The Effect of Age of Gender Transition on the Use of Mitigating Phrases in the Speech of Transgender Men

Leilanis Cancel-Lopez, Jay Seigler

Abstract and Introduction

Sociolinguistics is the study of language in relation to social factors such as region, gender, and class. Transgender individuals have a history of being ignored in sociolinguistics, and this study would be the first empirical study done on transgender discourse. This study focuses on the differences in language used by cisgender men– that is, men assigned male at birth who continue to identify as male– and transgender men– men assigned female at birth who transitioned to male. This study aims to measure both groups' use of mitigating phrases. These are phrases that purposely imply vagueness, examples being "*in my opinion*" or "*sort of*". Past research has shown that mitigating phrases are more commonly used by cisgender women when compared to their cisgender male counterparts, and that socialization from a young age helps develop these speech patterns; other research in the LGBTQ sociolinguistics field, done mostly by Lal Zimman, has found that transgender men– regardless of past socialization– tend to pick up more masculine sounding vocabulary unconsciously or not my mentor hypothesizes, then, that transgender men who transitioned socially and/or medically are less likely to use these mitigating phrases than their counterparts who transitioned past the age of thirteen.

Conclusion and Discussion

Due to the variability in participant data– likely attributable to individual speech patterns– both gender and age of transition in transgender individuals does not seem to be a factor of use of mitigating phrases in Spanish. The possible reasons for this are numerous: different portrayal thus different importance of masculinity across cultures, a general shift in gendered speech patterns, etc.

The purpose of this speech was to measure and deduce the different uses of mitigating phrases between transgender Spanish speakers who transitioned at or before the age of thirteen and those that transitioned after. Currently, there is no obvious difference between those groups. Further research in this field, however, should compare English– specifically American– speakers to see if it was a cultural difference, and also expand this from just transgender men to include transgender women and non-binary people.

References

Lakoff, G. (1973). Hedges: A study in meaning criteria and the logic of Fuzzy Concepts. Journal of Philosophical Logic, 2(4). https://doi.org/10.1007/bf00262952

Rickford, J. R. (2014). Situation: Stylistic variation in sociolinguistic corpora and theory. Language and Linguistics Compass, 8(11), 590–603. https://doi.org/10.1111/lnc3.12110

Methods

A total of fifteen sociolinguistic interviews in the style of Labov were held with cis participants, trans participants that transitioned before/at the age of thirteen, and trans participants that transitioned after the age of thirteen (five of each). The Labov style interview is loosely structured and meant to elicit the "natural" way subjects speak when not self-conscious. Most interviews took between twenty to thirty minutes, with no set time for each interview determined prior to the interview. Transcripts of the interview omitted the first and last five minutes of each one to ensure only casual speech was counted towards results. Each interview's transcription was dissected both manually and with an algorithm, then coded for type of hedge, purpose of the hedge, and age of transition (if applicable). A hedge is a word or phrase meant to make a statement less decisive, similar to "sort of" or "kind of" in English.

Average use of Mitigating Phrases
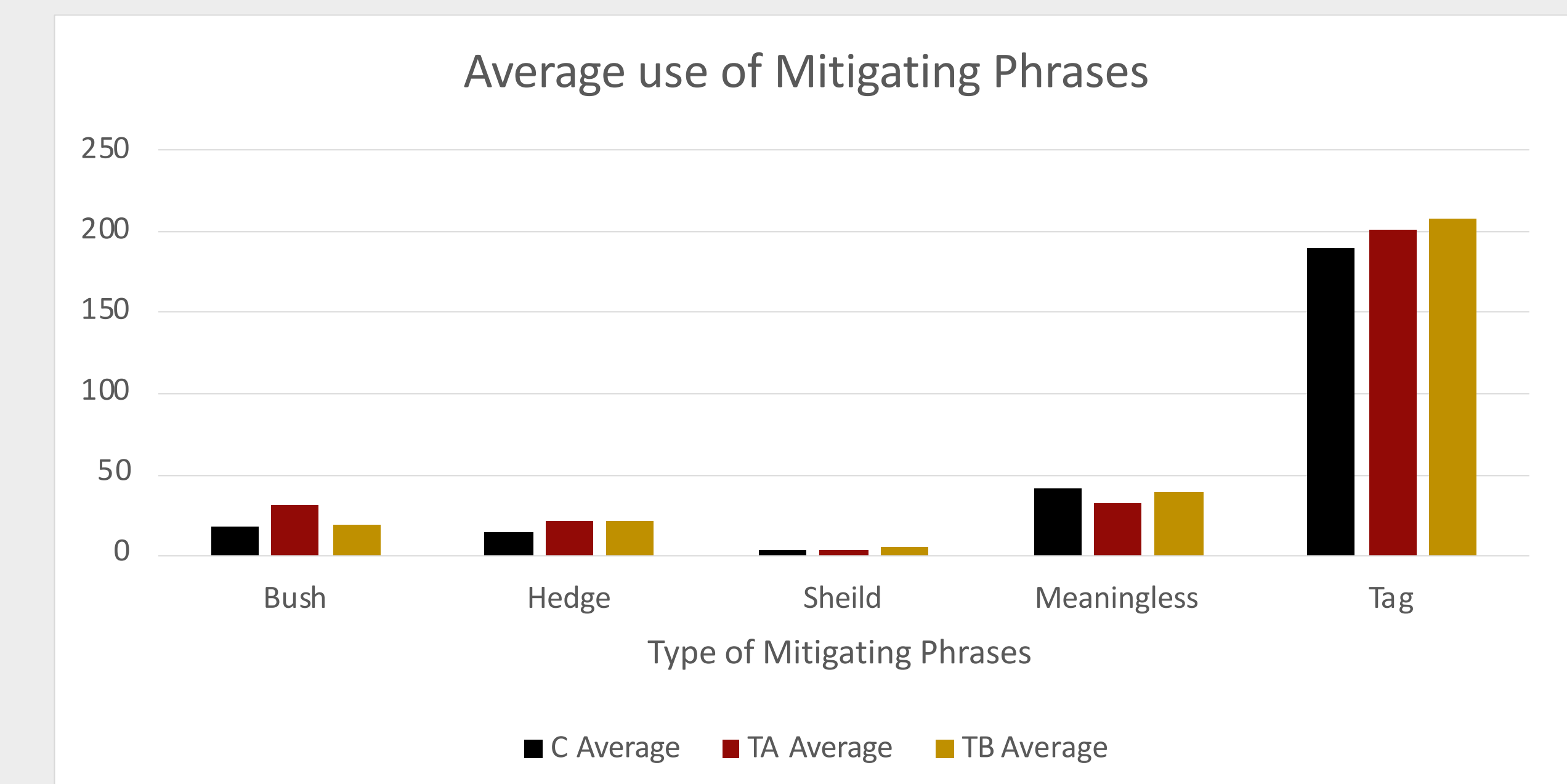
Results

The results showed no correlation between transition age and use of mitigating phrases.

Participant Mitigating Phrase Rate of Use

Participant	Mitigating Phrases	Total Words	Rate of Use
CP 1	167	580	0.288
CP 2	346	1429	0.242
CP 3	440	2345	0.188
CP 4	239	1202	0.199
CP 5	155	631	0.246
CP Average	1347	6187	0.232
TBP 1	447	1302	0.217
TBP 2	125	1021	0.063
TBP 3	242	2687	0.204
TBP 4	162	2444	0.162
TBP 5	461	828	0.204
TBP Average	1467	8282	0.216
TAP 1	283	2325	0.205
TAP 2	64	390	0.32
TAP 3	549	1994	0.202
TAP 4	395	997	0.162
TAP 5	169	2435	0.189
TAP Average	1460	7341	0.17