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Linguistic Strategies for Mitigation in the Spanish Language of Bucaramanga, Colombia

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ABSTRACT

This article presents a part of the results of a research project on frequently used features considered characteristic of the Spanish spoken in the city of Bucaramanga, Colombia. In this case, we study some linguistic strategies used in mitigation. For this purpose, 10 oral interviews from the Oral Language Corpus of Bucaramanga were analyzed. After determining the structures of interest to the study, ATLAS.ti was used to identify 203 contextual fragments (units of analysis) in which these structures acted as mitigators. As a result, it was possible to establish the percentages of occurrence of certain phrases in these interviews—conditional (27.09%); diminutives (11.33%); such as [como] (19.7%); suddenly [de pronto] (11.82%); and that is [digamos] (30%) being among the most frequent. This study contributes to an exhaustive characterization of the aforementioned variety of Spanish. At the same time, it allows us to correct the lack of studies on this variety; therefore, it can serve as a reference point for other works that delve deeper into the subject, specifically in the knowledge of linguistic variation at the pragmatic level of the regional varieties of Colombian Spanish, an area of enormous interest, which has not received much attention in research on linguistic variation.

Keywords: Mitigation; Linguistic Strategies; Colombian Spanish; Pragmatic Variation

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1. Introduction

Attenuation is a pragmatic and linguistic process through which speakers soften the force of their statements, reduce their impact, and promote greater social closeness. As highlighted by references ^[1,2], attenuation is a key resource in effective communication and is essential for social interaction. Many studies have been conducted on this discursive strategy in different varieties of Spanish; however, little has been written about its uses in certain specific regions, such as the case of the Spanish spoken in Bucaramanga, Colombia.

The present study is based on a definition of attenuation as a pragmatic strategy aimed at reducing the illocutionary force of the speech act and protecting the speaker's face ^[3]. It is presented in two ways: mitigation of what is said and the mitigation of saying ^[4,5]. The first one is the mitigation of what is said or of the propositional content, as defined by the reference ^[4], in which the utterance is also mitigated indirectly; it is that which minimizes the quantity or an element of the proposition that is expressed in a vague or imprecise manner. This is achieved mainly by morphological resources or by lexical selection (euphemisms, litotes). The second is the direct mitigation of saying or of the illocutionary force of a speech act ^[4]. To simplify, based on the reference classic typology of speech acts ^[6], mitigation can affect assertive, directive, commissive (promise and invitation), and expressive acts.

This article is derived from research aimed at identifying and categorizing the attenuation strategies employed by speakers in the Metropolitan Area of Bucaramanga (AMB), Colombia: the municipalities of Bucaramanga, Floridablanca, Piedecuesta, and Girón. Traditionally, the Spanish spoken in this area has been classified within the Andean dialectal subdivision, as part of the Santanderean subdialect ^[7,8]. Because this classification has been questioned, due basically to compelling theoretical reasons², to contextualize the linguistic variety examined in this work another more appropriate proposal is adopted ^[9]. Consequently, the variety selected for this study on mitigation

corresponds to the Neo-Granadian superdialect, the Eastern dialect, the Santander subdialect, and the Santander regional language ^[9].

Previous studies on the linguistic variety of Bucaramanga's Spanish have addressed phonological, morphological, and syntactic aspects ^[10-13]; however, the forms of expression of attenuation have largely been unexplored. The marked lack of research on the linguistic resources used to mitigate the Spanish spoken in this region of the country contrasts the abundant and continual realization of widely recognized research on this phenomenon in the Spanish language. Indeed, the works of the references ^[14-17], among the most prominent, have enriched the understanding of attenuation in the Hispanic context and emphasized the importance of exploring this phenomenon in different dialectal varieties.

Within the Colombian context, works such as those of the reference ^[18], in which the author describes and explains the use of periphrasis *dar + gerund* in the colloquial speech of a specific area of southern Colombia; the reference ^[19], on mitigation as an expression of courtesy in a television product; the reference ^[20], on this phenomenon in the city of Barranquilla; and the reference ^[21], on the mitigating forms used by workers to present an ideal image of themselves to others, are acclaimed.

Since no systematic studies were found on attenuation in the Spanish spoken in the AMB, this investigation aims to contribute to the knowledge of the linguistic resources used by speakers in this region to attenuate their statements.

As mitigation depends on communicative contexts, the way to verify their occurrence has been through a thorough analysis of the discursive piece in which they were inserted. To do so, 10 oral interviews from the Oral Language Corpus of Bucaramanga, obtained for a previous study on the expression of anteriority in the AMB, were analyzed. After determining the structures of interest to the study, ATLAS.ti was used to identify 203 contextual fragments (units of analysis) in which regular structures correspond to mitigating forms of frequent use in the area under

1 In this case, the indicated variety is characterized by "its intermediate position between Andean and Antillean Spanish" with two features that define it as a superdialect: "the tendency to conserve /-s/ and to aspirate /-s/ intervocalic and pre-stress" ^[9].

2 Despite the popularity that Montes' dialect classification still enjoys, it has been challenged, and rightly so, because of the enormous difficulty of applying the concept of "superdialect" indiscriminately to American varieties, both nationally and transnationally ^[9].

study and allow us to make a significant contribution to the characterization of this regional variety of Spanish.

The research carried out undoubtedly contributes to the knowledge of an aspect ignored by linguistic studies on the Spanish spoken in Santander, both traditional and current, while providing elements for the understanding of identity aspects that give this region its uniqueness.

2. Materials and Methods

The analysis aims to describe the forms of attenuation used in Bucaramanga and contribute to the understanding of how linguistic resources are employed to moderate speech in everyday interactions. Following the proposal by the reference^[22], morphological, syntactic, and lexical elements involved in the attenuation process are considered. This approach will allow for an understanding of how mitigating strategies are used in discursive practice and how they reflect the idiosyncrasies of AMB speakers, enriching the existing literature on attenuation.

The research is exploratory-descriptive in nature and seeks to identify and classify attenuation strategies in the

Spanish spoken in the AMB. To achieve this, 10 oral interviews were randomly selected from the Bucaramanga Oral Corpus (which contains 42 interviews) to ensure a representative sample. Using the ATLAS.ti software, the frequencies of use of different attenuation strategies in everyday speech were determined. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes and included professionals from various fields residing in the region. A total of 203 contextual fragments were identified, which are portions of speech where attenuation strategies manifest and can only be recognized as such based on their use in a particular communicative context. The strategies were coded and classified according to their pragmatic function.

The image displays the ATLAS.ti interface with the project titled “Mitigation Project.” There is a document named “ORAL CORPUS” containing 140 quotations. Under “Codes,” 12 codes are listed, such as “atenuación con como” and “atenuación con pospretérito,” along with their frequencies. The chart shows that these codes are the most frequently used. The project analyzes mitigation expressions in an oral corpus using ATLAS.ti to organize and visualize the qualitative analysis (Figure 1).

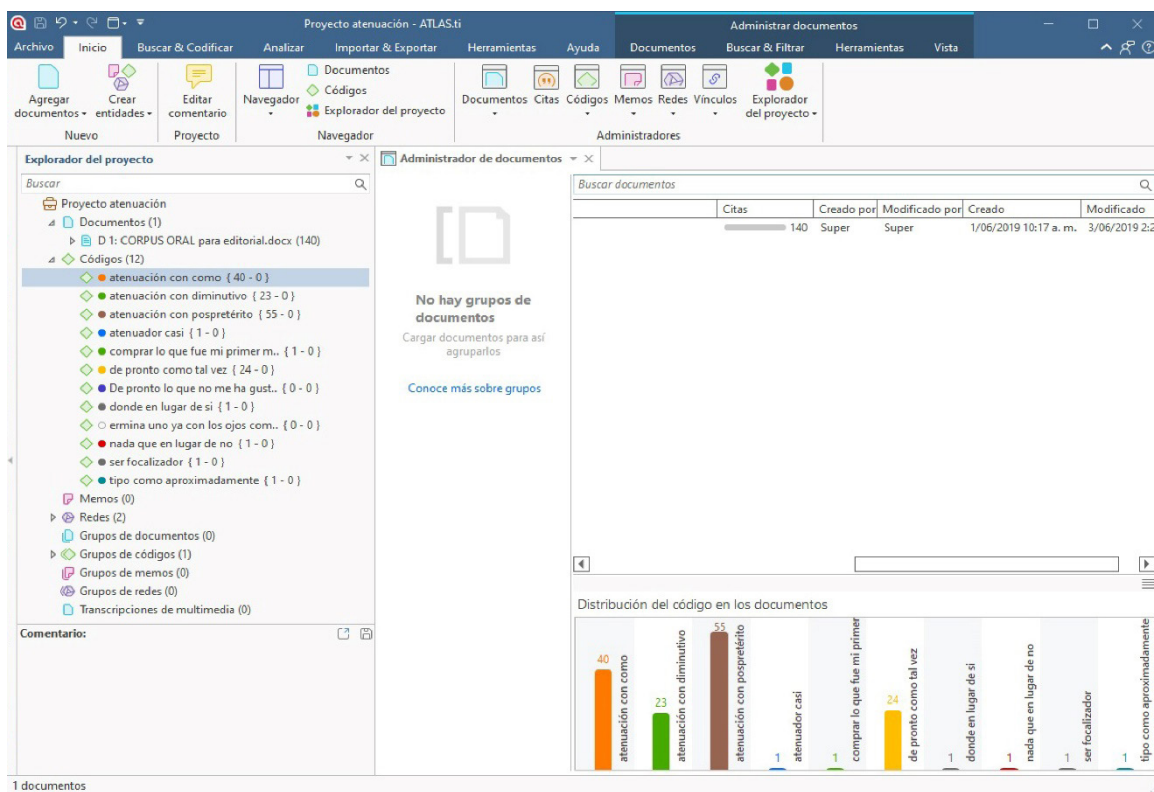


Figure 1. Atlas.ti Interface.

Although the study was not directly based on the PRESEEA corpus, several of its methodological principles were adopted, adapted, and integrated with a microanalytic approach, which focuses on a detailed and thorough analysis of the smallest units of a phenomenon or discourse. Since the purpose was to determine the frequency with which certain linguistic strategies are used in Bucaramanga for mitigation, the statements where they appeared were pointed out in the interviews, with the help of the ATLAS.ti program. Then the code was added.

From the beginning, there was a requirement to assign the function of mitigator to a particular linguistic or discursive unit based on its irrefutable pragmatic value, which can only be established through the analysis of such units in their actual context of use because a form is not mitigating by itself but rather according to its role within a specific communication event. In view of the above and considering what has already been expressed in the theoretical framework in relation to the new approaches in studies on mitigation, contextual fragments were selected as units of analysis that would allow for the identification of the corresponding mitigation strategy as far as possible (because the information contained in the corpus does not record extralinguistic data that are difficult to materialize in the corpus).

This approach makes it possible to appreciate how speakers use certain linguistic elements in real interactions and specific contexts to achieve their communicative goals^[23]. Consequently, linguistic attenuation structures were detailed, such as diminutive suffixes, expressions introducing degrees of uncertainty (for example, “de pronto” [perhaps]), the use of the verb “decir” in impersonal contexts (such as “dices” [you say] and “digamos” [let’s say]), temporal modification of verbs, and the use of expressions like “como” [like/as]. **Table 1** shows the distribution of the interviewed population, according to their age group and sex.

Table 1. Distribution of study population (age, sex).

Age Group	Women	Men
22–39 years	4	4
40–59 years	1	0
60 years or older	0	1
Total	5	5

3. Results and Discussion

With the help of the ATLAS.ti software, the statements in which the linguistic resources selected for analysis were mitigated were identified, making it possible to determine the frequency of their use, according to the sample. Two hundred and three (203) contextual fragments showing the use of linguistic resources that meet the conditions for being recognized as mitigators in the strict sense were identified, such as the use of suffixes, especially diminutives; mitigation of an assertion by expressing it in the form of doubt or uncertainty; enunciation made through a verbal person other than the speaker; temporal modification of the verb (specifically, the use of the conditional tense); and use of *de pronto*, *como* and *digamos como*.

The following percentages of the total number of forms studied were obtained: conditional (27.09%); diminutives (11.33%); *como* (19.7); *de pronto* (11.82); and *digamos* (30%). In the case of some of the speakers who were interviewed, the use of *como* [such as], *de pronto* [suddenly], and *digamos* [that is] filler words were identified. The percentages indicating the frequency of use are presented in **Table 2** and discussed in detail in the following sections.

Table 2. Distribution of linguistic strategies studied.

Resource	Quantity	Percentage
<i>digamos</i>	61	30
Conditional	55	27.09
<i>como</i>	40	19.7
<i>de pronto</i>	24	11.82
Diminutives	23	11.33
Total	203	100

3.1. The Use of *Como* for Mitigation

Studies discussing *como* and *como que* as modalizers with mitigating value were consulted^[24]. In the Spanish variety under study, we can find cases in which they are also used as filler words. These forms, almost crutches in certain idiolects, are used recurrently, achieving an effect of approximate meaning and mitigating the character of the statement.

The reference^[25] points to grammaticalized expres-

sions that function as mitigators, almost exclusively in colloquial registers of orality. Further, when applied to sentences, the expressions do not refer to the degree of epistemic certainty given to the statement but serve to soften the locutionary or illocutionary force of statements. In this function as modality markers, they arise from the grammaticalization of their use in domains other than the sentence domain; this explains how they do not function as comparatives. To function as a mitigator, expressions undergo a process of (re)grammaticalization; the comparative meaning derives in an approximative and then mitigative meaning, which is replicated in different domains, such as the adjective, adverbial, and oral according to ^[25].

Please see the following example: una vez ellos se habían graduado y estaban como solos allá; le dijimos préstenos el pensum/ el pensum académico/ nos pusimos a mirarlos y comenzamos arquitectura/ como que nos miramos/ préstenos la otra/; y ella como que se desvanecía// pero le dije mamá/ es que no/ no es/ no es la arquitectura lo que yo quiero/; yo no me acuerdo si en ese momento él estaba buscando trabajo también/ y yo también/ y como que nos topamos y me dijo en ese momento que nos topamos que aquí en la universidad estaban necesitando analistas pero que necesitaban que tuviera especialización; tuve una profesora que en la Normal/ hizo como que yo me aburriera de la condición de querer ser profesora/; a los funcionarios públicos no se nos permite manejar dinero así como tan directamente/.

3.2. The Use of the Conditional for Mitigation

According to the New Grammar of the Spanish Language ^[26], among the different values of the conditional verb tense is the conditional of conjecture—also called probability and epistemic. The rumor conditional, typical of journalistic language, and the mitigation conditional are considered variants. Along the same lines, “The courtesy or mitigation conditional is usually considered a certain type of modal conditional”, as ^[27] has pointed out.

As highlighted in the theoretical framework, a distinction can be made between politeness and mitigation: politeness is focused on the speaker and is used to “express consideration and respect toward the speakers”, according

to ^[28], whereas mitigation is focused on the speaker and “consists of minimizing the illocutionary force of speech acts” ^[28]. “The two types of utterances produce an inference consisting of a request for action: in the first case, the request for action is ‘act in a certain way’ and in the second case, it is ‘accept what has been said.’ We will call the first type politeness conditionals and the second mitigation conditionals”, following ^[27].

The following samples illustrate these ideas: comencé como auxiliar de ingeniero ahí// pero yo no podría decir que ese fue mi primer trabajo/ porque yo comencé desde que me gradué de bachillerato/ lo que pasa es que hice carrera en el banco; si me voy a la parte emocional yo te diría que/ que el haber estudiado ingeniera fue una de las mejores metas que he logrado/; Sí/ sí la recomendaría bastante/ porque tiene varias salidas/ pues ahorita digamos que hay mucho trabajo en parte comercial/ en la parte administrativa/ en todas las empresas necesitan un administrador sea de la clase que sea la empresa; me gustaría montar un negocio de// accesorios; lo importante yo diría que es no dejarse uno decaer ¿sí?; yo creo que los ingenieros tendemos a ser un poco como cuadrículados/ dicen/ ¿sí?/ un poco cuadrículados como un poco metódicos como un poco/ pero/ eso a veces/ digamos que es lo que yo pensaría/ o es mi perfil.

3.3. The Use of Digamos for Mitigation

^[29] points out that the discursive particles used most frequently have a greater positional mobility than others and, therefore, a greater variation in scope; they can appear in the initial, medial, or final position, and their scope is expanded or reduced depending on whether they function at the syntactic, semantic, or pragmatic level. Spanish has different particles and discourse constructions with *decir*; they can be based on a single form (e.g., *digo*, *dicen*, *digamos*) or combined with other elements (e.g., *es decir*, *digo yo*, *ya te digo*, *no digamos*, *que digamos*, *digámoslo así*, *por así decirlo*; according to ^[29].

In the case of *digamos*, ^[29] highlights that the following properties are considered when assigning it to the category of the discursive particle: morphologically, because the verb is in the first person plural and present subjunctive

tense, it has optimal properties for functioning in contexts of pragmatic mitigation and semantic vagueness; syntactically, it usually appears between commas in written texts or between pauses in colloquial conversations, which places its analysis at the supra-oral level because it is not integrated into the general syntactic structure; semantically, it does not modify the propositional content of the segment in which it is inserted, that is, its deletion would not result in an ungrammatical or incomplete formulation but rather in a loss of pragmatic values ranging from approximation to mitigation; and pragmatically, it allows the speaker to make explicit a type of speech marked in its interactive context. This is necessary when it must be made explicit, in some way, that the meaning of the enunciation exceeds the limits of what is said in a literal sense.

In the Spanish variety we are studying, it can also be recognized as a filler word in the case of some speakers. The following are examples: *Sí/ sí la recomendaría bastante/ porque tiene varias salidas/ pues ahorita digamos que hay mucho trabajo en parte comercial/ en la parte administrativa/ en todas las empresas necesitan un administrador sea de la clase que sea la empresa; Pues si me quiero independizar/ pues serviría de mucho/ pues para tener un buen manejo de mi empresa y de las finanzas de/ de pues el negocio/ ¿sí? sin tener otra persona ahorraría también pues digamos/ tendría un ahorro en contratar a una contadora para que me hiciera las cosas/ entonces me gustaría emm/ pues estudiar eso; Ehh/ bueno yo terminé mis estudios secundarios en/ en el 2008/ ehh/ y luego de ahí pues digamos como que no tenía una idea muy clara de qué quería estudiar/ estaba un cómo un poco desorientado/ y decidí pues/ ehh/ quedarme en la finca con mis papás/ eh pues trabajando en la finca y ayudándole a ellos y ya después de / de que digamos que de ese semestre sabático/ pues tomé la decisión de estudiar veterinaria/; yo creo que los ingenieros tendemos a ser un poco como cuadrículados/ dicen/ ¿sí?/ un poco cuadrículados como un poco metódicos como un poco/ pero/ eso a veces/ digamos que es lo que yo pensaría/ o es mi perfil.*

3.4. The Use of De pronto for Mitigation

According to ^[26], this mitigator is used in Colom-

bia as an equivalent of “possibly.” As already stated, the assertion can be downgraded by stating it as a doubt or uncertainty. This study considers that the use of *de pronto* can be associated with the meaning of “possibly” as a mitigator. The following examples serve to illustrate this case: *Si/ empezando si/ y yo de pronto me estaría incluyendo ahí al comienzo/ porque eso es lo duro que uno empieza y le toca regalarse y darse a conocer/; si es una persona que está insegura y de pronto no sabe qué es lo que le gusta pues/ ahí si no se la recomendaría porque hay gente que le gusta pues no sé/ como dicen ganarse el dinero fácil; ellos piensan que de pronto las cosas son muy fáciles, pero de pronto cuando las cosas ya se les/ cuando uno se enfrenta al trabajo/ al campo a la realidad las cosas son muy diferentes/ porque no solo el conocimiento/ también es la gente a la que uno se enfrenta// porque uno siempre tiene que lidiar con los maestros de la obra con los ingenieros con los de ambiental ¿sí? Con los mismos obreros; si el profesor por algún motivo no pudo ayudarle a solucionar el problema entonces deben acudir de pronto a la decanatura; y si de pronto hubiera algún inconveniente con el clima laboral hay un comité de convivencia del cual yo hago parte/ yo hago parte del comité de convivencia de la universidad entonces/ esa solicitudes deben elevarse a ese comité// cuando hay de pronto problemas en el clima laboral digamos que lo que pasa es que esos son temas más complicado porque cuando hay problemas entre funcionarios/ la gente no tiende hablar mucho de eso/ por miedo/ por muchos motivos pero si hay una instancia en la se debe enviar eso que es al comité de convivencia.*

3.5. The Use of the Diminutive to Mitigate

Diminutives in contexts in which they diminish the importance of a person or thing have been equated with mitigators or demeaners. They can also be used to reduce the effect of words that are perceived as uncomfortable or inconvenient or to diminish the degree of the quality denoted by certain adjectives. The following examples illustrate this kind of mitigation: *me dijo el ingeniero no está ahorita pero si quiere deje la hoja de vida// yo le dije no/ yo prefiero hablar con ella porque si yo dejo la hoja de vida eso termina por ahí dando vueltas en el escritorio y*

nunca la van a ver; y pues aparte del trabajo que uno hace siempre le queda como tiempo de/ de hacer otras cositas;/ no/ les parece muy bonita la carrera y que eso es así bonito/ y que eso es ir/ que con la camarita/ ellos le dicen camarita/ se llama estación//.

Si/ es que leer en el computador es complicado/ claro uno se levanta ya a las 6 o 7 de la noche que se termina la jornada y termina uno ya con los ojos como tú dices un poquito más pequeños/ ya como rojitos/ como que uno ya no quiere más el computador.

allá inicié mis primeros pasitos como profesora/ allá hice mis primeros escalones/.

Te nombran y te dicen: “Esta es tu escuela/ hazla funcionar/ si te dan poquitos recursos o nada/ igual te van a calificar porque lo supervisores están bajando constantemente a mirar resultados/ sin mirar que ellos no den mucho/ o muchos elementos o formas de que se puedan conseguir los resultados.”

fui condecorada como mejor proyecto para prescolar y mejor proyecto como creativo en la enseñanza de la lengua materna/ son cositas que uno no cuenta mucho pero que me hacen sentir orgullosa de lo que soy y de lo que me falta todavía por dar.

4. Conclusions

This study identified several linguistic attenuation strategies characteristic of the variety of Colombian Spanish spoken in the AMB. The most commonly used strategies in this region include the use of the conditional tense, diminutive suffixes, and the use of “como” (like/as), “de pronto” (perhaps), and “digamos” (let’s say). These reflect how speakers in the AMB soften their statements and adjust the illocutionary force, showing how attenuation operates in their everyday oral communication. This confirms that such structures are regularly employed as attenuation mechanisms in this dialectal variety.

This study presents some limitations: it was based on a small sample of 10 interviews which, although random, may not reflect all the attenuation strategies of the AMB; the research focused solely on the pragmatic level, without considering sociolinguistic variables such as age, gender, or socioeconomic status, which could influence the use of these

strategies; and, by using an oral corpus, it did not explore the attenuation forms present in written communication.

Future research should expand on these findings by analyzing a larger and more diverse sample to validate and refine the categorization of attenuation strategies in the AMB. Additionally, examining how sociolinguistic factors may influence the use of attenuation strategies within this community would be beneficial. Comparative studies could shed light on the extent to which these features are distinctive or shared, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of attenuation as a pragmatic phenomenon and helping to outline the unique characteristics of Spanish spoken in Bucaramanga within the broader spectrum of dialectal variation in Spanish.

Author Contributions

The contributions were made as follows: Conceptualization: R.A.B.G. and M.M.M.C.; methodology: M.M.M.C.; software usage: M.M.M.C.; validation, formal analysis, drafting, review, and editing: M.M.M.C. and R.A.B.G.; project administration and funding acquisition: M.M.M.C. All authors have read and approved the published version of the manuscript.

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Institutional Review Board Statement

Ethical review and approval were not required for this study because it does not involve personal data. It is based on interviews conducted for an oral language corpus.

Informed Consent Statement

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects interviewed for the study.

Data Availability Statement

The data will be available in the Papyrus repository

once the study is published. <https://www.ucc.edu.co/biblioteca/Paginas/papyrus.aspx>.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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