

## HEDGES: THE EXPRESSIONS OF DOUBT AND CERTAINTY

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**Abstract:** *Hedges are linguistic resources which convey the fundamental characteristics of science of doubt and certainty. Hedges are mostly verbal and adverbial expression such as could, perhaps, may, suggest which deal with degrees of probability. Hedges can be considered as the interactive elements which serve as a bridge between the propositional information in the text and the writer's factual interpretation. Based on Meyer in Miller (1994: 109-110) hedges are expressed in the following strategic stereotypes: modal auxiliary verbs; modal lexical verbs of varying degree of illocutionary force; adjectival, adverbial, and nominal modal phrases; approximators of degree, quantity, frequency, and time; introductory phrases; if clauses; and compound hedges. While the reasons why people use hedges are minimizing the "thread-to-face", being a way of being more precise in reporting results, being positive or negative politeness strategies, and conforming to an established writing style.*

**Keywords:** *hedges, taxonomy, style of writing, politeness strategies, strategic stereotypes.*

One of the most important features of academic discourse is the way that writers seek to modify the assertions that they make, toning down uncertain or potentially risky claims, emphasizing what they believe to be correct, and conveying appropriately collegial attitudes to readers. These expressions of doubt and certainty are collectively known as hedges. Hedges such as *might*, *probably*, and *seem* signal a tentative assessment of referential information and convey collegial respect for the views of colleagues, and allow writers to express conviction and to mark their involvement and solidarity with an audience.

The crucial importance of hedges lies in the fact that readers expect claim to be warranted in terms of assessment's reliability they carry, and appropriate in terms of the social interactions they appeal to. These devices help academics gain acceptance for their work by balancing conviction with caution, and by conveying an appropriate disciplinary persona of modesty and assertiveness (Hyland, 1996 a). Hedges therefore express both interpersonal and ideational (conceptual) information (Halliday, 1994), allowing writers to communicate more precise degrees of accuracy in their truth assessments. Indeed, in carrying authorial judgement, hedges can actually convey the major content of an utterance. Hedges may intentionally or unintentionally be employed in both spoken and written language since they are crucially important in communication.

### **Development of the Term *Hedges***

The study of hedges is well linked to pragmatics which Spencer-Otey and Zegarac in Miller (1994:109) define as the study of relationship between language forms, messages and language users. The use of *hedge* as a linguistic term goes back at least to the early 1970s, when G. Lakoff published his article entitled *Hedges: A Study in Meaning Criteria and the Logic of Fuzzy Concepts*. At that time, Lakoff was not interested in the communicative value of the use of hedges but was concerned with the logical properties of words and phrases like *rather*, *largely*, *in a manner of speaking*, *very*, in their ability to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy (Lakoff, 1972:195).

Markkanen and Schröder (2000:2-3) explain that the term of *hedge* has moved far from its origins, particularly since it has been adopted by pragmatists and discourse analysts. The term is no longer used only for expressions that modify the category membership of a predicate or a noun phrase. They then explained that in accordance with Lakoff's main concern, however, the term later been defined, for example by Brown and Levinson (1987:61-68) as a particle, word or phrase that modifies the degree of membership that is partial or true only in certain respects, or that it is more true and complete than perhaps might be expected. They also quoted Vande Kople's view of hedges that considers the use of hedges as showing a lack of full commitment to the propositional content of an utterance. In other words, hedges (e.g. *perhaps*, *seem*, *might*, *to certain extent*) are by him seen as modifying the truth-value of the whole proposition, not as making individual inside it more imprecise.

Furthest away from the original concept of *hedge* are those approaches in which hedges are treated as realizations of an interactional/communicative strategy called *hedging*. Thus, Markkanen and Schröder (2000: 3), who discuss the role of hedges in scientific texts, see them as modifiers of the writer's responsibility for the truth value of the propositions expressed or as modifiers of the weightiness of the information given, or the attitude of the writer to the information. According to them, hedges can even be used to hide the writer's attitude. It is also suggested that hedges offer a possibility for textual manipulation in the sense that the reader is left in the darkness as to whom is responsible for the truth value of what is being expressed (Markkanen and Schröder, 2000:4).

As to the motivation for the use of hedges, a lot of discussions have concentrated on their use in spoken discourse, and the most frequently mentioned motivating factor is *politeness*, as defined by Brown and Levinson (1987, 61-68). In their view, hedges are mainly used for negative politeness in face-saving, in which they are put to elaborate use. In positive politeness they figure only in expressions of extremes, like *marvellous* and *appalling*, which are typical of this form of politeness, 'safely vague' because they leave it to the addressee to figure out how to interpret them.

Hedges can also be considered as the interactive elements which serve as a bridge between propositional information in the text and the writer's factual interpretation. As Skleton in Miller (1994:105) remarks, hedges can be viewed as part of the larger phenomenon called commentative potentials of any language.

Natural languages are reflective: not only saying things, but also reflecting on the status of what they say.

Research on LSP (Language for Specific Purposes) has repeatedly shown that hedges are crucial in academic discourse because they are central rhetorical means of gaining communal adherence to knowledge claims. Indeed, scientific “truth” is as much the product of social as that of an intellectual activity, and the need to convince one’s fellow scientific of the facticity of the experimental results explains the widespread use of hedges in this type of discourse.

### Taxonomy of Hedges

Typically, hedges are expressed through the use of the following “strategic stereotypes”:

#### 1. Modal auxiliary verbs

Modal auxiliary verbs are the most straightforward and widely used means of expressing modality in English academic writing, the most tentative ones are: *may, might, can, could, would, should*.

Examples:

- a. *Such a measure **might** be more sensitive to changes in health after specialist treatment.*
- b. *Concerns that naturally low cholesterol levels **could** lead to increase mortality from other causes **may** well be unfounded.* (Observe the cumulative hedging effect: the main and the subordinate clauses are both hedged).

#### 2. Modal lexical verbs

Modal lexical verb (or so called “speech act verb” used to perform act such as doubting and evaluating rather than merely describing) of varying degree of illocutionary force: *to seem, to appear* (epistemic verbs), *to believe, to assume, to suggest, to estimate, to tend, to think, to argue, to indicate, to propose, to speculate*. Although a wide range of verbs can be used in this way (Banks in Miller, 1994:105-110), there tends to be a heavy reliance on the above-mentioned examples especially in academic writing.

Example:

- a. *Our analyses **suggest** that high doses of the drug can lead to relevant blood pressure reduction.* (Here too we have a cumulative hedging effect).
- b. *These results **indicate** that the presence of large vessel peripheral arterial disease may reflect a particular susceptibility to the development of atherosclerosis.* (The same as cumulative hedging effect as above).
- c. *In spite of its limitations, our study **appears** to have a number of important strengths.*
- d. *Without specific training, medical students’ communication skills **seem** to decline during medical training.*

#### 3. Adjectival, adverbial, and nominal modal phrases

These forms of hedges include probability adjectives: *e.g., possible, probable, un/likely*, nouns: *e.g., assumption, claim, possibility, estimate*,

suggestion, and adverbs (which could be considered as non-verbal nouns): e.g., *perhaps, possibly, probably, practically, likely, presumably, virtually, apparently.*

Example:

- a. *Septicaemia is **likely** to result, which might threaten his life.*
- b. ***Possibly** the setting of the neural mechanisms responsible for this sensation is altered in patients with chronic fatigue syndrome.*
- c. *This is **probably** due to the fact that Greenland Eskimos consume diets with a high content of fish.*

#### 4. Approximators of degree, quantity, frequency and time

This can be realized through for example: *approximately, roughly, about, often, occasionally, generally, usually, somewhat, somehow, a lot of.*

Example:

- a. *Fever is present in **about** a third of cases and sometimes there is neutropenia.*
- b. *Persistent subjective fatigue **generally** occurs in relative isolation.*

#### 5. Introductory phrases

Introductory phrases can be realized through phrases such as: *I believe, to our knowledge, it is our view that, we feel that,* which express the author's personal doubt and direct involvement.

Example:

***We believe** that the chronic fatigue syndrome reflects a complex interaction of several factors. There is no simple explanation.*

#### 6. "If clauses"

This is usually realized through the use of the following phrases: *if true, if anything.*

Example:

***If true**, then, our study contradicts the myth that fishing attracts the bravest and strongest men.*

#### 7. Compound hedges

These are phrases made up of several hedges, the commonest forms are: A modal auxiliary combined with a lexical verb with a hedging content (e.g., it would appear) and a lexical verb followed by a hedging adverb or adjective where the adverb (or adjective) reinforces the hedge already inherent in the lexical verb (e.g., *it seems reasonable/probable*). Such compound hedges can be double hedges (it *may suggest* that; it *seems likely* that; it *would indicate* that; this *probably indicates*); treble hedges (it *seem reasonable to assume* that); quadruple hedges (it *would seem somewhat unlikely* that, it *may appear somewhat speculative* that), and so on.

Examples:

- a. *There are **probably** many Southeast Asian students who **would like to** study there, but who must choose Malaysia or Singapore instead for economic reasons.*
- b. *That **may seem** a lot to accomplish in our country.*

### Reasons for Hedging

Hedges are used for some purposes. Here are four reasons for hedging based on the theory of Salager-Meyer (1994:108-115):

#### 1. Minimizing the “thread-to-face”

Since one of the functions of hedges is to minimize the threat-to-face, the theory of Face Threatening Acts (FTA's) is very important to understand. The term “face” in linguistics refers to the respect that an individual has for him or herself, and maintaining that “self-esteem” in public or in private situations. Usually someone tries to avoid embarrassing other persons, or making them feel uncomfortable. In their book, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, Brown and Levinson (1987:61) explain the term face as follows:

Our notion of ‘face’ is derived from that of Goffman (1967) and from the English folk term, which ties face up with notions of being embarrassed or humiliated, or ‘losing face’. Thus face is something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction. In general, people cooperate (and assume each other’s cooperation) in maintaining face in interaction, such cooperation being based on the mutual vulnerability of face.

Some acts which threaten a person’s face are called face threatening acts (FTA's). FTA's are acts that infringe on the hearers' need to maintain his/her self esteem, and be respected. Yule (1996:36) explains that in most circumstances a person will want to minimize the threat of such an act. A person may, equally, employ a face saving act. For example, if a neighbour is playing very loud music you might say, ‘I’m going to go and tell them to stop that noise right now,’ proposing a face threatening act which imposes on the neighbour choice and freedom to act as well as express no closeness or solidarity. Your partner, however, might propose a ‘face saving act’ by saying, ‘Perhaps you could just ask them if they’re going to stop soon because it’s getting late and people need to get to sleep’. Brown and Levinson (1987: 68) also explain:

In other words, people will take into consideration the relative weightings of (at least) three wants: (a) the want to communicate the content of the FTA's, (b) the want to be efficient or urgent, and (c) the want to maintain Hearer’s face to any degree. Unless (b) is larger than (c), Speaker will want to minimize the threat of his FTA's.

We can draw the line between the theory of face threatening acts and hedges because the most widely accepted view is that hedging is the process whereby authors tone down their statements in order to reduce the risk of opposition and minimize the “thread-to-face” that lurks behind every act of communication. This position associated hedges with scientific imprecision and defines them as linguistic cues of bias which avoid personal accountability for statements, i.e., as understatements used to convey evasiveness, tentativeness, fuzziness, mitigation of responsibility and/or mitigation of certainty to the truth value of proposition. In this view, hedging is what Skelton (1994:110) calls “the politician’s craft,” not

only a willed mitigation, but an obfuscation for dubious purposes. It is stated that hedges are used to signal distance and to avoid absolute statements which might put scientist (and the institution they work at) in an embarrassing situation if subsequent conflicting evidence or contradictory finding arise.

## 2. Being a way of being more precise in reporting results

Salager-Meyer and Banks in Miller (1994:110) claim that the exclusive association of hedges with evasiveness can obscure some important functions of hedging, and that expressing a lack of certainty does not necessarily show confusion or vagueness. Indeed, one could consider hedges as ways of being more precise in reporting results. Hedging may present the true state of the writers' understanding and may be used to negotiate an accurate representation of the state of the knowledge under discussion. In fact, academic writers may well wish to reduce the strength of claims simply because stronger statements would not be justified by the experimental data presented. In such cases, researcher are not saying less than what they mean but are rather saying precisely what they mean by not overstating their experimental results. Being too certain can often be unwise. Academics want their readers to know that they do not claim to have the final word on the subject, choosing instead to remain vague in their statement.

Hedges are not a cover-up tactic, but rather a resource used to express some fundamental characteristics of modern science (uncertainty, skepticism and doubt) which reveal the probabilistic nature science started acquiring during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (during the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> centuries and the first half of 19<sup>th</sup> century, science was more deterministic). Moreover, because of the close inter-connection between different scientific fields, no scientist can possibly claim to wholly master the field of knowledge of given discipline.

## 3. Being positive or negative politeness strategies

According to Brown and Levinson, politeness strategies are developed in order to save the hearers' "face." In other words, politeness strategies are developed for the main purpose of dealing with these FTA's. Brown and Levinson in Paltridge (2000:49) also state that politeness is based on the notions of positive and negative face. The definitions of both face is stated as follows:

*Positive face* refers to a person's need to be accepted, or liked, by others, and to be treated as a member of a group knowing that their wants are shared by others. *Negative face* refers to a person's need to be independent and not be imposed on by others.

Positive Politeness Strategy means that someone recognizes that someone else has a desire to be respected. It also confirms that the relationship is friendly and expresses group reciprocity. While Negative Politeness Strategy is a politeness strategy which similar to Positive Politeness in that someone recognizes that they want to be respected; however, it is also assumed that someone is in some way imposing on them. Some other examples would be to say, "I don't want to bother you but..." or "I was wondering if ..."

For example:

*"I'm sorry to bother you but, I just wanted to ask you if I could use one of those pens?"*

In everyday conversation, there are ways to go about getting the things we want. When we are with a group of friends, we can say to them, "Go get me that plate!", "Shut-up!" However, when we are surrounded by a group of adults at a formal function, in which our parents are attending, we must say, "Could you please pass me that plate, if you don't mind?", "I'm sorry, I don't mean to interrupt, but I am not able to hear the speaker in front of the room." In different social situations, we are obliged to adjust our use of words to fit the occasion. It would seem socially unacceptable if the phrases above were reversed. It is, however, possible to turn up the other side of the coin and emphasize the importance of hedges for the speaker's own face. Their use may be motivated, for example, by the fear of being proved wrong later on. Being imprecise or mitigating one's commitment to the truth-value of a proposition or a claim makes it possible to say, if proved wrong, that the claim was only tentative or an approximation.

Myers (1989: 1-35) argues that hedges are better understood as positive or negative politeness strategies, i.e., as sophisticated rational strategies" used to mitigate two central positions expressed in scientific writing: to present claims (or findings) pending acceptance by the international scientific community, and to deny claims presented by other researchers. Indeed, to express an opinion is to make a claim, and to make a claim is to try to impose one's opinion on others. The authors are usually presenting a claim to the scientific community while trying to convince their readers of the relevance of their findings. But, in doing so, they remain somewhat vague because they can not claim to have final word on the subject. In the social interaction involved in all scientific publishing, hedges permit academics to present their claims while simultaneously presenting themselves as the "humble servants of the scientific community" (Myers, 1989: 4). As soon as a claim becomes part of the literature, it is then possible to refer to it without any hedging.

Thus because new result or conclusions have to be thoughtfully fit in to the existing literature, hedging is not simply a prudent insurance against overstating an assertion, but also a rational interpersonal strategy which both supports the writer's position and builds writer-reader (speaker/listener) relationships. A hedged comment could reflect a polite and diplomatic disagreement, or it might also display genuine uncertainty on the speaker's part (definition 2).

#### 4. Conforming to an established writing style

Banks in Miller (1994: 108) argues that a certain degree of hedging has become conventionalized, i.e., that the function of hedges is not necessarily to avoid face-threatening acts, but simply to conform to an established writing style. This established style of writing arose as a consequence of the combination of the needs and stimuli mentioned in definition 1, 2 and 3 above. A totally unhedged style would not be considered seriously by journal editors.

It should be made clear at this stage that it is difficult to be sure in any particular instance which of the four above-mentioned concepts is intended nor

need we assume that the authors of hedged utterances always know why they hedge their statements in the first place. Salager-Meyer (1994:105) state that hedges which are the first and foremost the product of a mental attitude and decisions about the function of a span of language are bound to be subjective.

### **Conclusion**

Hedging is a human enterprise, a resource which is inherent in common language. In daily conversations with their peers, human being- as social beings- feel the need to modulate their speech acts in order to guarantee a certain level of acceptability and possibility of coexistence. The same remark applies to scientific language which is a product of human relations.

The “strategic stereotypes” called hedges permit language users to say something and to comment on what they are saying. From the repertoire of linguistic forms at their disposal, scientists –as any other language user- resort to those forms which better fit their communicative purposes and which they think will allow them to gain communal adherence and warrant the highest degree of acceptability for the claims they present to the word’s store of knowledge. The appropriate use of hedging strategies for academic argumentation is a significant resource for writers and plays an important part in demonstrating competence in a specialist register.

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