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The mitigation of disagreement in Spanish: a contrastive approach between native and non-native speakers

La atenuación del desacuerdo en español: una aproximación contrastiva entre hablantes nativos y no nativos¹

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Abstract: Many verbal and non-verbal resources exist for graduating the illocutionary force of speech acts, including mitigation tactics (Albelda & Cestero, 2011; Albelda, Briz, Cestero, Kotwica & Villalba, 2014; Villalba, 2020). This paper focuses on mitigating the illocutionary force of the speech act of disagreement (Medina Soler, 2012, 2013; Fernández García, 2020; Fernández & Sánchez, 2021). Specifically, in this paper, a contrastive analysis of the mitigating linguistic tactics employed by native Spanish speakers and non-native speakers (with Italian or English as their mother tongue and with at least a B1 level of Spanish) is presented. Based on the data collected, obtained through the presentation of scenarios (Di Pietro, 1987; Kasper & Dahl, 1991; Landone, 2022) and the use of Oral Discourse Completion Tasks (Ogiermann, 2018), it is concluded that there are certain confluences in the degree of frequency of mitigating strategies (for example, the least frequent strategy is to restrict or limit what is said). However, specific differences are observed: from the number of linguistic modulations in absolute terms to the use of specific mitigating strategies, such as justification or concession. These and other data analysed in the paper reveal the interlanguage identity of non-native speakers and demonstrate the importance of teaching pragmatic strategies in the classroom of Spanish as a second language. In the specific case of mitigation of disagreement, teaching would strengthen pragmatic competence to avoid eventual interpersonal conflicts or threats to images.

Keywords: disagreement, mitigation, pragmatic competence, interlanguage, Spanish as a foreign language (ELE)

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Resumen: Existe una generosa nómina de recursos verbales y no verbales para graduar la fuerza ilocutiva de los actos de habla, entre ellos las tácticas de atenuación (Albelda y Cestero, 2011; Albelda, Briz, Cestero, Kotwica & Villalba, 2014; Villalba, 2020). Este artículo se centra en la mitigación de la fuerza ilocutiva del acto de habla del desacuerdo (Medina, 2012, 2013; Fernández García, 2020; Fernández y Sánchez, 2021). Concretamente, en este trabajo se lleva a cabo un análisis contrastivo de las tácticas lingüísticas atenuadoras empleadas por nativos hispanohablantes y no nativos con italiano o inglés como lengua materna y con al menos un nivel B1 de español.

Con base en los datos recogidos, obtenidos mediante la presentación de escenarios (Di Pietro, 1987; Kasper y Dahl, 1991; Landone, 2022) y con la metodología de Oral Discourse Completion Task (Ogiermann, 2018), se concluye que existen ciertas concomitancias en el grado de frecuencia de estrategias atenuantes (por ejemplo, la estrategia menos frecuente es restringir o limitar lo que se dice), pero también se observan ciertas diferencias: desde la cantidad de atenuantes en términos absolutos, hasta el empleo de determinadas estrategias mitigadoras, como la justificación o la concesión. Estos y otros datos que se analizan en el artículo revelan la identidad de la interlengua de los hablantes no nativos y demuestran la importancia de la enseñanza de estrategias pragmáticas en el aula de español como segunda lengua. En el caso específico de la atenuación del desacuerdo, la enseñanza fortalecería la competencia pragmática con el fin de evitar eventuales conflictos interpersonales o amenazas a las imágenes.

Palabras clave: desacuerdo, atenuación, competencia pragmática, interlengua, español lengua extranjera (ELE)

1. Introduction

The present paper analyses the oral production of the speech act of disagreement in Spanish by native and non-native Spanish speakers. This research focuses on mitigation devices used by native and non-native speakers to attenuate the illocutionary force of this speech act in Spanish. The research question of this study concerns the use of mitigation devices by non-native and native Spanish speakers, whether there are differences and which type of difference. Furthermore, about the mitigating strategies adopted by non-native speakers, this research aims to establish general lines regarding the linguistic tactics used by native Italian and English speakers when expressing a mitigated disagreement in Spanish. The data collected show that the linguistic strategies employed by non-native speakers vary according to the communicative context (e.g., the social distance between the interlocutors) and their language skills (i.e., their level of proficiency in Spanish) but do not precisely coincide with the linguistic strategies of mitigation adopted by native speakers. Although non-native speakers demonstrated the ability to use context-appropriate mitigating linguistic strategies and devices, they also showed the repeated use of a few tactics.

The paper is organised according to the following structure. First, a theoretical framework is presented, mainly around the following notions. On the one hand, the concept of disagreement (§2.1.) is analysed deeply. In addition to presenting a brief terminological and conceptual overview of this speech act reactive, dialogical, and conversational, other aspects are considered to understand disagreement, for example, the extra-linguistic context in which it happens: the social status of hearer (H) and speaker (S), their distance and the

stake involved in the speech act. On the other hand, based on the works consulted, §2.2. presents the relationship between the formulation and interpretation of disagreement about pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence and some cross-cultural differences concerning the degree of tolerance of disagreement and conflict in general. Finally, §2.3. presents and explains the concept of mitigation and examines the classification of mitigation strategies adopted for analysing the data collected. It also provides some observations on the role of mitigation in an act such as disagreement, which might be seen as intrinsically confrontational and threatening faces interlocutors.

Section 3 explains the methodology adopted for this paper, underlining the advantages of Oral Discourse Completion Task (ODCT) to collect data more authentic as possible, presenting the corpora of this research, and the typology of scenarios proposed to participants. Likewise, the linguistic and geographical differences among participants are explained, emphasising the characteristics of trilingual participants, speakers of Spanish as FL and native speakers of Italian or English. Afterwards, section 4 includes the findings of this research, in which the mitigating productions of native and non-native speakers of Spanish are contrastively analysed. Finally, some considerations and reflections for future work are presented (§5).

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Defining the concept of *disagreement*

In the literature, the concept of *disagreement* and its linguistic and discursive expressions have been discussed and analysed for decades, and it has been studied from both micro-linguistic (conversation analysis) and macro-linguistic (discourse analysis, argumentation theory) perspectives². In this research, *disagreement* is conceived from the first perspective, i.e., the general definition of disagreement is presented in the conversational dynamic, that is, as a reactive action to a previous intervention. Thus, the disagreement “can be defined as the expression of a view that differs from that expressed by another speaker” (Sifianou, 2012, p. 1554) or “as any episode in talk-in-interaction where opposition and refusal is expressed” (Jørgensen & Olza, 2020, p. 63). In a broader vision, Herrero (2002) underlines that it is a reactive attitude that expresses objection, discrepancy, opposition, non-acceptance, rejection, refutation, etc., of the interlocutor or one of the various components of his discourse.

Regarding metalinguistic reflections to describe this speech act, some authors defend labels such as *disagreement* in these terms:

se ha elegido *desacuerdo* como término genérico, ya que el análisis detallado de las diversas acepciones demuestra que unas y otras acaban por igualarse: todas ellas suponen una toma de posiciones enfrentadas entre los interlocutores, una divergencia de opiniones o de voluntades que se manifiesta, finalmente, como una oposición de discursos, e implican siempre una reacción ante un objeto previo al que remiten –que se convierte en el foco o blanco del desacuerdo–. Realizan, por tanto, un movimiento discursivo de réplica, que contradice lo expresado en un enunciado anterior o no admite lo que en él se propone. (Herrero, 2002, p. 110).

² See, for example, Pomerantz (1984) and Angouri & Locher (2012).

At least in the Spanish-speaking context, *desacuerdo* (among others, Bertomeu Pi, 2020; Fernández-García, 2020) or also *acto disentivo* (Brenes, 2011) are used as generic terms that include different degrees of illocutionary force³ as well as different subfunctions within *disagreement*: dissent, discrepancy, refutation, objection, disconformity, etc. However, it should be noted that the label “disagreement” (‘desacuerdo’) occasionally only covers epistemic disagreement concerning a previous intervention of an assertive nature. For example, Padilla Herrada (2021) distinguishes between “disagreement” (‘desacuerdo’), “refutation” (‘refutación’), “rejection” (‘rechazo’) and “categorical denial” (‘respuesta negativa categórica’) according to the characteristics of the prior initiating intervention. For its part, the Spanish term “rechazo” and the English term “refusal” or “rejection” are frequently used to denote “disagreements” to proposals for action (invitation, order, request, suggestion, advice, etc. (see Félix-Brasdefer 2004 and 2020).

In this article, the generic term disagreement, widely used in the English-speaking literature, is also used without entering metalinguistic reflections. Furthermore, the present research will also use this generic term to label “epistemic disagreement” and the term refusal with the meaning described above. On the other hand, conceptual and terminological distinctions about the types of disagreement have to do with the different aspects of the previous utterance on which the disagreement is expressed. It can be differentiated into three targets that can be affected: the interlocutor, the content of his or her speech, or the form and intention of the speech. Disagreement thus conceived concerns different aspects: what is said (dictum or propositional content) and, thereby, the semantic component of the utterance (in the case of judgments, beliefs, opinions, etc.). Other dissenting acts reject the previous speech act’s illocutionary value and/or mode of enunciation (modus). This category includes, for example, cases that it has been named above as rejection (Padilla Herrada, 2021) of proposals for action (request, invitation, recommendation, etc.) or those in which the form (too direct, categorical, intensified) in which the speech acts are formulated is rejected. Logically, disagreement or rejection in this type of dissenting act frequently leads to the dictum: while rejecting the illocutionary value of a speech act, the content of that act, whether communicated explicitly or implicitly, is also rejected. In this sense, it is common for the disagreement to be based on the implicature derived from A’s utterance, that is, on what B deduces (whether right or wrong) from what A explicitly communicates. Finally, acts of dissent are directed at the interlocutor⁴. The rejection of the interlocutor can be done in a veiled manner, apparently expressing disagreement with the interlocutor’s content or form of discourse but aiming, above all, for the attack to target the interlocutor. Other times, the rejection of the interlocutor is expressed explicitly and directly, either through subtle forms, in which disagreement is expressed with a specific aspect or attitude of their personality without completely discrediting them, or through extreme forms, such as disqualification, insults, slurs, mockery, which implies an aggressive and violent attack.

As already noted, one of the essential research foci of the disagreement concerns the reactive dialogical contexts; hence its nature appears in its definition: dialogical, conversational, and reactive (Pomerantz, 1984; Herrero, 2002; Brenes, 2011). Indeed, disagreement necessitates expressing opposing or conflicting positions on a target by two interlocutors or opponents. On the other hand, its controversial or conflictual nature explains

³ Authors such as Bach and Harnish (1979) differentiate between *disputative* and *dissenting* acts according to the degree of illocutionary force.

⁴ Some authors call it *disqualifying* disagreements or *disqualifying* acts of dissent (Brenes, 2011; Bertomeu Pi, 2020).

that the disagreement is classified as the dispreferred second part of a speech exchange or as the dispreferred “next action” (Pomerantz, 1984, p. 63), whereas agreement is preferred. However, in this research, the approach adopted is focused on single utterances where disagreement is the only option, offering a limited perspective on disagreement from a conversational perspective (see §3).

On the other hand, it should also be emphasised that disagreement is not always a second dispreferred turn. As Pomerantz (1984, p. 64) underlines, “what is the preferred next action is structured, in part, by the action performed with the initial assessment.” In particular, “though sociability, support, and solidarity often involve the participants’ agreeing or at least not overtly disagreeing with one another, there are nonetheless circumstances in which sociability and support are accomplished by disagreeing” (Pomerantz, 1984, p. 77). In line with Pomerantz, Kotthoff states that although “unspecific friendly conversations are performed by an orientation toward consensus, [...] within the specified context of an argumentation - the preferred next action can very well be disagreement [...]. The dispute is even typically staged by suspending the ‘normal consensus expectations’” and it “is performed by a change in preference structure” (1993, pp. 195-196).

In general terms, depending on social or situational factors, disagreement requires all those conversational dynamics that create, develop, manage and eventually solve a conflictive talk. This greater elaboration of the disagreement intervention has to do with the fact that the disagreement is a face-threatening socially disruptive act in politeness theory (Jørgensen & Olza, 2020, pp. 63-64)⁵ or that speakers deploy different resources and mitigation strategies to avoid or reduce the damage that the disagreement can cause in interpersonal relationships (cf. *infra* §2.3.). Likewise, Leech (1983) underlines that people tend to minimise disagreement in favour of the agreement, following the Agreement Maxim, one of Leech’s six maxims (Politeness Principle). Furthermore, Brown & Levinson ([1978]1987, pp. 113–117) and Haverkate (1994, p. 117) include different strategies for avoiding disagreement, such as token agreement, pseudo-agreement, expressing uncertainty by presenting the divergent opinion or saying it with impersonal de-focalising constructions.

A final aspect analysed in this section relates to Sifianou’s (2019, p. 182) idea of the significance of the linguistic and extra-linguistic context to understanding disagreement. Therefore, in this research, dissent is considered following three major contextual factors: social status, distance and stakes involved (Ishihara, 2016). Referring to the concepts theorised by Brown & Levinson (1987) about determiners of the context, social status is comparable to the idea of power, distance coincides with distance, and imposition could represent the stakes involved. Social status is the addressee’s social status, defined as the relative power of the hearer over the speakers and vice-versa. Distance represents the social space or closeness between the hearer and the speaker. Stake involved refers to the situation’s seriousness, importance, or gravity in which the hearer and the speaker interact.

2.2. Disagreement, interlanguage pragmatics and cultural variation

The present research considers the studies on interlanguage pragmatics whose aim is to examine how non-native speakers understand and perform communicative action in a target

⁵ However, as many authors recognise (Jørgensen & Olza, 2020; Padilla Herrada, 2021), disagreement may fulfil an affiliative or socialising function rather than a conflictual or polemical role, and, on the other hand, there may be discursive genres in which disagreement rather than agreement is expected and unmarked.

language (such as disagreeing with another's point of view) and how they develop L2 pragmatic knowledge. In the definition proposed by Kasper and Dahl (1991), interlanguage pragmatics is referred "to non-native speakers' comprehension and production of speech acts, and how that L2-related knowledge is acquired" (p. 216). In other words, it is possible to state that interlanguage pragmatics analyses how non-native language users select and realise pragmatic phenomena (including speech acts), which is why there have been many contrastive studies between native and non-native speakers' realisation patterns in the last decades.

As interlanguage pragmatics started to emerge as a separate area of study near the end of the 1970s, the dominant line of research was the comparison of native and non-native speakers of different languages in the performance of various speech acts analysing the interferences of the native language in the second language. This comparative work revealed the difficulty, even at relatively high levels of grammatical competence in L2, of conveying the desired illocutionary force, and of doing so while respecting the norms of politeness, as Ishihara underlines (2010, p. 201): "If no formal instruction is provided, learners may take an extended period of time [...] to acquire native-like pragmatic ability, even in a second-language setting where learners are exposed to the target language on a daily basis". Indeed, pragmatic language use is challenging to acquire, for a variety of reasons, including divergent cultural standards of appropriateness, "regional, generational, ethnic, and individual variation; grammatical and lexical complexity; and subtleties of nuances and non-verbal behavior" (Ishihara, 2010, p. 201). For example, in the case of acts that can easily compromise the face of the interlocutors involved, such as expressing disagreement, it is observed, – through the analysis of data collected by authors– that even advanced learners tend to be aggressive and have little ability to mitigate the intensity of the illocutionary force of the speech act. Therefore, it is demonstrated that cultural knowledge is crucial to pragmatic competence and that such knowledge may be obtained through language-mediated social interactions.

There is a general perception that studies on interlanguage pragmatics focus on pragmalinguistic competence rather than sociopragmatics. On the contrary, in the execution of speech acts, two fundamental and linked aspects of pragmatic competence are crucial: sociopragmatic competence, that is, the capacity to recognise and manage the effect of context on communication and to employ language properly (e.g., politeness strategies, social variables, etcetera), and pragmalinguistic competence, that is, the ability to adopt the right resources which a given language provides for conveying particular communicative functions. This aspect explains why it is common to distinguish between the two pragmatic failure fields: pragmalinguistic failure and sociopragmatic failure. The first has to do fundamentally with "the inappropriate transfer of speech act strategies from one language to another, or the transferring from the mother tongue to the target language of utterances which are semantic/syntactically equivalent, but which, because of different 'interpretive bias', tend to convey a different pragmatic force in the target language" (Thomas, 1983, p. 101), whilst the sociopragmatic failure concerns "cross-cultural mismatches in the assessment of social distance, of what constitutes an imposition, of when an attempt at a threatening face act' should be abandoned, and in evaluating relative power, rights, and obligations, etc." (1983, p. 104). Pragmatic inadequacy (related to pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic competence) compromises the communicative effectiveness of non-native speakers and generates a false impression of impoliteness in the interlocutor or hyper-politeness.

In principle, we can affirm that this work has primarily a pragmalinguistic orientation. However, the analysis of the data shows that Bernal & Hernández Flores (2016, p. 115) are right when they state that “las dimensiones pragmalingüística y sociopragmática son niveles de análisis interdependientes, de manera que el uso lingüístico o comunicativo en general (objeto de la pragmalingüística) encuentra sentido en el significado social que aporta la sociopragmática, al mismo tiempo que los significados sociales y culturales (sociopragmáticos) tienen en el comportamiento comunicativo descrito por la pragmalingüística una de sus mejores vías de expresión”. This interdependence and complementarity, by the way, it is possible to state that is especially necessary when it comes to analysing the use of a strategy such as mitigation, which, by its pragmatic nature, is subject, as a good number of contrastive studies have shown, to cultural and situational variables (cf. §§2.3., 4. and 5.), which would predict the selection of mitigating strategies and linguistic resources.

On the other hand, the studies on disagreement and mitigation, whether they present an interlanguage perspective or applied to L2 teaching (Félix-Brasdefer, 2004; Medina, 2012, 2013; Kusevska, 2015), or are descriptive works of intercultural contrast, such as those of Fernández García (2020) and Fernández & Sánchez (2021), in which disagreement between native Spanish speakers and native British English speakers is compared, this pragmalinguistic and sociopragmatic complementarity is also observed, regardless of the specific objectives set out in each study.

The interest in disagreement and mitigation from an interlanguage perspective has increased in the last decade. In the researchers of Medina (2012, 2013), the participants were Spanish learners with different L1 (mother tongue); Kusevska (2015) analysed the phenomenon comparing Macedonian speakers of English with native American English speakers. Finally, Fernández & Sánchez (2021) compared native Spanish speakers with native British English speakers. These studies show that non-native speakers do not mitigate their disagreement as native speakers: the frequency, the mitigating functions and the linguistic means used by non-native speakers are at least partly influenced by the resources specific to their mother tongue and, above all, their culture of origin. All these empirically based contrastive studies could support or qualify how different cultures have been characterised according to their tolerance of disagreement or their degree of concern for conflict⁶. In this sense, Spanish and Mediterranean cultures have generally been considered as cultures tolerant to disagreement, to a conversational climate in this sense polemical, as opposed to others such as the Nordic, British or Asian cultures, which are identified more with a conversational style prone to consensus (cf., among others, Raga 2005, pp. 73 ff.; Bernal & Hernández-Flores, 2016, p. 116)⁷, from which it would also follow that the latter would be more prone to the mitigation of potentially threatening acts, such as disagreement. However, works such as Fernández García and Aguayo Cruz (2019) and Fernández García (2020) show the relevance of contrasting data from different situational variants that may or may not reaffirm such characterisations. Thus, for example, these works illustrate that British people

⁶ Raga (2005) organises his cultural typology and communicative behaviours based on two “socio-communicative” values: the degree of egalitarianism and the degree of concern for conflict. In his typology, Northern Mediterranean cultures would reveal communicative behaviours that would place them among cultures towards a high degree of egalitarianism and a low concern for conflict.

⁷ In a different sense, Siebold (2005, pp. 35-36), with bibliographical support in which the argumentative style of Germans and Spaniards is contrasted, concludes that, compared to the former, Spaniards have the dominant cultural value of opting for “un estilo conversacional fluido, relajado, armonioso y amable”.

mitigate disagreement less than Spaniards in asymmetrical formal contexts, data that does not meet “a las expectativas de la bibliografía especializada” (Fernández García, 2020, p. 411)⁸.

Moreover, it should be added that cultural profiles as more or less prone to polemic or consensus are not only identified based on the dissenting act most studied in interlanguage pragmatics and contrastive pragmatics, i.e., epistemic disagreement. Indeed, the intercultural contrast of other dissenting acts can also be assessed. Thus, in contrast to the tolerance mentioned above of disagreement among Spaniards, it has been proposed that Spaniards tend to avoid direct refusal of invitations, as opposed to what happens with other cultures (Siebold, 2005, pp. 31-32; Félix-Brasdefer, 2020).

2.3. Linguistic mitigation

Another pragmatic phenomenon considered in this research is linguistic mitigation. Mitigation has frequently been defined in terms of its gradual or scalar character. Mitigation, for example, is defined as a strategic argumentative (rhetorical) action that involves reducing the illocutionary force and the speaker’s participation in the utterance to achieve the intended purpose (Albelda & Briz, 2020), the means that “reduce el grado de intensidad obligativa que se asume o establece respecto de una proposición” (Albelda, 2016, p. 21). Such definitions also point to the idea that speakers adapt the formulation of their message to their needs or objectives, i.e., the mitigation “è strettamente connessa a quella di una consapevolezza metapragmatica, una «metapragmatic awareness» [...] che ci consente di adeguare le parole al mondo, con scelte che rendano il nostro dire appropriato alla situazione comunicativa” (Caffi, 2017, p. 5).

Among the entities cited as being affected by such minimisation, not a few authors place in a prominent place the degree of illocutionary force or the intensity of the interlocutors’ obligations (Caffi, 1999; Albelda & Briz, 2020, p. 575). The mention of such areas is based on the fact that mitigation is a pragmatic category; therefore, the mitigation phenomenon is contextual and uniquely definable through analysing the general and concrete interactive contexts (Albelda et al., 2014, p. 14). On the other hand, it affects extra-linguistic factors (the interlocutors and the relations between them) and others inscribed in the message but not belonging to the propositional content (the illocutionary forces and the perlocutionary effects). For mitigation to be recognised, pragmatic entities must always be affected in some way, whether it is a matter of mitigation of the dictum (semantic-pragmatic attenuation) or of the modus, i.e., when the mitigation concerns the speech acts and the force or role of the participants in the enunciation. Finally, this pragmatic nature of mitigation explains why the emphasis has also been placed on its social purpose, i.e., protecting interlocutors’ images. As Albelda (2016) points out, this social dimension has not always played a prominent role in definitions, or if it has, it has sometimes been contemplated as a possibility of mitigation without involving the images of the participants in the communicative exchange (Albelda et al., 2014, p. 48). However, more recent studies (Albelda, 2016; Villalba, 2020; Albelda & Briz,

⁸ An interesting tool concerning the value given by cultures to various speech acts is the map of intercultural communication (<https://mappaintercentrale.it>). It has been created, providing a quick reference to some of the cultural characteristics that can create potential problems in intercultural communication, and analyses more than twenty nations from Europe, Asia, Africa and America. For example, about Argentinians, Uruguayans, and Italians, it is stated that their way to dissent is generally direct and explicit.

2020, p. 581) argue that mitigation always plays a role in managing interpersonal relationships.

The principal taxonomy of mitigating strategies and devices adopted in this research is proposed by Albelda & Cestero (2011, pp. 18–36). As far as disagreement is concerned, as noted above (§2.1), its polemical and “dispreferred” character implies that speakers adopt minimisation strategies, mainly to prevent threats to the image. Thus, in this type of reactive act, such strategies are understood as strategies linked to the maxims or principles of verbal politeness. The researchers propose a scheme of strategic mitigation tactics or strategies that includes nine macro-categories, including a wide range of linguistic, some paralinguistic and non-verbal resources. However, this paper will only focus on the former (Table 1).

Table 1. *Mitigating strategies*

1. Minimising or diminishing the quantity or quality of what has been said	suffixes diminutives, <i>un poco, solo, aproximadamente, más o menos, algo así, no mucho</i> , litotes, euphemisms, foreign words onomatopoeias.
2. Downgrading the assertion by expressing it in the form of doubt or uncertainty	<i>creer, parecer, imaginar, ser posible que, quizá, tal vez, a lo (la) mejor, no creer, no saber, no estar seguro de, seguramente.</i>
3. De-focusing the elements of personal or temporal enunciation	<i>se, uno, tú generalizador, nosotros inclusivo sinceramente, francamente, la verdad, para ser honesto</i> , use or simulation of direct style to express one’s opinion, temporal modification of the verb (using the conditional or the imperfect or the hypothetical future instead of the present).
4. Narrowing or restricting what is said (opinion, assertion, request)	<i>yo digo, en mi opinión, que yo sepa</i> , conditional, concessive, or temporal syntactic constructions.
5. Justifying	<i>es que, lo que pasa es que, (se) puede decir, entonces, en consecuencia, pues, pues bien, por (lo) tanto, por eso.</i>
6. Correcting or repairing	<i>bueno, o sea, pues</i> , use of paralinguistic elements, apologising, an initial or final thanksgiving.
7. Making concessions	<i>sí pero, no pero, de acuerdo aunque, sin embargo.</i>
8. Involving the “you” in what is said by the speaker	<i>¿no?, ¿verdad?, ¿estás de acuerdo?, ¿te parece?</i> , ellipsis of the conclusion, <i>oye, mira, escucha, hombre, venga...</i>
9. Formulating directive acts in an indirect way	Use of questions (direct or indirect) and assertions instead of exhortations, request and questions expressed in different degrees of indirectness (with <i>por favor</i>).

The first strategy, minimising the quantity or quality of what is said, responds to the dictum’s mitigation. The remaining strategies are modus mitigation (Albelda & Cestero, 2011, pp. 18–19) because they affect the entire speech act or the roles of the interlocutors in enunciation. Both spheres of impact can be related to the types of mitigation pointed out by Caffi (1999,

pp. 890-895), who relies on the level of incidence of each type of mitigation: shields have an impact on the deictic origin of the utterance because with them “there is backgrounding, defocalization, or even deletion of the utterance source” (Caffi, 1999, p. 895); hedges affect the illocutionary force; and bushes affect the propositional content. In the presentation and discussion of the data (cf. §§4. and 5.), these typologies of mitigating strategies and devices will be taken as a reference point.

3. Methodology and participants

As mentioned, this research compares the oral production in Spanish of native Spanish speakers and trilingual participants (native Italian or English speakers) able to speak the three languages (Italian, English and Spanish) at least at level B1. The level declared is a participant self-assessment, although it can also be seen in their language production. More in detail, Italian NSs have a higher language proficiency (7 participants with level C1 and 5 with level C2), whilst English NSs have a lower language proficiency (1 participant with level B1, 2 with level B2, 4 with level C1 and 3 with level C2).

The participants in this study were required to express dissent in each of the scenarios provided in the questionnaires, with no more guidance on how to do so, in contrast to other contrastive studies on disagreement in which it was left open to informants to disagree or not to disagree and to formulate their disagreement in mitigation or intensification (Fernández-García, 2020; Medina, 2012, 2013).

The data collection instrument⁹ adopted was the Oral Discourse Completion Test (or Task) (ODCT). For this research, the ODCTs designed were online questionnaires that included the description of a situation (i.e., scenario)¹⁰ with different social distance, social status and stake involved (see Table 3), audio with the utterance made by a putative interlocutor, and a space to record what the participant wanted to say in that situation. To get the most accurate data possible, the audio recording was limited to a minute in length. On the one hand, the text input contained the sentence the participant could listen to in the audio proposed to make its content as understandable as possible. On the other hand, the audio was recorded by a female native Spanish speaker, adding authenticity and naturality to the scenario, which was a helpful starting point for the participant.

Many authors underline that DCT¹¹ “se han convertido en el instrumento de investigación por excelencia en los estudios de pragmática intercultural de la interlingua” (Díaz Pérez, 2003, p. 79). This method presents some advantages and disadvantages¹², as underlined by Levenston & Blum (1978). The main advantages of this instrument are that it helps test specific hypotheses, it helps compare different populations, it has ease of analysis and administration and a satisfying degree of contextual control such that responses can “be

⁹ For a more exhaustive overview of methods in intercultural and interlanguage pragmatic studies, see, for example, Díaz Pérez (2003, pp. 76-94), Siebold (2005, pp. 70-76) and Landone (2022).

¹⁰ According to Di Pietro’s (1987) definition of a scenario, it is a highly structured, motivating and engaging communicative event for the learners, who forget that they are operating in a foreign language because they focus on performing the assigned task. Relating to the design of scenarios, see Kasper & Dahl (1991), Ogiermann (2018) and Landone (2022).

¹¹ This instrument is developed based on the discourse completion test used by Levenston & Blum (1978) in studies of lexical simplification.

¹² See also Díaz Pérez (2003, pp. 77-86) and Siebold (2005, pp. 72-74).

compared along a number of dimensions (age, gender, ethnicity, etc.)” (Kasper & Dahl, 1991, p. 46). The main disadvantage lies in the limitations to achieving completely spontaneous, natural language data (Kasper & Dahl, 1991, p. 47) and the inability to interact with the participant while completing the task since it is online rather than in person. This limitation caused inappropriate responses because “no matter how precise the instructions given when administering the test, there will always be some responses which make very little sense because subjects ignore some aspects of the instructions. In our experience this is true, in varying degrees, of both native speakers and second-language learners” (Levenston & Blum, 1978, p. 9). Considering the advantages and disadvantages of DCT, ODCTs results in the ideal instrument for the contrastive study of this speech act (Ogiermann, 2018, p. 229; Díaz Pérez, 2003, pp. 78-79) because, although ODCT cannot replicate authentic and naturally occurring data, it approximates more closely to authentic discourse than the written DCT (Yuan, 2001, p. 283) and include the advantage of Written Discourse Completion Test (WDCT) in addition of advantages proper of data collected orally. Indeed, data gathered with ODCT are more representative of what respondents would say in real-life settings and reflect natural speech features such as false starts and hesitation.

Data collection was carried out during the period of the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to contact limitations with the participants, this data collection occurred online, leading to a heterogeneous background of native Spanish-speaking participants. Furthermore, the distinctive features required to participate in this data collection meant that only a few trilingual speakers could be involved. Nevertheless, the number of participants is in line with the numbers usually used in interlanguage studies (Medina, 2012, 2013; Félix-Brasdefer, 2004).

Participants recruited online were 19 native Spanish speakers (NSs) and 22 non-native Spanish speakers (NNSs) who spoke the three languages (Spanish, Italian and English), of which one between English and Italian as their native language (L1). Most NSs and NNSs participants were female (28). The average age was 35 years. Regarding the nationality of participants, there is a predominance of Spaniards (42,1%) for NSs and Italians (50%) for NNSs (Table 2).

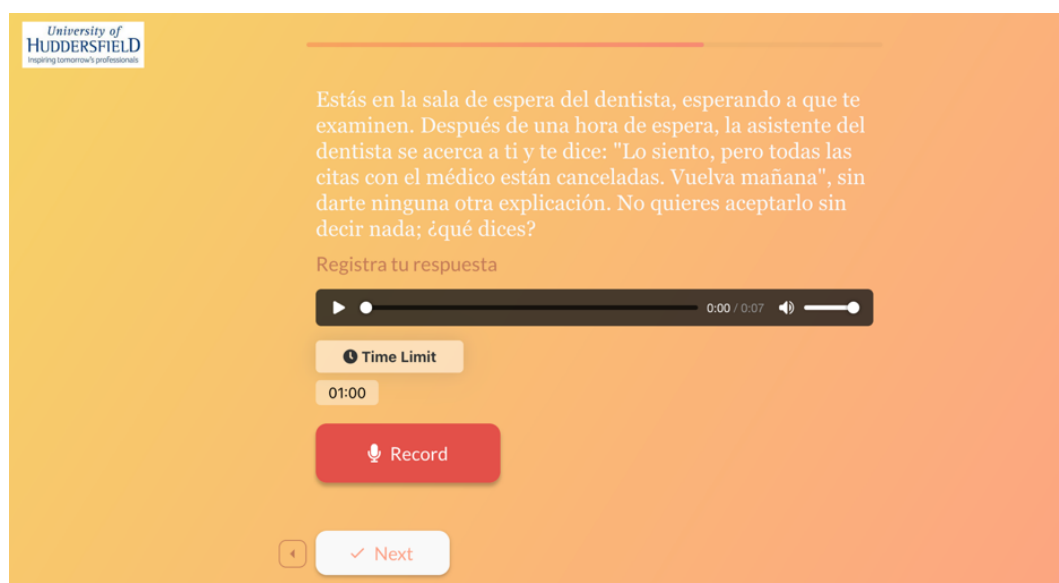
As has been demonstrated in various works, many of them very recent (Douglas, Soler-Bonafont & Vouto, 2018; Albelda & Cestero, 2020 and Cestero & Albelda, 2020), mitigation presents sociopragmatic and geo-dialectal variability. Therefore, in this work, native speakers of Spanish are divided into three groups: Spaniards (9 participants), Central Americans (3), and South Americans (7). Despite the number of informants being neither large nor balanced, in the final discussion (§5), some contrastive considerations will be made between these three groups of native Spanish speakers¹³.

¹³ No differentiation between British, American, or Australian origin is proposed for English native speakers because their cultural background is complex. Half have dual nationality and feel they belong to more than one culture.

Table 2. *Nationality of participants*

Nationality of participants	
<i>Native Spanish speakers (19)</i>	<i>Non-native Spanish speakers (22)</i>
Spain (8)	Italy (11)
Mexico (2)	US (3)
Colombia (2)	Italy + United Kingdom (3)
Chile (2)	United Kingdom (1)
Uruguay (1)	Australia (1)
Mexico + US (1)	Brazil (1)
Argentina + Italy (1)	Italy + US (1)
Uruguay + Spain (1)	Australia + Basque Country (1)
Spain + Australia (1)	

The tool chosen to collect data was Phonic. This platform allows collecting audio through recording online, randomising questions and setting minimum or maximum response lengths. The first part of the survey included questions about the linguistic background of participants (i.e., about their L1, L2, and L3). The second part presented scenarios.

**Figure 1.** *Example of a scenario*

The main goal of these ODCTs was to analyse the pragmatic competence of non-native Spanish speakers in the oral production of disagreement, focusing on linguistic mitigation. The scenarios analysed in the present paper are three (see Table 3). The same scenarios were proposed to NSs and NNSs (both in Spanish). The data collected were entered into two separate corpora, one containing the responses of native speakers and the other of non-native speakers. The two corpora were analysed similarly. The speech act of disagreement was taken as the basic unit of analysis for both. Two types of analysis were carried out in successive phases: firstly, a qualitative analysis, which made it possible to identify, describe and classify each case of mitigation found and their contextual uses; secondly, a quantitative analysis, which provided information on the frequency of occurrence studied, as well as the existing relationships between them and the role played by the participant's mother tongue in them.

Table 3. Scenarios proposed (translated into English)

Scenario n.	Context and situation	Conversational turn to which participants were asked to reply
1.	<p>Distance Low Distance</p> <p>Social status <u>Speaker=Hearer</u> Your roommate had a party last night, and this morning the house is still all messy and dirty. When you point this out to her, she replies: “Don’t worry, I’ll go for a walk now, but when I come back this afternoon, I’ll tidy up and clean everything”. This is not good enough for you; you have invited someone to lunch, and you need the house cleaned immediately. What do you say to her?</p>	<p>Stakes involved <u>Low stakes involved</u> “Don’t worry, I’ll go for a walk now, but when I come back this afternoon, I’ll tidy up and clean everything”</p>
2.	<p>Medium Distance¹⁴</p> <p><u>S=H</u> You are in the dentist’s waiting room, waiting to be examined. After one hour of waiting, the dentist’s assistant approaches you and says, “I’m sorry, but all the doctor’s appointments are cancelled. Come back tomorrow”, without giving you any additional explanation. You don’t want to just accept this without saying anything; what do you say?</p>	<p><u>Medium stakes involved</u> “I’m sorry, but all the doctor’s appointments are cancelled. Come back tomorrow”</p>
3.	<p>High Distance</p> <p><u>S<H</u> Your new director just arrived a week ago. One day she calls you into her office and says: “I am sorry, but I have noticed that you work too slowly. Don’t bother coming back Monday morning”. You want to defend yourself against this criticism; what do you say?</p>	<p><u>High stakes involved</u> “I am sorry, but I have noticed that you work too slowly. Don’t bother coming back Monday morning”</p>

Participants did not deal exclusively with epistemic disagreement. As underlined in §2.1, the disagreement speech act combines several adverse reactions. Indeed, the narrow label of disagreement does not fit in any of the responses. In scenario 2 (but not in 1 and 3), the propositional content of the elicited response could be disagreement. Still, from the viewpoint of illocutionary force, it is asking the participants to reject the roommate’s promise and issue a directive (scenario 1), express outrage or issue a complaint (scenario 2) and reject personal criticism (scenario 3).

4. Findings

The findings, in line with the previous researchers of Medina (2012, 2013) and Kusevska (2015), show a substantial difference between native and non-native speakers’ responses. First, the responses of native speakers are more extended than non-native speakers. The examples in (1) and (2) gave an idea of this phenomenon:

1st Turn: “I’m sorry, but all the doctor’s appointments are cancelled. Come back tomorrow”.

¹⁴ This scenario is semi-formal, i.e., with a moderate grade of formality. Indeed, most participants opted for a formal response (addressing a 3rd singular formal person).

- (1) Me perdone, pero yo tenía una cita y he pedido el día libre en el trabajo, así que lo siento, usted me tiene que dar una cita hoy y más sin dar ninguna explicación. Mañana yo no puedo venir porque hoy me dio el día libre. No voy a pedir otro día libre mañana porque ustedes no tengan dentistas que puedan atender. NS (native speaker)
- (2) Okay, pero por lo menos me podría explicar qué pasó. Digo, estuve aquí como todo ese tiempo en espera. NNS (non-native speaker)

In addition, the number of strategies NSs adopt is higher than that of NNSs. The nine macro-groups of mitigation strategies (or tactics) are discussed below.

- *Minimising or diminishing the quantity or quality of what has been said*

Examples of internal morphological modification are diminutive suffixes (3), a widespread phenomenon in Italian and Spanish but less so in English. The only case found in the corpus of English NS belongs to a participant who considers Italian as her heritage language.

1st Turn: “Don’t worry, I’ll go for a walk now, but when I come back this afternoon, I’ll tidy up and clean everything”.

- (3) Ehm, si si puedes hacer antes de ir a dar una *vueltecita* lo apreciaría mucho. NNS

Depending on the context, suffixes diminutives can be considered an attenuating device to reduce the threat of a request. Indeed, in the case of requests, this may threaten the speaker (especially if the speaker does not wish to perform the requested action). In this case, the speaker may minimise the threat by using the diminutive as an attenuating element. This linguistic feature may be found in informal and semi-formal contexts, as happened with the corpora analysed, where it was present in scenarios 1 and 2.

Another device can be employed to mitigate: the rhetorical figure of litotes, characterised by a softer semantic load. This type of euphemism is created by replacing a word with the negative expression of its opposite. Lastly, participants used external morphological modifications, such as minimisers (*un poco*), to diminish the dictum’s quantity. This strategy is adopted three times more by NNSs than NSs.

1st T: “I am sorry, but I have noticed that you work too slowly. Don’t bother coming back Monday morning”.

- (4) Me parece un comentario *un poco* apresurado. Me parece que podemos discutir la situación. NS

- *Downgrading the assertion by expressing disagreement (doubt or uncertainty)*

Concerning the downgrading of assertions, some lexical devices can convey the speaker’s reservations regarding a specific speech act. Several of these strategies highlight the speaker’s doubt about the validity of their assertion. NSs and NNSs use two parenthetical verbs, *creer* and *parecer*, in affirmative and negative sentences to obtain this pragmatic effect. These lexical devices are adopted more by NSs than NNSs, and above all, in semi-formal and formal contexts. Moreover, the result was that three times out of four in which participants used the

verbs *creer* and *parecer*, those were used with a mitigated scope. The same effect of doubt or uncertainty can be expressed through adverbs, such as *capaz* (maybe), a form of Spanish American.

(4) *Me parece un comentario un poco apresurado. Me parece que podemos discutir la situación.* NS

1st T: “Don’t worry, I’ll go for a walk now, but when I come back this afternoon, I’ll tidy up and clean everything”.

(5) *Sí, pero, pero mira porque creo que no capaz que no te había dicho pero yo invité a un amigo para venir a cenar y y me gustaría que fuera limpio el apartamento. Entonces capaz que podrías limpiar algo por lo menos esta sala común antes de irte y yo hasta te puedo ayudar un poco, si quieres...* NNS

- De-focusing the elements of personal or temporal enunciation

Albelda et al. (2014, p. 32) and (Caffi, 1999, p. 895) point out that one of the most recurrent procedures in attenuation is the impersonalisation of the semantic subject, that is, the defocalization, or even deletion of the utterance source, as in (6), where the participant avoids identifying who is the object of criticism (i.e., the dentist’s secretary).

1st T: “I’m sorry, but all the doctor’s appointments are cancelled. Come back tomorrow”.

(6) *Entonces, pues igual habría sido mejor igual avisarme antes, antes de que y incluso antes de que llegara o sea mandarme un WhatsApp o llamarme diciéndome que la cita de hoy se cancelaba.* NNS

Another example of impersonal construction is with the verb *ser* (to be) in the third singular person plus the adjective *necesario*. This syntactic device is used most by NS than by NNS. With the same scope, participants used, on many occasions, an inclusive “we” to embed themselves in the audience (e.g., the speaker tries to get the listener to cooperate) and to mitigate the illocutionary force of a speech act. In directive speech acts (such as requests or petitions), the speaker may employ an indirect, pseudo-inclusive referential strategy by claiming that both the speaker and the interlocutor are equally responsible for performing the required action, as in (7). Furthermore, it must be considered that, in *podemos limpiar juntos*, the pronoun ‘we’ is used inclusively: it includes both the I-speaker and the you-listener¹⁵. Both NSs and NNSs use this strategy above all in the informal scenario.

1st T: “Don’t worry, I’ll go for a walk now, but when I come back this afternoon, I’ll tidy up and clean everything”.

(7) *Comprendo que quieres ir a tomar una vuelta. Pero necesito todo limpio antes de la del almuerzo. Entonces si podemos limpiar juntos, sería perfecto.* NNS

A further tactic that aims to impersonalisation is using discourse structures or markers which affect the frankness of what is said, namely *la verdad (es que)*, employed above all by English NSs. Finally, a de-responsibilizing mechanism could be a temporal verb modification. In the

¹⁵ Concerning inclusive *we*, this distinction works for both English and Spanish.

data collected, conditional moods –used to mitigate the illocutionary force of the participant’s utterance– by NSs and NNSs change depending on the scenario. NSs opted for conditional moods, especially in semi-formal and formal scenarios, whereas NNSs chose to utilise conditional moods mainly in informal and semi-formal scenarios.

- *Narrowing or restricting what is said*

The restriction of the speech act could be obtained with conditional syntactic constructions. Indeed, conditional structures are a marker that encodes politeness in offers and suggestions. In the example, the participant chose the partial conditional structure *si quieres* to mitigate the imposition and save the face of both participants in the conversation. Another mechanism which restricts the opinion to the person expressing it is *para mí* or *en mi opinión*. In line with the findings of Albelda & Cestero (2011) relating to native Spanish speakers, it is possible to notice that this strategy is the least adopted by NSs and NNSs (only two occurrences in all corpora).

- (5) Sí, pero, pero mira porque creo que no capaz que no te había dicho pero yo invité a un amigo para venir a cenar y y me gustaría que fuera limpio el apartamento. Entonces capaz que podrías limpiar algo por lo menos esta sala común antes de irte y yo hasta te puedo ayudar un poco, *si quieres...*

- *Justifying*

Albelda & Cestero (2011, p. 28), regarding the strategy of justifying, observe that “se puede justificar mediante cualquier mecanismo que apoye argumentativamente lo dicho y, a la vez, suponga una reducción del peso enunciativo del hablante”, hence, also presenting reasons or justifications is a strategy to introduce rejection indirectly (Félix-Brasdefer, 2020, p. 23). This strategy could be obtained through discourse markers which present a logical consequence, such as *pues* and *entonces*, since these operators “permiten reflejar que lo dicho es una conclusión lógica de lo precedente; la justificación suele encontrarse, por tanto, anticipadamente a la conclusión argumentativa” (Albelda & Cestero, 2011, p. 29). Indeed, as Herrero (2004, pp. 97-98) underlines, the dissenting act can be paired with a show of justification of the disagreement, following these schemes: justification and dissenting act (Since Q, Not A) or dissenting act and justification (Not A, Since Q). Following the analysis of the data collected, it can be noted that NSs preferred to use *pues* (so) and NNSs *entonces* (then) to introduce their justification. Indeed, according to Travis (2005) and Fernández, Gates Tapia & Lu (2014), *pues* is one of the most complex discourse markers to master for NNSs, because it includes many more functions than the Italian and English equivalents.

Another way to justify and excuse what is said or what is going to say is the use of some stereotyped formulae, such as *lo que pasa es que, es que* (it’s just that, the thing is that), typical of colloquial Spanish, adopted more by NNSs than by NSs. It is utilised to express hesitation or present a justification and is used in informal, formal and semi-formal scenarios.

1st T: “I’m sorry, but all the doctor’s appointments are cancelled. Come back tomorrow”.

- (8) *Lo que pasa es que* mañana voy a estar trabajando y voy a estar muy ocupada. Tengo varios compromisos después del trabajo. ¿No sería posible ver al doctor ahora mismo un momentito? NNS

- *Correcting or repair*

Corrective discourse markers are linguistic devices helpful in “reformulating a position that could be perceived as negative” (Lovejoy, 2015, p. 90). Lovejoy states that discourse makers such as *bueno* “mitigate a negative or conflict interaction by creating a delay or modifying the propositional content of an utterance” (2015, p. 28). Likewise, *pues* is a discourse marker that often serves as a shift marker to take over a shift smoothly and “indica una relación entre los enunciados que une basada en una cierta oposición marcada por un cambio en la línea de argumentación (por ejemplo, el hablante muestra su desacuerdo ante las palabras de su interlocutor o una crítica)” (Porroche Ballesteros, DPD, *pues*, 2008). Following the analysis of the data collected, it can be noted that NSs opted for *pues* more than NNSs. Another of the downtoners employed is *o sea*. This device seeks reinforcement, includes the hearer, seeks agreement, and is used when wishing to hide an opinion, convince, or clarify. Briz (DPD, *o sea*, 2008) underlines that in the case in which *o sea* is used to clarify or rectifies, “la rectificación añade un matiz de atenuación, especialmente en situaciones problemáticas en las que, por ejemplo, la imagen propia o ajena puede quedar afectada”. It is used more by NNSs than NSs in informal, formal, and semi-formal scenarios.

1st Turn: “I’m sorry, but all the doctor’s appointments are cancelled. Come back tomorrow”.

(9) Perdón, ¿pero qué significa que están canceladas? *O sea*, yo tenía una cita hoy. NNS

Apologising and thanksgiving are other strategies used to repair, such as rejecting proposals for action such as invitations (Félix-Brasdefer, 2020, p. 23). Those participants who opted to apologise mostly did so to preface their utterances before continuing to express their viewpoints. They also used it to convey sympathy and emphasise that they feel sorry for disagreeing. Apologies¹⁶ are acts of normative politeness, and they also serve a reparative function for the listener’s face; they can be used as mitigation mechanisms for a subsequent action that may threaten the interlocutor’s face and represent a type of “strategic politeness” in this sense (Hernández & Mariottini, 2018, p. 21). In the data analysed, it is possible to notice, as Félix-Brasdefer underlines (2004, pp. 635-636), that “whereas L1 Spanish speakers provided specific alternatives and used a range of expressions of apology with appropriate levels of intensification” (e.g., the verb *perdonar* and *disculpar* in informal and formal contexts and *lo siento*), NNSs “offered vague alternatives”, preferring opting for two expressions of apology, namely, *lo siento* and the verb *disculpar* (in formal and informal contexts), adopting this device half of the time.

1st T: “I am sorry, but I have noticed that you work too slowly. Don’t bother coming back Monday morning”.

(10) Eh... Pues, *disculpe*, pero es, no me parece este el tono, o sea decir, así como de no me presentar tampoco el lunes por la mañana. NNS

Finally, another way to repair the face-threatening act is another expressive act, such as thanksgiving, which works as an affiliative strategy move (Félix-Brasdefer, 2020, p. 23). This strategy is closely linked to the desire to safeguard the social image (of the interlocutor or

¹⁶ The apology is one of the most studied speech acts. Many contrastive studies exist, especially about its linguistic strategies (more or less explicit, elaborate, etc.). See, for example, the overview given in Siebold (2005, pp. 131 ff.). In addition, see Haverkate (1994, pp. 101-102) for the apology in reactive acts of rejection.

oneself). The damage to the image has already been done or is intentionally going to be done, and the speaker seeks a way to restore order and thus minimise the disagreement. In the occurrences found in the corpora, thanksgivings are present at the beginning and the end of the turn. Whether it opens the turn, it precedes a dissenting act and has a mitigating role because it aims not to threaten the interlocutor's image (11) (Hernández & Mariottini, 2018, p. 26).

1st T: "Don't worry, I'll go for a walk now, but when I come back this afternoon, I'll tidy up and clean everything".

(11) *Gracias por decirme que va a limpiar la casa después, pero invité a una amiga para almorzar y quiero que todo ehm que todo esté limpio cuando ella venga.* NNS

- Making concessions

Concessive-oppositive dialogic constructions are typically used at the beginning of a reactive intervention to demonstrate a partial or not-so-partial disagreement, in which participants appear to agree while hiding their disagreement. These constructions include, e.g., *sí, pero...*; *vale, pero...*; *entiendo, sin embargo...* As Brown & Levinson (1978) stated, this strategy is an example of linguistic politeness and is adopted mainly by NNS in this research.

(5) *Sí, pero, pero mira porque creo que no capaz que no te había dicho pero yo invité a un amigo para venir a cenar y y me gustaría que fuera limpio el apartamento. Entonces capaz que podrías limpiar algo por lo menos esta sala común antes de irte y yo hasta te puedo ayudar ayudar un poco, si quieres...*

- Involving the "you" in what is said by the speaker

A way to mitigate the disagreement is using conversational discursive markers well known in the Hispanic field with the generic label of *enfocadores de la alteridad* (Martín Zorraquino & Portolés Lázaro, 1999), such as *oye, mira, etc.*, which have great multifunctionality, very dependent on prosodic features. Its attenuating function in our sample consists of bringing the hearer closer to minimise the message's content, thus trying to minimise the disagreement. For example, *oye* is used in informal and semi-formal contexts to get the interlocutor's attention without being rude. Even in formal circumstances, like in (13), the conversational discursive markers *mirar* has numerous applications for both groups of participants. In the data, NSs used different types of markers of alterity, such as *oye* and *mira/mire*; instead, NNSs utilised mainly *mira/mire*¹⁷. Moreover, NNSs used the phatic formula of requesting the consent of the interlocutor *¿entiendes?*¹⁸, which is not present in the NSs' corpus.

1st T: "I am sorry, but I have noticed that you work too slowly. Don't bother coming back Monday morning".

¹⁷ "Con una entonación marcada, y preferentemente en contextos dialógicos, la llamada de atención de *mira* puede interpretarse como marca de atenuación" (Pons Bordería, *DPD, mira*, 2008).

¹⁸ "Ocasionalmente, se emplea como recurso de atenuación, junto a otros elementos atenuantes (reiteración de partículas equivalentes de autojustificación, enunciados explicativos, apelativos de acercamiento al interlocutor). El interlocutor M minimiza lo dicho y protege, así pues, su imagen" (Briz, *DPD, ¿entiendes?*, 2008).

(12) Pues, *mire*, el otro director no me dijo nada y al respecto y siempre cumplí con los tiempos entonces... Nunca nunca he entregado en retardo. Mi chiedo¹⁹ por qué no puedo seguir adelante. NNS

1st T: “Don’t worry, I’ll go for a walk now, but when I come back this afternoon, I’ll tidy up and clean everything”.

(13) Esta vida ya no me conviene, porque la verdad es que mi mamá viene esta tarde y a mí no me gusta tener una casa sucia. Entonces lo que necesitas hacer es organizar y limpiar ahora, antes de dar un paseo ¿*entiendes?* porque la última la última vez no no habías ah organizado ni limpiado todo. NNS

- *Formulating directive acts in an indirective way*

The primary strategy employed by both NSs and NNSs is doing requests and questions with different indirectness, adding the language chunk *por favor*. The speech act of disagreement can quickly generate impoliteness or a sensation of impoliteness whether the speaker’s utterance is not appropriate to the sociocultural context or if it is expressed directly. For this reason, adding linguistic elements to a statement, such as *por favor*, mitigates the illocutionary force of the disagreement (Hidalgo Downing, 2017). In analysing this linguistic strategy, the position in the conversational turn has taken on a crucial role. The chunk *por favor* aims to mitigate when it is at the beginning of the sentence or the end, with the intonation that stresses this element. The expression *por favor* in Spanish acts as a mitigating device without the need to use the conditional (14), whilst, in Italian, it tends to be accompanied by a conditional. This pattern is seen in the Italian NS data in (15). Furthermore, this aspect explains why Italians used more conditional mood than Spanish NSs, and why the latter employed more the chunk *por favor*.

1st T: “Don’t worry, I’ll go for a walk now, but when I return this afternoon, I’ll tidy up and clean everything”.

(14) No, *por favor*. Tienes que limpiar ahora. Es que tengo invitados. NS

(15) Mira, es que tengo invitados para comer. ¿*Podrías limpiar ya, por favor?*

This macro-group subdivision was carried out to analyse the data as structurally as possible. It must be said, however, that these strategies can combine in the same sentence. Indeed, in the data collected, as in natural speech, some responses contain more than one strategy together, as in (16)²⁰ or (6):

1st T: “Don’t worry, I’ll go for a walk now, but when I come back this afternoon, I’ll tidy up and clean everything”.

(6) *Sí, pero, pero mira porque creo que no capaz que no te había dicho pero yo invité a un amigo para venir a cenar y y me gustaría que fuera limpio el apartamento. Entonces capaz que podrías limpiar algo por lo menos esta sala común antes de irte y yo hasta te puedo ayudar ayudar un poco, si quieres...*

¹⁹ The linguistic transfer from the Italian language (*mi chiedo*) is interesting in this utterance. As mentioned, all non-native participants are trilingual speakers (Italian, Spanish and English), with Spanish as L2 or L3.

²⁰ One of the tests that have been adduced to decide whether a form is mitigating in a particular occurrence is that of *solidarity*, according to which the co-presence in the close co-text of other forms that could also be mitigating would reinforce the possibility that the candidate element plays the same pragmatic role (see Villalba, 2020).

(16) No. *Perdón. Por favor. ¿Podrías limpiar todo antes de salir? Gracias.* NNS

5. Discussion

Concerning the interlanguage pragmatics, on the one hand, the data analysed show that NNSs adopted the same three main strategies used by NSs: correcting or repairing, justifying and de-focusing the elements of personal or temporal enunciation, “lo cual refleja una conciencia pragmática similar” between these two groups (Hidalgo Downing, 2017, p. 175). On the other hand, the data collected show that NNSs, as stated by Félix-Brasdefer (2004, p. 590), “at various proficiency levels lack the pragmalinguistic knowledge necessary to mitigate a face-threatening act”, such as disagreement. In general, it can be noticed that NSs use 21% more strategies than NNSs and, according to Hidalgo Downing (2017, p. 176), the data show that “en los hablantes no nativos [...] son menores los mitigadores, y menos variados”. This result depends on the fact that NNSs are short of the idiomatic resources (pragmalinguistic resources) of the Spanish language (Hidalgo Downing, 2017, p. 177)²¹.

In line with previous research, such as that of Fernández & Sánchez (2021), the analysis of the data collected shows that native speakers of Spanish tend to downgrade their assertion by expressing it in the form of doubt or uncertainty more than native speakers of Italian and English. In addition, as studied by Medina (2012, 2013), concerning the differences between Italian and English NSs, Italian NSs make concessions using token agreements more than English NSs (see Figure 2). Furthermore, Medina emphasises that “los datos muestran que de la totalidad de respuestas en las que se expresa diferente opinión [...], la atenuación constituye un 95,6%, es decir, los estudiantes E/LE [...] usan casi en el 100% de los casos recursos atenuadores” (2013, p. 130). The present research also shares this finding; although a collective employs fewer mitigation strategies than others, that is, the English group. The main reason is their proficiency in Spanish (lower than Italians).

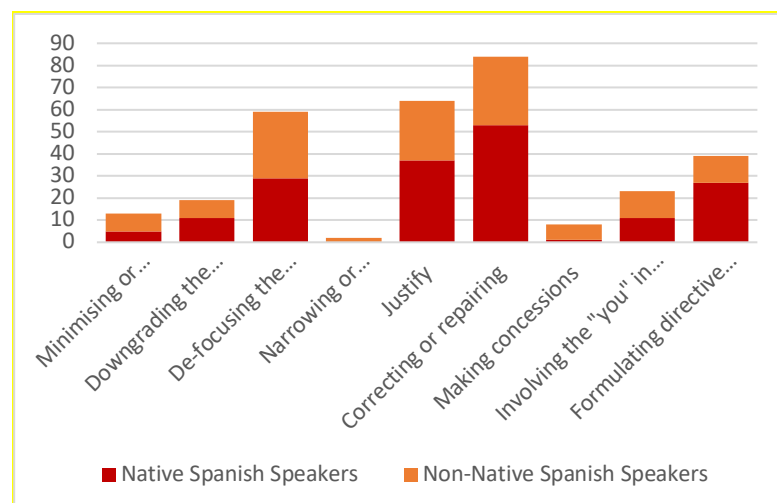


Figure 2. Mitigation strategies by native and non-native Spanish speakers

Regarding the conclusions of Fernández García’s research (2020), these are not reflected in the present study, possibly because his work does not consider interlanguages, but it is a

²¹ It should also be stressed that the length of NNSs’ sentences is shorter than NSs’, and the variety in the vocabulary used by NNSs is less than that shown by NSs.

contrastive analysis between native speakers of Spanish and English, expressing the disagreement in their mother tongue; furthermore, it concerns disagreement as epistemic and not in a broader way as the present study. In fact, in Fernández García's (2020, p. 400), the principal mitigation strategies of Spanish NSs are the use of opinion narrowing syntagms such as *desde mi punto de vista*, the use of doxastic predicates ((*no*) *creo que*) and explicit expression of doubt such as *puede que lleves razón*. On the contrary, the primary strategy adopted by Spanish NSs in the present study is the justifications followed by logical consequences introduced by discourse markers as *entonces* or *pues bien* and corrective mitigation devices such as *bueno*, *o sea* or *pues*. However, the study of Fernández García demonstrates how cultural and situational variation affects the expression of disagreements formulated in a mitigated manner. In the present study, as in his research, English speakers and Spaniards adopted the same strategies in an informal context.

In the present research, concerning the use of mitigation strategies bonded to the context, it is possible to notice that NSs and NNSs adopted diverse strategies in informal, semiformal and formal contexts. For example, Italian chose three different strategies for the three contexts: formulating directive acts indirectly in the informal situation, justifying in the semiformal situation and correcting and repairing in the formal situation. In addition, the data show that NNSs use mitigating strategies above all in semi-formal and formal contexts (with higher social distance), whilst NSs use mitigating strategies in all contexts.

By comparing NNSs (Figure 3), it is possible to observe that, apart from employing a main strategy (*de-focusing the elements of personal or temporal enunciation*), English NSs tend to apply all strategies equally. Concerning Italians, instead, the dominant strategies are three: the first is *correcting and repairing*, the second is *justifying*, and the third is *de-focusing the elements of personal or temporal enunciation*. Despite the latter strategy being the first adopted both by English and Italian NSs, the linguistic means adopted vary: English NSs opted more for the use of discourse markers (such as *entonces* and *bueno*) or structures which affected the frankness of what is said, such as *la verdad (es que)*; whilst Italians employed more the temporal modification of the verb (conditional instead of present).

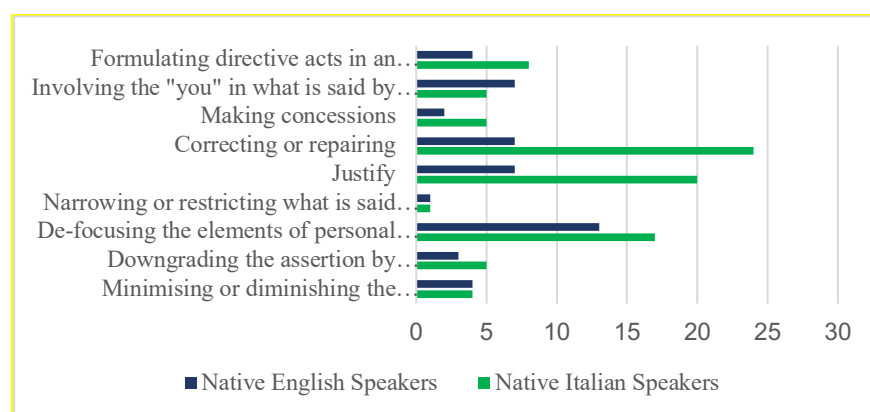


Figure 3. Mitigation strategies by Italian and English native speakers

Lastly, despite the modest size of the three Spanish NSs micro-groups, it can be deduced from a quantitative analysis that the South American micro-group employs mitigation tactics the most frequently (despite not being the most numerous group). From a qualitative point of view, data collected show a Spaniards' preference for the strategy of *correcting and repairing*; for Central Americans, the first choice was *de-focusing the elements of personal or temporal*

enunciación; finally, South Americans opted equally for *correcting and repairing* and *justifying* the disagreement (Figure 4). These data correspond, in general terms, with some geolectal contrastive studies between Peninsular and American Spanish on the frequency of mitigation and the different mitigating tactics (Douglas, Soler-Bonafont & Vouto, 2018; Albelda & Cestero, 2020; Cestero & Albelda, 2020). However, as mentioned, the unrepresentativeness of our volume of data prevents firm conclusions from being drawn²².

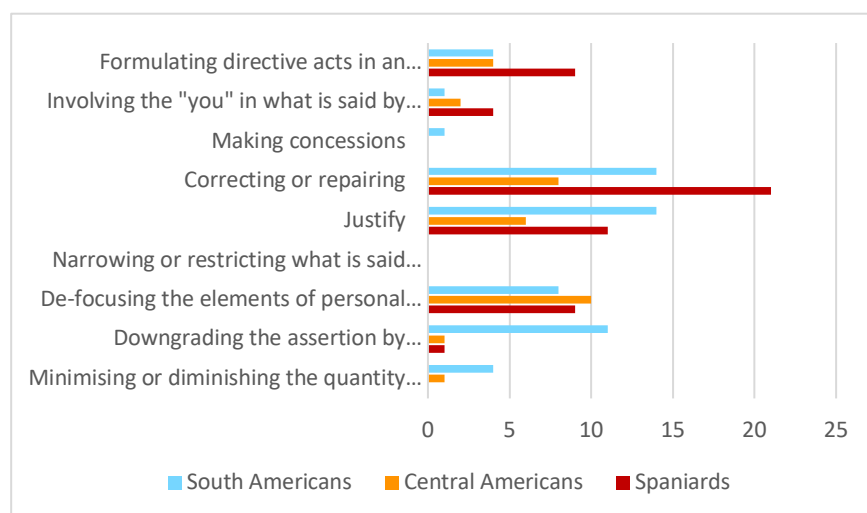


Figure 4. Mitigation strategies by three groups of Spanish native speakers

A brief final observation concerning NNSs production in Spanish and their relative cultural profiles is proposed below. The following cases demonstrate pragmatolinguistic and sociopragmatic transfers from the L1 to the L2 (or L3). On the one hand, in data of English American speakers, for example, following the pragmatic behaviour of their mother tongue, as explained by Félix-Brasdefer (2004, p. 593), their expressions of criticism (disagreement and refusal) in Spanish are “often accompanied by other strategies that functioned as mitigators, such as suggestions” (17) “and positive remarks” (e.g., *entiendo, gracias* (18), *tiene razón*), as possible to see in these examples:

1st T: “I am sorry, but I have noticed that you work too slowly. Don’t bother coming back Monday morning”.

(17) *Ehm, ¿podemos hablar y discutir un poco de lo que puedo hacer para para hacer un mejor trabajo para usted?*

1st T: “Don’t worry, I’ll go for a walk now, but when I come back this afternoon, I’ll tidy up and clean everything”.

(18) *Gracias por decirme que va a limpiar la casa después, pero invité a una amiga para almorzar y quiero que todo ehm que todo esté limpio cuando ella venga.*

On the other hand, for Italians, for example, the use in Spanish of diminutives suffixes to diminish, at least apparently, something, is a strategy that echoes an existing pragmatic use in Italian (since these diminutives also exist in this language, e.g., *-ito/a, -ino/a, -ello/a, -*

²² Works such as Blanco’s (2014) on dissenting acts in Havana speech, reported in Albelda & Cestero (2020, pp. 968-969), open the way to the contrastive and geolectal sociopragmatic study of disagreement, in particular its mitigation.

etto/a, etc.) to get closer to the interlocutor and mitigate the illocutionary force of one's disagreement, by indirectly not approving the idea proposed by the interlocutor, through a polite request, as in (19):

1st Turn: "I'm sorry, but all the doctor's appointments are cancelled. Come back tomorrow".

(19) Lo que pasa es que mañana voy a estar trabajando y voy a estar muy ocupada. Tengo varios compromisos después del trabajo. ¿No sería posible ver al doctor ahora mismo un momentito?

In conclusion, these findings highlight the significance of teaching linguistic and conversational strategies to Spanish language students to develop pragmatic competence like native speakers and improve the use of mitigation in expressing disagreement, which is a potentially conflictual speech act. This study could be a good starting point for further analyses involving more participants and homogeneous native speakers. Furthermore, the present study can be a starting point for a more in-depth analysis regarding, for example, the age or gender of the participants, which were not considered in this paper.

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