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## *Contextual Applications of Mitigated Speech*

Successful communication often requires modifications in the way we speak. We adjust our speech to meet the needs of the people to whom we speak and to establish relationships. Mitigated speech is a way to use language to be polite, and show respect, courtesy and deference. Mitigated speech is often used when those speaking to each other do not share equal power. Mediators may also use mitigated speech to promote neutrality.

In the landmark book *Language and Woman's Place* (1975), Robin Lakoff examined the influence of gender on mitigated speech. Lakoff claimed that women hold a less powerful place in society than men and speak a language reflecting that position. Common among the features Lakoff identified is the effort by the speaker to avoid making direct statements or give commands to the listener. Instead, the speaker qualifies the statement to lessen the weight of the claim, asks for agreement or assistance, expresses respect and deference, thus minimizing her own credibility. In later research, John M. Conley and William M. O'Barr found that the patterns identified by Lakoff were not solely gender based but tied to a speaker's status. They argued that those who hold less social power use "powerless language," a pattern of speaking that includes many of the features Lakoff defined.

More recent research suggests that using powerless speech benefits speakers in certain contexts. In her 1996 PhD dissertation, Annette Harres found that doctors who used tag questions (following a statement with a question such as "Don't you agree?") and disclaimers when speaking to patients were viewed as more down-to-earth, generating more goodwill, and showing greater concern than those who made declarative statements. The active voice assigns action (verb) to an actor (subject); *You broke the glass*. The passive voice describes the action but does not assign it to an actor - the action simply occurred, e. g., *The glass was broken*. This structure is effective for avoiding blame and deflecting responsibility, and may be used by mediators to promote neutrality.

Appropriate use of mitigated speech can demonstrate concern for the listener, convey respect, and indicate a willingness to work together. Speech patterns once considered powerless now provide speakers with an additional tool to adapt to the needs of the situation.