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Mitigating devices: A comparative study between generations of the corpus "El habla de Monterrey"

ABSTRACT: The objective of this paper is to compare and contrast the linguistic mitigating devices three different generations of speakers from Monterrey, Mexico, use when performing an assertive act. The research is part of the inter-institutional project *El habla de Monterrey-PRESEEA* (Rodríguez Alfano, 2012). Firstly, the mitigating act will be studied using different theoretical approaches. A list of mitigating strategies, which has been adapted from previous frames (Albelda Marco and Cestero Mancera, 2011; Briz, 2010), will then be provided. This list can be useful for the understanding and study of how affiliation face appears. In this study, affiliation face is defined as the desire to be accepted by a group. It also shows what linguistic mitigating devices the three generational groups preferred to use when mitigating an assertive act. The investigation is primarily a pragmalinguistic analysis of a corpus composed of oral semi-formal interviews of Mexican Spanish speakers from Monterrey, Mexico.
KEY WORDS: Mitigation, assertive acts, face.

RESUMEN: el objetivo de este trabajo es comparar y contrastar las estrategias lingüísticas de atenuación empleadas por tres grupos generacionales proce-dentes de Monterrey, México al momento de llevar a cabo un acto asertivo. La investigación es parte del proyecto inter-institucional: "EL habla de Monterrey-*PRESEEA*" (Rodríguez Alfano, 2012). Primero, el acto de atenuación se analizará desde varias perspectivas con el fin de proporcionar una lista de estrategias de atenuación, la cual ha sido adaptada a partir de propuestas previas (Albelda Mar-co y Cestero Mancera, 2011; Briz, 2010). Esta lista puede ser de utilidad para el entendimiento y estudio de cómo se construye la imagen de afiliación. Asimismo, nos muestra qué estrategias de atenuación lingüísticas los tres grupos generacio-nales prefieren emplear al mitigar un acto asertivo. En este trabajo, la imagen de afiliación se define como el deseo de ser aceptado por un grupo. La investigación es primordialmente un análisis pragmalingüístico de un corpus que consiste en entrevistas semi-formales de hablantes nativos del español de Monterrey, México.
PALABRAS CLAVE: atenuación, actos asertivos, imagen.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to compare and contrast the linguistic mitigating devices produced by three generational groups (from 20 to 34, from 35 to 54 and older than 55) from Monterrey, Mexico when used when performing an assertive act.In the paper, we propose some functional and formal criteria for the study of attenuation activity, and in so doing wish to contribute to intra-and interlingual contrastive studies from a pragmalinguistic perspective.

Based on the notion of face proposed by Goffman (1967), Brown and Levinson (1987) construct a universal theory of politeness. Brown and Levinson (1987) define face as a social characteristic of a speaker that can be lost, maintained or reinforced during a linguistic interaction. For Brown and Levinson, in every social interaction every speaker acts in order to show respect for the face wants of the other. This notion of face has two interrelated components: a positive face or negative face. Positive face is characterized by the desire of the speaker to be appreciated by the group and be part of the group. On the other hand, negative face is understood as the desire not to be imposed on by others, and instead to be independent and autonomous. Brown and Levinson suggest that certain speech acts are face threatening acts (FTAs) that potentially threaten the face of the speaker and/or hearer and, therefore, the task of the speaker is to select the most efficient means of achieving their particular objective. Politeness strategies are used to reduce the particular face threat. There are two types of strategies, positive and negative, which are selected according to the type of face that is threatened. Thus, the appropriate politeness strategy is selected to preserve the speaker's face.

Unlike Brown and Levinson (1987), Bravo (1999) defines face as an empty, general and relative concept that has the advantage that it can be fulfilled within the framework of a particular community. That is, each sociocultural context provides different contents depending on the dimension of the concept of face in question. Therefore, face has an important role in Bravo's theory of politeness, and she proposes the following concepts to consider it: autonomy and affiliation. Affiliation is defined as the desire to be part of a community: to accept and be accepted by the group, while autonomy is where a speaker has a particular idea about himself/herself and a unique role within the group. For example, Flores Salgado (in press) comments that in equal situations, where interlocutors are intimates, in Mexican culture it is very common to use a mitigating strategy to respond to a compliment. This is an affiliation manifestation that has the purpose of strengthening the relationship between the interlocutors and maintaining the speaker's position in the group. In contrast, autonomy is manifested with the use of *usted* and conventional indirectness to perform a request in unequal and distant situations (Félix-Brasdefer, 2005).

Bravo (2003) defines politeness as a strategy that is used to save face and to make a good impression on the

other, and which can be interpreted as polite when the speaker is using the social norms established by the speech community. The effect, in terms of politeness or even impoliteness, can only be interpreted through the communicative context in which the social act is taking place. Following the model of communicative politeness proposed by Bravo (1999) and the notion of impolite act and anti-polite act introduced by Zimmermann (2003), Bernal (2005) proposes that there are three types of acts: impolite acts, anti-polite acts, and polite acts. Firstly, it is remarkable the fact that impolite acts do not preserve the hearer's face, on the contrary their main objective is to destroy it. Secondly, anti-polite acts are not polite or impolite acts. Their main characteristic is that they do not follow the social values and norms established by the speakers of a certain group. Lastly, polite acts have, as a main discoursive function, to protect the interlocutor's face, which is divided into collaborative, mitigating, and flattering acts. In the collaborative acts, the speaker cooperates in the discourse with the interlocutor by using different strategies that show interest, agreement, and empathy. On the other hand, the flattering acts have the purpose of inflating the value of the other's face. Finally, mitigating acts are used to avoid conflicts or disagreement in the interaction since some actions might be interpreted as a face threatening act. In such interactions, the speaker tends to say something to lessen a possible threat to the hearer's face. In other words, the speaker realizes a mitigating act by showing awareness of the hearer's face.

Assertive acts

In order to analyze the mitigating devices used in assertive acts, we begin providing a definition of what they are. Speech acts are the minimal units of discourse. Searle (1969) considers that a "speech act is the basic or minimal unit of linguistic communication" (p. 16). Austin (1962) emphasizes the function of speech acts as a way of carrying out actions with words. He divides a speech act into its basic components: locutionary force, illocutionary force, and perlocutionary force. The locutionary force corresponds to the production of a meaningful utterance in the language (it implies the use of phonemes, morphemes, and sentences). The illocutionary force is the attempt to achieve some communicative purposes. When an utterance is produced, an action is also performed. Promising, warning, greeting, informing, and commanding are all distinct samples of the illocutionary force enacted by different types of speech acts. Then, illocutionary differs from perlocutionary force in the sense that the latter involves the effect that the speaker has on his/her addressee in uttering a sentence. The illocutionary force of any speech act can, in principle, be gradually mitigated or intensified.

Various attempts have been made to classify speech acts. One of the most criticized classification, but widely accepted, is that proposed by Searle (1976), in which he classifies speech acts into assertives, directives, commissives,

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expressives, and declarations, etc. In this paper, we are mainly concerned with assertive acts. In the assertive acts, the speaker states what he/she believes to be, or not to be, the case. By expressing an opinion about a fact, a speaker might provoke agreement or disagreement (e.g. concluding, describing, advising, certifying, admitting, and agreeing). Furthermore, in a certain speech community expressing opinions might be regarded as face threatening acts. Hence we are interested in understanding what strategies speakers employ to lessen the impact of what is said or done when an assertive act is enounced. What mitigating strategies do speakers use to negotiate meaning, to establish their territories and to come closer?

Mitigation

With the concept of an assertive act thus defined, it is necessary to turn to the concept of mitigation. Mitigation, or downgrading, is defined by some authors (Briz, 1995, 1998, 2003, 2007; Fraser, 1976; Meyer-Hermann, 1988) as either a pragmatic category or as a discourse function of the service of communication, whose main purpose is to downgrade the effect of what is said or done. According to Caffi (1999), speakers of a language are aware of the strategies that they need to use to make their saying-doing more effective. Therefore, mitigation can affect diverse elements in the communicative process: the message, the speaker, the hearer or the relationship between both interlocutors. Furthermore, the mitigation effect can be conveyed

with different linguistic strategies. Our definition of mitigation is simple. As a pragmatic category, it is a strategy used by the speaker to distract or even detract from the message, when the producer of the message does not want to take responsibility for part or all of what is said and done. That is, the degree of certainty that speaker imposes upon the message or his/her commitment to the truth, is reduced in order to "prevent something", "cure" or "self-protect himself/herself" (Albelda Marco and Cestero Mancera, 2011). Mitigation is regarded as discursive, interactional and social. It is discursive since it is an argumentative activity whose communicative purpose is the reduction or weakening of the strength of actions. As an interactional strategic activity, mitigation shows discursive realizations. It is a conversational, or interactional, strategy because its purpose is to avoid problems and conflicts during the interaction; it is an attempt to achieve agreement (negotiation of meaning). Finally, it is a social strategy as it seeks to approach the other, or at least try not to stray too far from the other, which consequently makes the speaker more effective and efficient in achieving agreement or acceptance from the others.

According to Briz and Albelda Marco (2012) mitigation activity is preferred by no immediacy contexts or discourse distance, which is favoured by the general situation of the interaction or by the specific interactional context within this. They also highlight that for researchers wishing to recognize and

explain mitigating activity, it is necessary to identify its cause (the trigger or cause of mitigation, whether explicit or implicit), the part of discourse affected (attenuated), the linguistic resources used (mitigating strategies) and the effect that it might produce.

The functions of the mitigating strategies in an assertive act are to lessen the commitment of what is said, save the speaker's face, downgrade the threat of what is said, look for agreement, repair disagreement during the interaction, avoid imposing the speaker's point of view, and protect the speaker's or hearer's face, or both (Albelda Marco, 2005; Briz, 2005). With the functions of mitigation identified, we can constrain the scope of this paper to three main aspects: the first of which being the compilation of an inventory of the mitigating strategies that appear across the use of assertive acts and, in particular, the pragmalinguistic information employed during the mitigating process, including lexical devices, grammatical categories, and pronouns. Secondly, a contrastive analysis is undertaken from a pragmatic point of view to study the mitigating strategies produced by three Mexican generation groups when using an assertive act is examined. Finally, this research analyzes how affiliation face appears when an assertive act is mitigated. We hope to establish a list of pragmalinguistic strategies for the study of mitigation, which will allow us to understand how Speakers of three different generations from Monterrey, México, are capable to produce and interpret the sense of affiliation as a culturally determined issue.

Methodology

In order to analyze our main objective here, a set of segments have been selected from 36 semi-controlled interviews taken from an oral corpus (El Habla de Monterrey –PRESEEA, Rodríguez Alfano, 2012), containing conversations in Spanish as spoken in Monterrey, Mexico. This data provides authentic and reliable material for the observation and analysis required to examine how speakers from Monterrey employ mitigating strategies to lessen an assertive act, and the negative and positive social effects that these strategies have upon other speakers.

As mentioned before, it is important to analyze a pragmatic category in the context where it is used in order to determine whether or not it has a mitigating function. One of the most recommended methods for doing so is the analysis of a linguistic corpus where researchers can immerse themselves in the interactional context and can learn about the social variables of the communicative interaction (Briz and Albelda Marco 2009). These particular aspects help to determine whether or not the detected marker has a mitigating function (Albelda Marco, 2010; Briz, 1998). Within the PRESEEA framework, the context of each interview was analyzed, as well as the pragmatic information of the speech acts that were being mitigated. The more information that is analyzed, the greater the probability of identifying the real

intention of the speaker in mitigating his/her words (Albelda Marco and Cestero Mancera, 2011).

Thirty six participants were selected from different generations whose speech is representative of the prestige/high social dialect in Monterrey, Mexico and divided into three age groups: Group 1 (12 participants from 20 to 34 years), Group 2 (12 participants from 35 to 54 years), and Group 3 (12 participants older than 55). All subjects had been educated up to undergraduate degree level. While the sample did include 18 women and 18 men, the gender variable was not part of the scope of analysis of this study.

The data were analyzed according to a modified classification of mitigating mechanisms presented by Albelda Marco and Cestero Mancera (2011). This classification included 8 categories and associated subcategories: 1) lessen what is said, 2) reduce the assertion by expressing doubt or uncertainty, 3) The use of impersonal expressions,

4) constrain what is said to save face, 5) justify, 6) correct or repair, 7) make concessions, 8) include the listener in the speaker's discourse. The analysis was carried out on the transcriptions of the recordings. The following aspects shaped the collection and analysis of the data: the analysis started in the 20th minute, concluded in the 40th minute, and only the information provided by the interviewee (I) was considered.

Results

This section presents a broken down list of the mitigating strategies used to mitigate the assertive act being performed. Table 1shows their distribution in raw numbers and percentages across the three groups of participants. In what follows, we provide examples of these strategies to prepare for our discussion of the most important findings of the study –namely that Group 3 (more than 55 years) employed more mitigating strategies than the other two groups.

Table1. Frequency of mitigating strategies

Mitigating strategies	Group1	Group 2	Group 3
1. Lessen the quality of what is said	8(2%)	38(9%)	35(4.4%)
2. Expressing doubt or uncertainty	34(9%)	47(10%)	57(7%)
3. Impersonal expressions			
3.1 Impersonal pronouns	37(9.5%)	58(13%)	80(10%)
3.2 External source	19(5%)	8(2%)	25(3%)
3.3 The verb say	1(0.2%)	23(5%)	6(0.7%)
3.4 Discursive markers	3(0.7%)	1(0.2%)	6(0.7%)
3.5 Evidence	10(2.5%)	2(0.5%)	3(0.3%)
4. Constrain			
4.1 First singular person	40(10%)	45(10%)	46(6%)
4.2 Conditional	5(1.2%)	3(0.7%)	7(0.8%)

Mitigating strategies	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
5. Justification			
5.1 Explanation and justification	61(15%)	51(12%)	146(19%)
5.2 Comparison	10(2.5%)	7(1.6%)	2(0.2%)
5.3 Logic consequence	32(8%)	39(9%)	73(17%)
6. Correct or repair			
6.1 Lexical phrases	12(3%)	10(2%)	8(1%)
6.2 Expressions of apology	2(0.5%)	0	2(0.1%)
7. Make concessions			
7.1 Concession	15(4%)	37(9%)	136(17%)
7.2 Litotes	17(4%)	1(0.2%)	1(0.1%)
8. Include the listener			
8.1 The speaker involves the listener	31(8%)	14(3.2%)	72(9%)
8.2 Phatic formulae	45(11%)	41(9%)	65(8%)
8.3 Ellipsis	3 (1%)	3(.7%)	9 (1%)
Total	386(100%)	428(100%)	779(100%)

Lessen the quality of what is said

As shown in Table 1, Group 2 (9%) tended to use this strategy more than Group 3 (4.4%) and Group 1 (2%). The main purpose of this strategy is to mitigate the logical content of the meaning of the assertive act, so that the act is hidden with the employment of semantic mechanisms, as can be seen in (1):

(1) *la gente / seguía unas disposiciones **más o menos** fuerte / le… / pegaban muy duro / a… / comer poco durante / una o dos de las comidas del día /* (H33-HMP097, Group 3[1])

'people / lived by some more or less strong restrictions / they / were hit hard / by/ eating little during / one or two meals per day/'

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[1] H33-HMP097, Group 3, Man participant 97 who belongs to Group 3.

In this case, *más o menos* (more or less) reduces the prepositional meaning of the adjective *fuerte(s)* (hard) so that the speaker expresses vagueness in his opinion about the privations experienced during the period being discussed. Thus, while '*más o menos*' semantically mitigates the locutionary force of the assertive act, indirectly it has also an effect on the illocutionary force of the assertion.

Reduce the assertion by expressing doubt or uncertainty

The main purpose of the following syntactic devices is to reduce the assertion by expressing doubt or uncertainty. As seen in Table 1, Group 2 (10%) employed this strategy the most, followed by Group 1 (9%), while in Group 3, the use of this strategy was less frequent (7%). This strategy uses syntactic forms to lessen the degree of certainty of what is said. The following

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structures were found in the corpus to have been used to realize this function: (a) Certain verbs/modals that express beliefs, thoughts, doubts or possibilities are used, such as *suponer* (guess), *parecer* (seem), *se me hace que* (it seems to me that) and *poder* (can/could), (b) adverbs such as *a lo mejor*, *tal vez* (perhaps/maybe), etc. The following adverbs are employed to express uncertainty: *posiblemente* (probably), *no creo que esté yo* (I don´t think I can…), *no sé…* (expressing ignorance e.g. I don´t know). This can be seen in the following samples:

(2) I: *bueno **a lo mejor** la vida es un poco más económica allá ¿no?*
I:' well perhaps life is a little cheaper there, isn´t it?'(M13-HMP034, Group 1)

(3) I: ***se me hace que** le perdería/ lo divertí-/ lo divertido/ **no sé/** trato de no…*(H13-HMP025, Group 2)
I: 'It seems to me that I would lose/ the fun- / the fun part/ I do not know/ I try not to…'

Reduce the impact of what is said by using impersonal expressions
Interpersonally, this strategy shows the need to downgrade the origin or source of what is said. The doers of the performed acts are unfocused. The speaker, who is responsible for what is said, hides his/her opinion about another interlocutor, any participant, or the general opinion of a group so that the impact of what is said and, in all likelihood, done is reduced. As this

mechanism is characterized by the use of impersonal expressions, personal, temporal, or spatial pronouns are normally employed. The procedures are mentioned below. We have identified the following five manners of mitigating an assertive act by reducing the impact of what is said.

Impersonal pronouns
This was the most common sub-strategy used by Group 2 (13%), the third most common used by Group 3 (10%), and the fourth most common used by Group 1 (9.5%). Impersonal pronouns that use of that have no specific referent are used and may include the speaker and any co-present participant: *uno* (one), *tú* (impersonal you), *nosotros* (inclusive we), and some modifications of the first person, such as the use of the passive voice. For example:

(4) I: *pues realmente / como dices tú o sea/ eh / ya **no estamos** en otras épocas donde / bueno repercutía en otras cosas / en este caso puede repercutir / eh / o sea / en la bolsa / pero realmente es algo / eh / incierto **¿no?** / o sea uno… /* (M13_HMP031, Group 1)
I: 'well really / as you say well/ eh/ we're not in other times where/ well there were repercussions in other aspects/ in this case the repercussions / eh / well / in the stock market / but it is really something / eh / uncertain isn't it? / well one…/'

(5)*tienes los hijos / que / que dios te manda / sabiendo que realmente / no es cierto*

que dios los manda / **uno** se manda.
(M23_HMP069, Group 2)
I: 'you have the kids/ that / that
God sends you / knowing really / it
is not true that God does send them
/ one sends them'.

External source
Another source, or institution, or
a general opinion can be used as
a reference to what is said in the
conversation. For example, *Todos dicen*
(everybody says), *todo mundo* (everybody),
la gente dice (people say). The youngest
group (5%) used this strategy more than
the oldest group (3%) and the middle
group (2%). The personal opinion is
hidden by what others say, as shown in
(6) and (7):

(6) I: *pero sí necesitamos ritos /* ***y como
    decía*** *Cuperini /* (H33-HMP098,
    Group 3)
    'but we do need rituals / as Cuperini
    said /

(7) I: ***como decía mi tía*** *las revistas son
    para dentistas* (M23-HMPO68, Group 2)
    I: 'as my aunt says magazines are for
    dentists'

The verb say
The use of the verb *decir* (say) in an
impersonal form *dices* (you say; you
impersonal), *dicen* (they say) *digamos* (we
say) was rarely used by Groups 1, 2,
and 3 (0.2%, 5%, 07% respectively). An
example (8) is given below:

(8) I: *de ahí se deriva algunas otras cosas /
    gelatina y demás cosas / que por eso* ***dicen***

que el caldo / de gallina / es muy bueno
(HMP106, Group 3)
I: 'many things can come from there/
jelly and other things/ that's why
many people say that chicken/ broth/
is very good'

Discursive markers
This sub-strategy consists of discourse
markers with evidential content to
indicate that the source of information
is another person. Examples are:
alguien me dijo (somebody told me),
por lo que dicen (it is said), *según cuentan*
(it is said), *yo oí* (I have heard), *por lo
visto* (from what I have seen). The use
of hedges and vague expressions are
quite common in this strategy. The
forms are used to express the speaker's
own discourse as distal, such as *como
que es* (it is like…), *al parecer (*it seems*)*,
supuestamente (supposedly), *no me vas a
creer* (you won't believe me). Table 1
shows the low frequency of this sub-
strategy in the three groups. Some
examples of this sub-strategy are as
follows:

(9) I: */no sé / yo creo / creo que /* ***alguien
    me / me dijo que*** *como seis horas /
    mjm* (HMP105, Group 3)
    I: '/I don't know/ I think/ I think
    that/ somebody/ told me that like six
    hours/ mjm'

(10) I: *mjm / ésa área* ***como que es*** *un
     poquito conflictiva ¿verdad? / Colón y Pino
     Suárez*(M23-HMP067, Group 2)
     I: 'mjm/ that area is like a little bit
     violent, right? / Colón and Pino
     Suárez'

Evidence

This sub-strategy was rarely used by the participants in the study. In this sub-strategy, the speaker uses evidence to reduce his/her commitment to what s/he is saying. The use of discourse markers such as *la verdad* (the truth), *la verdad es que* (the truth is that), *a decir verdad* (to tell the truth) have the function of indicating that the opinion that the speaker is mentioning is shared by others. When the speaker uses it in this way, then s/he makes his/her opinion impersonal. Therefore, s/he transforms a personal comment into a more general opinion as s/he is no longer expressing simply his/her opinion rather, they are expressing everybody's. In other words, the speaker relies not on what he/she is saying, but on the evidence he/she is providing using such phrases as *es cierto que* (it is true that), *como es lógico* (obviously):

> (11) I: *lo estamos haciendo mi esposa y yo / **la verdad es que** lo voy escribiendo y ella me corrige y complementa todas las cosas de /* (HMP108, Group 3)
> I: 'we are doing this my wife and I / the truth is that I write it and she corrects it for me and complements all of the things involved'

Constrain what is said

In this strategy, mechanisms are used to indicate that the opinion expressed by the speaker only belongs to him/her. These are forms that give all the responsibility of what is said to the speaker by the use of personal rather than generic references. This was one of the most common strategies used by groups 1, 2 and 3 (6%, 10% and 10% respectively). There are two mechanisms that have been identified.

First singular person

Expressions that contain a first person singular subject and a verb in the non-negative present tense, which denotes a propositional attitude specifying the speaker's view towards a particular point of view – *yo lo veo* (I see it)', *yo veo que* (I see that), *digo* (I say), *digo yo* (I say), *Yo siento que* (I feel that), *Yo creo que* (I think that), *yo sé* (I know) etc. In other cases, the use of direct style to express the speaker's own citation as a manner to save face and indicate that the speaker's situation has changed. Therefore, the use of first person and past/imperfect tense indicates that the idea expressed is distant from his/her current situation or reality – *y yo pensaba* (and I thought), *yo dije* (I said), and *yo decía* (I said). The possessive pronouns are also found to point out that the opinion mentioned only belongs to the person who is saying it and nobody else – *para mí* (for me), *a mi* (to me), *a mi parecer* (it seems to me), *a mi modo de ver* (from my way of seeing things), *tengo entendido* (as far as I understand), *personalmente* (personally), *a mi juicio* (to my mind).Mechanisms referring to a specific context, space, or moment are also used to constrain what is said in order to save the speaker's face such as *por lo menos* (at least), *en principio* (to begin with), *por ahora* (for the time being). For example:

(12) I: ***yo lo veo*** *por ejemplo con mis hijos / pos casi todos trabajan por su cuenta / sí/ ha- / hace años /*(HMP105, Grupo 3)

I: 'I see it for example with my children / I mean that almost all of them work for themselves / yes / fo- / for years'

(13) I: *por eso mismo **personalmente** le / le cuento que **a mí** hay muchas actitudes que no me / que me han decepcionado / muchas veces por esta búsqueda de / de / vender canciones o de / ser famosos / **a m / a mi juicio** / se pierden de / de vista cosas importantes como / prisa / precisamente / principalmente la familia / o la…* (H13-HMPO25, Group1)

I: 'for this reason personally I / I tell you that to me there are many attitudes that haven't /that have disappointed me / many times for this quest to / sell songs or/ to be famous/ to m/ to my mind/ many important things are lost like/ pre/ precisely/   mainly the family / or the…'

(14) I: *empezar de nuevo / pero / m / **yo decía** qué egoísta nomás estoy pensando en mí o sea ∕ a la mejor mi / mi papá pues / él no / él quiere seguir / o sea hay gente que / que le gusta vivir / vivir del recuerdo / hay gente que no / entonces / digo/ en parte **yo decía pues** sí / irme y / **yo pensé ¿verdad?** / pero orita / creo que / como dicen ya con la cabeza más fría y con el tiempo / como que ya te haces un poquito / no acostumbrando / es muy difícil acostumbrarte / pero ya hacerte un poquito más a la idea / y / y tratando de / de llevar / pues / tu vida normal podría decirse / un poquito* (M13-HMP031, Group 1)

I: 'start again/ but/ m/ I said that it is selfish I'm just thinking of me well/ maybe my/ my dad well/ he doesn't/ he wants to go on/ or well there are people that/ that they like to live/ live through memory/ there are people that don't/ then/ I say/ partly I said well if / I go and/ I thought, right?/ but now/ I think that/ as people say with a cool head and with time/ you start to become / a little unaccustomed/ it is very hard to get used to/ but you start accepting the idea/ and/ and trying to/ to live/ well/ your normal life it could be said/ a little'

Conditional

Although no generational group made frequent use of this category, Group 1 (1.2%) used it more than Group 2 (0.7%) and Group 3 (0.8%). Another form used to restrict the opinion of the speaker is the use of the conditional, *si no hacemos algo* (if we don't do something),and the fixing of expressions with conditional forms, such as; *si no me equivoco* (if I am not wrong), *si no te importa* (if you don't mind), *si te parece bien* (if it's alright with you), *si no me fallan los calculus* (if my calculations are not wrong), *a menos que* (unless), *si es possible* (if it is possible). These are used to limit the illocutionary force of the speech act, as can be seen in the following example:

(15) I: ***si no hacemos*** *algo nos vamos 'ir para'bajo / porque si no avanzan /*

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(risa) yo les digo que's como el que anda en bicicleta / que si no avanzas tienes que hacer muchos circos pa' no caerte (risas) (HMP108, Group 3)
I: 'if we don't do something we are going down / because if we don't move forward / (laughs) I tell them that it's like riding a bike / if you don't go forward you have to do a lot of circles so you don't fall over (laughs)'

Justify

This was the most common strategy employed by the three groups of participants (Group 1 – 5%, Group 2 – 12% and Group 3 – 19%). An opinion can be mitigated when it is supported by a justification or an explanation. An explanation has the purpose of making the speaker understand by giving the reasons behind the argument being made, while a justification finds a reason to discharge the speaker's responsibility for what is said. Three devices have been identified.

Explanation and justification

There are some mechanisms that can be identified as justifications or excuses for what is said, such as the lexical connectors *porque* (because), *por eso* (so), *lo que pasa es que* (the point is that).These mechanisms can also take the form of lexical connectors that are intended to link the action with the illocutionary force of the act – *por así decírtelo* (to put it this way), *por decirlo de alguna manera* (one way of saying it) such as:

(16) E: *está peor Arteaga*
I: *sí no ╱ **por eso dijimos** ╱ vamos ╱ vamos de día **porque no sabemos cómo está ¿verdad?** *(HMP043, Group 2)
E: Arteaga is worse
I: Yes/ that´s why we said/ let's go/ let's go during the day because we don't know how the place is right?

(17) I:*esto ╱ pos yo lo impuse **porque ╱ no ╱ no es costumbre*** (HMP106 , Group 3)
I: 'this/ well I imposed it because/ it is not/ it is not tradition'

Comparison

Comparison is another sub-strategy that helps speakers to release themselves from the responsibility of what is said by bringing up examples from daily life that can be interpreted as facts about the world. A comparison, therefore, is used to clarify. Group 1 (2.5%), Group 2 (1.6%) and Group 3 (0.2%) make a comparison between something and something else to justify it, such as *como que* (as though) and *como todos* (as everybody), as can be seen in (18).

(18) I: ***yo les digo que's como** el que anda en bicicleta / que si no avanzas tienes que hacer muchos circos pa' no caerte (risas)* (HMP105, Group 3)
I: 'I tell them that it is like riding a bike / that if you don't go forward you have to do a lot of circles so you don't fall over (laughs)'

Logic consequence

The employment of discourse markers that show a logical consequence is also a characteristic of this strategy, examples of which are *entonces* (then), *en consecuencia* (in consequence), *por lo tanto* (therefore), *pues bien* (so well), *pues* (well), etc. Group 3 (17%) showed a greater reliance on this strategy when compared to Group 1 (8%) and Group 2 (9%). As can be seen in (19), these markers are used to show that what has been said is a logical conclusion of what was mentioned before:

(19) I: *sí fue una amiga que / los / fuimos vecinas*
E: *mjm*
I: **entonces** *fuimos / pos compañeras de la primaria entramos juntas a la primaria / y este / y / e / y éramos vecinas de ahí mismo / ya ve que antes los barrios eran muy chiquitos* (M23.HMP067, Group 2)

I: yes it was a friend of mine that / the / we were neighbors
E: mmm…
I: at that time we were / well classmates in the elementary school we entered the elementary the same year / and well/ we / and we were also neighbors / you know in the past there were very little neighborhoods.

Correct or repair.

This strategy is employed to lessen a possible threat, which has already been produced or will be intentionally produced. The purpose of this strategy is to minimize the possible offence, restore social harmony between the interlocutors, and/or repair a possible error (misinformation) made by the speaker during the interaction. In this way, the speaker protects both his/her and the other's face. Two devices have been identified.

Lexical phrases

This is used when the speaker tries to minimize a disagreement (either one that has occurred or could occur). This strategy was commonly employed by Group 1 (3%), followed by Group 2 (2%), and Group 3 (1%). Some lexical devices that have been identified are *bueno* (well), *o sea* and *pues* (I mean), *hombre* (man), *mujer* (woman). In this study, this strategy was commonly used when the speaker provided inaccurate information, and then tried to correct what was said, as can be seen in the following example:

(20) I: *ya se graduó de psicología / o* **bueno** *está por obtener el título porque le falta / creo que el servicio / algo le falta / o un curso que tiene que llevar / de esos que te ponen trabas y todo* (M13-HMP034, Group 1)
I: 'she just graduated from psychology/ or well she is about to get her degree because she doesn't have it / I think the service / she needs something/ or a course that she has to take / one of those that complicate things for you and everything'

Expressions of apology

Another mechanism used by speakers is to apologize when they are going to interrupt, give negative or wrong

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information to the hearer, ask a question, or ask for a favor; *perdón* (pardon), *lo siento* (sorry). This strategy was scarcely employed by the groups; 0.5% for Group 1, 0% for Group 2, and 0.1% for Group 3. An example of an apology can be seen below (21):

(21) E: *no / no los he leído / **bueno no** /sí he leído a Javier a / ¿cómo se llama?*
I: *Jaime Sabines*
E: ***Jaime Sabines / perdón** / pero no en clase* / (M13-HMP0107, Group 2)
E:' no/ I haven´t read them /**well no**/ yes I have read Javier/ what his name?
I: Jaime Sabines
E: **Jaime Sabines/ sorry/** but not in class'

Make concessions

This was the second most common strategy used by Group 3 (17%) and Group 2 (9%). It has an argumentative function because the speaker concedes, or at least gives an argument either in favor of what the other says, or against his/her position. There are two types of mechanisms.

Concessions

In the first mechanism, the concession can be placed in two different positions. It can be placed before the disagreement, which the speaker achieves by formulating the concession first and thus placing themselves in the position of a conceding subordinate. *Sí* (yes), *cierto* (sure), *de acuerdo* (of course) are lexical devices employed here. It can also be

placed after the disagreement, where the speaker disagrees and then mitigates his/her opinion with a concession. *Aunque (*although), *pero* (but), *sin embargo* (however), *pero sí* (yes but), *aún y cuando* (even when) are employed. For example:

(22) *I: yo / el cerro de La silla siempre me / lo máximo para mí el cerro de La silla / **pero el popo sí está muy impresionante*** (M13-HMP033. MP3, Grupo 1)
I: / 'the hill La silla has always been/ the best for me the hill La silla/ but 'el popo' really is awesome'

(23) *I: no había tantos atracos tantos asaltos / nada / ¿sí? / el narco tenía sus matones **pero para sus propias organizaciones*** (M21-HMP043 , Grupo 2)
I: 'there were not so many robberies so many assaults / nothing / right? /the drug traffickers had their own killers but for their own organizations'

Litotes

In the second mechanism, understatements, also known as litotes, are a rhetorical device used to tone down a negative opinion that could threaten the other speaker's face by using a double negative to negate the contrary of what is said, for example, *he's not as young as he was* (meaning he's old), *no le cuento* (I won't tell you).These can be used either to minimize a possible threat to the listener's face by expressing more and saying less, or to show modesty on the speaker's behalf as seen in (24). Although

no group made frequent use of this category, Group 1 (4%) used it more than Group 2 (0.2%) and Group 3 (0.1%).

(24) I: *Es poco / es muy poco / sí / y / ya ves / son muchos nombres de Myrnas / y nombre de / los / a veces / que se ponen de moda en / un momento dado / **yo no estoy en contra pero** / hay hasta cosas tan raras como / Andrea / pos es nombre de hombre…* (H13-HMP026, Group 1)
I: 'It is small / it is very small / yes / and / you see / there are many named Myrna / and a name of / the / sometimes / that become fashionable / at a given moment / I am not against it but / there are some things so strange like / Andrea / I mean it is a man's name…'

Include the listener in the speaker's discourse.
In this strategy, the listener is included in an assessment of what is said by the speaker. There are three ways to include the listener in the speaker's discourse.

The speaker involves the listener
The hearer is directed addressed by the speaker during the turn with the main purpose of involving the listener in what the speaker is saying. This was the most common strategy employed by Group 3 (9%) and the fourth most common used by Group 1 (8%). Linguistic devices associated with this mechanism are *como dice usted* (as you say), *como dices tú* (as you say), *haz de cuenta* (you see), *haz de cuenta que* (you see that), *fíjese* (you see).

(25) I: *es el estudio de / de las empresas / **haz de cuenta que** de / lo que son / cómo vender / qué le pega al cliente / los precios que le pondrías / cómo lo publicarías / y todo eso / está muy interesante / y se aplica en todo* (M13-HMP034, Grupo 1)
I: 'It is the study/ of businesses / **you see that**/ what they are / is how to sell/ how to get the client's attention / the prices that you could put/ how you would publish it/ and everything/ it is very interesting/ and it has many uses'

(26) I: *y hay que / seguir / pedalearle **como dice usted*** (HMP101, Group 3)
I: 'and it is a question of / keeping on / pedaling as you say'

Phatic formulae
The use of tag questions and phatic formulae were commonly used by Group 1 (11%), Group 2 (9%), and Group 3 (8%). They are especially used in extended turns to reach consensus with the listener and / or to verify whether the hearer is listening and following the dialogue, and include ¿no? (isn't it?), ¿sí? (is it?), ¿verdad? (right?), ¿tú que crees? (what do you think?), among others. For example:

(27) I: *para que los muchachos pues se desenvolvieran **¿no?*** (HMP107, Group 3)
I: 'so that the boys got along well, didn't they?

(28) I:*ay sí / que tiene una ortografía pésima **¿verdad?*** (M23-HMP068, Group 2)
I: 'ay/ he has terrible spelling, right?'

Ellipsis

The use of ellipsis occurs when the speaker does not complete the idea that s/he is expressing and leaves the hearer to assume the conveyed meaning as can be seen in (29). This is possible because both interlocutors share the same context and background information. This strategy was rarely adopted by the participants.

(29) I: *sí / bueno estar conectados con / con amigos y todo eso / y otra es este tener información de de / a lo que me dedico / y aparte comunicarme con clientes* **y todo eso** (MONR-H13-HMP027, Group 1)
I: 'yes/well to be connected with / with the friends and everything / and another is to have information about about / my occupation / and besides communicate with clients and all that'

5. Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to investigate the mitigating strategies used to perform an assertive act among three generational groups, with its results showing three important aspects. The first results of this study suggest similarities and differences among them. Similarities include the use of justification as the most common strategy employed by the three groups. A significant point to note is that the use of this strategy is influenced by the topic being discussed in the conversation, an aspect that will be examined below. In addition, impersonal expressions are the second most common strategy used by members of the three groups to mitigate an assertive act. This finding concurs

with what Albelda Marco and Cestero Mancera (2011) found in their study. Although the groups share similarities in their use of mitigating strategies, they also differ in important ways. With respect to the use of mitigating devices, the analysis shows that the oldest group (Group 3) employed more devices, followed by the middle age group (Group 2), and the youngest group (Group 1) who used them the least. Regarding the use of strategies, there are important differences among the groups that must be emphasized. It was found that Group 3 and Group 2 made concessions, whereas Group 2 and Group 1 used constraint on what was said more often than Group 3. In the same way, Groups 1 and 3 preferred to use the strategy of including the listener. These findings are not compatible with previous results. Albelda Marco and Cestero Mancera (2011) reported in their study that making concessions and constraining were the less common strategies employed by Spaniards.

As mentioned before, the topic played an important role in the occurrence of mitigating strategies. The second finding revealed that the mitigating strategies are favored by the structure of the interview and the presence of the comment, the speaker's opinion and their assessment of the topic that is discussed. This finding confirms and extends that found by Albelda Marco and Cestero Mancera (2011), who state that assertive acts frequently occur in an argumentative, descriptive and expository discourse. However, it can be seen that the highest frequency of use of these strategies

occurred to argument a controversial topic. The more controversial the topic the more probable it was that the speaker used a mitigating strategy. Due to the structure of the interview, it is remarkable to note that controversial topics such as religion, politics, death and drug trafficking promote mitigation among speakers in an attempt to reach consensus and agreement. Speakers avoid committing themselves to what it is said in order to look for agreement; otherwise conflict might arise.

Lastly, it was observed that in spite of the differences among the three Mexican groups, they preferred to use justification, impersonal expressions, make concessions, constrain what is said and include the listener. This preference indicates that, during conversation, Mexicans pay special attention to the maintenance of interpersonal relationships, acceptance by the other, and being understood in terms of group practices. The use of impersonal expressions show that the three generation groups depersonalize the content of the assertion through the use of deictic pronouns *uno* 'one', *tu* 'you', and *nosotros* [inclusive] 'we', and the reference to another source or institution – *Todos dicen* (everybody says), *todo mundo* (everybody), *la gente dice* (people say) – with the main purpose of showing concern for the face of the addressee, a strategy reported by Koike (1998) when Mexicans used a suggestion. Further attention to the addressee's affiliation face is achieved by the constraint of what is said, such as *yo lo veo* (I see), *yo veo que* (I see that), *digo* (I say), *digo yo* (I say), *Yo siento que* (I feel that), *Yo creo que* (I think that), *yo sé* (I know). These personal references are used when the hearer's affiliation face is at risk.

Justifications were commonly employed to mitigate an opinion, and were a way to be understood by the hearer and to protect the faces of both the hearer and the speaker. Félix-Brasdefer (2004) considers that Mexicans are more concerned with keeping up appearances before the others in the group and that affiliation and group face are characteristics of Mexican society. Another strategy that was commonly used was the making of concessions, which shows how the speaker makes an argument in favor of the other; *aunque* (although), *pero* (but), *sin embargo* (however), *sí pero* (yes but), *aún y cuando* (even when). This strategy shows that to be modest and to protect the kind of self-image approved of by society are some of the aspects that the speakers considered to protect his/her face and the others face. According to Chen and Yang (2010), to be modest means to lower oneself in order to elevate the other. Based on this, it can be said that in Mexican culture, to be polite means to value the view of the other, and, as a consequence consider them first and then oneself second (Curcó, 2007). Finally, the inclusion of the listener in the discourse, with the use of *como dice usted* (as you say), *como dices tú* (as you say), *haz de cuenta* (you see), *fíjese* (you see), reflects that speakers are more concerned with building solidarity and emphasizing interpersonal relations because they are constantly looking for the approval of the

hearer. This is a way to show affiliation. Based on these results, it can be said that the Mexican pragmatic system shows an affiliation face-based tendency that has, as a main function, the satisfying of the hearer's need for belonging and common ground. The main purpose of this system is to show appreciation of the addressee by using solidarity and in-group identity markers, and to show interest in and sympathy towards him/her (Curcó, 2007).

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