ON THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ATTENUATION, DISCOURSE PARTICLES AND POSITION

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ABSTRACT

This chapter aims to provide evidence for the direct interaction between the meaning of discourse particles and their situation with respect to discourse units. Changes in position bring corresponding changes in meaning and, more importantly for our purpose, they may trigger or inhibit attenuation. Examples taken from the Diccionario de partículas discursivas del español (DPDE, www.dpde.es) provide evidence for the existence of some discourse particles whose core meaning is mitigating, and some others where an attenuating meaning arises in particular contexts. The former particles are prototypically attenuating, but their position with respect to discourse is determinant for them to finally work as such; the latter, by contrast, may develop a contextual, peripheral attenuating meaning if their position in discourse is changed.

1. INTRODUCTION

The term attenuation accounts for a particular argumentative strategy aiming to get other people’s agreement or acceptance (including social acceptance). It consists in a downgrading of what is said and of the fact of saying it: of what is said, because utterances containing this strategy

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1 The terms attenuation, mitigation and hedge will all be considered synonyms.
become blurred or less explicit; of the fact of saying it, because attenuation allows speakers to soften the strength of their actions and intentions. Attenuating or mitigating devices are the verbal tactics used to reach the intended attenuation. (Fraser, 1980, 1999; Caffi, 1999, 2007; Briz, 2005; Briz and Montañez, 2008; for a particular study on no sé, see Schneider, 2007):

(1) P: Carlos no sé es un poco raro
   ‘P: Carlos, I don’t know, he’s a little weird’

In (1), P’s pretended ignorance, expressed by no sé ‘I don’t know’, mitigates or diminishes the strength of both the act of stating and the statement, that is, the weirdness of Carlos (this last role can be played by the quantifier poco as well). Attenuation saves the face of the speaker, allowing him or her to avoid responsibility.

In (2), the use of bueno, insofar as it is a concessive prelude, downgrades the following opinion, which contrasts with the one stated by the interlocutor L and, hence, disagrees with her. The attenuation, thus, is also of a polite nature: it watches over the other’s face:

(2) L: a mí me ha encantado la conferencia
   S: bueno/ yo esperaba otra cosa
   ‘L: I loved the lecture
   S: well/ I was expecting something else’

Finally, in (3), by using a lo mejor, the speaker in E2 is trying to mitigate (again, in a polite way) the disagreement and the conflict provoked by E1’s previous assertion. Thus, the speaker’s face is preserved:

(3) E1: la culpa puede ser de los dos
   C1: no me digas que soy yo culpable de nada
   E2: quiero decir que a lo mejor tú tampoco estás actuando bien
   ‘E1: both of you can be blamed for it
   C1: Surely you are not telling me I’m guilty of anything
   E2: I mean that perhaps you are not acting properly either’

Here, C1 interprets E1’s utterance as face-threatening and, consequently, C1 reacts showing disagreement. In order to avoid tension, E1 must restore harmony by using a reformulation strategy, introducing the connective quiero decir ‘I mean’ first, and reinforcing it with the use of the hedge a lo mejor ‘perhaps’, thus attenuating the strength or harshness of the utterance.

Three facts can be noted in the light of the above-mentioned examples:

(i) The first fact has to do with the various ways of understanding attenuation (Puga Larraín, 1997; Bravo, 1999, 2001; Caffi, 1999; Hernández Flores, 2002; Albelda, 2004; Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 2004; Álvarez, 2005):