

MODIFICATION OF SPEECH ACTS: AGGRAVATION AND MITIGATION

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Abstract: This paper analyses the phenomenon of aggravation in language. By aggravation I mean a speaker's more or less intentional use of modes of expression that may render his speech more risky for his own or the addressee's face as compared with a more neutral way of performing the same speech act. Here I especially raise the following points and questions:

- a) *aggravation* vis à vis mitigation: a continuum or two different phenomena? Do they operate on the same or on two different scales?
- b) the term '*aggravated/-ing*' is not to be equated with 'face-threatening' or 'conflictual' or 'dispreferred' or 'rude'.
- c) *aggravation* (and mitigation): illocutionary or perlocutionary in character?

Keywords: discourse analysis, pragmatics, modification of illocutionary strength, mitigation, intensification.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper concerns an area globally definable as modification of speech acts, i.e. the ways in which the intensity of the illocutionary force of an act is weakened or strengthened. Mitigation and aggravation are central phenomena, in this field.

Pertinent models for the analysis of speech act modification are Searle & Vanderveken (1985), Brown & Levinson (1987), Bazzanella & Caffi & Sbisà (1991), Dressler & Merlini Barbaresi

(1994) and Merlini Barbaresi (1989, 1993). But I also draw upon more specific analyses concerning English, such as, among others, Labov & Fanshel (1977), Fraser (1980), Lachenicht (1980), McLaughlin & Cody & O'Hair (1983), Holmes (1984), Thomas (1985) Lakoff (1989), Blum-Kulka & House & Kasper (1989), Caffi (1990), Grimshaw (1990), Benoit & Benoit (1990, 1991).

My previous work in this area has concerned modification in both directions but my largest study, on diminutives and other alteratives, especially focuses on downgrading of intensity and on mitigation. The focus here is on aggravation. In particular, I attempt to achieve some theoretical understanding of the notion of aggravation and state its right to be dealt with as a phenomenon of its own and not as the negative counterpart of mitigation or other similar phenomena.

The following is a sample of aggravated language, the analysis preceding each example is not systematic but can provide an idea of the linguistic means employed and the effects obtained:

1. [sarcastic, exaggerated contrast between signans and signatum; strong irony in anomalous semantic collocation with abstract noun *rationality* (*going down the drain and swimming around*) and in anomalous morphological coinage *turdology*, with classical suffix for a very trivial base]

BEL: Really? Is there a rational explanation to this?

ANDY: Rationality went down the drain years ago... all that found rationality of yours is swimming about in the waste disposal turdology.

2. [ambiguous use of familiarity markers: *mate*, also *old darling* in 6 and *boyo* in 13.

a: as a means for lowering distance and sounding more direct and /or as a means for debasing addressee; b: as a mitigator. Use of interjections: *for Christ's sake*]

PETE: Make yourself useful, mate, for Christ's sake..you want to listen to your friend, mate.

3. [impositive deontic modals *have to* ; metadiscursive reference to repetition *how many times...*; bad language *fucking*, “extremer” *all*; increase in aggravation in the course of the action]

TERRY: You just have to shut up and mind your own business, how many times do I have to tell you? ... all you have to do is shut up and mind your own fucking business. How many more times do I have to tell you?

- 4.-5. [aggressive discourse marker *Look*, insistent repetition]

DOUGLAS: ... Look., let me tell you something. We want peace (repeated 3 times).

Look, I don't want him to stay here.

6. [familiarity marker *old darling*, “extremer” *totally*]

TERRY: What you've got wrong there, old darling, what you've got totally wrong ...

7. [ruling out of official addressee and 3rd person reference *she* adopted instead]

DUSTY: Does anyone know what's happened to my brother Jimmy?

TERRY: I don't know what it is. Perhaps she's deaf or perhaps my voice isn't strong enough. What do you think folks?

8. [“extremer” *no idea*, *simply no*; insistent repetition]

TERRY: You have no idea. You don't know what his position is. You have no simply idea. You simply have no idea.

9. [bad language *bloody*; repetition]

DUSTY: ...He'll send me flowers in the morning...

TERRY: No. He bloody won't. Oh, no, he bloody won't.

10. [exaggerated negative meaning applied to the referent (anomalous signans/signatum relation)
nymphomaniac, slut]

LIZ: I could have cut her throat, that nymphomaniac slut.

11. [a) deontic modality, refusal of obligation; "extremer"]

A: What time is it? B: a) Why should I know? / I have no idea.

B: b) Too late for a coffee! / I haven't got a watch, sorry.

12. [repetition across turns by same speaker]

a) VLADIMIR: They make a noise like feathers. ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

VLADIMIR: Like ashes. ESTRAGON: Like leaves.

b) VLADIMIR: Worse than the pantomime. ESTRAGON: The circus.

VLADIMIR: The music-hall. ESTRAGON: The circus.

13. [bad language *bloody*; exaggerated negative meaning applied to referent; ironic repetition in rebuttal *Like it!*]

JIMMY: I'm getting hungry.

ALISON: Oh no, not already!

CLIFF: He's a bloody pig.

JIMMY: I'm not a pig. I just like food

CLIFF: Like it! You're like a sexual maniac - only with you it's food. You'll end up in the News of the World, boyo, you wait....

By "extremer" I intend an element which obtains extreme upward and downward values along a scale of intensity (maximization or minimization), like *at all, not in the least, totally (wrong), always (late), etc.*

I here disregard various factors that tend to relativize the degree of modification performed by aggravators, including vocal indicators - prosody, stress and voice pitch and quality. I consider these factors as variables having the power to move the intensity of aggravation up and down a gradient. This random sample easily shows that in the language there are available means for expressing aggravation and that these means recur with a certain regularity in discourse. Still, aggravation, unlike mitigation, is hardly recognized as a phenomenon in its own right in linguistics.

2. AGGRAVATION IN THE LITERATURE

Mitigation has acquired an institutional, official stance in verbal behaviour, at least in English. Its role is clearly defined by analysts: for example, it is recognized as being a preferential procedure for complying with politeness principles and more generally, it is ethnographically valued as a civilized, non-impositive, cautious and non-sanctionable way of behaving in interactional discourse. In the language, there is a recognized set of mitigators, namely hedges, discourse markers, modal particles, disclaimers, gambits, tag questions, and others.

This is not the case with aggravation. The phenomenon of aggravation is variably hinted at in the literature, but, as far as I know, there is no independent, systematic treatment of it. In particular, what is still lacking is a theoretically motivated study of aggravators. Thomas (1985) is moving in this direction when she describes what she calls 'aggravated' upshots and reformulations, that is responses by a dominant speaker who paraphrases the subordinate's utterance by aggravating it (he

puts offensive or 'snarl' words into the subordinate's mouth, much beyond the intentions of the subordinate speaker).

As a phenomenon, aggravation is either conceived of negatively as the opposite pole of mitigation (e.g. Labov and Fanshel 1977; McLaughlin et al. 1983)- a sort of abstraction derived from the notion of mitigation (Leech 1983) - or it is conflated with other phenomena, like conflictual speech acts, face threatening character of speech acts, dispreferredness and rudeness, and is subsumed under these headings (Grimshaw 1990).

I here try to challenge these theoretical positions and propose a different description of aggravation vis à vis mitigation.. The aim is to obtain an unbiased approach to the phenomenon.. This procedure is in line with Kerbrat-Orecchioni's (1997), when she criticizes Brown and Levinson's (1987) pessimistic and unilateral treatment of the phenomenon of Face Threatening Acts, and postulates instead the symmetrical and independent existence of what she calls Face Enhancing Acts.

3. AGGRAVATION: AN ELUSIVE PHENOMENON

The phenomenon of aggravation is prototypically relevant in interactional discourse and has to do with face work (Goffman 1967; Brown & Levinson 1987). From this perspective I propose the following definition:

By aggravation (various degrees of it), we can provisionally mean a speaker's more or less intentional ("rational attempt" in Lachenicht 1980:607) use of modes of expression that may render his speech more risky for his own or the addressee's face. This implies that the speaker either wants to be provocative or at least that he is indifferent to his potentially sanctionable behaviour and to a conflictual perlocutionary sequel to his speech. We must also accommodate here a frequent correlate on the speaker's side, namely heightened emotion, such as irritation, impatience, and even anger and rage, which may be a bias to the notion of intentionality/rationality.

This sociological definition describes the speaker's motivations and behaviour rather than the linguistic phenomenon. Criteria for actually identifying the phenomenon will be proposed later on. But before trying a description, it is necessary to overcome some theoretical difficulties, with the view of clearing up what I consider a major misunderstanding.

The first objection I move is against conflating the notion of aggravation in language and that of conflict talk or rather conflictual speech acts (Grimshaw 1990). This is typically the position of Labov & Fanshel (1977), among others. Aggravation, like mitigation, in fact, is not a speech act, it is a regulative discursive operation which may affect any type of speech acts. It is preferentially associated with conflict talk but not necessarily (see example 6). It may be initiative or responsive. It may mirror a stable conflictual relationship between speakers (see 12) or may be occasioned in and limited to a single specific speech situation or even portion of it, as in (1). It may cause a conflictual perlocutionary sequel but not necessarily (see example 12).

Challenging speech acts like insult, disapproval, criticism, contempt, ridicule, disagreement, irreverence, recriminations, etc, are prototypically expressed with linguistic means that are generally recognized as aggravated (or aggravating) language and may exhibit various degrees of aggravation, but they may also be expressed with mere recourse to an ontologically negative propositional content. Compare Terry's aggravated response in (9) *No. He bloody won't* repeated

twice with simple denying *No. He won't*. The speech act is the same and is challenging in both cases.

A second type of conflation to be found in the literature is between aggravation and face-threatening character and dispreferredness. All classes of speech acts may be aggravated to the point of becoming conflictual and face-threatening under certain conditions of use, even those acts which, before modification, are neutral as to face effect, as in (11). In particular, I don't agree with Labov & Fanshel (1977:63), when, in the class of directives, they distinguish between mitigated directives, like petitions, pleas and suggestions and "unmitigated or aggravated" directives, like orders, commands and demands. Surely, there are aggravated suggestions (see 2 or compare 3 with a more neutral *I would say no more, if I were you*) or mitigated orders, but, more importantly, there are aggravated orders (example 4). What makes aggravation a phenomenon in its own right is precisely the fact that one can aggravate the potential negative character of a face-threatening act further and further. Similarly, the degree of dispreferredness in responses (refusals, denials, unpleasant news, rebuttals, etc.) may be finely and amply modified along a scale of aggravation (see 8 and 11-a vs. 11-b). But even Face Enhancing Acts (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1997) can be aggravated through exaggeration, flattery, patent insincerity, etc.

A third type of conflation is between aggravation and rudeness or impoliteness. This is consistent with viewing aggravation as the opposite pole of mitigation (cf. Benoit & Benoit 1990). A consequence of this perspective is that, at least in English, aggravation is seen as starting with :

1) a lack of mitigating devices where mitigation is socially/culturally required (Lakoff 1989), or
 2) improper use (ironic/sarcastic or incompetent) of mitigating devices (cf. the notion of "ironic rudeness" in Haverkate 1990). Interesting, in this concern, is the investigation carried out by Knapp-Potthoff (1992) on what she calls 'secondhand politeness', concerning mitigation reduction in discourses reported by translators/interpreters (reported speech). According to native informants, the removal of mitigating devices contained in the original made the new texts sound markedly less polite or even rude.

Semiotically, this is an interesting phenomenon, highly marked, as expected, because there is a certain content-signatum (the speaker's meant aggravation) which has either no expression-signans (an absentia on the surface level), or signantia (mitigating devices) which come to signify something opposite in meaning and function.

At this first stage of aggravation, it is also problematic to analyse the type of modification performed on the speech act. Which component of the illocutionary force (Searle's conception) gets aggravated? Should we expect modification on the same dimensions or components that normally get modified by the presence of mitigated devices? Unfortunately for the analyst, things are not so nicely symmetrical. Another difficulty would be to define the neutral point in a continuum mitigation/aggravation.

Surely aggravation is not a phenomenon in absentia only, negatively conceived of on the basis of its opposite. Like mitigation, it involves modification of forces and this implies conceiving of it as a gradable rather than binary value. We can always expect modalities aimed at moving the value further up this stage, i.e. the stage of aggravation as a lack of mitigation. Gradability can be easily checked in (3), (6) and (8).

4. AGGRAVATION VIS À VIS MITIGATION

The final point I would like to make concerns the relation between mitigation and aggravation. Mitigation, we said, is an important regulative practice in interactional discourse when face work is involved and is a preferential mode to comply with politeness principles. Compliance may be induced by ethical ideals or just by an "irrational, neurotic" (Zimmermann 1978:607, as quoted in Held 1992) form of fear of disharmony, sanctions, reciprocation.

Held (1992), in defining the state of the art in politeness research, witnesses a generalized conception of politeness as a social super-norm, bound to affect the linguistic system from outside. According to this view, the power of the norm would be responsible for the ritualistic (Goffman 1967) mastering of politeness. More importantly for us, its deterministic force would be responsible for the conventionalized, formulaic, routinary character of the language used in the practice of politeness. These recurrent patterns of linguistic behaviour are to be specifically learnt, they are part of a social and communicative competence. This would explain the emergence in the language of an inventory of conventional forms clearly and specifically suited for expressing politeness, and, in second order, for expressing mitigation.

Now, can we say the same of aggravation? Is aggravation a procedure for complying with some superordinate social norm? Are there in the language routinary, formulaic expressions to be learnt to comply with it? This is hardly tenable. I don't agree, here, with Lachenicht (1980), who, in order to analyse aggravating language, adopts a negative counterpart of Brown and Levinson's politeness strategies as a heuristic criterion.

What we can safely say, perhaps, is that the potential conflict inherent in social interaction sometimes is not avoided or is specifically pursued for some personal (selfish?) or interactional reason (emotion or exercise of power, or aggressive mode to achieve goals, etc.). We cannot admit a deterministic power of conflict. What is called "the tyranny of conflict" (Lavandera 1989) rather determines "remedial acts". Avoidance / resolution of conflict becomes the unmarked social option and conflict the marked one. The language of conflict is only functionally determined, is not a pre-patterned, routinary inventory of forms to be independently learnt to comply with a mandatory social convention. This explains the difficulty of identifying expressions having a conventional aggravation function and allows prediction of their marked character as compared to mitigation devices. This is one argument against conceiving of mitigation and aggravation as two poles of the same continuum.

A second argument may be the following. Mitigation as well as aggravation are difficult to locate along the process of producing discourse. Mitigation is explicitly defined as an anticipatory strategy, (e.g. by Fraser 1980 and Edmonson and House 1981, Zimmermann 1984: in Held 1992), but substantially it is conceived of as perlocutionary in nature, addressee-oriented, an "anticipation of possible recipient reactions". It is aimed at modifying perlocutionary effects, at pre-empting the risk of possible negative outcomes. To be more precise, mitigation rests on the contractual double-faced principle of minimization of self and maximization of others. Mitigation contributes to minimization of reciprocal costs and maximization of reciprocal benefits. Its anticipatory character is in line with viewing mitigation as determined by the strong social norm of politeness. We also have traces of this anticipatory character in the language, in formulae preceding the propositional content

expression (e.g. *I wouldn't like to sound intrusive, but...*, or *If I'm allowed to, I would suggest..., sorry to bother you, but...*, etc.).

Aggravation is more ambiguous in this regard. First of all, since it is not derived from a social norm, it lacks the contractual, conventional character typical of mitigation. It definitely appears speaker-centered. The speaker is strongly committed to achieving his own goals (see examples 4 and 5). Such goals might even benefit the addressee but the speaker does not seek his cooperation for achieving them (see 2). The speaker's indifference of the addressee very often is specifically expressed in his discourse, for example in (7), where Terry rules out the ratified addressee, referring to her as a third person. Sometimes the speaker's indifference may cause a block in the interaction, as in (1) and (8).

Anticipators, like *I want to be frank with you...*, *You won't like what I'm going to tell you, but...* etc., anticipate some dispreferred content for the addressee but they are used to warn the addressee, to prepare him. They actually function as mitigators rather than aggravators.

Is there a rationale behind the practice of aggravation or is aggravation just the untamed expression of compulsive emotions (strong desires included)? This description could explain the great fortune of aggravated language among children and youths, whose use of "bad language" (a modality of aggravated language) is well-known.

This interpretation of aggravation is reductive, though. If we look at example (1), we may witness the subtle, highly-controlled use of aggravating devices, i.e. the irony in the lexical choices and the very elaborate coinage, *turdology*.

Another fallacy is trying to elucidate the relationship between mitigation and aggravation by equating this opposition to that of attenuation and intensification. For example van Djik (1984) refers to "emphasizing and its converse mitigation".

In example (1) we may observe how aggravation is not necessarily based on a semantic mechanism of intensification or amplification nor rendered with emphatic rhetorical devices. Irony, understatement, litotes may often occur to express aggravation as well as mitigation..

A further argument in favour of an independent treatment of the two phenomena is the following. Modification of force is not an overall phenomenon, it applies to individual components of the illocutionary force and operates on various dimensions and parameters, which change according to speech acts. An utterance may exhibit concomitant mitigators and aggravators which compete in terms of perlocutionary effect. These generally affect different components of the speech act (Searle's notion, 1985, and Bazzanella et al. 1991).

In (13), for example, the diminutive *boyo* acts as a social variable, it emphasises social closeness and thus relativizes the effect of aggravation, whereas the various aggravators signal the speaker's strong assertive commitment as well as his inner states.

Finally, something can be said towards a positive and independent description of aggravation.

A first criterion for an independent analysis of aggravation is the following: a recurrent feature and perhaps a motivation of aggravated language is its multifaceted illocutionary potential. Aggravated language is capable of contributing autonomous expressive (e.g. in 10 and 13), verdictive (e.g. in 1, 6, 10, 13), directive (e.g. in 2 and 4) and commissive (e.g. in 13) forces to the speech act in which it is involved. Its contribution is first of all at the level of illocution rather than perlocution. It should be pointed out here that I intend aggravation in terms of *aggravated* (Benoit & Benoit 1990) rather than *aggravating* language (Lachenicht 1980).

For mitigation, the picture is different. Its main objective is to affect perlocutions rather than illocutions, i.e. to reduce conflictual perlocutionary sequels. Mitigation does not substantially change the illocutionary status of the utterance.

A second criterion for investigating the nature of aggravation concerns the speaker's attitude. In line with its non-routinary mode of expression, aggravation is capable of expressing speaker's meaning more explicitly than mitigation. In this sense, aggravation better than mitigation, contributes to the compliance of Grice's maxim of perspicuousness. The frequent, so-called masking character of conventional polite forms does not belong to aggravation.

Within the same area and in line with the above argument, it would be interesting to try and elucidate the general pragmatic orientation of the discourse. At this first stage of analysis, aggravated language appears speaker-oriented, whereas mitigation seems addressee-oriented. This difference may be full of consequences at the level of the interaction.

By way of concluding, we can emphasize the appropriateness of our investigation. There is room for viewing aggravation as a phenomenon of its own rather than derive a conception of it from its counterpart or opposite pole, mitigation, or other similar phenomena (e.g. the continuum intensification / attenuation).

Yet, finding a locus and a teleological motivation for aggravation, or giving an independent (not circular) definition of it requires a more systematic analysis, concerning: 1) the linguistic expressions used, to check possible regularities, 2) the semantic and pragmatic mechanisms whereby aggravation is obtained, 3) the illocutionary modifications contributed and 4) the pragmatic effects produced (perlocutionary and interactional).

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