Linguistic Mitigation in English and Spanish: How Speakers Attenuate Expressions
Nydia Flores-Ferrán (2020)

ISBN: 9781138584655 (hbk)
ISBN: 9780429505867 (eBook)

Reviewed by Ying Fang and Diexi Lu

For several decades, the phenomenon of linguistic mitigation (henceforth mitigation or attenuation) has been a crucial point in socio-pragmatics. In spite of the early efforts to conceptualize attenuation with Politeness Principles and to examine affective expressions in terms of speech act assumption, the author of the book, Nydia Flores-Ferrán, holds that ‘Mitigation or atenuación (as it is known in Spanish) has been defined as what we do with language that results in softening the effects of a message or decreasing the harshness of a message. It does not manifest in specific linguistic forms and features (Schneider, 2013)’ (p. 12).

Based on the initial study by Flores-Ferrán in 2009, which reveals that native speakers of Spanish preferred alternating the use of uno ‘one’ with yo ‘I’, the book tries to explain how mitigating devices and strategies contribute to reducing the illocutionary force of a message in the two categories of discourse, namely the institutional and non-institutional.

The key concept of the book lies in the idea proposed by Flores-Ferrán that mitigation is a distinctive communicative strategy that affects the severity of what is being stated, the perlocutionary effects (p. 220).

The monograph consists of nine chapters. Chapter 1 includes a detailed explanation of the defining characteristics of linguistic attenuation and also literature reviews involving some important works which deal with mitigation as
if it were indirect speech or vague language. The author uses Czerwionka’s seminal work (2010) as a jumping-off point and operationalizes mitigation as a socio-pragmatic-linguistic and affective expression.

Chapter 2 introduces empirical research on mitigation in both English and Spanish, which demonstrate various subtle theoretical perspectives and models. Specifically, British researchers mainly examine the use of linguistic choices, such as lexical items, speech acts and modifications from pragmatic perspectives, while Spanish scholars generally investigate social or external factors regarding gender, age and generational differences in mitigated linguistic behaviors. The author integrates the taxonomy of English proposed by House and Kasper (1981) with that of Spanish.

In view of different communicative intentions involved in spontaneous speech interactions, related theoretical perspectives are offered in Chapter 3, including Politeness Principles, Speech Act Assumption (a semantic and syntactic approach), Psychological-Social-Affective Theory, Socio-Pragma-Rhetorical Aspect (a socio-pragmatic-affective and rhetorical-cultural approach) and Pragmatic Variation (a pragmatic approach). Despite their limitations, the author speaks positively of Politeness and Speech Act Theory because they provide reliable data which unveils speakers’ preferences for mitigating devices. Meanwhile, the author points out the necessity of exploring the mitigated speech at the discourse-rhetorical level, for speaker-hearer interactions may be subject to and mediated by a multiplicity of psycho-socio pragmatic factors. Toward its end, with regard to the full breadth of mitigated communication, the chapter touches on pragmatic variation and suggests that speakers are likely to adapt mitigating devices to typical context, respective dialect and social pressure.

Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 focus on how to detect mitigating devices or strategies with relevant theories. Some concepts are introduced concerning how the pendulum may move from intensification to escalation. In addition, a corpus of linguistic indicators intended to soften or decrease the force of expressions is exemplified and analyzed by way of authentic speech excerpts, involving impersonal constructions, omission of referents, epistemic disclaimers and so forth. The analyses indicate that mitigated linguistic behaviors do not necessarily have face-saving or politeness-related motivations, but are mostly shaped or influenced by societal ideologies and group affiliations.

In Chapter 6, the author underscores the importance of the integration of quantitative and qualitative research approaches. The use of the mixed-method assists in triangulating data and generating comprehensive depictions of linguistic attenuation. The quantitative approach is crucial to identify patterns and tendencies based on statistics or data collected through questionnaires or surveys, while the qualitative analysis provides a macro-account of metalinguistic
perspectives of the research participants. This chapter also combs through ways to elicit data or make choices from protocols early researchers have employed to examine attenuated linguistic behavior. It is suggested that in order to ensure consistency and draw comparisons, a constellation of linguistic and non-linguistic variables should be considered.

Chapter 7 centers on socio- and-pragmatic-linguistic aspects in terms of language instruction. Since language learners are usually placed in cohorts with mixed levels of age and proficiency, the author illustrates instructions on attenuation and conceptualizes mitigation-related examples to make it easier for them to learn. Moreover, based on the results of studies related to the effects of instructional intervention, the author holds that language instructors should incorporate the acquisition of pragmatic competence as an instructional objective and strategize activities to raise metalinguistic awareness accordingly.

Chapter 8 recommends the partnerships between instruction and research to bridge the pragmatic lacunae. Considering the fact that teaching interventions rarely attend to addressing socio-pragmatic competence and issues of linguistic mitigation, the author introduces protocols, related activities and assessment techniques which are approachable and manageable in instructional contexts. In addition to informing instructions, digital communication facilitates the investigation of attenuated speech, starting from symbolic emoticons to written emails and other online communications. Furthermore, while naturally occurring speech helps to assess the acquisition thresholds of learners and stimulates measures appropriate to the interventions’ designs, institutional discursive settings harness authentic target language environment and provide avenues for assessment and research.

In Chapter 9, the author finalizes the book, concluding various aspects of mitigation by way of questions. As mentioned previously, linguistic mitigation is not merely associated with politeness, but rather relates to how speakers modify statements to make language more pleasing or acceptable to others. While a number of studies have demonstrated that mitigated utterances and expressions are ubiquitous in verbal, digital, and written interactions, attenuation is difficult to determine when you are examining isolated linguistic items. There is a myriad of considerations that researchers need to take into account – power distance, prosodic features, social status and the like. In spite of the remarkable progress regarding the research of attenuating devices in Spanish and English, a thorough analysis of the socio-pragmatic-linguistic and affective elements that may condition, prompt and mediate attenuation is proposed.

Overall, the book features carefully worded arguments, compelling data and lucid and a lively writing style. While it is an intellectually challenging read with its theorizing or academic presentation, the author has made her ideas accessible
and readable through penetrating convincing analysis. A massive amount of data from English and Spanish are analyzed to find out whether they can be considered as mitigation or not. Through such analysis, the book argues that beyond the use of lexical items and syntactic structures, linguistic indicators can in effect function to mediate the illocutionary force. What is more, the statistical analysis of motivational interviews between a therapist and his clients shows that the therapist produces most of the attenuating devices, including shields, bushes, tag questions, hedges, epistemic disclaimers and redundant forms.

It is also remarkable that the book reveals the insufficiency of research on novice language learners and insists that attenuation should be included in language instruction and research contexts, which opens a conversation with the language teaching community and provides a script for future endeavors. Language-learning textbooks are recommended as the first vehicle for creating target language environments and transmitting knowledge. Additionally, teenage learners of a language should be instructed to differentiate various discursive styles. Finally, it suggests some ways in which researchers could find a well-articulated collaborative venture with instructors and conduct empirical experiments to investigate the use and effects of mitigating strategies.

Last but not least, the book emphasizes that the phenomenon of mitigation cannot be categorically represented by a single form, formula or structure. It could be a useful resource for second language acquisition experts and language instructors because it presents and proposes mini-intervention examples to gauge developmental progress in language learners. It could also be introduced to students and teachers who seek to have a better knowledge of mitigating strategies in communication.

References


(Received and accepted 30th July 2021)