

Dissertation Abstract
論文の内容の要旨

A Cross-Cultural Empirical Study of Mitigation in Face-Threatening Contexts
by Native English Speakers and Chinese/Japanese EFL Learners

(フェイス侵害状況に於ける英語母語話者と 中国系・日本人英語学習者の
緩和表現使用に関する異文化論アプローチからの実証的研究)

袁 牧杭
Yuan Muhang

The current era features globalization realities that have been emerging rapidly, with the people around the village of the world interrelated more immediately and intensively than ever before. As a result, both the field of pragmatics and sub-fields of pragmatics should be matters of concern when dealing with the improvement of communicative competence for world citizens. Mitigation is a pragmatic behavior produced as a wide set of discourse strategies to deal with the potential danger faced by one or more participants in social interactions, and it is shaped or reshaped variously in different cultural backgrounds. In reality, we often mitigate to attune with others in order to bring us into harmony in social settings in order to reduce vulnerability.

However, pragmatic research in the past has mainly assumed the issue of mitigation theoretically, and accordingly, not enough empirical research has been conducted on the topic. Given this circumstance, Caffi (2007) claimed that the turning point in the development of mitigation research is “a shift from a paradigm of introspection to one of empirical analysis.” Furthermore, Bresnan (2016), proposed the metaphor of turning the focus from “the garden”—theoretical linguistics—to “the bush”—authentic data-based empirical research. In other words, it is time to turn from the analysis of invented examples to the study of authentic speech, from the abstract ideal of speech act to an emphasis on the objective occurrence in social reality. For this reason, the present study tries to make up, as much as possible, for gaps in the research by building on reasonable epistemological assumptions.

In the present study, mitigators refer to linguistic techniques ubiquitously employed by humans in order to eliminate any unwanted predictable face-threatening responses from the hearer and to alleviate potential vulnerability or shame experienced by the speaker. Based on the literature, the present paper categorizes four types of mitigators—propositional effect mitigators, communicative effect mitigators, performative effect mitigators, and embedded contextual mitigators—which include 19 sub-types of mitigators. There are two research questions: First, what is the distribution of mitigators employed by native English speakers (NES) and Chinese/Japanese EFL learners respectively in the designed face-threatening situations? Second, if there are some differences in the degree of psychological vulnerability between NES and Chinese/Japanese EFL learners in the face-threatening situations in the present research, what are the correlations between mitigator use, vulnerability and gender, age, and linguistic competence among the participants? Applying the formula $Weight = Distance (Speaker, Hearer) + Power (Hearer, Speaker) + Ranking$ (Brown & Levinson 1987) to

quantify the degree of a face-threatening act, 15 original face-threatening situations were developed with references from our authentic life observations and experiences. Those situations were then used to examine the utilization of mitigators and the degrees of vulnerability of NES, Chinese EFL learners, and Japanese EFL learners.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods were combined in the present study, especially through the triangulation of open-ended online conversational-simulated survey (OOCs), simulated interactional analysis (SIA), and interviews for data collection, and with software tools WordSmith 6.0 and SPSS 22.0 for data analysis. As a result, the research data were sourced from multiple channels: online responses and face-to-face responses with spontaneity and immediate interactions, either in written or in oral form.

Around the two aforementioned research questions, a number of major findings are resulted from the study.

(1) Distribution of Mitigators

Foremost, viewed on the comprehensive level, the corpus data showed that NES and Chinese/Japanese EFL learners generally utilized mitigators in many similar ways within the 15 face-threatening situations, overall. However, on closer examination, although there were not too many dramatic differences on the large scale, there existed some crucial differences among them, with NES employing mitigators less frequently than the Chinese/Japanese EFL learners while both Chinese and Japanese EFL learners used approximately equal numbers of mitigators. To some extent, the analysis might point to widely shared aspects of human language behavior because language, as a psycho-social phenomenon as well as a physiological-cognitive phenomenon (Kohler 2005), could reflect the common traits in our cognitive, psychological mechanisms, and behavior patterns. That being said, NES used fewer mitigators to weaken the degree of face-threatening situations while the Chinese/Japanese EFL learners used more mitigators.

Second, when comparing mitigators' standardized frequency (SF) in the four main types, NES only led in the propositional effect mitigators, which implied that NES were most likely to reduce their commitments to the validity of their own propositions. Contrastively, Japanese EFL learners took the lead in communicative effect mitigators, which implied that they were more inclined to utter mitigators in order to reduce the force of their speech acts on the ensuing illocutionary acts. Chinese EFL learners, however, took the lead in performative effect mitigators and embedded contextual mitigators, which implied that they tended to use mitigators more frequently to reduce the possible unwelcome effects that a speech act might produce on the listener so that the perlocutionary force was alleviated. Moreover, Chinese EFL learners were most likely to make full use of a particular contextual construction to mitigate the face-threatening intensity.

Third, with respect to the SF of mitigators among the 19 sub-types, the overall SF of subjectivizers, politeness markers, disclaimers, and apologizers were high for all groups of participants, whereas SF of tag questions, truth claimers, hesitators, subjunctives, indirect speech, and self-mockeries were low for all groups of participants. Comparatively, NES topped six sub-types of mitigators—epistemic modals, understaters, hesitators, empathizers, acknowledgers, and subjunctives—which implied that NES paid more attention to the manipulation of mitigators not only to show their uncertainty, hesitation, and mild attitude towards the statements they wanted to propose, but also to convey their empathetic and grateful feelings toward the hearer. What is more, they were better at operating and employing

subjunctives to deliver their wishes for the purpose of softening negative effects compared with the Chinese/Japanese EFL learners in the current study.

In contrast, Japanese EFL learners topped deprecators, hypothesizers, disclaimers, and self-mockeries when they encountered unpleasant situations. It may be inferred that Japanese participants were most likely to dissociate themselves from the ensuing illocutions that were potentially inappropriate for violating a social rule; to show their hypothetical conditions in semantic uncertainty; to state that they were not entitled to perform a certain speech act; and to use negative words, phrases, sentences or even a made-up story or scenario to downgrade themselves in order to alleviate the embarrassment between the speaker and the hearer, either humbly or humorously.

Meanwhile, Chinese EFL learners topped the SF of subjectivizers, evidentials, politeness markers, apologizers, direct dissuasion, and intentional compliments. Accordingly, we might conclude that Chinese EFL learners were most likely to introduce their personal opinions, to show their politeness and apologies, and to use the most compliments intentionally in certain stressful social and cultural contexts.

In the comparison of mitigators chosen by Chinese and Japanese EFL learners, the two groups showed nearly equal frequencies in terms of epistemic modals, understaters, evidentials, hesitators, empathizers, apologizers, acknowledgers and subjunctives, which might indicate a great number of similarities in both linguistic and cultural traditions between these two groups of participants and some adjacent EFL learning behaviors as well. More interestingly, the SF of their linguistic performances in both evidentials and apologizers appeared much higher than NES, which might show, first, that both Chinese and Japanese EFL learners tended to back up their own speech by citing outside opinions in order to minimize the threatening effects on the hearer, as a kind of indicator of collectivism or “collective preference.” Second, both of them tended to be more serious about making immediate apologies to mitigate the stressful emotions felt in and associated with the face-threatening situations. It should be noted that the tentative conclusions and explanations drawn above were also confirmed by some participants in the current study as well.

(2) Vulnerability and Mitigation

First, there was a significant difference in the mean value of vulnerability among the three groups: the mean vulnerability of NES was low, the Chinese mean vulnerability was intermediate, and the Japanese mean vulnerability was high.

Second, there were significant positive linear correlations between the total weight of the situations and the mean vulnerability of the three groups of participants. However, the study showed that perceived vulnerability differed according to the variables in the equation. Especially, in the equation of weight, it was calculated statistically that ranking of imposition had a much more significant effect on vulnerability than the other two factors of power and distance. In other words, the higher the ranking of imposition, the more threatening the weight of the situation, and the more vulnerable the subjects felt.

Third, there was a significant difference in the mean number of mitigators used by the three groups in situations with high vulnerability, among which the mean mitigator use of the Japanese was low, NES was intermediate, and the Chinese was high.

Fourth, there were positive linear correlations between the total weight of the situations and the mean number of mitigators used by participants in all sample groups, which meant that when participants felt more threatened in particular situations, they would use significantly more mitigators to deal with the perceived threat.

Fifth, in general, the three groups of participants tended to use 2-3 mitigators in each situation, and there was also a positive linear correlation between amount of mitigators and psychological vulnerability. Namely, a more frequent use of mitigators indicated that the participants felt more vulnerable, which corresponded with the higher value of vulnerability in the experiment. The correlation varied somewhat by group, however, with the correlation for NES being strong while the correlation for the Japanese was weak.

Sixth, analyses of correlations according to gender, age, and linguistic competence produced varying results. For gender, with all situations considered, statistical analysis showed no significant difference in either mean vulnerability or amount of mitigators used between male and female participants. With respect to age, there was a significant negative linear relationship between age and mean vulnerability of all participants. As for linguistic competence, there were no significant linear correlations between linguistic competence and mean vulnerability, or between linguistic competence and mean use of mitigators. However, linguistic competence had a small negative effect on mean vulnerability, because participants tended to feel less vulnerable when they had higher linguistic competence.

Therefore, we could arrive at three possible conclusions about the three groups. On average, NES felt least vulnerable and their performance of mitigators was highly consistent with their internal vulnerability in all face-threatening situations; namely, they were more likely to employ more mitigators when they felt more vulnerable. As for the Chinese, they generally felt vulnerable at the intermediate level when faced with threats, and their performance of mitigators was in moderate consistency with their level of vulnerable feelings. As for the Japanese, on average, they suffered the most vulnerability when faced with threats, but their performance of mitigators was least consistent with their psychological vulnerability. In general, we found that NES used mitigators at a minimum level to downgrade the intensity of the face-threatening acts embedded in the designated face-threatening situations, which was consistent with the results of NES being least vulnerable psychologically in such potentially embarrassing episodes. Therefore, the cross-cultural findings of the present study might generate more useful academic interest in research on mitigation and mitigators within the fields of pragmatics and communications.

Finally, the findings could possibly provide some practical help for EFL teaching and cross-cultural communications. This is because NES patterns and tendencies revealed in the current research may benefit non-native language learners in acquiring English as a natural language in a more efficient and productive manner. What is more, the implications discussed might contribute to the enrichment of the field of cross-cultural communication strategies. Greater awareness of cultural diversities in strategies for the utilization of mitigation and mitigators in face-threatening situations might allow interlocutors (speakers and hearers) to be better capable of predicting the characteristics and inclinations of their communicative “partners” (hearers and speakers) and thus to decrease and alleviate the cognitive and psychological burdens aroused by the corresponding “partners” in the interactions. In other words, the distinguishable differences found in the present study that separate the non-native English speakers from NES could possibly be used in pedagogy to enhance the harmony of conversation and nurture compassion and empathy in human interactions, especially when an L2 or a FL is involved.