

# Participant perspectives on mitigated interactions: The impact of imposition and uncertainty



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## Abstract

The present study, regarding the influence of imposition and uncertainty on mitigation, explored speakers' and listeners' perspectives on mitigation in interaction. Participants assessed the video playbacks of their own role play interactions, relating to four contexts. The four contexts, which combined imposition and certitude to manipulate mitigation, provoked interactions about: a missing car (severe imposition/uncertain), a stolen car (severe imposition/certain), a missing glass pitcher (mild imposition/uncertain), and a broken glass pitcher (mild imposition/certain). Following creation of 56 dyadic role plays, participant perspective data was collected using playback comments. The comments about the interactions, categorized initially through a grounded approach to qualitative analysis, expressed emotion words, discourse purposes, and discourse evaluations. Some of the notable findings were that too much mitigation may be detrimental and that speakers and listeners differ in the emotion words used to characterize their interactions and also their tendency to address discourse purposes or evaluations. Recommendations for future mitigation research included using both role play and naturally occurring interactions, an increased consideration of emotion in mitigation research, and further examination of the role of speaker and listener in mitigated interactions.

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## 1. Introduction

This investigation presents an examination of mitigation in interaction, and specifically it is an examination from the perspective of the speakers and listeners who were involved in the interaction. Mitigation has often been described as softening the message or softening the effect of the message in interaction (Fraser, 1980). More recently, mitigation has been addressed as any modification of language in response to stressful contextual factors whether social or cognitive (Martinovski et al., 2005), like imposition or uncertainty. Despite many linguistic analyses of mitigation (Lakoff, 1972; Fraser, 1975, 1980; House and Kasper, 1981; Prince et al., 1982; Hübler, 1983; Holmes, 1984; Chafe, 1986; Markkanen and Schröder, 1997; Caffi, 1999; Ballesteros Martín, 2002; Briz Gómez, 2002, 2003; Félix-Brasdefer, 2004; Martinovski, 2006; Caffi, 2007; Flores-Ferrán, 2010), we still do not have a complete grasp on what makes people mitigate or how this linguistic phenomenon affects interlocutors. Thus, in response, this investigation explores speakers' and listeners' perspectives on mitigated interactions.

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The current investigation is a sequel to two prior investigations (Czerwionka, 2012a,b) involving the influence of imposition and uncertainty on mitigation. The data for all three investigations were drawn from role play interactions that were carried out in Monterrey, Mexico with the help of 56 local participants. Four role play contexts, impacted by degrees of imposition and certitude, were used to manipulate mitigation within speaker and listener dyadic role play interactions. The speakers in the four contexts communicated that: (a) the listener's car had gone missing, (b) the listener's car had been stolen, (c) the listener's glass pitcher had gone missing, or (d) the listener's glass pitcher had been broken. In relation to imposition and uncertainty, these four contexts corresponded respectively to (a) severe imposition/uncertain, (b) severe imposition/certain, (c) mild imposition/uncertain, or (d) mild imposition/certain. In the two prior investigations of these role play dialogues, the researcher linguistically analyzed the interactions in terms of discourse markers, interpersonal markers, conversational turns, fragmented dialogue, and cohesive dialogue. A goal of these investigations was to empirically study the impact of uncertainty, which is a factor that is salient in the mitigation literature but challenging to examine in conversation, along with imposition. Additionally, the aim was to address the impact of mitigation on the discourse-level of language. While offering findings related to the contexts and discourse that emerged, these examinations were only able to offer suggestions about why mitigation occurred differently in the different contexts and how the interactions impacted interlocutors, similar to other mitigation research.

With the desire to examine why mitigation occurs and how it impacts interlocutors, the current investigation sought a different perspective on the four contexts of interactions. In this exploratory investigation, the 56 participants were asked to assess their interactions in the four contexts, using a playback comments approach (Spencer-Oatey, 2009). Participant perspective data has been useful in relational pragmatics work, but has yet to be utilized in mitigation work. Therefore, besides delving into the topic of mitigation from a participant perspective, this current investigation also assessed participant perspective methods in a distinct pragmatic arena.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. Mitigation

Prior research on mitigation has presented diverse perspectives and purposes related to the study of mitigation, including the study of semantic and pragmatic interests, written versus spoken language, and physician–patient communication (Lakoff, 1972; Fraser, 1980; Prince et al., 1982; Chafe, 1986; Martinovski et al., 2005; Caffi, 2007). Mitigation has been understood as having a softening effect in language (Fraser, 1980), and more recently mitigation has been described as a response to social or cognitive challenges in interaction (Martinovski et al., 2005). For example, asking a friend to borrow a car presents a social challenge that may differ from when asking to borrow a pitcher to make lemonade. The topic of mitigation addresses questions about how people use language to cope with the challenges of the world around them.

In theory (Martinovski et al., 2005) the mitigation process begins when an interpersonal event presents a situational challenge and prompts interlocutors to appraise the situation. The appraisal process may include evaluation of variables such as who is responsible for the event, how acceptable the event is, or emotional judgments. The overall appraisal of the event leads to potential threats, such as a threat to the interlocutors' relationship, the threat of blame, or the threat of some other negative outcome. In response to the threat, mitigation emerges in language as a coping mechanism. While the situation unfolds, the variables that were evaluated as part of the initial appraisal process and potentially new variables are evaluated and reevaluated, resulting in modified values that can alter the overall appraisal of the event and the associated threats. This cycle of event appraisal and reappraisal occurs throughout the interaction and impacts discourse in interaction and perhaps beyond.<sup>1</sup> So mitigation may be viewed as intertwining the linguistic, sociological, and psychological aspects of interaction, a "process undergoing constant revision" (Caffi, 2007:18). This complex system of mitigation is not yet fully understood, and therefore requires continued attention.

Thus far, the primary focus of mitigation literature has been threefold: to describe the language used to mitigate, to explain the effects of mitigation, and to explain its causes. Describing the language of mitigation, terms like hedges (Lakoff, 1972), approximators (Prince et al., 1982), understatement (Hübler, 1983), and bushes (Caffi, 2007) have been used. Lexical items, verb constructs, discourse markers, and the organization of discourse have been examined. The language used to mitigate has also been analyzed in Spanish linguistic research (Ballesteros Martín, 2002; Briz Gómez, 2002, 2003; Félix-Brasdefer, 2004; Flores-Ferrán, 2010), leading to the current interest that focuses on Spanish. The specific studies that were the precursors and bases for this current investigation (Czerwionka, 2012a,b) presented examinations of discourse markers,

<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed description of this theory, its origins related to artificial intelligence, and the elements that have been applied to human interaction, see Martinovski et al. (2005) and Martinovski (2006).

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