

Mitigation Strategies in Semi-structured Oral Chinese Interviews

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Abstract

This paper identifies and accounts for mitigation strategies in a corpus of language that attempts to reflect the communicative style of Chinese speakers in semi-structured oral interviews. Thus, the analysis was carried out on the informal conversations of the C-ORAL-CHINA corpus. Mitigating resources were classified and grouped into seven general procedures that constitute different strategic mechanisms with which mitigation is carried out. Regarding the strategic mechanisms through which mitigation was carried out in these semi-structured oral Chinese interviews, the most common strategies were the following: the use of resources that downgrade what has been said or done, the use of resources that involve the addressee in what has been said or done, and the use of resources that limit or restrict what has been said or done. Conversely, the strategies of correcting or repairing what has been said, justifying, and defocalizing had the lowest frequency of use.

Keywords: Chinese language, linguistic mitigation, linguistic resources, discursive strategies, pragmatics choice

Povzetek

Članek opredeljuje in pojasnjuje ublažitvene strategije v korpusu jezika, ki odraža komunikacijski slog kitajskih govorcev v polstrukturiranih ustnih intervjujih. Analiza je bila izvedena na neformalnih pogovorih korpusa C-ORAL-KITAJSKA. Sredstva za ublažitev so razvrščena in združena v sedem splošnih postopkov, ki sestavljajo različne strateške mehanizme, s katerimi se izvaja ublažitev. Najpogostejše strategije mehanizmov, prek katerih je bilo blaženje izvedeno v teh polstrukturiranih ustnih kitajskih intervjujih, so bile: uporaba virov, ki zmanjšujejo pomen povedanega ali storjenega, uporaba virov, ki vključujejo naslovnika v to, kar je bilo rečeno ali storjeno, in uporaba virov, ki omejujejo ali omejujejo izrečeno oziroma storjeno. Nasprotno pa so bile najmanj pogosto uporabljene strategije popravljanja ali popravljanja povedanega, utemeljevanja in defokalizacije.

Ključne besede: kitajski jezik, jezikovne ublažitve, jezikovni viri, diskurzivne strategije, izbor rabe jezika



1 Introduction

Mitigation is a highly complex pragmatic phenomenon that has become a prioritized object of study in recent decades and has been approached from disciplines such as pragmatics and discourse analysis (Fraser, 1980; Sibsa, 2001; Caffi, 2007; Cestero, 2020). After decades of intense work, it has been possible to: define mitigation, and also discriminate and establish the limits of this phenomenon in terms of other close concepts, such as vague language (Lakoff, 1972; Fraser, 1980; Holmes, 1984; Caffi, 2007; Overstreet, 2011; Albelda & Briz, 2020), verbal courtesy (Fraser, 1980; Bravo, 2005; Thaler, 2012; Briz & Albelda, 2013; Figueras, 2020), or intensification (Sbisà, 2001; Kotwica, 2020; Albelda & Briz, 2020); and to establish operational criteria for its recognition in its context of use (Albelda et al., 2014; Villalva, 2020; Cestero & Albelda, 2020).

Regarding Chinese language, the literature review shows that the study of mitigation is like that of other linguistic traditions. It starts within the framework of the study of speech acts, specifically in the category of internal modifiers, and with a methodology mainly based on the Discourse Completion Test (DCT). In recent years, however, the study of mitigation has increasingly focused on its recognition and analysis in different discourse genres, as well as on the monographic analysis of the different linguistic resources that make its realization possible (Querol-Bataller, 2022).

Thus, this research aims to describe the use of mitigation strategies in semi-structured interviews in the Chinese language. In addition, for the development of future research, it would be advisable to find a theoretical and methodological framework that allows not only to outline a Chinese linguistic pattern of mitigation in this context but also its contrast with other languages or linguistic varieties.

We should not forget that mitigation is a strategy subject to variation: it is a pragmatic, sociolinguistic and dialectal variable. Although it has been recognized for some time, very little research had been carried out until studies were made of linguistic mitigation taking into account its variability. (Cestero, 2020, p. 364)

2 Theoretical and methodological framework

This paper applies a theoretical and methodological framework that has already been successfully used to study mitigation (Albelda & Briz, 2020; Cestero, 2020; Cestero & Albelda, 2020; Cestero & Albelda, forthcoming). According to them, mitigation is defined as follows:

a rhetoric-pragmatic strategy that arises from the need to save face (own or others'), to protect, soften, and repair possible damaging effects on the proper development of communication. It is expressed through vague language mechanisms that blur propositional content, minimizing semantic quantity or

quality or directly reducing the illocutionary force of speech acts and formulating less commitment to what is said. It generates conversational implicature through indirectness in the expression of the speaker's true intention. (Albelda & Briz, 2020, p. 582. My translation)

In addition, Villalva (2020) offers three criteria (absence, commutation, and solidarity) in order to identify the effective use of mitigation resources in the analysis.

Based on the concept of mitigation as a pragmatic phenomenon that can be carried out using various linguistic or nonverbal resources, Cestero (2020), and Cestero and Albelda (2020) classify the mitigation resources into seven general strategies, which comprise the different strategic mechanisms through which mitigation is carried out. These strategies are as follows:

1. Resources that correct, repair or prevent what has been said or done, or will be said or done. The resources may be included in this category are explicit illocutionary force indicating devices (IFID), correcting or reformulating markers, or prosodic and paralinguistic elements.
2. Resources that limit or restrict what is said or done. The resources may be included in this category are constructions that limit an opinion to a particular person or a certain field, or concessivity and syntactic structures that restrict the range of the speech act, by means of conditional, concessive, or temporal structures.
3. Resources that downgrade what is said or done. The resources may be included in this category are verbs, verb constructions, and modal particles that express doubt or probability regarding an opinion; verbs, verb constructions, and discourse particles that feign doubt, incompetence, or ignorance; modal use of verb tenses; or requests, questions, commands, and orders indirectly expressed.
4. Resources that minimize or blur the quantity or the quality of what is said. The resources may be included in this category are internal morphological modifiers (diminutive suffixes), external modification (downgrading quantifiers, and approximators or diffusers of meaning), softer expressions in a meaningful content, or foreign words.
5. Resources that justify. The resources that may be included in this category are justifying or excusing constructions.
6. Resources that involve the addressee in what is said or done. The resources may be included in this category are ellipsis in the conclusion, structures that are suspended or cut short, discourse particles and expressions of control of the interaction, or ways of addressing the interlocutor.

7. Resources that impersonalize and defocalize. The resources may be included in this category are impersonalizations hiding the source of the utterance, using an impersonal construction or a widely-held opinion, impersonalizations using direct speech; and objectivization using modal discourse particles.

These strategies are organized as a continuum between two extremes that indicate the greater or lesser commitment of the speaker and, consequently, the greater or lesser exposure to the self-image. Figure 1 represents this continuum and shows these seven strategies, which range from correcting or repairing what has been said or done to defocalizing.

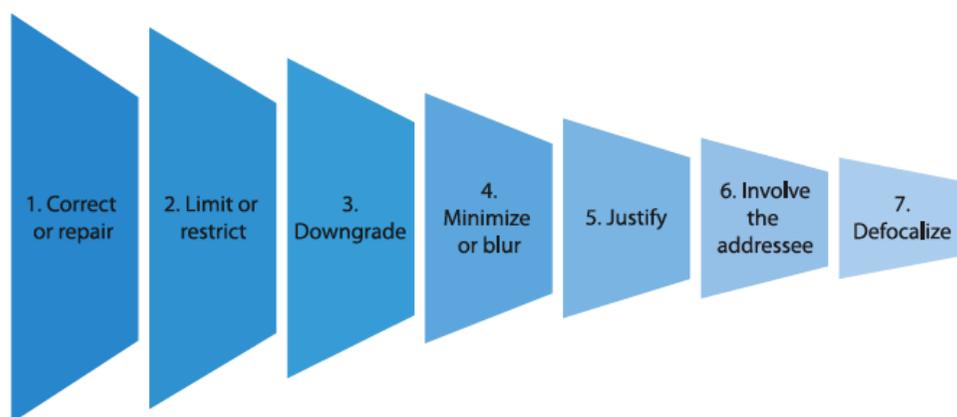


Figure 1: Mitigation strategies (Cestero, 2020, p. 369)

The typological characteristics of the languages constrain the linguistic resources that make mitigation possible for each. However, this fact, using the above-mentioned framework of analysis, does not prevent the comparison between different languages or linguistic varieties from being carried out, since the classification of resources is not based on the linguistic nature of these resources but on the strategic mechanism for which they are used. Thus, for example, in Spanish, verb tenses can be used pragmatically to downgrade what is said or done, and diminutive suffixes can be used to minimize or blur the quantity or quality of what is said. Such a morphological modification is not common in Chinese,¹ but these mechanisms can be carried out by

¹ The Chinese language is traditionally classified as an isolating language, as it is generally considered to lack an inflectional and derivational morphology. However, there are some exceptions, such as 儿 (er). “Etymologically, -er was a diminutive suffix for nouns; but it has lost its semantic content in modern Mandarin, and its distribution in Beijing dialect has been extended to other parts of speech [...] Basically, the retroflex suffix remains a nominal suffix as it once was when it served as a diminutive suffix” (Li & Thompson, 1989, pp. 39–40).

other resources, such as auxiliary verbs, the reduplication of volitive verbs, downgrading quantifiers, approximators of meaning, or softer expressions in the meaningful content. Thus, a framework used by Cestero (2020), and Cestero and Albelda (2020), and criteria set by Villalva (2020) will be used as an exploratory proposal to describe and analyze mitigation in semi-structured interviews in the Chinese language.

Material from the C-ORAL-CHINA corpus² is used as the primary source of data to be analyzed. This open-access corpus includes recordings classified into three types: media, formal, and informal. In the latter, one of the interlocutors asks the other interlocutor about topics such as leisure, customs, travel, or decoration. As Dong Yang (2011, pp. 98–99) acknowledges, these conversations are more like semi-structured interviews than spontaneous conversations.

The speakers of the informal conversations in C-ORAL-CHINA are male and female, aged between 18-25 and 25-40, university students or graduates; thus, these are Generations 1 and 2 of Education Level 3.³ However, as Dong (2011, p. 92) points out, they are not equally represented because, among other reasons, the aim of the C-ORAL-CHINA corpus is not to carry out sociolinguistic studies.⁴ Thus, the speakers in the informal conversations analyzed in this paper are distributed, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Informal conversations from C-ORAL-CHINA corpus

Education level 3 (higher education)	Men	Women
Generation 1 (20–34 years old)	27 %	52 %
Generation 2 (35–55 years old)	8 %	13 %

3 Mitigation strategies in the informal conversations from the C-ORAL-CHINA corpus

This section shows the analysis of the informal conversations from the C-ORAL-CHINA corpus, which was carried out according to the specific guidelines established by Albelda et al. (2014), Cestero (2020), Cestero and Albelda (2020), and Villalva (2020). The percentage of use of each of the mitigation strategies is presented global terms

² Available at <http://cartago.illf.uam.es/dat/c-oral-chino?m=1>

³ Three interviews (Ch10 Hospital, Ch11 Hospital2, and Ch21 Supermarket) have been excluded from this analysis, as according to their characteristics, they are more similar to spontaneous conversations than to semi-structured interviews. Some of the interlocutors, moreover, belonged to Generation 3.

⁴ The corpus does not specify the geographical origin of the speakers, so it is not possible to carry out sociolinguistic research on the basis of their diatopic features.

(See Figure 3), and also broken down by age and gender (See Figure 4). In addition, the linguistic resources with which the Chinese speakers implemented these strategies are exemplified.

The corpus consists of 22 informal interviews from C-ORAL-CHINA, involving a recording of 218,132 minutes and a transcription of 60,339 characters. As mentioned above, these interviews involve university students or graduates who have been specifically encouraged to use Putonghua, the standard form of Chinese.

The analysis revealed the use of 1,410 mitigation resources, which means an average of one mitigation resource for each of the 42.79 characters. However, some variability was observed, since while certain conversations, such as Chin 08 Postcards or Chin18 Movies are well above average, others, such as Chin12 Playing games or Chin05 Character, are far behind (See Figure 2).

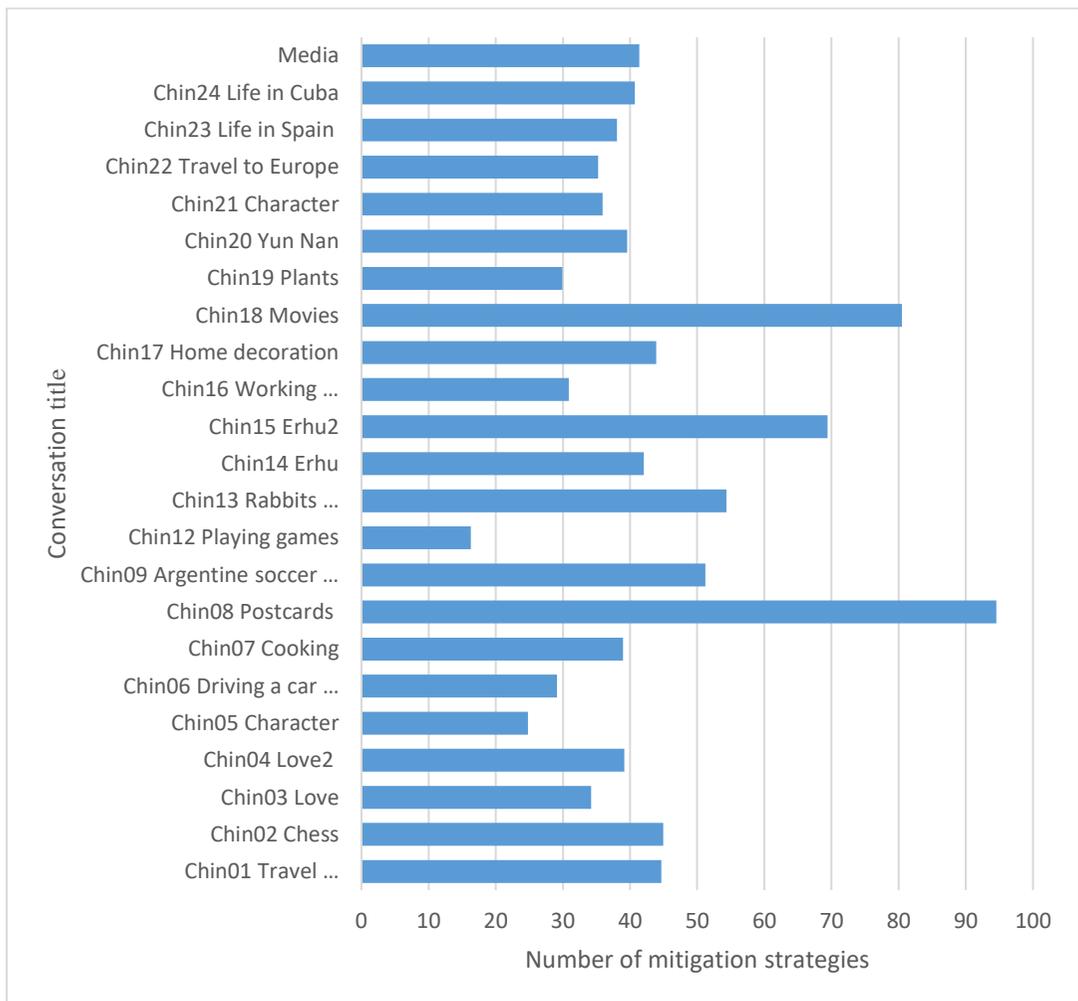


Figure 2: Frequency of mitigation resources in each of the informal conversations from C-ORAL-CHINA

Regarding the strategic mechanisms through which mitigation has been carried out, the most common strategies were the following: resources that downgrade what has been said or done, resources that involve the addressee in what has been said or done, and resources that limit or restrict what has been said or done. Conversely, the strategies of correcting or repairing what has been said, justifying, and defocalizing had the lowest frequency of use (See Figure 3).

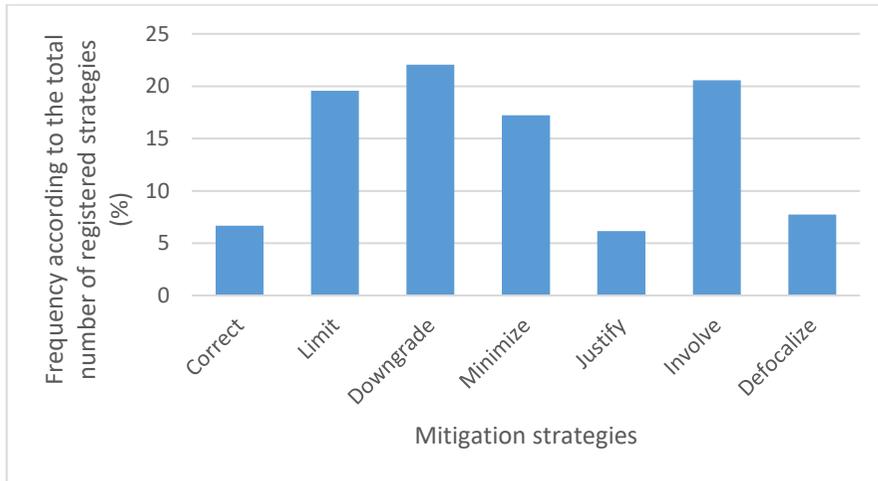


Figure 3: Mitigation strategies in informal interviews from C-ORAL-CHINA

Similar results were found if the data were broken down by age and gender (See Figure 4). The results in the group of G2-Men may be striking. However, although the data have been weighted according to the percentage that each of the groups represents the total sample analyzed, the sample of the G2-Men group accounts for barely 8% (See Table 2). Therefore, it is probable that this result cannot be considered illustrative of the behavior of the G2-Men group. A larger sample would be necessary to draw definitive conclusions.

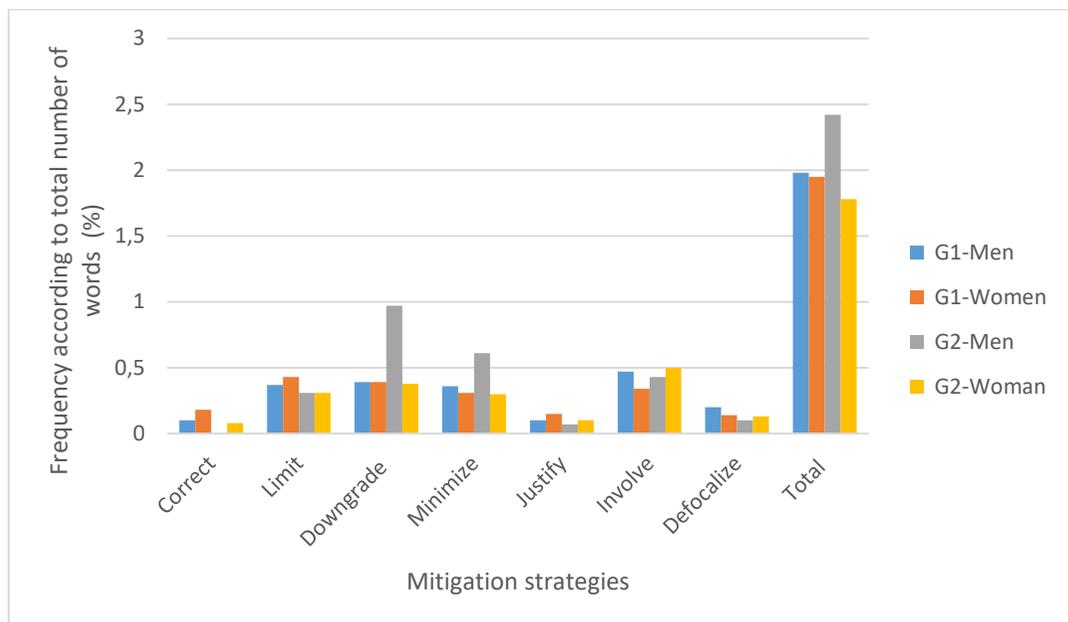


Figure 4: Mitigation strategies in informal interviews from C-ORAL-CHINA, distributed by age and gender

According to the analysis, in global terms, the strategy of downgrading what is said or done was the most used (See Figure 3), and in each of the different groups, this strategy shows a very high degree of frequency of use (See Figure 4).

The strategy of downgrading what is said or done involves the use of resources such as, for example, assertions in the form of doubt or probability, as well as verbs, constructions, or particles that feign ignorance. These resources reduce the illocutionary force of the speech act, and at the same weaken the speaker's commitment to what is said. Some examples are given below.

In the conversation Chin06 Driving a car, the use of public and private means of transport to get to work in Beijing is discussed. The GLT speaker repeatedly expressed his assertions in the form of doubt or probability, not because of his lack of knowledge, but as a clear mitigation strategy to self-protect his image (1). In Example (2), the conversation Chin01 Travel, the speaker talks about her experience in the educational system. She also expressed her assertions in the form of doubt or probability as a mitigation strategy.

(1) Conversation Chin6 Driving a car.⁵

- GLT: 这个[/]这个有个最好的好处就是说/它的保养成本啦各方面**可能**会比较低///
 zhè ge [/] zhè ge yǒu gè zuì hǎo de hǎo chu jiù shì shuō / tā de bǎo yǎng chéng běn lā gè fāng miàn **kě néng** huì bǐ jiào dī ///
 'This [/] one of the best things about this is that / its maintenance costs **may** be lower in all aspects///'
- GLT: 因为大家 XXX 都知道//出租车一年的里程数**可能**会顶着私家车差不多七到十年吧///
 yīn wéi dà jiā XXX dōu zhī dào // chū zū chē yì nián de lǐ chéng shù **kě néng** huì dǐng zhe sī jiā chē chà bú duō qī dào shí nián ba ///
 'Because everybody XXX knows // The mileage of a taxi in a year **may** be about seven to ten years compared to a private car. ///'

(2) Conversation Chin01 Travel.

- ZXH: 所以//**可能**在西班牙//我们会感觉上课的时候比较随意//但是真正接收的知识/**可能**不一定有国内接收得多 ///
 suǒ yǐ // **kě néng** zài xī bān yá // wǒ men huì gǎn jué shàng kè de shí hou bǐ jiào suí yì // dàn shì zhēn zhèng jiē shōu de zhī shì / **kě néng** bù yī dìng yǒu guó nèi jiē shōu dé duō ///
 'So // **maybe** in Spain // we'll feel more casual when we're in class // but the knowledge we really receive / **may** not have much acceptance in our country ///'
- ZXH: 虽然说/我们的教育体制不一样//&mm 但是我想/
 我**可能**更适应国内的教[/]授课方法吧///
 suī rán shuō / wǒ men de jiào yù tǐ zhì bù yí yàng // &mm dàn shì wǒ xiǎng / wǒ **kě néng** gèng shì yìng guó nèi de jiào [/] shòu kè fāng fǎ ba /
 'even though / our education system is not the same // &mm but I think /**perhaps** I am more used to our teaching [/] teaching methods ///'

Some of the resources traditionally included in so-called *conventionalized indirect strategies* (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Zhang, 1995a) are resources to downgrade what has been said or done. In Chinese, these resources are auxiliary verbs, such as 可以 (kěyǐ, 'may'), 能 (néng, 'can'), or 应该 (yīnggāi, 'should'); interrogative sentences, such as 怎么样 (zěn me yàng, 'How about ...?'); or verbs of desire, such as 情愿 (qíngyuàn, 'wish'), 需要 (xūyào, 'need'), 希望 (xīwàng, 'hope'), or 想 (xiǎng, 'wish'). In this paper, they are included and accounted for in a list of mitigation resources specifically as resources that downgrade what has been said or done. It is important to point out this

⁵ The mitigation resources are marked in bold type.

phenomenon because when the study of mitigation is based on speech acts, these resources, insofar as they are considered to be part of the head of the speech act, are very often not identified as mitigation resources (Blum-Kulka et al., 1989; Zhang, 1995a; Zhang, 1995b; Li, 2016) (Querol-Bataller, 2022). Some examples are given below.

(3) Conversation Chin07 Cooking, the speaker explains how to solve some cooking problems.

XUN: 那你为什么不自己做点东西吃呢?
 nà nǐ wèi shén me bù zì jǐ zuò diǎn dōng xī chī ne?
 ‘So why don't you make yourself something to eat?’

XUN: 你可以自己在家里 / 煮一点儿肉吃啊?
 nǐ kě yǐ zì jǐ zài jiā lǐ / zhǔ yì diǎn er ròu chī ā?
 ‘You could cook a little meat for yourself at home?’

(4) Conversation Chin01 Travel, the speaker talks about her hobbies during her stay in Spain.

DOY: 那你现在在西班牙//西班牙不有好多海边儿吗
 Nà nǐ xiànzài zài xībānyá // xībānyá bù yǒu hǎoduō hǎibiān er ma
 ‘So you now in Spain // Doesn't Spain have a lot of beaches?’

DOY: 你可以趁机去一下///
 nǐ kě yǐ chèn jī qù yí xià
 ‘You may take advantage of it and go sometime///’

The resources that involve the addressee in what is said or done also function as a pragmatic strategy to reduce the illocutionary force of the speech act, but in this strategy, the responsibility for the statement is transferred from the speaker to the addressee. Thus, this strategy leaves space for negotiation with the addressee, and the speech act becomes negotiable and more suggestive. Furthermore, according to Cestero (2020) (See Figure 1), this is one of the mitigation strategies with the lowest degree of self-image exposure.

For this function, the most commonly used resource in the corpus is the 吧 (ba) particle (Kendrick, 2018; Fang & Hengeveld, 2020) (5), but so are questions with assertive value, either in the form of question tags (Han, 1988; Hsin, 2016) (6) or in the form of rhetorical questions (Alleton, 1988; Wu & Zhou, 2020) (7).

(5) Conversation Chin01 Travel, the speaker talks about her experience in the educational system.

- ZXH: 所以//可能在西班牙//我们会感觉上课的时候比较随意//但是真正接收的知识/可能不一定有国内接收得多///
 Suǒyǐ// kěnéng zài xībānyá// wǒmen huì gǎnjué shàngkè de shíhòu bǐjiào suíyì// dànshì zhēnzhèng jiēshōu de zhīshì/ kěnéng bù yīding yǒu guónèi jiēshōu dé duō///
 'So // maybe in Spain // we'll feel more casual when we're in class // but the knowledge we really receive / may not have much acceptance in our country///'
- ZXH: 虽然说/我们的教育体制不一样//&mm 但是我想/我可能更适应国内的教[/]授课方法吧///
 Suīrán shuō/ wǒmen de jiàoyù tǐzhì bù yīyàng// &mm dànshì wǒ xiǎng/ wǒ kěnéng gèng shìyìng guónèi de jiào [/] shòukè fāngfǎ ba///
 'even though/ our education system is not the same // &mm but I think / I may be more used to our teaching [/] teaching methods ///'

(6) Conversation Chin23 Life in Spain, the speaker talks about how to prepare Chinese dishes in Spain.

- ZXH: 所以如果我想做中国菜的话//只能用现有的材料将就一下了///
 Suǒyǐ rúguǒ wǒ xiǎng zuò zhōngguó cài dehuà// zhǐ néng yòng xiànyǒu de cáiliào jiāng jiù yīxiàle///
 'So if I want to make Chinese food // I'll just have to make do with the available ingredients ///'
- ZXH: 比如我们可以在超市买到蒜//对吧?
 Bǐrú wǒmen kěyǐ zài chāoshì mǎi dào suàn// duì ba?
 'For example we could buy garlic at the supermarket // right?'

(7) Conversation Chin07 Cooking, the speaker talks about how to prepare Chinese dishes in Spain.

- ZXH: **你不觉得中国的茄子和西班牙的茄子有些不一样吗?**
Nǐ bù juéde zhōngguó de qiézi hé xībānyá de qiézi yǒuxiē bù yīyàng ma?
'Don't you think the Chinese eggplant is a little bit different from the Spanish eggplant?'

In global terms, the strategies that limit or restrict what is said or done was the third most frequently used. In the informal interviews from C-ORAL-CHINA, this strategy is basically carried out through constructions that limit an opinion to a particular person or a certain field. One of the most frequently used is 我觉得 (wǒ

juéde, 'I think') (Lim, 2011), but others are also found, such as, for example, 我想 (wǒ xiǎng, 'I think'), 对我来说 (duì wǒ lái shuō, 'for me'), 这是我现在的看法 (zhè shì wǒ xiànzài de kànfa, 'this is my current point of view'), 我是这么想的 (wǒ shì zhème xiǎng de, 'I think so'), 从这一点上说 (cóng zhè yìdiǎn shàng shuō, 'from that point on'), and 我个人认为 (wǒ gèrén rènwei, 'I personally think'). Some examples are shown below.

(8) Conversation Chin04 Love2, the speaker talks about those who, in order to keep a relationship, focus mainly on appearance.

HAK: 然后这时候 // 就是说那个感情就会很快出现裂痕 // 然后直至双方都失去兴趣 // 然后分开 // 这是我现在的看法 ///

Ránhòu zhè shíhòu// jiùshì shuō nàgè gǎnqíng jiù huì hěn kuài chūxiàn lièhén// ránhòu zhízhì shuāngfāng dōu shīqù xìngqù// ránhòu fēnkāi// **zhè shì wǒ xiànzài de kànfa**///

'And then that's when // that relationship will quickly crack // and then until both parties lose interest // and separate // that's **how I see it now** ///'

HAK: 所以我觉得这种 [/] 这种就是只凭 / 外表来维持感情 // 确实是比较肤浅的 ///

Suǒyǐ wǒ juéde zhè zhǒng [/] zhè zhǒng jiùshì zhǐ píng/ wàibiǎo lái wéichí gǎnqíng// quèshí shì bǐjiào fūqiǎn de///

'So **I think** this kind of [/] is just based on / appearance to maintain the relationship // /is indeed rather superficial //'

(9) Conversation Chin01 Travel, the speaker talks about her learning experience in Spain.

ZXH: 虽然说/我们的教育体制不一样//&mm 但是我想/我可能更适应国内的教[/]授课方法吧///

Suīrán shuō/ wǒmen de jiàoyù tǐzhì bù yīyàng// &mm dànshì wǒ xiǎng/ wǒ kěnéng gèng shìyìng guónèi de jiào [/] shòukè fāngfǎ ba///

'Although / our education system is different // &mm but **I think** / perhaps I am more comfortable with the teaching [/] method in China ////'

It is interesting to consider, however, whether this high incidence is conditioned by the Chinese communicative style or by the discourse genre that makes up the corpus. The data are taken from conversations (semi-structured interviews) in which the speakers are asked for their opinions on certain topics. Semi-structured interview promotes the use of assertive speech acts, and the use of constructions that limit an opinion to a particular person or a certain field is closely related to the production of assertive speech acts. Therefore, the following question is raised: is Chinese speakers' high use of strategies that limit or restrict what is said a feature of their own

communicative style, or on the contrary, does the discourse genre explain their high use?

In terms of a discourse genre, the PRESEA corpus⁶ and the informal conversations from C-ORAL-CHINA are quite similar, and the PRESEA corpus also promotes the use of assertive speech acts. However, except for Mexico City, the use of that strategy is very low and, even in some varieties, it is not representative (Cestero & Albelda, 2020; Cestero & Albelda, forthcoming). Consequently, the use of the strategy of limiting or restricting what is said or done through constructions that limit an opinion to a particular person or a certain field seems to be a characteristic of the communicative style of speakers of Standard Chinese, at least among those of Generation 1 and Educational level 3.

Resources that minimize or blur the quantity or quality of what is said or done have also registered a relatively high frequency of use. Among the resources that make this strategy possible, the use of external modifiers stands out, especially the so-called minimizing quantifiers, such as 一下 (yíxià, 'a little'), 一点 (yídiǎn, 'a little'), or 一些 (yìxiē, 'a little') (Jiang 2012, Zhang 2019). On the other hand, it is also relevant to highlight the use that these Chinese speakers make of *litote* resources.

The *litote* consists of an evaluative expression made through the negation of its opposite. It can be used pragmatically in the expression of negative judgments and evaluations (10), but also in the expression of positive judgments and evaluations toward the speaker, or in the expression of socially committed opinions (11).⁷

(10) Conversation Chin23 Life in Spain, the speaker talks about his cooking skills.

ZXH: 而且你知道吗 // 我的厨艺可**不太好**/// 他们两个经常在 QQ 上通过视频教我做饭呢
Érqiě nǐ zhīdào ma // wǒ de chú yì **kěbù tài hǎo**/// tāmen liǎng gè
jīngcháng zài QQ shàng tōngguò shìpín jiào wǒ zuò fàn ne
'And do you know what // my cooking skills are **not very good**/// the two
of them often teach me to cook through videos on QQ'

⁶ PRESEA comprises semi-structured interviews in Spanish, in a neutral register, and based on thematic modules, such as time, place of residence, family, friendship, customs, etc. Available at <http://preseea.linguas.net>.

⁷ It is striking how the use of some of these mitigation forms has become lexicalized in the language and become the unmarked option. This is the case of expressions such as 不错 (bú cuò, 'not bad') or 没错 (méi cuò, 'not bad') to evaluate a certain state of affairs. However, it should be noted that their original structure is a mitigation strategy, as the speaker blurs the content of what is said.

(11) Conversation Ch01Travel, the speaker talks about her learning experience in Spain.

- LXX: 然后//除了语言//&mm 一些语法课以外//还有一些什么艺术课/电影课/
经济类的都可以选修
Ránhòu// chúle yǔyán// &mm yīxiē yǔfǎ kè yǐwài// hái yǒu yīxiē shénme
yìshù kè/ diànyǐng kè/ jīngjì lèi de dōu kěyǐ xuǎnxiū
'Then // in addition to language // &mm some grammar classes // there are
some art classes / film classes / economics that can be taken as electives'
- LXX: 但是总体来讲//那些课要求**不是特别高**
Dànshì zǒngtǐ lái jǐng// nàxiē kè yāoqiú **bùshì tèbié gāo**
'But in general// those classes **are not particularly demanding**'

As mentioned above, the strategies that the analysis has revealed with the lowest use were, on the one hand, resources that justify what has been said or done and, on the other hand, resources that correct or repair what has been said or done. With regard to the latter, it should be noted that laughter⁸ was the most common recourse, and its use was noticed, for example, in reply to criticism, positive or negative, of the speakers themselves or of another person, in response to socially compromised utterances, or after showing disagreement with the addressee. Some examples are given below.

(12) Conversation Chin01Travel, the speakers talk about shopping in Spain.

- SMW 而且我比较喜欢去 SOL 那边儿逛//因为我记得 SOL 那边店多//然后还大
//东西比较全一点儿//
Érqiě wǒ bǐjiào xǐhuān qù SOL nà biān er guàng// yīnwèi wǒ juéde SOL nà
biān diàn duō// ránhòu hái dà// dōngxī bǐjiào quán yīdiǎn er//
'I prefer to go to Sol and walk there // because I think that in Sol there are
many shops // and it's also bigger // there is quite a bit of everything'
- DOY 是因为你个子太高了//所以你在中国
- Shì yīnwèi nǐ gèzi tài gāole// suǒyǐ nǐ zài zhōngguó.....
'It's because you're too tall // so you're in China...'
- SMW 当然高是一个原因//胖还是另外一个原因 hhh {%act laugh}///
Dāngrán gāo shì yīgè yuányīn// pàng hái shì lìngwài yīgè yuányīn hhh {%act
laugh}///
'Of course high is one reason // fat is another reason hhh {%act laugh}///'

⁸ Cestero (1999) explains different conversational uses of laughter.

(13) Conversation Ch23 Life in Spain, the speakers talk about birthday celebrations.

- ZXH: 不过//我还是更喜欢吃别人做好的蛋糕 ///
 Bùguò// wǒ háishì gèng xǐhuān chī biérén zuò hǎo de dàngāo///
 'But // I still prefer to eat cakes made by others ///'
- ZXH: 这样又省事儿又方便 // 嘿嘿 hhh {%act: laugh} // 我就是太懒了 ///
 Zhèyàng yòu shěngshì er yòu fāngbiàn// hēihēi hhh {%act: laugh}/// wǒ jiùshì
 tài lǎnle///
 'It's so much less work and easier // hey hhh {%act: laugh} // I'm just too
 lazy ///'

4 Conclusion

Communication in Chinese has traditionally been described as non-assertive and implicit, where the aim is to avoid overt conflict and, above all, to maintain harmony in any interaction (Du, 1995; Ma, 1996; Ge Gao & Ting-Toomey, 1998, pp. 61–66; Chen & Ma, 2002). Chen (2011, p. 1) and Pan (2000, p. 134) criticize these descriptions because they focus their characterizations on general principles. Thus, they are often simplifications of the reality of language without considering its use in specific situations and discourses.

The study of a pragmatic category such as mitigation, which has clear implications for negotiation and conflict avoidance, as well as for the protection or repair of the image of interlocutors, may be a valuable tool for a more accurate description of Chinese speakers' communicative style.

To this end, a study has been undertaken on the use of mitigation in standard Chinese. It is based on a theoretical and methodological framing of mitigation, which has already been tested and validated by the scientific community, although its application has been limited to the Spanish language (Cestero & Albelda, 2020; Cestero 2020; Cestero & Albelda, forthcoming). The originality of this paper lies in its application to descriptions of the Chinese language. In this paper, a description of mitigation strategies and their resources has been carried out based on C-ORAL-CHINA's informal conversations.

The data presented in this study show that, at least among younger speakers of higher education, mitigation is usually carried out through strategies that affect illocutionary force. In particular, the mitigation resources used to downgrade what is said or done and to involve the addressee were, respectively, those that had the highest frequency of use. The prevalence of these strategies, which means a medium level of exposure, may be objective data with which to support the non-assertive and implicit communicative style of Chinese speakers.

Variationist language studies are one of the least developed areas of Chinese linguistics (Lin et al., 2012; Ren et al., 2013; Ren, 2015). In this sense, in future research, it would be desirable to enlarge the C-ORAL-CHINA corpus and to have equivalent and representative speech samples of different generations and education levels, genders, and even diatopic varieties. This would not only allow for a more detailed knowledge of mitigation in Chinese, as well as a more precise and concrete description of the communicative style of their speakers, but also a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of mitigation itself.

Acknowledgments

This research is granted by “Pragmatic-rhetorical strategies in the conflictive interaction among intimates and acquaintances: intensification, mitigation and interactional management (ESPRINT)” (ref. PID2020-114805GB-I00) funded by MCIN/AEI/ 10.13039/501100011033.

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