that he feels pity for the bad health condition of the addressee by using you know as conveying sympathy.
As shown above, there are instances of *you know* that do not keenly appeal for explicit feedback from the addressee but rather convey sympathy, even though they express the speaker’s uncertainty concerning the addressee’s attitude and anticipated response. In this case, *you know* is used to express that the speaker feels pity for the painful situation of the addressee, and I call this function of *you know* conveying sympathy. Instances of *you know* in this category also work as negative politeness. They express mitigating, attenuating or apologetic functions as negative politeness strategies.

### 3.1.2. Context

As shown above, there are instances of *you know* which convey sympathy from the speaker to the addressee. In this case, the situation where *you know* occurs is different from the other categories. Let us compare between (15) and (13):

(15) [A man talks about his experience when his wife left]

Man: Yeah, I mean, obviously it was a very big shock, because we were so happy, *you know.*

*(About a Boy)*

(13) [A woman talks with her son who failed in the speech contest]

Woman: You all right?
Son   : I’m cool.
Woman: *You know,* I am really sorry about all this. *(Maid in Manhattan)*

In (15), the speaker wants to share his personal experience and feeling with the addressee. The speaker realizes that he threatens the addressee’s negative face in that he imposes his wants on the addressee. Hence the speaker feels addressee-oriented uncertainty and uses *you know* as an apologetic function which redresses the addressee’s negative face. In this case, *you know* serves to appeal for reassurance or sympathetic response from the addressee. From these points of view, *you know* in (15) is the function as appealing. In contrast to (15), as is shown in the previous subsection, in (13) *you know* mainly serves to convey sympathy rather than to appeal for reassurance from the addressee. It also
works as negative politeness expressing apologetic feeling to the addressee.

Between these examples, what is a remarkable difference is that the situation where *you know* occurs. In (15) the speaker mentions what is possessed by the speaker and is not painful to the addressee. The speaker unilaterally imposes his personal feeling on the addressee. On the other hand, in (13) *you know* occurs where the speaker refers to what is possessed not only by the speaker but also by the addressee and is painful to the addressee, which the speaker thus cannot mention straight forwardly. Therefore, the speaker does not mention unilaterally but rather with consideration in relation to the addressee. Furthermore, considering the speaker’s impingement directly in relation to the addressee in (13), the FTAs to the addressee are stronger than in other categories. From this point of view, we find that the speaker mentions with much hesitation in this situation.

As shown above, instances of *you know* as conveying sympathy occur in the context where the speaker mentions what is possessed not only by the speaker but also by the addressee and is painful to the addressee. In this case, the impingement on the addressee is strong, and thus *you know* indicates that the speaker refers to with much hesitation in this category.

### 3.2. Categorization of *You Know*

We can see from the previous subsections that the categorization of *you know* by Holmes (1986) is inadequate to explain all types of *you know* in relation to politeness strategies. There is room for improvement in her study, especially in the subcategories of negative politeness. In her study, she just focuses on instances of *you know* which introduce what the speaker possesses, such as the personal feeling or experience, or negative comment by the speaker. However, there are instances of *you know* which occur in the situation where the speaker mentions what is possessed not only by the speaker but also by the addressee and is painful to the addressee, such as a negative comment toward the addressee. In this case, *you know* mainly conveys sympathy to the addressee rather than appeals for reassurance, even though the speaker feels addressee-oriented uncertainty. I call this function of *you know* conveying sympathy, and I propose it as an additional category to Holmes.
Considering that instances of *you know* in this category occur when the speaker is uncertain about the addressee’s attitude and anticipated response, I add this function to the subcategory of addressee-oriented uncertainty. Here is a figure that enables us easily to view the functions of *you know* as politeness strategies:

Expressing certainty  Positive politeness

- Conjoint knowledge
- Emphatic
- Attributive

Expressing uncertainty  Negative politeness

- Addressee-oriented uncertainty
  - Appealing
  - **Conveying sympathy**
- Message-oriented uncertainty
  - Linguistic imprecision
    - Signaling lexical imprecision
    - Introducing qualifying information
    - Indicating false start

**Figure 2: Categorization of You Know**

4. Conclusion

This paper has shown that *you know* is a pragmatic expression that serves a number of different functions between a speaker and an addressee. In section 2, I showed the categorization of *you know* suggested by Holmes (1986), adding some detailed explanations in relation to politeness strategies. In her study, there are two broad categories of *you know* based on the degree of speaker certainty. One is the category reflecting the speaker’s certainty concerning the addressee’s relevant background knowledge, attitude and anticipated response, which works as positive politeness. The other is the category expressing both addressee-oriented uncertainty and message-oriented uncertainty, which functions as negative
politeness. While considering previous studies on *you know* in relation to politeness strategies, in section 3, I showed room for improvement in Holmes (1986). Here I reported my finding of a category of *you know* which cannot be explained by Holmes (1986). I called this category conveying sympathy, and I proposed to add it to her categorization.

However, there is room for further discussion. One potential area for further research is more precise analysis considering not only by linguistic features, such as intonation and syntactic position, but also illocution features, such as the relative status and role of the participants, formality of the interaction and so on. This point to be examined would make the categorization of *you know* in politeness strategies even clearer.

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