

MARITAL STATUS AND THE USE OF MITIGATION AND HESITATION  
AMONG MINNESOTA WORKING WOMEN

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Mitigation and hesitation are two linguistic features that have been commonly associated with women's speech. Of course, these features appear in all speech: when we are unsure of our knowledge about a subject or when we are unsure how to continue a statement, we use terms such as "I think" to indicate doubt or "you know" to allow time to prepare the rest of the utterance. As a result, the semantic force of the statement is somewhat dissipated, which the listener, consciously or unconsciously, takes into account. According to Lakoff 1975, however, these features are particularly common in women's speech. She claims that they function as hedges to mitigate impoliteness, that they signal a doubt about knowledge on the speaker's part, and, most importantly, that they act "as an apology for making an assertion at all," even when the speaker is certain that her assertion is true (54). Thus, Lakoff's introspective analysis argues that women's speech often emphasizes the hesitancy and insecurity of the speaker.

This general claim, however, needs to be tested against specific data: all women may not hesitate and mitigate at the same rate. Moreover, since speakers do not necessarily hedge for the same reasons, context must also be accounted for. Utterances like "I don't know" can signal either a genuine doubt about knowledge or express personal insecurity on the part of the speaker. Therefore, it is important to determine not only frequencies of mitigation and hesitation but also their functions.

In order to examine this thesis, we studied two groups of women who differ only according to marital status. Each group consists of three, white, middle class, educated, native Minnesota, white collar working women. The women in the first group are married, work as editors at TV Guide magazine, and are between the ages of 26 and 32. The women in the second group are single, work as library assistants at the University of Minnesota library, and are between the ages of 24 and 26. The two groups' jobs are typical of white collar jobs for women: salaries are middle range--\$13-\$15,000, they involve routine work with detail, and there is not much chance for promotion. The working environment consists largely of women with men in management positions. In each group the women are friends both in and outside of work.

Since we have both worked with these groups in the past (Pat at TV Guide, and Jean at the library), we gathered data by taping casual, spontaneous conversations. We each taped our groups on

three separate occasions, each of us gathering a total of at least one hour. The tapings were made at work, during coffee breaks, and, the most lengthy ones, at lunch. From our previous experience with these women, we know that these are typical conversations--about work, soap operas, families, current events, etc.

After transcribing the tapes, we listed and counted the mitigations and hesitations and then compared the two groups. Table 1 shows the overall findings:

Table 1.

	Married Women	Single Women
Overall Utterances	395	342
% of hesitations and mitigations	25%	46%
# of hesitations	46	60
# of mitigations	51	97

In 395 utterances the married women mitigate and hesitate 25% of the time while in 342 utterances the single women mitigate and hesitate 46% of the time, almost double the amount. Breaking the data down into hesitations and mitigations shows exactly where the difference lies. The total number of hesitations (46 for the married women and 60 for the single women) shows the single women hesitating only slightly more often than the married women. Both groups are speaking informally, and hesitations are a natural part of informal conversation. The total number of mitigations, on the other hand, shows a marked difference: 51 mitigations for the married women and 97 for the single women. The single women as a group mitigate at nearly twice the rate of the married women. Table 2, listing the frequency of hesitations and mitigations per utterance for each informant, shows that the group rate is born out in the individual rates.

Table 2. Individual Frequency per Utterance

Speaker	Hesitations	Mitigations	Overall
Married			
A	4%	12%	15%
B	12%	15%	27%
C	13%	11%	24%
Single			
A	13%	22%	35%
B	23%	29%	52%
C	17%	38%	55%

No single individual throws the group rate off. The single women, individually, mitigate at nearly twice the rate of the married women.

In order to determine exactly where and why this difference in the level of mitigations occurs, we categorized the mitigations as to type and then examined them in context. First, we distinguished three different types of mitigators: adverbials, disclaimers, and personal qualifiers. Adverbial mitigators, such as "probably," "maybe," and "kind of," are words or phrases that suggest a statement could be true, or that something is like something else: they weigh possibilities. For example, a married woman says, "You'll probably miss it if you don't get it now." Table 3 reveals that, just as in the case of the hesitations, the two groups do not differ markedly in their use of adverbials, with the married women using 19 and the single women 26.

Table 3.

Adverbial Mitigators	Married Women	Single Women
	19	26

With the use of the disclaimer, however, a significant difference between the married and the single women begins to emerge. Disclaimers, such as "or something," "and whatever," and "and everything," are phrases added on to the end of a statement that allow the listener the option of adding to, correcting, or disregarding the opening assertion of the speaker's statement. In Lakoff's words, they could be used "as an apology for making an assertion at all." For example, a single woman says, "When I went into the hospital that one time and they made all those mistakes and everything in my treatment." Table 4 shows that the single women use disclaimers more than twice as often as the married women.

Table 4.

Disclaimers	Married Women	Single Women
	8	19

Table 5 then breaks down the occurrence of the most commonly used disclaimer, "or something," into times and percentages for individual speaker per utterance (see next page). Individually, as well as as a group, the single women use disclaimers more often than the married women.

For both groups, however, the most frequently used type of mitigator is the personal qualifier, "I don't know," "I think," and "I guess." Personal qualifiers use the first person in order to express doubt about knowledge or insecurity about making a

statement. For example, a single woman, despite her anger over the cost of a hospital stay, and although she remembers it vividly, mitigates about both her knowledge and emotion, saying, "I guess it wasn't so bad. I think it was about, I think the whole bill was like \$800 for one stupid day." In the married women's conversation, when a speaker describes how she feels about going back to work after a three-month maternity leave, this example occurs: "I think everybody goes through it, it's always at least one month, I think it's the middle month, it's always, I'm not going back. Forget it. I'm not leaving this baby."

Table 5. Use of the disclaimer "or something" per utterance

Speaker	# per utterance	Overall %
Married		
A	0/26*	0%
B	2/214	1%
C	2/155	1%
Single		
A	4/126	3%
B	7/126	6%
C	2/88	2%

\*Married speaker A participated in only one conversation.

Table 6.

Personal Qualifiers	Married Women	Single Women
	24	51

As you can see in Table 6, while the married women use 24 personal qualifiers, the single women use 51, slightly over twice as many; Tables 7a and b provide examples of the frequency of such utterances for each informant.

Table 7a. Use of the personal qualifier "I don't know"

Speaker	# per utterance	Overall %
Married		
A	0/26	0%
B	4/214	2%
C	6/155	4%
Single		
A	3/126	2%
B	2/126	2%
C	8/88	9%

## Mitigation and Hesitation

Table 7b. Use of the personal qualifier "I think"

Speaker	# per utterance	Overall %
Married		
A	1/26	4%
B	4/214	2%
C	3/155	2%
Single		
A	6/126	5%
B	5/126	4%
C	8/88	9%

Thus, most of the difference between the single and the married women in the overall use of mitigations occurs because the single women use significantly more disclaimers and personal qualifiers.

Of course, use of mitigations does not necessarily indicate insecurity about making an assertion. Mitigators are often used in polite speech and can even be used sarcastically. But when looking at the contexts in which disclaimers and personal qualifiers occur in these conversations we found uses of them in polite or sarcastic contexts infrequent, as Table 8 shows.

Table 8. Contexts of Disclaimers and Personal Qualifiers

Context	Married Women	Single Women
Politeness	2	3
Sarcasm	1	3
Doubt about Knowledge	18	37
Insecurity	11	30

Since the two groups consist of coworkers and friends who see each other almost daily, and the tapings were made in informal settings, politeness would not be as necessary as in a formal setting. For both groups the most frequent uses of disclaimers and personal qualifiers occur in contexts involving doubts about knowledge, or insecurities about expressing personal opinions, asserting knowledge, or discussing one's private life. But the single women show more doubts and insecurities than the married women by wide margins. There are twice as many doubts about knowledge (37 as compared to 18 for the married group) and, more interestingly, nearly three times as many insecurities about expressing a personal opinion or talking about themselves (30 as compared to 11).

For both groups, doubts about knowledge occur when the speaker is recalling past events, speculating about other persons or events, or discussing a subject that requires specialized knowledge which the group knows the speaker does not possess. For example, a married woman, when asked where someone is moving, answers, "East Coast or New York or something." The disclaimer, "or something," expresses her doubt about her knowledge of the plans of someone she does not know very well. In a similar use of a personal qualifier, a married woman says, "I think he's sending out resumes." The single women use disclaimers and qualifiers in much the same way. For example, one speaker, recalling a magazine article, says, "When she met that one weirdo guy . . . he was Nicky Hilton or something," and another says about a coworker, "I don't know. I guess they're going to live together." Thus, the married and single women express doubts about knowledge on similar issues; the fact that the single women express them twice as frequently as the married women points to the different tendencies in choice of conversational subject matter in the two groups. The married women talk more frequently about personal reactions to work and about their families. They have little reason to doubt their knowledge on such topics. The single women, however, steer away from such topics and focus on more impersonal subjects such as TV programs and magazine articles. Therefore, they frequently have more reason to doubt their knowledge of the subject under discussion.

It is also interesting to note that disclaimers and personal qualifiers can be used together in the same utterance, which would heighten the hearer's sense of the speaker's doubt or insecurity. A single woman expresses her doubt about knowledge of an address by saying, "I think she said it was 871 or something." In another instance, a single woman signals her lack of specialized knowledge in this way: "I don't know. Can X-rays show up if it's like a muscle problem or something?" While the use of one mitigator might indicate a legitimate doubt about one's omniscience, using more than one unnecessarily reemphasizes the doubtful nature of the utterance, thus calling attention to the speaker's insecurity as well as to her lack of knowledge. This tendency to pile up mitigators in a single utterance also contributes to the high number of doubts about knowledge in the single women's speech (See Table 9, next page).

For our purposes, the most interesting use of disclaimers and personal qualifiers appears in contexts that reveal the speaker's insecurities. For the married women this usually occurs when a speaker is discussing a personally embarrassing topic or when a speaker is directly questioned or challenged about her opinion. For example, a married woman says, "And after that she told X that it was a pity that he was married to me. He didn't, she didn't see what he and I had in common. I don't know--something like that. and if he weren't, if I, if X didn't work with me she'd make a play for him anyway or something like that." Here, two uses of the

disclaimer "something like that" and one use of the personal qualifier "I don't know" emphasize the touchy nature of the subject matter and the insecurity the speaker feels in recalling it and sharing it with her audience.

Table 9. # of Doubly Mitigated Statements

Speaker	# per utterance	Overall %
Married		
A	0/26	0%
B	4/214	2%
C	3/155	2%
Single		
A	5/126	4%
B	5/126	4%
C	7/88	8%

In another instance, a strong personal opinion about work is questioned and, as a result, the speaker mitigates her opinion: Speaker A: "I don't mind the [printing] plant. It's the people I go with that I mind." Speaker B: "I hate the plant." Speaker A: "Why do you hate it so much?" Speaker B: "I don't know. I don't like that kind of pressure; I don't like working like that." Speaker B obviously does know why she hates the printing plant (the pressure and the type of work done there), but she feels insecure about directly contradicting the opinion of Speaker A who "doesn't mind" that type of work, and, therefore, mitigates her original opinion. On the other hand, when left unchallenged, the married women often express their opinions strongly. "I hate it," "That's real stupid," "That makes me sick," and "I don't like X" are some of the expressions that occur during their conversations. Overall, there are only eleven situations where they use mitigations that indicate insecurity about themselves as speakers.

The single women contrast strikingly, with 30 mitigators in contexts that indicate insecurity. During their conversations there is embarrassment in discussing personal issues. For example, one woman expresses undue anxiety over cutting and curling her hair although she appears to have already decided not to do it: "Yeah, and I don't know if it would curl. It would be stuck all over my forehead. I don't know. I'll get glasses and that'll make me happy for a while." The repetition of "I don't know" underlines the speaker's insecurity about her personal appearance. When discussing situations at work, the single women are less direct and more hesitant than the married women. One of the single women, who has had previous experience interviewing job candidates, describes the interviewing process in a way that downgrades her abilities and reveals her insecurities as a supervisor: "Everyone was pretty good, except for one student. He seemed kind of nice but almost

like he was high, sort of glazed. He looked like, you know, he was friendly enough and would try to be conversive; you know, you try and lure them into talking about themselves or something and he'd say yeah and something, like he was going to elaborate on it and then no, and you'd have to come up with another chatty question to ask him." Although the speaker holds the position of authority she reveals a great deal of insecurity about her abilities as an interviewer and the worth of her own interviewing procedure.

Another difference between the single women and the married women is that the single women mitigate personal opinions whether challenged or not. For example, here is the group discussing a movie which only speaker B has seen: Speaker A: "Oh, how was X?" Speaker B: "I guess I didn't think she was very good." Speaker C: "Is she pretty?" Speaker B: "I don't know. I thought she had kind of a piggy face." Here four personal qualifiers (I guess, I didn't think, I don't know, I thought) emphasize Speaker B's insecurity about expressing her opinion of an actress, even when there is no likelihood that her opinion will be challenged. This also fits into a wider pattern of mitigated opinion from the single women in contrast to the strong opinions frequently voiced by the married women. Typical expressions from the single women are "I don't particularly like Laura anyway," and Question: "Can you get emotional about food?" Answer: "Maybe."

The differences that emerge from this comparison of the use of mitigation and hesitation in the informal speech of a group of married working women and a group of single working women are not so much in kind as in quantity. Both groups use the same types of hesitators and mitigators and they use them in the same contexts. Quantitatively, however, the differences are striking. The single women use mitigators, especially disclaimers and personal qualifiers, twice as often as the married women and use them in contexts that express doubts about knowledge and insecurities about themselves. Since marital status is the one major difference between the two groups, we conclude that it can be a significant factor which should be taken into account when discussing women's speech. If our results are at all typical, marital status influences the self-confidence of white collar working women. In most white collar jobs for women, at least for these women, the career potential is not great, and security and status still derive from the traditional source of marriage. But, typical or not, the results indicate some of the problems that arise from generalizing about women's speech. Since certain groups of women mitigate at significantly different levels, it is misleading to attempt to characterize women's speech as a whole. Unless enough social variables are taken into account, drawing conclusions about speech based solely on the sex of the speaker is not satisfactory.

REFERENCES

- Lakoff, Robin. 1975. Language and Women's Place. New York: Harper and Row.



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