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# **REDRESSIVE ACTIONS FOLLOWING COMMISERATIONS IN ONLINE DISCUSSIONS**

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*In Brown and Levinson's (1978) seminal classification of positive politeness strategies, commiserating is listed in the subgroup referred to as human-relations wants. The qualitative and quantitative analysis of a corpus consisting of five Internet discussion boards has shown that it is also one of the most frequent positive politeness strategies used there. All the threads under examination are dedicated to the so-called women's topics, such as dieting, pregnancy, infertility or mothering. The members of these close-knit communities formed upon the boards find it necessary to express sympathy in order to enhance each other's (positive) face and avoid face-threatening acts arising from the sensitive nature of these topics. However, the analysis of the corpus has also revealed that to commiserate merely by saying they are sorry is not enough. The interlocutors find it necessary to add often complex redressive actions to boost the illocutionary force of their statements. Thus the aim of the paper is to explore the formulaic character of commiserations and categorise the numerous redressive actions following them, taking into account their two main functions, i.e. building rapport and facilitating smooth communication within online communities.*

**KEY WORDS:** *commiserations, face enhancement, rapport, redressive strategies.*

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## **Introduction**

The paper addresses the issue of building rapport in online communication via positive politeness strategies, namely commiserating. Politeness is a key concept in modern linguistics; as Xie (2003, p. 811) argues, "where there is communication, there is politeness studies". Thus there have been numerous studies and articles dealing with politeness in respect to online communication as well (e.g. Hobbs 2003, Lewis 2005, Graham 2007, Kouper 2010, Ädel 2011, Hopkinson 2013). However, the speech act, or better to say speech event<sup>1</sup>, of commiserating in virtual communities has not been fully examined yet.

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<sup>1</sup> Speech event is "a set of circumstances in which people interact in some conventional way to arrive at some outcome" (Yule 1996, p. 135).

Furthermore, the analysis of a large number of discussion board threads has shown that a mere saying sorry is not enough. A vast majority of commiserations are followed by redressive actions, boosting the illocutionary force of the asynchronous utterance, and helping online interlocutors to overcome the face threat posed by their, more or less difficult, life situations. Hence the article intends to demonstrate how the online users build rapport and express support, which leads to establishing a solid common ground and safer environment in which they can discuss just about anything they wish to share in the virtual world. First, it describes the results of a quantitative analysis of all commiserations present in the examined material, composed of several online discussions. Second, it goes on to explain which redressive strategies prevail in the discussions and groups them into several categories.

Leech defines commiserations, together with their more formal component, condolences, as “utterances that politely express the speaker’s sympathy for the hearer when the hearer has suffered some misfortune” (Leech 2014, 210). He lists commiserations among hearer-oriented positive politeness strategies related to the Maxim of Sympathy. Contrary to another type of these strategies, congratulations, where the speaker shares the hearer’s joy at his/her accomplishing something good, when commiserating the speaker expresses shared emotions as well, but this time concerning something negative. Apart from expressing sympathy, the speaker also tends to offer some comfort. In terms of facework, the face threat is represented by the misfortune; therefore, by showing mutual sorrow, the threat is overcome and redressed. This strategy also appears in Brown and Levinson’s (1978, 1987) classification among strategies of giving gifts to the hearer where sympathy is related to the so-called human-relations wants, such as being cared about. Apart from sympathy, other gifts belonging to this category are goods, understanding and cooperation.

## Data and methodology

The analysis was conducted on a self-compiled corpus consisting of 5 threads from various discussion boards (altogether containing 170.500 words), all of which were predominantly attended by women. That determines also the choice of topics discussed, such as pregnancy, mothering, infertility or losing weight. For more details on the individual threads, message boards from which they were retrieved and the particular topics, see Table 1 below.

Table 1. **Individual threads, their source and topics**

Corpus	Thread	Message board	Topic
C1	Slimming_world_support	Three Fat Chicks	dieting, special diet
C2	30_Somethings_chat	Three Fat Chicks	dieting, everyday talk- chat
C3	Infertility_forum	Mothering	infertility, trying to conceive
C4	Due_date_October2008	Health & Fitness	pregnancy
C5	Catholic_mammas	Mothering	parenting, religion

First of all, the quantitative analysis of the corpus has revealed two main facts: the act of commiserating occurred in every thread and recurrently and, more importantly, merely expressing you are sorry was often not enough. Consequently, the communicants apparently felt there should be another step minimizing the threat by offering encouragement and other ‘gifts’, as is illustrated in Example 1 below. In the first part, the speaker expresses she is sorry that another board user has gained weight and instantaneously goes on to offer a solution to the problem and gives support. Besides that, the speaker also employs Brown and Levinson’s (1978) positive politeness strategy 11 of “being optimistic”, which again functions as a powerful face-threat mitigator, in this case making the hearer believe that the weight gain is not that bad after all, as it can soon be lost again.

(1) Bubbly, shame about the gain, but don’’t let that get you down. Jump back on and I’m sure next week you’ll be a loser again!!!

## Results and discussion

### Commiserations and their form

As is clearly visible from Table 2 below, the speech event of commiserations was present in all the threads under examination, there were altogether 243 commiseration acts. Moreover, the analysis has confirmed that the range of patterns expressing sorrow is quite limited; the interlocutors used only several patterns: 1. expressions comprising the adjective *sorry*, 2. other verbs expressing commiserations, 3. interjections + prepositional phrase, which will now be scrutinised in more depth.

Table 2. **Commiserations: total number of occurrence**

	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Total
Number of occurrences	16	73	101	21	27	<b>238</b>

Let us now briefly examine the patterns of the most productive commiseration structure found in the corpora, *sorry*. The quantitative analysis revealed the four most frequent linguistic realizations using this adjective (Table 3). Example 2 shows the first pattern consisting of *I am sorry* boosted by the adverb *so* repeated several times. This accentuation is rather rare in the material and occurs in higher numbers only in C3.

(2) Oh Laggie, I am so so so sorry . That is so unfair it sounds like it’s a MF issue.

Secondly, there is the *sorry to hear* phrase, analogical to a similar Sympathy Maxim strategy, congratulating (e.g. *glad to hear*). It also fulfils the same functions, i.e. both showing concern and interest by referring to the hearer’s previous messages. Similar to *glad to hear* standing on the opposite side of an imaginary scale, this strategy was used most in C2 and C3 (Example 3). Both of the aforementioned structures also serve as

powerful cohesive devices referring backwards to what was said by other message board users, thus overcoming the often confusing structure of online boards.

- (3) Hanna, sorry to hear that the hospital says there is nothing else they can do for your little guy.

The third pattern, *sorry (too bad) that* followed by a subordinate clause depicting the misfortune itself is used especially in C3 where it represents the most numerous subgroup. In Example 4, the misfortune refers to the addressee's obligation to work when others have a day off.

- (4) Moonchild, sorry you had to work on bank holiday, that sucks, I hope it wasn't too busy for you.

Finally, the last group consists of *sorry/shame* and a prepositional phrase (*about/for*). The prepositional phrase again introduces the misfortune described by the hearer in a previous message. In Example 5, the speaker expresses sorrow at another user's miscarriage and minimizes the threat by asking about her feelings. The follow-up question implies the speaker's intensified interest in the hearer; it can also serve as a springboard for giving advice (advice pre-formula). Moreover, it helps to achieve coherence via starting with the first part of a question-answer adjacency pair.

- (5) Sorry about your m/s. How else are you feeling?

Table 3. **Sorry: number of occurrence**

Sorry	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Total
I am (so) sorry	--	5	19	2	2	<b>28</b>
sorry to hear	3	32	16	10	5	<b>66</b>
sorry/too bad (that) addressee's misfortune	5	12	29	2	5	<b>53</b>
sorry/shame + prepositional phrase (about/for)	5	17	8	6	8	<b>44</b>
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>72</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>191</b>

Apart from commiserations expressed by means of the adjective *sorry*, there are several other ways, which, however, do not occur in very high numbers (see Table 4).

Table 4. **Other commiseration strategies**

	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Total
it sucks/sux/stinks <sup>2</sup>	3	3	18	1	3	28
(huge) hugs to (excluding emoticons)	---	4	1	---	4	9
interjections: ugh to not (getting)	---	---	10	---	---	10
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>47</b>

The first small subgroup consists of various verbs expressing more or less the same; it concerns mostly slang expressions suggesting that something is objectionable or inadequate. The most numerous in this category were the verbs *suck* and *stink*; however, other expressions with a similar meaning were included as well: *it sounds awful/miserable/horrible, it's a pain in the butt, I twinge to think about*. As regards creative spelling, the form *sux* is used several times. Sometimes the verb is modified by a booster, as in *it totally sucks*. The last two expressions listed express even stronger emotions than *it sucks*.

In Example 6, the speaker shows she is sorry about the addressee's having to undergo another infertility treatment. It is followed by a frowning emoticon and an interjection (*ugh*). Example 7 illustrates a very rare strategy, using the *poor you* address expressing sympathy, in this case followed by a prepositional phrase referring to the misfortune, i.e. a mouse found in the addressee's house.

(6) It sucks that you have to go back on the shots though :o( ugh

(7) Ugh Helen poor you with the mouse!

The next strategy is a typical feature in CMC (computer-mediated communication); due to the lack of visual means, it is necessary to describe what one would perform physically in real-life face-to-face conversation, i.e. hugging. It is either expressed verbally, as in Example 8, or it is often performed by a hugging emoticon showing two smilies hugging each other (as in Example 9 where it actually works on its own with no further text, just following the nickname). Interestingly, C2 members can employ a special version of this emoticon, the *group hug* with a circle of hugging smilies (Example 10). It should be pointed out that smilies are actually animated in this sub-corpus and hence they keep moving. Furthermore, the hugging emoticons perform multiple functions depending very much on the context; apart from expressing sympathy, they are also used to express positive feelings, e.g. also with congratulations mentioned above, or to say goodbye to another member.

<sup>2</sup> This group includes also the following phrases synonymous to *it sucks*: *it sounds awful, it's a pain in the butt, I twinge to think about*.

When verbalised, in a vast majority of cases, it is used as a noun phrase (e.g. *hugs to you*), sometimes pre-modified by an adjective functioning as a booster (Example 8)<sup>3</sup>. Finally, there is an illustrative sample of what message board users in women's discussions are often accused and made fun of, proliferate use of smilies. To a great extent, the users in the material under my examination are actually quite sparing with emoticons, as opposed to some similar Czech discussion boards, but Example 11 shows an excessive use of emoticons used to express sympathy. In this case, it is a sign of humour rather than the over-exaggerated use of this device. Numerous group hugs are followed by an explanatory sentence using a witty metaphor, *an army of monster hugs*, implying that the author of the post is actually joking. Further on, in Example 12, the speaker stresses the importance of hugs as comfort givers and points out the difference between real life and CMC.

(8) Keep your head up through out this ordel. Sending you a huge hug.

(9) Hanna 🍷 🍷

(10) John – sorry about the bad traffic and getting late to work. Hang in there



(11) **Big John:**



There, an army of monster hugs to help you through the next few days! ;-)

(12) Silver, 🍷 🍷 I'm so sorry that you're not feeling well. I'm happy that you got your surgery done and hopefully, recovery is fast but I wish that I could give you a hug in real life because I know that sometimes, when you're feeling lousy, you just need a hug.

The last strategy consisting of an interjection and prepositional phrase referring to the particular miserable event is relatively rare (only 10 occurrences) and restricted merely to C3. In Example 13, the speaker expresses her sympathy for the addressee's health problems.

(13) Blue, ugh to not getting AF<sup>4</sup>!

## 2. Redressive actions following commiserations

The previous parts dealt with the most frequent structures expressing commiseration in the examined data. However, as has been mentioned above, they are rarely used on

<sup>3</sup> In the quantitative analysis, *hugs to you* as an expression of sympathy had to be carefully distinguished from the same phrase used recurrently as a part of a saying goodbye greeting.

<sup>4</sup> AF is an acronym for Aunt Flow, which means menstrual period.

their own, without further redress. It is actually quite the opposite, as a great majority of saying *sorry* is accompanied with one or more follow-up actions mitigating the original threat caused by the misfortune that had elicited the commiseration in the first place. Such a typical string of utterances can be found in Example 14 below. The speaker starts by expressing her sympathy for the hearer who has suffered an anxiety attack. Then she goes on with three more strategies: she admits she knows about the addressee's difficult past, goes on to express appreciation for a sign of improvement, adds some words of encouragement (*Hang in there!*) and, finally, finishes the utterance with a hugging emoticon signifying solidarity and comfort.

- (14) I am so sorry about the panic attack. You have been through so much. I am glad that you are feeling a little better. Hang in there! 😊🤗

The complex utterances were divided into single patterns that were grouped under the following subcategories: sharing a personal story, stressing common ground, giving suggestions/advice, giving encouragement, offering help/support or *I wish I could*, agreeing, congratulations, well wishes, follow-up question, complimenting and others.

**A. Shared personal experience:** the speaker compares the addressee's misfortune to a similar situation that has happened to her or other people she knows. According to Eischenclas (2012), sharing personal experience is something that speakers tend to do quite often as it fulfils two functions: to promote solidarity or to substantiate the speaker's authority for giving advice, for example. In Example 15, the speaker gives a personal account placing emphasis on how she was feeling when she also discovered a mouse. It is a vividly depicted story full of details and playful humour, as when she calls the little creature *mr. mousey*. She stresses her own inability to solve the situation herself to enhance the original speaker's face; hence the story also functions as a claiming common ground strategy via self-deprecation. Moreover, some of the stories they tell are not their own; they like to describe other people's experience as well, as in Example 16.

- (15) Ugh Helen poor you with the mice! I was massively freaked out last November when I had one. I called my boyfriend immediately and said "Oh my god I just saw a mouse!" He was like, "Uh... OK. It's a mouse. You'll be fine." Then I just kinda sat on the bed thinking I saw mr. mousey again and googling ways to get rid of them!
- (16) Sorry to hear about your sleep walking and eating. One of my friend's son's does that. He had lost 20 pounds. But he started doing it again and gained 11 of them back. He told us he was just going to give up eating.

**B. Stressing common ground:** the members emphasise in-group values and solidarity, there is frequent use of the inclusive *we* and generalisations ("it can happen to us all"). This strategy of sharing responsibility and emphasising that weight is a problem to other board members, too, occurs repeatedly in the two threads dealing with weight loss. Furthermore, in a similar situation, one of the speakers stresses she comes to seek sup-

port in the thread from “people here in the same boat” (C1). The metaphor of the ‘same boat’ appears in the material six times; besides weight loss, it also refers to people who are pregnant for the first time, like the contributor of the message. Example 17 shows the use of the inclusive *we*, which is then changed into *you* in the last sentence suggesting that with the support of others, the speaker herself can achieve her goal and lose weight. In Example 18, the speaker distinguishes two groups – us (women, the in-group) and them (men)<sup>5</sup>.

- (17) We all have these glitches when we slip up, but *you* can lose it again :D  
 (18) I find men are blunt and to the point when we get the coruage to stay anything when it comes to feelings it just sorta comes out and we say what goin through our heads at that moment. This is how we end up with our foot in our mouth sometimes all the way up do our but cheek.

**C. Expressing sympathy (stressing sameness):** again stressing solidarity with the hearer and expressing sorrow at her misfortune. As is stressed by Leech (2014, p. 211), the speaker claims he/she shares the hearer’s sorrow and at the same time offers comfort to make the sorrow more bearable. There are two strategies in the material: first, the speaker claims she can absolutely understand the other person’s feelings (Example 19–20). This strategy tends to be followed with the personal story strategy mentioned above; the speaker proves she can relate to the addressee’s emotions as “she has been there, too”. Hence, it also overlaps with the claiming common ground strategy, which is evident in the last sentence of Example 20, where she stresses what a great community has been formed there. Secondly, on the contrary, it is emphasised that the other person’s suffering is so intense that none of the board members can understand how horrible she feels (Example 21).

- (19) I know what you mean about moving on, after this year of constant treatments I felt like I had missed “enjoying” my life because I was always looking towards the next cycle, then so disappointed when it was a BFN.  
 (20) Aura, I know how you feel about being here many seasons, Fall was my fourth this time around...it can be sad to think about the time lost, but I can’t imagine meeting a better group of ladies.  
 (21) HUGE hug to you... None of us have any idea what you’re going thru right now

**D. Giving encouragement:** in a way, encouragement is another non-tangible gift that the speaker can give to the hearer, as in Brown and Levinson’s (1978, p. 134) positive politeness Strategy 15. Hence the speaker suggests there is a way out of the unfortunate situation and mitigates the threat of failure. Encouragement often takes on the form of an imperative (*don’t be, keep, don’t let, jump back on*); in this case, it is not regarded as

<sup>5</sup> For more about the claiming common ground positive politeness strategy, see Trávníková (2017).

an imposition on the hearer's face – it is quite the contrary, as is evident from both utterances in Example 22.

- (22) Don't be disheartened hon, keep with the programme and I'm sure you'll have a good loss next week. 🤔 🤔 love ff x  
... shame about the gain, but don't let that get you down. Jump back on and I'm sure next week you'll be a loser again!!!

**E. Asking a follow-up question:** having expressed commiseration, the speaker asks a question related to the misfortune. Like in Example 23, the question implies the speaker's intensified interest in the hearer and can serve as a springboard for giving advice (advice pre-formula), as in Example 24. In this case, the piece of advice on how to fight morning sickness in pregnancy is given in the form of a personal story in order not to sound too offensive or clever-clever. Moreover, it helps achieve coherence via starting with the first part of an adjacency pair question-answer.

- (23) 8 hours of sleep in the past 4 days... you poor kid:-(. Does the doctor say how long it should take for this new dosage to kick in?

**F. Giving advice:** the speaker repeatedly shows her interest in helping other less fortunate participants, which very often takes on the form of advice, as in Example 24 below. Advice-giving is considered a strong FTA (face-threatening act), hence usually mitigated by making the piece of advice less direct and bossy (here the threat is mitigated by asking a question and then sharing personal experience, rather than going bald on record, using, for instance, an imperative). In this example, the FTA is also mitigated by humour; vomiting is replaced by a euphemism when the toilet is called *porcelain queen* followed by a winking smiley.

- (24) Man, getting sick daily would suck. Have you tried ginger pops or ginger tea? I made myself a cup of ginger tea every morning when I was pregnant. Helped me avoid the "porcelain queen;-)"! 😏

**G. Wishing well:** the last redressive action appearing repeatedly in the material under examination are well wishes, one of the main strategies related to the Sympathy Maxim. They frequently go hand in hand with commiserations; first the speaker expresses she is sorry about what has happened and immediately goes on to wish good luck so that the hearer can soon overcome the difficulties caused by the misfortune itself. In Example 25, the speaker provided a very formal, nearly poetic wish for a great future.

- (25) sorry to hear you have had some darker days lately! I hope the sun starts to shine on your life more and more everyday!!!!

## Conclusions

Table 5. Overview of commiserating patterns

COMMISERATIONS- overview	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	Total
sorry	13	66	72	20	20	191
others	3	7	29	1	7	47
<b>Total</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>73</b>	<b>101</b>	<b>21</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>238</b>

In conclusion, the analysis has confirmed that commiserations are a frequent positive politeness strategy found in the data. There was a total of 238 strategies; two-thirds (192) of them were realised by means of the adjective *sorry* and a prepositional phrase. Their number of occurrence in the individual corpora varied; for example, they were quite rare in C1, just as other Sympathy Maxim strategies (e.g. congratulations). In C2 and C4, the users preferred to express their sympathy by the phrase *sorry to hear (that)*, in C3 by means of *sorry* followed by a subordinate *that clause* plus there were also many cases of a simple *I am (so) sorry*. In C5, the most frequent way to express sympathy with another person's failure was a prepositional phrase consisting of *sorry* and the preposition *about/for*. The last third of commiserations, occurring almost exclusively in C3, was realised via the three following devices: *it sucks/stinks*, hugging (both expressed verbally and by means of emoticons) and interjections followed by a prepositional phrase. Due to the different patterns prevailing in the threads, I believe that each community develops its own way of how to express and share sorrow. Furthermore, the analysis has confirmed that these ways are highly formulaic.

A vast majority of the commiserations in the data contain further redressive actions boosting their effect and mitigating the FTA caused by the original misfortune. These actions occurring in the data were as follows: sharing personal experience, stressing common ground, expressing more sympathy, giving encouragement or advice, asking follow-up questions and good luck wishes. Finally, it should be stressed that commiserating is only one of many other positive politeness strategies used to promote solidarity among community members, others are e.g. complimenting, agreeing or claiming in-group membership.

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## **REDRESSIVE ACTIONS FOLLOWING COMMISERATIONS IN ONLINE DISCUSSIONS**

### **Summary**

The paper aims at analysing commiserations as a positive politeness strategy fulfilling a rapport-building function in an online community. As an analytical framework, the author uses two major linguistic politeness theories, that of Penelope Brown and Stephen C. Levinson (1978, 1987) and Geoffrey Leech (1983, 2014). Both of these theories list commiserations, together with e.g. agreeing, congratulating, well-wishing, etc., among strategies promoting togetherness and mutuality between people. A qualitative and quantitative analysis of a self-compiled corpus composed of several Internet discussion board threads has revealed that commiserations occurred repeatedly in all the communities under examination. After analysing the most frequent commiserative patterns (pointing out that the structure of commiserations is rather formulaic), the author went on to explore further redressive actions often used together with commiserations to minimise the face threat posed for the Internet users mainly due to the delicate character of most of the topics (dieting, pregnancy, infertility, parenting). The following redressive strategies were identified in the corpus: sharing a personal story, stressing common ground, giving suggestions/advice, giving encouragement, offering help/support or *I wish I could*, agreeing, congratulations, well wishes, follow-up question, and complimenting. Finally, the author also highlighted the special devices of online communication helping to overcome the fact it is deprived of prosodic and paralinguistic features (e.g. emoticons - group hugs, inventive spelling) and simultaneously again boosting the spirit of solidarity within the virtual community. To conclude, the paper illustrates how commiserative strategies serve as positive politeness devices minimising the face threat and enhancing faces of all the members of several online communities.

**KEY WORDS:** commiserations, face enhancement, rapport, redressive strategies.