

POLISHING YOUR SPEECH

Some points in Unit 1, “General Language Points,” of *Language of Meetings 155ff*, and in “Distancing: Softening what you say” (E>G, Other Aids) should be clarified and added.

Remote models

Problem

The tendency to use the remote models *would* and *could* with the wrong kind of verb.

Examples

I would have a slight problem with money. (*would have* → *have*)

To be honest, there would be a problem. (*would be* → *is*)

I’m afraid your profit calculations would be incorrect. (*would* → *are*)

I would not understand what you mean. (*would* → *do*)

Frankly speaking, I would find a problem. (*would find* → *have found*)

I hope you could do a little better. (*could* → *can*)

I’m afraid I would be busy that day. (*would* → *will*)

I hope that you would revise your calculations.” (*would* → *will*)

Solution

Wrong verb: Point 3 in “Distancing” tells us to use remote modals with verbs that express requests, offers and desire, and verbs of saying and thinking. This may be because remote modals are used to soften attitude, not actions or states that have no attitude. (For example, the verb *have* in its contexts above has nothing to do with attitude; one either has a problem with money or doesn’t, so *have* is not softened.)

Therefore, we can repair the last example above: “I would hope that you will revise your calculations.” (Note that we allow *would* to be used with *hope*, since *hope* expresses an attitude or desire.)

Problem

We sometimes distort meaning by using a remote modal.

Example:

“I’m afraid I couldn’t understand.”

This is awkward in the context of present time. In the context that I found this sentence, the writer meant inability to understand at the present, not past. You may remember that one modal can have different senses, and you have to be careful that the unintended sense does not dominate and thus distort your intended meaning. As an instance of this phenomenon, you already know that the obligatory sense of *should* often dominates a situation and replaces the probability sense, and that you should not use it to express probability unless you are sure that it will not distort your meaning. Another instance: In many contexts, the hypothetical/unreal sense will dominate the softening sense, thus distorting meaning in another way.

Grammar solution

Ask yourself whether the dominant sense of the modal in a given context will change meaning.

A general solution

Use the remote modal only with fixed (conventional) terms that you read, and keep your ears open for other uses by native speakers. A good rule: If you have heard or seen the expression used in a similar context by a native speaker, use it; if you have not heard or seen it used yet, do not use it. For example, in *Newsweek* you read an interview, in which the interviewer asks, “What do you think about the terms of that agreement?” The interviewee replies, “I would say they should scrap the whole thing.” Later, if someone asks your opinion on something, you can say “I would say...” because you have witnessed a native speaker using it in an opinion-expressing context.

Depersonalizing

“Distancing,” in point 6, presents one method for depersonalizing; here are two more methods of depersonalizing and therefore making your language more tactful:

- **Don’t use “you.”** Instead of saying “I wish you hadn’t done that,” say, “I wish that hadn’t happened.”
- **Use passive without “you.”** Instead of saying “You should do this work more carefully,” say, “This work should be done more carefully.”

Would: Don't overuse it

The “would” tool for tactful expression is restricted to certain circumstances. Mr. MacStein has tried to define a general rule for its correct usage, but in all the grammar books that he has searched through he has not been able to find good coverage. So, let's try using “would” only 1) in the functions presented below (when certain key words—like “better”—are present in the statement), and 2) in statements with other key words that you encounter from native speakers.

Opinion

It would be better to...

Wouldn't it be a good idea to...?

Would it be preferable to...?

Desire

I would like to...

Wouldn't you prefer to...?

Would you rather...?

Questions, requests and suggestions

Use the “*would* phrases” that appear in Section “3. *would, could* and *might*” of “Distancing...” (“I thought it would be nice to...” is an example of a “*would* phrase.”)

Conditional and negative expressions

Use the “*would* phrases” that appear in Section “4. conditional and negative expressions” of “Distancing...” (“It would be better if...” is an example of a “*would* phrase.”)

The main point here is that we should not use “would” with every verb. Use it only with the key words that you have seen a native speaker use it with.

Rubbing the wrong way or right way?

When we speak in a foreign language we have to be careful of the effect which the language we use has on our counterparts. Usually, we want to avoid giving a feeling of confrontation. Here are some alternatives to confrontational words.

Confrontational

expect

demand

insist

have to, must, had better

reject

Less confrontational

→ hope, wish, would like *smn* to

→ require, need, propose

→ see ‘demand’

→ We really wish you would..., Please consider...

→ difficult to accept

Tactful Criticism

Tactifiers

- Preface your criticism with general praise or praise for the point related to the criticism.
We learned a lot from Ms. Kim's presentation, and I had just one question about . . .” (“And” is better than “but.”)
- Be positive rather than negative.
Instead of “Mr. Lee's conclusion wasn't helpful,” say “A more thorough conclusion might be more informative.”
- Present your suggestion as an alternative rather than as a criticism.
I wonder if Mr. Park has considered providing a slightly more detailed introduction to each section.
- Pretend to ask for opinion.
I'd like to get your opinion on this. Do you think a mini-summary after each section might make the whole presentation more easily understandable, or would it make the presentation too long?
I can't help wondering if a mini-summary... Could you tell us what you think about that?
- Use certain conventional expressions.

I wonder if I might suggest *np* (alternative to criticized point)

I was wondering if you have considered *np* (alternative to criticized point)

- De-personalize by avoiding “you.” You can use passives to avoid personalizing with “you.” Or say “*the significant developments section*” instead of “*your significant developments section*.”

All the facts ought to be considered before we make such an important decision. (Instead of “You ought to consider all the facts.”)

- Use tentative language
‘might’ instead of ‘would’: It might be a good idea to first ask them what they want.
- Dilute by sharing responsibility by using “we.”
I was wondering if we have considered all the facts.

De-tactifiers

- “you” or “your” (Don’t make it personal!)
- “had better,” “should,” “ought to” (and their negative forms)

Application

Which criticisms here are tactful, and which are tactless? (Compare your answers with your teacher’s opinion in “Answers.”)

1. You had better make a few changes in your change.
2. I wonder if I might suggest a bit more body language to keep your audience’s attention and get it back when it starts to wander.
3. You ought to present a basic outline before each section so that we can understand more easily.
4. I understood most of your plan quite easily, and it would be even easier if an occasional mini-summary were presented.
5. It would be better if you presented an occasional mini-summary.
6. I was wondering... Do you think a mini-summary at the end of that long background report might help the audience remember the details more easily later on?
7. Presenting an occasional mini-summary might make the plan easier to understand.
8. Have you considered/tried providing a mini-summary after each section of your presentation, for helping the audience remember?
9. Your plan sounds very well-thought. I only wish that we had been given some mini-summaries for clarity.