

## Multifunctional Disclaimers in Thai Communication: Perceptions and Factors Influencing Interpretation Through a Mixed-Methods Approach

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Article information	
<b>Abstract</b>	The purpose of this study was to explore the multidimensional roles of disclaimers in Thai communication, emphasizing the factors influencing the perceptions and therefore the interpretations of the messages conveyed. Through a mixed-methods approach, this two-pronged study encompassing a survey and semi-structured interviews attempted to analyze the perceptions of the hearer and overhearer towards disclaimers. The findings indicated that disclaimers are capable of paradoxically strengthening the speaker's intent and therefore bolstering negative implications for the listener. This is in stark contrast to the often-taken-for-granted function of disclaimers as simply a mitigating device. In other words, the participants realized that disclaimers accompanying face-threatening acts could render their effectiveness dubious. That is, the listener may find the use of disclaimers as an insincere or uncertain attempt rather than a means to assuage discomfort. Further, contextual factors come into play when it comes to the interpretation of a given disclaimer, e.g., tone of voice, familiarity

	with the conversation partner, and social dynamics. Disclaimers in Thai are truly context-dependent, thus defying the simplistic view of linguistic politeness. Equally important, the findings reported suggest that there exists an important interplay between metapragmatic awareness and social dynamics, thereby emphasizing the importance of the motivations and implications underpinning given instances of disclaimer use.
<b>Keywords</b>	disclaimers, Thai communication, metapragmatic awareness, interpersonal relationships
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## 1. Introduction

Disclaimers are ubiquitous. Our everyday communication manifests the use of disclaimers face-to-face, and, equally important, via social media such as radio and television. As one of the most frequently used linguistic strategies, a disclaimer indicates that the speaker is aware of potentially negative effects or face-threatening acts due to the use of the speech act, e.g., criticizing, blaming, gossiping, or even threatening. In so doing, the speaker attempts to mitigate the effects of the emotion-filled communication of the hearer. As for a disclaimer in Thai, it has been reported to occur when face-threatening verbs are used, e.g., gossip, sue, scold, boast, or threaten (Hongladarom, 2007; Paksasuk & Toomaneejinda, 2023; Toomaneejinda & Paksasuk, in press).

Granted, the present study argues that disclaimers in Thai are, more often than not, used more intricately than has been reported in previous research (Toomaneejinda & Paksasuk, in press). That is, previous research suggests that in using disclaimers the sender simply wants to mitigate the negative impacts on the recipient and thus avoids any responsibility on the part of the sender for the

statement that he/she produces (El-Alayli et al., 2008; Ercan, 2019; Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; Hongladarom, 2007; Shapiro & Bies, 1994; Tayebi & Parvaresh, 2014). Quite to the contrary, disclaimers in Thai, in the eyes of the recipient, serve to clarify the sender's communicative intent or to prevent the speaker from shirking the responsibility for undesirable effects impinging on the receiver rather than lessening the severity of the negative effects or facing threats commonly experienced by the recipient (Paksasuk & Toomaneejinda, 2023; Toomaneejinda & Paksasuk, in press).

Over the past decades, considerable research has been done focusing on disclaimers in a number of languages, namely, Chinese (Ran, 2015; Yang, 2021), English (Fraser, 1980; Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; Overstreet & Yule, 2001; Parvaresh, 2016), Dutch (van der Meij et al., 2022), Italian (Bongelli et al., 2023), Persian (Sharifian & Jamarani, 2011; Tayebi & Parvaresh, 2014), and Turkish (Ercan, 2019). However, studies that investigate disclaimers in Thai are few and far between. In fact, a study conducted by Hongladarom (2007) appears to be the only study so far, which, by and large, focused on metapragmatic explanations from exclusively the speaker's perspective imbued with profuse interpretations of the researcher. Practically speaking, the research insufficiently addresses how disclaimers tend to be construed by different stakeholders, not least of which are speakers, hearers, and overhearers. Further, the research does not take into consideration the probable factors influencing these perceptions.

To fill this research gap, the present study attempted to explore the multifaceted roles of disclaimers in Thai communication. That is, the study focused on how disclaimers come to be perceived and how such perceptions are shaped by external factors. Adopting a tripartite approach, this study incorporated the perspectives of speakers, hearers, and overhearers. Presumably, this should lead to insights into the factors involved in shaping the use and interpretation of disclaimers in Thai society at large.

An extended function of how disclaimers are used in Thai communication necessitates research that delves into the potentially context-bound nature of disclaimers as used by Thais. In the next section, a literature review, including a theoretical framework and reference to prior studies, is presented.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1 Linguistic Aspects of Disclaimers**

As a linguistic construct, a disclaimer is used when speakers realize that their statements could generate negative perceptions or consequences on the part of the listener (El-Alayli et al., 2008; Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; Watling & Banerjee, 2012). In this regard, a given disclaimer functions beyond politeness; it protects the speaker from undue harm by mitigating foreseeable corrosive effects on the speaker's image and at the same time managing the listener's emotional responses (Tayebi & Parvaresh, 2014). When seen in the light of Thai communication, disclaimers speak to social norms and interlocutor expectations in the sense that use of a disclaimer involves an understanding of social harmony and the potentiality for misinterpretation (Groark, 2009; Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; Hongladarom, 2007).

As regards linguistic structure, disclaimers typically comprise two crucial components: a preliminary statement enabling the speaker to distance him/herself from imminent negative remarks and the critical statement (Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; Stokes & Hewitt, 1976). For instance, it is customary for Thais to use such phrases as "I don't want to..., but..." in a statement to be followed by a significant observation. This seemingly convoluted structure helps to soften the impact of a forthcoming criticism and at the same time allows the speaker to be more careful between expressing their otherwise terse opinions and retaining positive relations with the listener.

It should be noted that traditionally disclaimers that are used as mitigating devices play a positive role in a given instance of communication (Brown &

Levinson, 1987; Caffi, 2007; Ercan, 2019; Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; Hongladarom, 2007; Ran, 2015; Shapiro & Bies, 1994; Yang, 2021; Yu, 2003). However, research suggests that disclaimers could potentially reinforce perceptions of insincerity and thus tarnish the speaker's credibility (El-Alayli et al., 2008). This finding provides assertion that disclaimers are almost exclusively used to soften criticism. The cognitive dissonance accruing from the reinforced perceptions of insincerity arises on the condition that listeners (mis)interpret disclaimers as suggestive of the speaker lacking in confidence or honesty. This is tantamount to discomfort, not a lack thereof.

## **2.2 Cognitive Aspects of Disclaimers**

Disclaimers and the speaker's and listener's mental processes are intertwined, indicative of the inseparable roles of social awareness and cognitive functions. The speaker's decision to use a disclaimer depends, to a great extent, on his/her awareness borne out of the social and contextual implications of the statements. Conversely, a disclaimer and key messages must be processed simultaneously by the listener. Extant research on cognitive linguistics and psycholinguistics posits that disclaimers function in situ, unfolding the underlying mental mechanisms that influence their interpretation.

Considering the foregoing, working memory and cognitive load exemplify a critical cognitive component. As El-Alayli et al. (2008) argue, the listener experiences a cognitive load increase when allocating mental resources to process not just the disclaimer but the main message simultaneously. This is particularly the case when he/she attempts to compromise between the speaker's effort in distancing him/herself from potential face-threatening acts and the actual meaning of a given content. Disclaimers that are either too lengthy or complicated are capable of overwhelming the listener's working memory. As a result, the listener is faced with decreased comprehension or a shift of focus, emphasizing the disclaimer's face-saving function rather than the message itself.

It can be argued that the violation of expectation and focus clearly influences how the listener processes disclaimers. Often, disclaimers point to contentious or socially sensitive forthcoming messages. Once the listener's expectation violation mechanisms are triggered, statements that potentially violate social norms or self-images can be anticipated. As a consequence, the listener tends to zoom in on the negative trait being disclaimed rather than the message content. This, in turn, causes a "backfire effect," posing a challenge for the listener to differentiate between the disclaimer and the main statement (El-Alayli et al., 2008).

According to Baumeister et al. (2001) and Festinger (1964), cognitive dissonance is another factor potentially influencing disclaimer interpretation. That is, when a disclaimer content and the main message are mismatched, the listener is said to experience cognitive dissonance, which forces him/her to cope with contradicting information cautiously. For example, when a speaker says, "I'm not trying to be rude, but..." before a statement that could be perceived as uncouth, the listener has to process both the speaker's intention to be polite and the perceived rudeness of the statement. Caught in this situation potentially creating mental discomfort, the listener would have to either brush aside the disclaimer or construe the speaker's intent in greater detail in order to lessen the cognitive dissonance.

Brehm's reactance theory (1966) indicates that cognitive reactance may occur. That is, the listener when perceiving disclaimers as insincere attempts to shape interpretation might end up resisting the disclaimers. The resistance is usually accompanied by a defensive response, which in turn emphasizes the probable negative judgments that the speaker intended to avoid in the first place. As such, the listener's attention may be riveted to the unpleasant trait being disclaimed, amounting to an adverse effect with the resultant disclaimer intensifying the negative perception.

Disclaimers involve the listener's theory of mind—the cognitive capacity to infer another's intentions and emotions. In this respect, the listener evaluates whether a given disclaimer is intended to genuinely mitigate face threats or to help the speaker shirk his/her responsibility. Coupled with social cues and context, this assessment is, quite often, done unconsciously, rendering disclaimer successful. For instance, Nesbit and Watling (2019) note that the listener unconsciously assesses the sincerity level, utilizing prior experiences with comparable communication patterns. This enables him/her to decide whether the disclaimer is to be accepted or rejected.

Another worthwhile aspect of how disclaimers are perceived has to do with cross-cultural cognitive processing with an emphasis on cultural variability. According to Fraser (1980), because Western contexts prize directness, any disclaimers intended to hedge responsibility for clarity are usually interpreted as informational hedges. By contrast, eastern cultures, which highly value relationships and conflict avoidance, view disclaimers as relational tools to preserve harmony. As Hongladarom (2007) and Liu (2022) explain, the listener from eastern cultures may place more emphasis on the relational function of a disclaimer than information management. This allows people from eastern cultures to make their interpretations with the cultural expectations of social harmony and politeness.

Last, two other significant mechanisms are at work: framing and priming mechanisms. These serve to guide the listener's understanding of disclaimers. Framing is defined as an act engaged by the speaker in attempting to reduce confrontational tones or to display sensitivity toward the listener's feelings. Nevertheless, the intended framing can fail utterly if the listener views the disclaimer as insincere or as an attempt to evade responsibility, leading to a mismatch in mutual norm understanding (Goffman, 1974). When it comes to priming, this mechanism involves initial cues that trigger the operations of mental schemes or expectations. This affects how the listener perceives subsequent

content. For example, such disclaimers as “I don’t mean to criticize, but...” serve to prep the listener for the anticipation of a criticism, effectively causing cognitive dissonance provided that the ensuing message is perceived as confrontational (Holtgraves, 1997; Schwarz & Clore, 1983).

### **2.3 Multifaceted and Multifunctional Use of Disclaimers**

Because of its multi-dimensionality, whether or not a disclaimer is effective depends in large measure on various contextual factors, e.g., the relationship between conversational partners, the dynamics of the social power in the moment, and the conversational topic (Yang, 2021). As a corollary, a firm rapport between the speaker and listener translates into disclaimers being perceived in a favorable light. On the contrary, less familiar contexts result in the emergence of skepticism or criticism.

All in all, disclaimers in Thai communication are shrouded in a discourse that somehow unveils the complex social interaction and multi-pronged roles that language plays in interpersonal relationships (Hongladarom, 2007; Paksasuk & Toomaneejinda, 2023; Toomaneejinda & Paksasuk, in press). Thus far, a number of studies (e.g., Ajayi, 2022; Brown & Levinson, 1987; El-Alayli et al., 2008; Ercan, 2019; Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; Hongladarom, 2007; Shapiro & Bies, 1994; Tayebi & Parvaresh, 2014; van der Meij et al., 2022; Yang, 2021) have emphasized the pivotal role of disclaimers as mitigating devices, notably regarding politeness, cognitive processing, and interpersonal relations.

In order to reaffirm the multi-faceted aspects of disclaimers, research has revealed that the speaker uses them not just to lessen negative evaluations but also to navigate complex interpersonal dynamics. To be more precise, forewarning and alerting the listener to the likelihood of negative implications, as well as reflecting the speaker’s concerns and attempts to conform to social expectations, are exemplary evidence of such aspects (House & Kasper, 1981; Li & Li, 2024; Watts, 2010). Obviously, metapragmatic awareness is at play in this regard,



enabling the speaker to shed further light on how language choices potentially affect listener perceptions (Fairclough, 2016).

Although intended to provide a protective intention to the speaker, disclaimers can result in skewed reactions. That is, the listener's attention may be diverted to subsequent negative statements, harboring suspicion of the speaker (El-Alayli et al., 2008; Li & Li, 2024; Toomaneejinda & Paksasuk, in press). In other words, disclaimers may backfire, prompting the listener to pay close attention to the very issues that the disclaimers intend to shy away from. In this respect, future research could tap into this area of politeness in order to scrutinize the extent to which cognitive processes and cultural contexts influence the perceptions and efficacy of disclaimers, particularly in non-Western contexts such as Thailand. Practiced social norms and expectations in such contexts may, to a large extent, influence communication dynamics.

To conclude, the use of disclaimers is widespread in social interactions. They are useful tools interweaving cognitive, psychological, and cultural factors, which oftentimes make their roles in communication rather complex. Disclaimers are dynamic, and an appreciation of the roles of disclaimers, including their implications in both Thai and non-Thai contexts, is long overdue. Attempting to gain insight into the cognitive processes, intentions, or motivations undergirding language use means that metapragmatic awareness is required. Although language use in context reflects the cognitive processes, beliefs, expectations, emotions, feelings, and interpretations of language users, relatively few studies have been conducted in pragmatics that place emphasis on these issues (Caffi, 2007; Culpeper, 2011; Culpeper & Hardaker, 2017; Kasper, 2008; Spencer-Oatey, 2011; Verschueren, 2000), particularly in Thai contexts and Thai politeness research (Getkham, 2013; Hongladarom, 2007; Leelaharattanarak, 2015; Paksasuk & Toomaneejinda, 2023; Samermit & Samermit, 2020; Toomaneejinda & Paksasuk, in press).

### 3. Research Design

Through a mixed-methods approach, this study explored participants' perceptions toward the use of disclaimers, including the probable factors that came into play in the attempted interpretations in Thai communication. Arguably, the mixed-methods approach allows for the marriage of numerical data and in-depth information, thus contributing to a holistic understanding of a phenomenon under study (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Further, triangulation was achieved through the quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews, both of them enhancing the reliability and validity of the results (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2010). The combination of the research methods made it possible to explore not just generalizable patterns but context-bound interpretations. According to Bryman (2016), these strategies are significant when investigating the multifaceted roles of disclaimers.

Through a mixed-methods approach involving a survey and semi-structured interviews, this study attempted to explore the perspectives of the participants towards the use of disclaimers and the factors influencing their interpretations in Thai communication. Arguably, this two-pronged approach contributes to a heightened understanding of the roles of disclaimers in social interactions, with due attention paid to the inherent complexities discussed in the literature.

A questionnaire was administered to the participants ( $n = 309$ ) who constituted a convenience sampling. The questionnaire consisted of the following parts: the demographic factors of the participants, the perceptions of the speakers, the perceptions of the hearers, the perceptions of the overhearers, and additional comments on disclaimers. It should be noted that the questionnaire went through a rigorous process whereby an index of item-objective congruence (IOC) was reviewed by experts in linguistics and applied linguistics. The review practically focused on clarity, relevance, and item appropriateness.

Consisting of both males and females, the participants represented a wide range of ages, educational levels, and occupations. That is to say, a broad

spectrum of perspectives towards disclaimers and contextual effects was warranted. The questionnaire items sought to elicit the participants' perspectives towards the use of disclaimers, together with the factors affecting their interpretations of disclaimers. The key constructs under study involved metapragmatic awareness and the contextual elements influencing how the disclaimers were perceived by the speakers, direct recipients (hearers), and indirect recipients (overhearers) alike.

As regards the qualitative data collection, a group of participants ( $n = 30$ ) was systematically selected based on their declared willingness to be interviewed. Specifically, the odd-numbered order (e.g., 1, 3, 5 and so on) was used to select the participants. Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted, lasting approximately 30 minutes for each of the participants. A set of loosely determined questions was asked of the participants to allow for a relatively high flexibility for both the researchers and interviewees to maneuver the course of the interviews.

In terms of data analysis, SPSS software (version 26) was used to analyze the quantitative data in order to identify the correlations and patterns of perceptions towards disclaimers and the factors influencing their interpretations. Moreover, thematic analysis was employed regarding the qualitative data; that is, Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework was utilized focusing on the following process of familiarization with the data, coding, theme identification, and interpretation. Reliability checks were conducted involving three expert coders to ensure the trustworthiness and confirmability of the qualitative analysis.

Based on a rigorous synthesis of the quantitative and qualitative findings, this study attempted to elucidate the participants' perceptions involving the use of disclaimers and to identify the contextual and cognitive factors that came into play when interpreting Thai communication. The mixed-methods approach mentioned

above warranted a better understanding of the social and psychological dynamics governing the use of disclaimers.

## **4. Findings**

### **4.1 Factors Influencing the Interpretations of Disclaimers**

#### **4.1.1 Quantitative data analysis**

One of the key findings resulting from the analysis of the factors affecting the interpretation of disclaimers was that 82.8% of the direct recipients believed that the speaker's tone of voice was crucial for interpreting the intent behind the use of a disclaimer. This finding lent strong support to the relevance of paralinguistic cues in communication. That is, emotional content as displayed through voice altered the perceived meaning of disclaimers. This yielded significant insight into how disclaimers are perceived by direct recipients and overhearers.

In addition to the tone of voice, 70.6% of the participants concurred that the listener's familiarity with the speaker made the interpretation of the disclaimers positive. That is, established relationships provide a context against which to measure the appropriate level of understanding the speaker's intent. This reinforces the notion that social dynamics play an important role in how interlocutors interpret the conveyed message. Further, 68.3% of the participants held the opinion that conversational topics had a direct bearing on the interpretation of the disclaimers. Again, contextual relevance was seen to shape the listener's perception.

As regards the overhearers (indirect recipients), it turned out that 82.5% of the participants also relied on tone of voice to distinguish the intent displayed through the disclaimers, and 70.2% used the conversational topic as a basis of their interpretation. What is more, 57.0% of the overhearers regarded familiarity with the conversation partners as a key component. All of this combined to signify how relational contexts play a crucial role in creating understanding.

Apart from the factors discussed so far, other factors also were at work, including the social power of the interlocutors and their experience with various media, accounting for 23.9% for the direct recipients and 32.7% for the overhearers, respectively. Further, conversation locations and the age of the interlocutors exerted a certain influence: 22.7% for the direct recipients and 31.4% for the overhearers for the former; 22.3% for the direct recipients and 26.5% for overhearers for the latter. Collectively, these percentages illustrated the multi-faceted nature of how disclaimers are interpreted, indicating that a cohort of social, contextual, and cognitive factors are influential in a comprehensive understanding of disclaimer use in Thai communication (Table 1).

**Table 1**

*Summary of the Factors Influencing Listeners' Interpretation of Disclaimers*

<b>Factor</b>	<b>Hearer %</b>	<b>Overhearer %</b>
1. Interlocutor's tone of voice	82.8	82.5
2. Familiarity with the conversation partner	70.6	57.0
3. Topic of conversation	68.3	70.2
4. Interlocutor's social power	27.2	37.9
5. Experience from certain media types, e.g., dramas and interviews	23.9	32.7
6. Place of the conversation	22.7	31.4
7. Interlocutor's age	22.3	26.5

#### 4.1.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

Given the fact that disclaimers perform different functions relative to the speaker's communicative intent and the listener's interpretation, the present study explored those functions in greater detail, taking into consideration the many factors that the direct and indirect recipients used to interpret the conveyed messages. The factors were classed into linguistic and non-linguistic aspects. The linguistic aspect included accompanying statements, conversation topics, and

non-verbal communication, whereas the non-linguistic aspect focused on the physical context, social context, and the various experiences encountered by language users. Table 2 displays the factors impinging on the recipients' feelings and interpretations of the goals undergirding the disclaimers used.

**Table 2**

*Summary of the Factors Influencing the Interpretation of Disclaimers*

<b>Type of Factor</b>	<b>Factor</b>
<b>1. Linguistic context</b>	1.1 Co-occurring utterance
	1.2 Topic of conversation
	1.3 Various non-verbal communication
<b>2. Non-linguistic context</b>	2.1 Relationship between language users
	2.2 Social status
	2.3 Personality traits of the interlocutor
	2.4 Role in the communication situation

The metapragmatic comments analyzed qualitatively revealed significant insights into the perceptions towards disclaimer use in Thai communication and the factors influencing their interpretations. The participants identified disclaimers as complex linguistic tools capable of performing multiple functions, with their efficacies stemming from linguistic and non-linguistic contextual factors.

The statements following a disclaimer played a significant role due to the influence of metapragmatic awareness. For instance, MAI-04 stated, "If it's a critical statement or something like that, it feels like they're just making excuses." This suggested that subsequent statements carrying a negative tone could result in the recipient perceiving the speaker as insincere. By contrast, as noted by MAI-12, "If the following statement is positive, like, 'I don't want to criticize you, but I think you could do better,' it shows they meant well for us." Based on this viewpoint, it can safely be argued that the perceived negativity of the initial statement could be mitigated by means of a positive tone of voice. Moreover, a

conversation topic also influences how disclaimers are to be perceived. For example, as MAI-04 expressed, “If the topic isn’t serious, the disclaimer adds humor. It feels lighter.” Essentially, this means that informal contexts are accompanied by a less intense interpretation of disclaimers. Further, MAI-09 elaborated on the importance of topic or person familiarity, arguing that prior knowledge can influence how disclaimers are received: “If we know about it, we tend to believe them; otherwise, we wait for the content.”

Non-verbal cues can compare favorably with verbal cues in terms of disclaimer interpretations. As MAI-10 stated, “If the body language is closed off, I read that as insincere.” The implication here is that body language plays an equally important role in disclaimer reception. In the same vein, MAI-30 commented, “If I see a smirk, it makes me think they’re being sarcastic.” An ensuing interpretation is that non-verbal signals could bring to bear a mismatch between the intended message and its interpretation. One should also be mindful of the fact that the relationship quality between the speaker and listener has a direct bearing on disclaimer interpretations. MAI-22 remarked, “If we have a good relationship, we feel they’re teaching us; if not, it feels like a disguised insult.” For certain, a positive relationship is in direct proportion to a more favorable interpretation of disclaimers. Furthermore, MAI-13 noted that the speaker’s credibility is relative to age and qualifications: “Older individuals are perceived as more credible than those who are younger.” This speaks to how social status affects a change in the reception of disclaimers.

As much as linguistic factors are crucial in disclaimer interpretations, the interlocutor’s personality traits influence the extent to which disclaimers are to be interpreted. As MAI-02 stated, “[T]he choice of words reflects their personality...it can show whether they are sincere.” Apparently, the perception of disclaimers is influenced, in large measure, by an individual’s character. This is further corroborated by the speaker’s role in a given communication situation. MAI-15 concurred the speaker’s role in communication efficacy by stating that “[W]hen

I'm the speaker, I want them to believe me. There's a contradiction." This assertion underpins the fact that context determines the effectiveness of a given disclaimer in pursuance of shifting roles.

Another noteworthy aspect concerning disclaimers is cognitive dissonance vis-à-vis the participants' perceptions. That is, based on the qualitative findings, although disclaimers are intended to lessen negative consequences, the recipients found critical content more worthwhile at the expense of the intended mitigation. In this respect, MAI-29 expressed, "When I hear, 'I'm not trying to offend you, but...', I think, 'Why say that if they're going to criticize?'" It should be noted that the preconceived notion about the speaker plays a key role in interpretation.

To recap the qualitative findings as reported, both linguistic and non-linguistic contextual factors exert a certain influence on the effectiveness and interpretation of disclaimers, thereby adding an important dimension to the time-honored concept of disclaimers being tools for lubricating social interactions. The use of disclaimers in Thai communication can be best explained by the interplay among such factors as metapragmatic awareness, cognitive processes, and social dynamics, all of which emphasize the complexity involved in the phenomenon. A better appreciation of the functions of disclaimers in Thai discourse and the way in which they shape perceptions towards language use and communication can be attributed to a deeper understanding of the said factors.

## **4.2 Perceptions Towards Disclaimers**

### **4.2.1 Quantitative Data Analysis**

Through the survey data, significant findings concerning the perceptions of disclaimers among both the hearers and overhearers were reported. Upon hearing the disclaimers used by their conversation partners, a little more than half of the hearers (52.1%) were convinced that the statements that followed were inconsequential and therefore less severe. An argument could be made here that the participants must have perceived the disclaimers as a protective strategy. That



said, 37.2% of the participants were of the opinion that the disclaimers rendered the speaker’s communicative intent more explicit, whereas 31.4% believed that the speaker was concerned about their feelings and emotions. An additional 26.2% of the participants found the use of disclaimers as a means to maintain the speaker’s self-image, and 23.0% perceived the use of disclaimers as humorous.

Mixed perceptions were also found in the data; for instance, 16.2% of the hearers considered the use of disclaimers a case of less clear intent on the part of the speaker, whereas 13.3% thought that the disclaimers made the statements more severe. Furthermore, upon hearing the disclaimers, 12.9% felt anger or dissatisfaction. That is to say, disclaimers appeared to play a dual role of softening negative statements and eliciting negative reactions from the audience (see Table 3 below).

**Table 3**

*Summary of Hearers’ and Overhearers’ Perceptions*

Perception	Hearer	Overhearer
	%	%
1. The use of disclaimers made the statements less severe.	52.1	46.0
2. The use of disclaimers clarified the speaker’s communicative intent.	37.2	36.9
3. The speaker cared about their feelings.	31.4	28.2
4. The recipient cared about their own image.	26.2	34.0
5. Felt amused and found it humorous	23.0	23.0
6. The use of disclaimers made the speaker’s intent less clear.	16.2	21.7
7. The use of disclaimers made the statements more severe.	13.3	24.9
8. Felt angry/unhappy	12.9	14.6

Similar sentiments were found among the overhearers. That is, 46.0% thought that the severity of negative statements was effectively reduced through the use of disclaimers. However, 36.9% viewed the speaker's intent, for example criticizing or reprimanding, as palpable because of the disclaimers used. For the remaining 34.0%, disclaimers were used to maintain the speaker's public image instead of focusing on their conversation partners' feelings.

Given the aforementioned aspects of disclaimer use, it may be argued that the perceptions towards disclaimers in Thai communication indicated both positive and negative feelings. This is made possible through context. More specifically, interpersonal relationships, the seriousness of a given situation, and the individual personalities of the parties concerned are factors determining the effectiveness of disclaimers. In a nutshell, a multi-faceted understanding of how disclaimers are used in situ calls for an appropriate approach to investigating communication in the Thai context.

#### 4.2.2 Qualitative Data Analysis

Comparable to the findings from the quantitative analysis, the metapragmatic comments based on the qualitative analysis suggested that disclaimers were perceived as complex linguistic tools, operating in concert with other contextual factors resulting in various implications. For certain, the participants' perceptions towards the use of disclaimers in Thai communication cannot be taken lightly. Rather, those perceptions as articulated by the interviewees reflected their personal experiences and the dynamics of communication in context.

Contrary to popular beliefs as discussed in prior research, in this study the disclaimers were found to have exacerbated undesirable emotions, more than mitigating negative effects or reducing face-threatening acts. For instance, MAI-29 stated, "I don't really believe it. I feel like it's a kind of shield to make us not feel so bad about them, but we still feel it anyway. For example, if a friend says, 'I'm

not saying anything bad, but it doesn't look very straight,' I would still feel like they're criticizing me, because it's something obvious." Along the same line, MAI-04 remarked that, "[I]t feels like a preemptive excuse before saying something...It has the same impact, but when we say, 'I'm not trying to criticize,' it actually feels worse because it seems like an excuse."

Additionally, some of the participants suspected that hidden intentions may lurk from the use of disclaimers, leading them to distrust the speaker's credibility. MAI-18 explained, "If a friend chooses to use a disclaimer with me, I feel they have a hidden agenda. It leads to a lack of credibility for the person using the disclaimer." At work here is the cognitive process whereby the disclaimers were interpreted based on the kind of relationship between the speaker and listener.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that some of the participants found that the disclaimers played a neutral role. For example, MAI-29 noted that their mother frequently uses disclaimers, viewing them as habitual rather than meaningful. They stated, "Sometimes the things she says are actually compliments, but she'll still use a disclaimer." This example suggested that disclaimers represent a communicative routine rather than a specific communicative intent.

As much as they play a neutral role, disclaimers were preferred on some occasions in this study. MAI-06 remarked, "I understand because, if it were me, I'd probably say it like that, too. Using a disclaimer shows that the speaker cares about the listener's feelings." What this means is that the purpose of disclaimers could be to maintain interpersonal relationships and to mitigate potential conflicts, thus underscoring the multi-dimensional functions of disclaimer use.

To conclude, although generally viewed in a negative light, disclaimers reflect a cognitive dissonance. That is, the speaker's intended mitigation is misconstrued by the listener, resulting in a mismatch in the actual perception. That said, disclaimers are used, on many occasions, for the better. In Thai

communication, disclaimers are multi-pronged, shaped by both linguistic structures and the overall context of interpersonal relationships. In this regard, metapragmatic awareness should be of paramount concern, for it helps communicators to understand how disclaimers function and are interpreted across context.

### **4.3 Integrated Data Analysis: Perceptions of the Use of Disclaimers**

This section examines the combination of quantitative and qualitative data in hopes of providing a thorough understanding of the perceptions towards the use of disclaimers in Thai communication. That is, the complexities surrounding the function and interpretation of disclaimers can be elucidated in the present study.

Concerning the quantitative data, 82.8% of the participants perceived disclaimers as critical factors influencing their interpretations of the speaker's intent. In this respect, 70.6% viewed speaker familiarity as something altering their interpretation of a given disclaimer, suggesting the role of relational dynamics in shaping perspectives. Moreover, 68.3% of the participants regarded conversation topics as a significant factor. This indicates that context is a deciding factor contributing to the way in which disclaimers are perceived.

Many of the participants in this study were dubious about the effectiveness of disclaimers. For instance, more than 60% of them admitted that they paid more attention to the critical content than to the disclaimers. This is a case of cognitive dissonance. That is, the planned mitigation did not match the actual perceptions. Further, 37.2% felt that the speaker's communicative intent was clearer through the use of disclaimers, whereas 16.2% thought that the disclaimers mitigated clarity. Certainly, a complex interplay among these factors was perceived as affecting how disclaimers are actually used.

One of the most interesting findings based on the qualitative data analysis is that many of the participants found disclaimers to have exacerbated rather than

alleviated negative feelings on the part of the listener. For example, MAI-29 stated, “It feels like a kind of shield to make us not feel so bad about them, but we still feel it anyway.” Essentially, this statement attested to the notion that disclaimers turned out to be ineffective in reducing negative emotions.

Disclaimers were found to have played another significant role, that of portraying the speaker’s sincerity, as put forth by MAI-06: “Using a disclaimer shows that the speaker cares about the listener’s feelings.” This reflected a more positive interpretation of disclaimers, contradicting a broader skepticism as reported in the quantitative data. Apparently, the disclaimers were depicted as being complex, lending themselves to both appreciation and doubt regarding their roles in maintaining interpersonal relationships.

Suffice it to say that the complex interplay in disclaimer use as aforementioned indicates that both linguistic structures and the broader social dynamics influence perspectives towards disclaimers. The findings based on the quantitative and qualitative components give us a panoramic understanding of perceptions towards the use of disclaimers in Thai communication. All things considered, this study attempts to point out the need for further research into the roles of metapragmatic awareness that shapes the production and interpretation of disclaimers across different communicative milieus.

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

With their multiple functions in communication, disclaimers are complex linguistic constructs, entailing the context of politeness, cognitive processes, influencing factors and, not least, the importance of effective research methodologies. The following section discusses how these dimensions could be synthesized, focusing on how they work in tandem to generate a proper understanding of perceptions towards disclaimers in Thai communication.

Based on the politeness perspective, disclaimers are strategic tools employed by the speaker to mitigate face threats and to preserve social harmony. It is argued that the speaker opts to use disclaimers in order to cautiously deal with contentious interactions and at the same time to maintain his/her face and that of the listener (Ajayi, 2022; Brown & Levinson, 1987; El-Alayli et al., 2008; Ercan, 2019; Hewitt & Stokes, 1975; Hongladarom, 2007; Shapiro & Bies, 1994; Tayebi & Parvaresh, 2014; van der Meij et al., 2022; Yang, 2021). Nevertheless, skepticism exists because the majority of the participants focused more on critical content than disclaimers. This bifurcated stance points to the complexity of politeness strategies. That is, while disclaimers are meant to soften negative messages, they oftentimes end up intensifying the issues, prompting misunderstandings and negative perceptions (Toomaneejinda & Paksasuk, in press).

Because of their roles in the simultaneous processing of disclaimers and main messages, cognitive processes are considered significant in one's attempt to interpret disclaimers. The findings of the current study indicated that cognitive load rises a great deal when the listener attempts to settle conflicting information dealing especially with lengthy or complex disclaimers. This corroborates a study by El-Alayli et al. (2008), indicating that cognitive overload tends to lessen the level of comprehension, turning the listener's attention to the disclaimer's face-saving function rather than the core message. Moreover, expectation violation theory sheds light on how disclaimers indicate potential contention, essentially encouraging the listener to pay close attention to the negative traits being disclaimed. This amounts to a backfire effect, indicating that the intended mitigation fails.

It should be pointed out that the interpretation of disclaimers is also shaped by such factors as the relationship between the speaker and listener, social context, and cultural norms. More specifically, this research suggests that the interpretation of disclaimers is influenced by various contextual factors, for

example the relationships between the speaker and listener, societal context, and cultural practices. As a corollary, it can be safely assumed that, on the one hand, disclaimers are construed as genuine and considerate when close interpersonal relationships are at work. Conversely, in somewhat unfamiliar or strained relationships, disclaimers could be interpreted as insincere or, at worst, manipulative. Additionally, the speaker's social status or age could come into play. For instance, when disclaimers are rendered by elder or more authoritative speakers, they are viewed as credible. What is more, cultural norms cannot be discounted, for they exert some influence on how disclaimers are to be used or construed.

As discussed briefly above, disclaimers in Thai communication function as relational tools in order to keep politeness and conflict avoidance tightly in check. This is reflective of a society that highly prizes social harmony (Hongladarom, 2007; Leelaharattanarak, 2015; Samermit & Samermit, 2020). With that being said, misinterpretation could arise provided that listeners realize that there is a mismatch between the disclaimer delivered and the speaker's intent, namely through body language, tone of voice, or more broadly the conversational context. Such a misinterpretation could mean that disclaimers are simply excuses or signs of insincerity.

Disclaimers perform functions beyond linguistic devices; they are imbued with socio-cultural and relational factors that impinge on communication in Thai. This very fact amounts to the necessity of carefully analyzing disclaimers in pragmatic research and, equally important, of considering what effective communication means in the Thai context.

Based on the qualitative data analysis, it turned out that the listener evaluated the sincerity of disclaimers by relying on his/her prior experiences and social cues, both of which truly affected perceptions. For instance, on the one hand, some of the participants viewed disclaimers as genuine efforts to smooth

the listener's feelings. On the other hand, others perceived them as attempts to evade accountability. In this respect, cultural context plays a key role. That is, as far as disclaimers are concerned, what Western audiences see as hedges for clarity, Eastern listeners interpret as relational tools to help maintain social harmony (Hongladarom, 2007; Ran, 2015; Yang, 2021; Yu, 2003).

Finally, the foregoing necessitates effective research methods, ones that delve into metapragmatic awareness and comments in researching disclaimers. This is because metapragmatic awareness provides insights into how the members of a given society engage in social interactions and, in so doing, how they interpret the speaker's intentions behind disclaimers. The integration of quantitative and qualitative data would strengthen our understanding of the dynamics inherent in disclaimers, providing a stepping stone towards a richer analysis of how disclaimers are used in situ.

In summary, given the multifaceted nature of disclaimers as communicative tools, this study highlights the necessity for rigorous research methodologies that bring to the fore the complex interactions among politeness, cognitive processes, and influencing factors. Equally important, this study highlights metapragmatic awareness with a view to unfolding the roles of disclaimers across diverse social and cultural contexts. A critical analysis of disclaimers, therefore, deserves serious scrutiny that will most likely enable us to better appreciate how they are actually used as linguistic strategies.

## **6. Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

The previous studies on disclaimers which argue that they serve as mitigating strategies should be construed in a new light, bearing in mind the potential for a disclaimer to be susceptible to misinterpretation. The present study reiterates the need for better understanding of how disclaimers operate in social contexts. The speaker's intentions and the listener's perceptions must be given equal weight to be effective. Further research might look into the taxonomies of



disclaimers in Thai, which could enable a systematic categorization and analysis of various types of disclaimers as used in Thai communication. In the same vein, future study can explore the implementations of disclaimers in wider social and cultural contexts, which could shed more light on the role of disclaimers as mitigating strategies. Attempting to enhance our understanding of disclaimers by incorporating the politeness theory framework, we can strive towards more effective communication strategies and better interpersonal relations.

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