



USING HEDGES IN WRITTEN AND SPOKEN DISCOURSES

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Abstract

The article discusses the use of hedges in written and spoken discourses and explains their importance in academic and everyday communication. Hedging is explained as a linguistic device that can help speakers and writers to express politeness, caution, and uncertainty when presenting opinions and claims. The article describes the origin and historical development of the concept of hedging, definitions, and classifications of hedging proposed by different researchers. Moreover, this article analyzes the research done by native and non-native English writers on the use of hedging devices in academic writing and suggests the necessity of teaching hedging strategies to EFL learners. Gender and cultural influences are also discussed in the article. The article concludes that hedging plays an important role in polite communication and academic writing and considers the need to introduce a hedging strategy into English language teaching in Uzbekistan.

Keywords: Hedging, hedging devices, academic writing, spoken discourse, politeness strategies, uncertainty, EFL learners, native and non-native writers, intercultural communication, linguistic classification.

Introduction

Hedging is an important feature of both written and spoken discourse. It is widely used in academic writing, professional communication, and everyday interaction to express uncertainty, avoid directness, soften claims, and show politeness. This article discusses the origin of the concept of hedging, its classifications, stages of development, and comparative studies conducted in different cultural and linguistic contexts.



The Origin and Development of the Concept of Hedging

The word hedge originated from the Old English word *hecg*, which meant “fence” (living or artificial). It refers to a row of small bushes or trees growing close together, normally dividing a field or garden from another; something that protects from possible problems, especially financial problems; and something that avoids giving a direct answer to a question (Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English; Collins English Dictionary).

“Hedging” as a strategy was first used in the economic field in the middle of the 1800s in Chicago, USA. A “hedging strategy” was used to plan production, reduce waste, and avoid financial loss. Later, hedging became an object of linguistic research in the 1960s. The term “hedge” was introduced into linguistics by George Lakoff in 1972. Lakoff defined hedges as expressions that make things “fuzzier or less fuzzy” and stated that they are used to make statements stronger or weaker (Lakoff, 1972).

After Lakoff, Lotfi Zadeh studied hedges from a semantic and logical point of view, linking them to fuzzy logic (Zadeh, 1965). Later, Bruce Fraser introduced the term “hedged performative,” referring to the use of certain performative verbs such as apologize, request, and promise combined with modal verbs to soften illocutionary force (Fraser, 1975).

Classifications of Hedges

Hedges were classified by several researchers. Prince, Frader, and Bosk (1982) divided hedges into two subgroups: approximators and shields. French linguist Françoise Salager-Meyer (1994, 1997) classified hedges into five groups: shields, approximators, expressions of the author’s doubt and direct involvement, emotionally charged intensifiers, and compound hedges. Crompton (1997) classified hedges into epistemic copulas, non-factive verb phrase structures, epistemic modals, probability adverbs, and probability adjectives.

Ken Hyland (1996, 1998, 2004) divided hedges into three groups based on their function: accuracy-oriented, writer-oriented, and reader-oriented. Eli Hinkel (2005) later classified hedges into six groups: epistemic, lexical, possibility, downtoners, assertive pronouns, and adverbs of frequency. Many researchers have used these taxonomies in their studies. Among them, Salager-Meyer’s and Hyland’s classifications have been widely applied in academic research.



Several researchers also provided definitions of hedging. Lakoff (1972) defined hedges as expressions that make things fuzzier or less fuzzy. His ideas were later criticized by Lewin (1998). Lakoff, Prince, Frader, and Bosk addressed both attenuation and reinforcement aspects of hedges. In Salager-Meyer's classification, emotionally charged intensifiers such as extremely difficult, unexpectedly, and surprisingly were included. However, hedges and intensifiers (boosters) are considered different phenomena. Hedges are used to weaken statements, express opinions indirectly and politely, and show uncertainty, while boosters strengthen statements. Nevertheless, both contribute to persuading readers or listeners (Hyland, 1998).

Hedging in Academic Writing in a Non-Native English Context

Several studies have examined hedging in academic writing by non-native English writers. Malaysian researcher Maizura Mohd Noor and colleagues analyzed hedging strategies in diplomatic press releases and explained their importance in local and global communities (Noor et al., 2015). Iranian researchers Hassan Soodmand Afshar and Mohammad Bagherieh investigated the use of hedging devices in English and Persian abstracts of Persian Literature and Civil Engineering MA/MS theses. Their findings indicated that Persian graduate students were not fully aware of the importance of using hedges in academic writing and recommended including this topic in textbooks (Afshar & Bagherieh, 2014).

Inna Livytska studied hedges in research articles in Applied Linguistics, supplementing earlier research (Hinkel, 1997; Hyland, 1996, 2004). The findings showed that reader-oriented hedges were the dominant type and were topic-related. Dissertations written by fifth-grade non-native English students at the Higher Teachers' Training College of Maroua (Cameroon) were also analyzed (Nkemleke, 2010). The results showed that students' use of hedges was not satisfactory (2.6%). The most common types were hedges showing vagueness, accuracy hedges, and writer-oriented hedges.

Sri Lankan researcher J.A.M. Buddhima Karunaratna examined the use of hedges in argumentative essays through reading journal articles. The participants were 32 undergraduate ELT students. The results indicated significant improvement in the use of hedges after reading academic articles (Karunaratna, 2015).



A distinctive PhD dissertation, *Hedges and Boosters in the English as a Foreign Language Undergraduate Persuasive Essays and Job Application Letters*, written by Ali Saleh Ali Alward (2019), analyzed 120 third-year undergraduate students at Sana'a University. The results showed that students used more hedges in EFL persuasive essays and job application letters than in L1 writing. Female students used more hedges and boosters than male students. Advanced-level students used fewer hedges and boosters than intermediate and low-level students.

Gender and Cultural Influences on Using Hedges

Several studies examined gender and cultural influences on hedging. Nigerian researcher Chinomso P. Dozie investigated whether politeness depends on gender. The study included 300 undergraduate students and 30 staff members. The findings showed that women were more polite than men (Dozie, 2017).

Indonesian researchers R.P. Trihartanti and M.Y. Fadilah studied gender differences in the use of hedging devices in students' conversations. The results showed that male students answered more confidently and directly, while female students answered with hesitation and used more hedges (Trihartanti & Fadilah, 2018).

Lakoff (1975) also concluded that women use more hedges than men and that strong direct expression is not considered polite or ladylike. Therefore, women seem to use more hedges to be polite, whereas men tend to be more direct and confident.

Comparative Study of Native and Non-Native English Writers

Research comparing native and non-native English writers showed different results. A study comparing PhD dissertations written by native English writers and Saudi non-native English writers indicated that native writers used more hedges. Saudi writers were more loyal to their claims due to cultural and linguistic factors (Alshahrani, 2015).

However, Elif Tokdemir Demirel analyzed 100 research articles from the American Academic Corpus and the Turkish Academic Corpus and found no noticeable differences in the use of hedging devices (Demirel, 2018). Similarly, Diaz Adrian and Muchamad Sholakhuddin Al-Fajri (2022) analyzed 400 soft science articles (2019–2022). They found that modal auxiliary verbs were the most common hedges. The expression “can be” was frequently used by non-native writers, while native writers preferred “may” or “would” to express uncertainty.



Conclusion

Hedging as a linguistic device has been studied by many native and non-native English researchers in different cultures. It plays an important role in expressing uncertainty, politeness, and persuasion in both written and spoken discourse.

However, the concept of hedging is still new in Uzbekistan and has not been widely introduced in higher education curricula. Therefore, it is necessary to study and teach hedging to EFL learners in Uzbekistan. Awareness of hedging devices is essential for polite intercultural communication and appropriate academic writing when expressing one's opinions and claims.

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