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**LINGUISTIC HEDGING IN INTERPERSONAL  
COMMUNICATION**

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*Abstract*

It's very important to develop and maintain courteous relations between the speaker and the hearer in everyday conversation. Politeness is the basic principle of human relations which protects basic human values and needs, such as personal freedom, freedom of choice, the right to personal space, the desire to be understood and get approval, to be involved in something common, to show solidarity and get support. Politeness is aimed at conflict-free and harmonious communication according to socially accepted rules in interactional communication. Creating favorable psychological conditions of communication is achieved, among other things, through the use of non-categorical and fuzzy statements. The core of fuzzy language is hedging. Hedging occurs quite frequently in interpersonal communication and indicates degree of less than full commitment to the accuracy or precision of what is said. The paper reviews the meaning and functions of hedges in everyday conversation. The main functions of hedging in conversational discourse include: avoiding conflicts, minimizing face-threatening acts, mitigating the imposition. Hedging is an important issue in the language study as the correct use of hedging devices reflects a high level of knowledge of the principles of rhetoric in the process of social interaction. Hedging makes communication more polite and effective. When a non-native speaker fails to recognize a hedge he may be perceived as impolite, arrogant, rude or it may even lead to miscommunication.

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## 1. Introduction

Although the term hedging has existed in linguistics for more than four decades, there is no unitary definition covering all aspects of its usage. Weinreich (1966) was the first to write about this phenomenon as metalinguistic operators whose designata are themselves aspects of the language, and they cannot be characterized either grammatically or morphologically. Such operators include true, real, so-called, strictly speaking, like.

The concept of hedging in linguistics was first introduced by Lakoff (1973). According to Lakoff (1973), hedges are “words whose meaning implicitly implies fuzziness – words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy” (p. 471). Lakoff offered the following as examples of hedges in English: sort of, kind of, loosely speaking, more or less, roughly, pretty (much), relatively, somewhat, rather, mostly, technically, strictly speaking, essentially, in essence, basically, principally, particularly, par excellence, largely, for the most part, very, especially, exceptionally, quintessentially, literally, often, more of a \_\_\_ than anything else, almost, typically/typical, as it were, in a sense, in a real sense, in a way, in a manner of speaking, details aside, so to say, practically, a true, a real, a regular, virtually, all but technically, practically, actually, really, all but a, anything but a, (he as much as...), -like, -ish, can be looked upon as, can be viewed as, pseudo-, crypto-, in name only, etc. (Lakoff, 1973, p. 472).

I think last year *more or less* shows that we really have to concentrate on one thing.

This made for a *kind of* harmony and a *kind of* confidence.

You can get there on motorway, erm, all the way *practically*, can't you?

Lakoff based his work on Zadeh's (1965) *Fuzzy Sets Theory*. Zadeh observes that fuzziness plays an essential role in human cognition and believes that most classes in the real world are fuzzy. The basic idea of a fuzzy set concerns the flexibility over the concept of belongingness. In a classical sets theory one is able to classify objects in collections through a binary processes: accepting or rejecting the object as belonging to that collection. In fact, in a great number of situations it is possible to say if the element  $x$  belongs or not to the set  $A$ , that is,  $x \in A$  or  $x \notin A$ . One can affirm without doubt that the number 5 belongs to the natural numbers set and that -5 does not belong to this set (Massad, Ortega, de Barros, & Struchiner, 2008, p.11). But there are cases when it is not easy to say whether the element belongs to the set or not (e.g., the set of low temperature, tall people, high speed, etc.). To solve this problem Zadeh (1965) proposed a membership degree, according to which an element could belong partially to the set. He generalizes the classical concept of the set, noting that the membership function of an element to the set can take any values in the interval  $[0;1]$ , and not only 0 or 1. According to this theory, the vagueness occurs when the belongingness of the word to the category is presented as something true only to a certain extent. He comes to the conclusion that the concepts of natural language have very fuzzy boundaries, so that statements are rarely completely true, false or meaningless. They are often both not false and not true, but either false or true to a certain extent.

Initially, hedging was considered by Lakoff (1973) from the point of view of formal semantics within the ideational function of language. He emphasized that natural language sentences are not always entirely true, false or nonsensical, but rather somewhat true and somewhat false, and that membership in conceptual categories is not a simple yes-no question but a matter of degree. In real situations, it is rare to find objects that exactly match a particular class or category. Some categories do not have clear

boundaries and belongingness to them is expressed not absolutely, but gradually. The sentence *John is tall* is true only provided John is really tall, because tallness is a relative concept. Lakoff's concept of hedging is also connected with the prototype theory suggested by Rosch (1978). According to this theory every object belongs to a category but represents it to different degrees. For example, a robin is a more typical representative of the category *bird* (prototype) than a penguin. Hedges are appropriate to use in relation to non-prototypical concepts. Therefore, a sentence *A penguin is sort of a bird* is true, but *A robin is sort of a bird* is false (Lakoff, 1973, p. 471). Fuzziness represents the degree of deviation from the prototype.

## 2. Problem Statement

To define the most frequently used types of hedges in everyday conversation and specify their functions.

### 2.1. Post-Lakoff approaches to hedging

Lakoff's approach was taken as a starting point in future studies of hedging (Lewis & Lawry, 2014; Rosanti & Jaelani, 2015). Later, the concept of hedging has been further developed in the course of linguistic pragmatics where its semantic content has considerably expanded.

Salager-Meyer (1995) states that hedging is an application in pragmatics and discourse analysis in the general sense of the word to a range of items which express a notion of imprecision or qualification. Brown and Levinson (2000) offer a broader definition of hedging:

*[...] a particle, word or phrase that modifies the degree of membership of a predicate or a noun phrase in a set, [and] says of that membership that it is partial or true only in certain respects, or that it is more true and complete than perhaps might be expected. (p. 145)*

Fraser (2010) considers hedging a rhetorical strategy, arguing that:

*There is general agreement today that **HEDGING** is a rhetorical strategy, by which a speaker, using a linguistic device, can signal a lack of commitment to either the full semantic membership of an expression (**PROPOSITIONAL HEDGING**) or the full commitment to the force of the speech act being conveyed (**SPEECH ACT HEDGING**). (p. 22)*

The scope of hedging has considerably broadened since Lakoff's (1973) initial work.

Fraser (2010) suggests the following list of hedges:

- impersonal pronouns (one);
- concessive conjunctions (though, whereas);
- hedged performative (must);
- indirect speech acts (could you...);
- introductory phrases (we feel that, it is our view that);
- modal adverbs (practically, possibly, apparently);
- modal adjectives (likely, unlikely, possible);
- modal noun (suggestion, possibility);

- modal verbs (should, would, could);
- epistemic verbs (think, believe);
- negation (didn't...?);
- reversal tag (... , isn't it?);
- parenthetical construction (I guess);
- if clause (if true, ...);
- conditional subordinators (given that, so long as);
- conditional clause implying permission (if I may say so);
- conditional clause expressing uncertainty about the extralinguistic knowledge required for a correct interpretation of the utterance (if I'm correct), etc.

This is not the whole list of hedges represented in Fraser's (2010) work and for sure it does not capture the whole list of linguistic means used as hedges in the English language, but it gives a clear idea of the issue.

## 2.2. Types of hedges

Prince suggests two types of hedging: approximators and shields. The first type affects the truth condition of a proposition (propositional hedging), and the second type affects the degree and type of speaker-commitment that is inferred (speech act hedging) (Prince, Frader, & Bosk, 1982, p. 85).

Let us have a look at the following examples:

And the conditions on the ground floor are *somewhat* different (propositional hedge).

No side effects, fine *as far as I can tell* (speech act hedge).

Approximators are subdivided into adaptors (some, somewhat, sort of, kind of, more or less, a little bit, etc.) that relate to class membership and rounders (about, approximately, roughly, around, something, etc.). These words do not affect the speaker's propositional attitude but its content. Sometimes precise terms or numbers are not relevant or not known by the speakers and they simply give approximate terms.

Life's *a little bit* more complex than that.

Dinner for two should run to *around* 30 for a starter, a pasta dish, sweet, coffee and a bottle of good wine.

Shields include the following two types: plausibility shields (I think, I am afraid, as far as I can tell, probably, I guess, I suspect, etc.) expressing doubt and a lack of speaker certainty and attribution shields (it is believed, it is said, somebody says that, presumably, according to his estimates, etc.) which attribute the belief in question to someone other than the speaker. As the term 'shield' indicates, they protect the speaker from having to take full responsibility for the propositional content of her utterance.

They're *probably* not allowed to show it, are they.

*I think* before we ask any other questions, we'll ask everybody to just have a stretch.

You say you've loved your wife for twenty-six years. *Presumably*, she too was the woman you vowed to love forever.

According to Namsaraev (1997) there are 9 types of lexical hedges: modal verbs (will, must, might, can, should, could, would, may), lexical verbs (believe, assume, suggest,

estimate, think, argue, seem, propose, suppose), probability nouns (assumption, claim, possibility, estimate, suggestion), probability adjectives (possible, likely, unlikely, clear, definite, certain, probable), probability adverbs (practically, presumably, clearly, probably, possibly, perhaps, definitely, certainly, apparently, completely), adverbs of frequency (often, occasionally, generally, usually, sometimes, normally, frequently, always, rarely, never, seldom), if clause (if true, if anything), compound hedges (seems reasonable, looks probable, may be suggested), fillers (you know, you see, by the way, sort of, well, hmm, uhm, uhh, uh..huh, all I know, I mean, yeah, like).

Hedging is a pragmatic phenomenon and its interpretation depends on the context. Virtually any linguistic unit can function as a hedge. It depends on pragmatic factors.

*I think it's a little odd.* (think is a hedge)

*I think about you all the time.* (think is not a hedge)

### 3. Research Questions

Based on the theoretical overview above, the research question for this study is:

What are the functions of hedging in everyday conversation?

### 4. Purpose of the Study

The present study approaches hedging as a strategy by which a speaker can indicate degrees of less than full commitment toward an accuracy of conceptualizations of the world. The focus of this study is the pragmatic functions of hedges in conversational discourse.

### 5. Research Methods

The data of this study were spoken dialogues included in British National Corpus (BNC). This study utilized a descriptive method to analyze the pragmatic functions of hedges in conversations, as well as contextual interpretation of linguistic phenomena.

### 6. Findings

Hedging has received much attention in the pragmatics literature in recent years in relation to social conventions and politeness (McCready, 2014; Barotto, 2018; Zhang & Redeker, 2018). Research of various types of hedges has been primarily associated with politeness, vagueness, hesitation, uncertainty, and indirectness (Kranich, 2015; Takimoto, 2015; Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2017; Malyuga & McCarthy, 2018; Qin & Uccelli, 2019). The terms hedges and hedging generally refer to a large class of lexical and syntactic features of text that have the goal of modifying and mitigating a proposition. Hedging is extremely common in casual conversation. It represents a significant interpersonal communicative resource for speakers.

The research showed that the most frequently used hedges in everyday conversation are plausibility shields. The most numerous shields are *I think*, *you know* and *I mean*.

*Well I think we have to stop there for a little while because it's nine o'clock, and I've just got erm a few more pictures to show you later on so if we have a short break now, I think the coffee ladies are ready.*

Subjectivity markers like *I think, I suppose, I believe, I guess* are speaker-oriented markers which emphasize the subjective attitude of the speaker towards the message. These markers are considered to be more polite as they are not understood as something universally true or definite. Their main function is to avoid absoluteness and any possible disagreement from the hearer, to minimize face-threatening acts and sound more polite.

*Well, I imagine that won't be too difficult for you. I suppose you're very experienced at that kind of thing. It's my job.*

*Well, I believe this is the happiest day of my life.*

*The Covent Garden job, though, will be open to applicants, and I guess there will be some competition for it.*

Attribution shields are rarely used in conversational discourse. And they are mostly expressed by composite hedges.

*Perhaps that's the problem. From what you told me, you're no longer the same person anymore.*

Among approximators we singled out *sort of, probably* and *kind of* as the most commonly used hedges in the British data:

*Originally I wanted to be a doctor like my father, but it was soon clear I didn't have the intelligence for that – that's to say I wasn't any good at mathematics and physics and that sort of thing.*

*When I finish playing football I'll probably be coaching and be one of those still playing in Wimbledon's reserves at 40.*

It should be noted that the frequency of use of adaptors is twice as high as rounders.

*He's about to lose everything, and I'm partly responsible for that.*

Approximators indicate that the actual situation is close to but not identical with the prototypical situation. The main function of approximators is to mitigate the illocutionary force of speech acts or minimize the size of imposition.

## 7. Conclusion

The concept of hedging has received the most attention in the area of casual conversation where it is possibly twice as frequent as in written discourse. Thus, hedging helps to maintain and regulate relations between communicants and plays an important role in harmonizing communication and making it more effective.

This research revealed that the most frequent type of hedges in everyday conversation is plausibility shields. Hedges of this type can be expressed by epistemic verbs, introductory phrases and expressions, tag-questions, conditional sentences, modal verbs, and adverbs. The second most frequently used type is adaptors. Then come rounders and attribution shields.

The main functions of hedging in conversational discourse include: avoiding conflicts, saving the face of both the speaker and the hearer, mitigating the imposition.

Hedges are the most typical components of fuzzy language and play a significant role in maintaining politeness in communication. Hedges can make communication polite and flexible, which effectively helps to maintain and adjust the relationship between speakers and hearers and keep communication smooth.

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