A downgrade (or downgrading, downgraded) has been used in slightly different ways throughout the CA and IL literature, but always with a general sense of scaling down or attenuating a turn or action, usually with respect to something prior. The point of comparison may either be others’ prior talk or one’s own talk, or some unmarked default turn design, against which different alternative formulations are measured.

More specific senses can be identified in particular sequential contexts, for instance:

(i) The term downgrading has been applied to toned-down versions of others’ prior claims or descriptions. In particular, this has often referred to subsequent assessments, where participants ascribe a referent the same properties as others previously have, but to a lower degree (Pomerantz 1984). This might be accomplished lexically by reversing the procedures associated with upgrading, e.g., selecting an evaluative term that is weaker on some semantic scale (e.g., nice as a downgrade of beautiful), excluding an intensifying modifier previously used (e.g., nice as a downgrade of really nice) or including a mitigating modifier (e.g., kind of or pretty) (Ogden 2006; Pomerantz 1984; Thompson, et al. 2015). Within assessment sequences, downgraded assessments convey weak or pro forma agreement, typically projecting disagreement or other disaligning actions. This is illustrated in the following extract, taken from Ogden (2006):

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[nrb/01.reluctant lover]
01 K: =she's- she's- she's really nice in’t [she
02 ]: [she is nice=
03 =.h I do find that she just says stuff just for the sake of
04 £saying stu[(h)uff though£
05 K: [yeah
```

A special situation pertains when the first assessment is a compliment: responding with a downgraded assessment may then serve to manage cross-cutting preferences for agreement and avoidance of self-praise (Pomerantz 1978).

(ii) In other sequential contexts, participants may downgrade their own prior talk by producing subsequent versions of it, and in each case the downgrading may be accomplished in a different way. For instance, in so-called concessive repair, extreme case formulations or other overstatements are subsequently downgraded: the speaker of the original claim or description concedes some exception(s) and grants that the claim/description was in part unjustified, before producing a revised version that is weakened, qualified, or restricted (Couper-Kuhlen & Thompson 2005). This often takes the form of downgrading the claim by selecting an item that is lower on some locally relevant semantic or pragmatic scale of ordered expressions, for instance quantifiers (all, most, many, a few). Thus, an overstatement (everyone has a gun) may, after a concession (not everyone), be downgraded to a version with a quantifier lower on the scale (but a lot of people have guns; Couper-Kuhlen & Thompson 2005: 258). Such concessive repair may be
produced in response to challenges by co-participants (either on-record or anticipated), or in response to relevantly missing uptake (see also Pfänder 2016).

Relatedly, revised versions of complaints and criticisms, in the face of problems of uptake, can be designed so as to be understood as downgraded with respect to previous versions. In such cases, downgrading may amount to making a more reasonable or less exaggerated claim about the complainable, sometimes formulating a complaint in entirely different terms instead of scaling down the original assertion (Weatherall 2011).

As another example, following non-lexical “moans” by players in board game interactions (Hofstetter 2020), such players may subsequently downgrade their own display of in-game suffering, where the downgrading then amounts to verbal utterances that present the suffering as less severe (e.g., bummer).

(iii) Particularly in interactional linguistics, a phonetic sense of the term downgrading refers to the opposite features of phonetic upgrading, i.e., some or all of the following: reduced pitch span or lower pitch placement in the speaker’s range, reduced loudness, shorter durations of segments, and more open and lax articulatory settings compared with (some specific bit of) prior talk (Couper-Kuhlen 2012; Ogden 2006; Plug 2014).

(iv) Furthermore, in a somewhat different sense of the term, the point of comparison for downgrading may not be prior talk, but some unmarked turn design that could have been produced in that sequential position. As an example, in responses to how are you-questions, a downgraded response might be for instance oh alright or pretty good, as compared with a neutral or conventional fine. Such downgraded responses to how are you’s may foreshadow troubles-tellings (Heritage 1998; Jefferson 1980).

(v) Like upgrading, the term ‘downgrading’ may also refer to fine-tuning of epistemic and deontic claims. Epistemically downgrading a turn is done through turn-design that claims comparatively less direct or less certain knowledge of the referent or the state of affairs referred to (Raymond & Heritage 2006). Indirect or mediated knowledge (or access) may be marked as evidential indexing (lexically, e.g., I hear or it seems), whereas degree of certainty may be marked lexically (e.g., I think) or grammatically (e.g., question tags in English; or a question-final or, see Drake 2015; or through final particles in Mandarin, see Kendrick 2018).

In the domain of deontics, downgrading of deontic authority may amount for instance to turn design features (e.g., accounts, or prefices like I was thinking…) that make a proposal hearable as inviting acceptance, where it might otherwise be heard as a directive requiring compliance, due to the deontic status associated with the position of power held by the speaker relative to other participants in societal or institutional structures (Stevanovic 2013, 2018). Typically, these epistemic and deontic uses of the term downgrading are understood as relative not to prior talk, but to what would be a neutral or normative turn format in that place in sequence (cf. iv above).

Additional Related Entries:
- Upgrade
- Extreme case formulation
- Deontics
- Epistemics
- Assessment

Cited References:


Plug, L. (2014). On (or not on) the ‘upgrading–downgrading continuum’. In D. Barth-Weingarten & B. Szczepek Reed (Eds.), Prosodie und Phonetik in der Interaktion – Prosody and Phonetics in Interaction (pp. 70–86). Verlag für Gesprächsforschung.


