WUT 2020
10th International Conference "Word, Utterance, Text: Cognitive, Pragmatic and Cultural Aspects"

ON HEDGING AND MITIGATION IN THE SPEECHES OF BORIS JOHNSON

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Abstract

The article is devoted to revealing the interconnection between hedging and mitigation, and to consideration of functional features of hedging and mitigation in political media discourse on the material of Boris Johnson's speeches. The category of mitigation combines rhetorical techniques aimed at attenuating the illocutionary force of an utterance. Being a purely pragmatic phenomenon, mitigation can hardly be subdivided into any clearly defined structural types. The most common approach to classify types of mitigation would include three main parameters: attenuation of the proposition itself, attenuation of the speaker's commitment to the proposition, and shift of the deictic coordinates of the utterance. Hedging is a pragmatic mitigation strategy, which has a protective function of speaking out by presenting subjects and phenomena as unclear and ambiguous. Hedges, being a mitigating means, make communication polite and successful. There are several classifications of hedging in linguistics, but in our study we rely on the classification of E. Prince because it fully reflects the pragmatic features of the use of hedging in political media discourse and coincides with main types of mitigation. Thus, in the speeches of Boris Johnson the most abundant class of hedges is plausibility hedges (63.3%), with the hedge "I think" outnumbering all others almost twofold. Adapters and rounders, which affect the truth of the proposition, account for 30.4.% altogether. The least numerous class is attribution hedges, with only 6.3% of the total amount. Overall, Boris Johnson's communication style can be characterised as mitigating.

Keywords: Political media discourse, pragmatic, hedging, mitigation, hedge.

1. Introduction

Natural language is a unique instrument of communication as it allows humans to express their thoughts and ideas in an infinite number of ways. However, in order not to drown in the ocean of possibilities, people elaborated a complex system of norms, styles, behavioural patterns and other interactional parameters in all social dimensions. These interactional parameters tend to evolve under the influence of both internal development of each particular language and external factors that affect particular social, economic, political, cultural, etc. sphere.

Regarding political communication, there has been a trend for traditional formal political rhetoric to incorporate features of colloquial language: speeches are becoming less formal, more personal, forming the basis for new linguistic research.

According to Karakulova (2016), modern linguistics is characterized by anthropocentricity, with the focus on emotions, intentions, attitudes and motives of a particular linguistic personality (p. 34). A multifaceted study of various aspects of communicative activity of a person led to the introduction of new terms that were not used or properly studied and, accordingly, require interpretation and specification. Among these terms, one can distinguish mitigation.

2. Problem Statement

2.1. Mitigation

In the light of pragmatics, mitigation is viewed as rhetorical devices that attenuate the unwanted effects on the speaker or listener that an utterance may have (Danet, 1980). According to. Fraser (1980), mitigation is not a specific type of communicative act, but its modification, as it reduces possible unwanted effects that the speech act may cause. Caffi (1999) views mitigation as an umbrella term in pragmatics, which includes a wide range of strategies by which the speaker attenuates the interactional aspects of their speech in order to reduce possible communicative risks (as cited in Melnik, Nechepurenko, & Krasnoshchekov, 2016, p. 167). Takhtarova (2010) argues that mitigation is an attenuation of the illocutionary force of an utterance determined by specific parameters of the speech act, both individual, psychological (which concern personal characteristics of the speaker) and social (norms and rules which regulate speech behaviour of individuals, ensuring successful and effective implementation of their communicative intentions).

It is hardly possible to suggest any structural or semantic classification of types of mitigation as it is endowed with a number of versatile means of expression that are not limited to exclusively lexical or syntactic. Regarding this, only pragmatic classification of mitigation types appears feasible.

There have been various approaches to classifying types of mitigation. Caffi (1999) suggests three types of mitigation devices, naming them bushes, hedges and shields. Bushes are called so because they are used to "hide" the true meaning of the proposition itself, and they have no connection with the speaker. Hedges are devices that "stand" between the speaker and the proposition, and thereby indicate lack of speaker's commitment to the truth of the proposition. The group of shields "covers" the figure of the speaker using deictic shifts of various kinds (e.g. when time, place or agent of the utterance are put out of focus of the hearer). She also proposes an alternative approach in the framework of modality theory. This approach

is built around the mitigating nature of modality per se. If speaker's obligations are reduced, we deal with epistemic modality, whereas if hearer's obligations are mitigated, the modality is known as deontic (Caffi, 1999, p. 883). Similar approach was suggested by B. Fraser in his work "Conversational Mitigation" (1980). He classifies types of mitigation based on the motivation to mitigate. If the motivation is to mitigate the effect of the speech act on the hearer, to reduce negative feelings (e.g. pain, fear, disappointment, alarm, etc.) that the hearer may feel after getting the information communicated by the speaker, the type of mitigation we deal with is called altruistic. The opposite type of mitigation, known as self-serving mitigation, puts the speaker in the motivation focus. It refers to instances when the speaker tries to protect their face (e.g. when the speaker is obliged to order the hearer to perform a difficult task) or when the speaker rejects their commitment to the proposition (Fraser, 1980, p. 345). One more approach that is worth mentioning was proposed by Russian linguist Takhtarova (2010). It reminds Caffi's bushes, hedges and shields. What in Caffi's classification is known as shields, Takhtarova calls deictic mitigation, bushes and hedges are grouped in a single class called propositional mitigation, and a third class called illocutionary mitigation (this includes indirect speech acts) is divided.

Though there has been a number of attempts to define mitigation, it is still not clear whether it should be regarded as a rhetorical device, a pragmatic function, a speech strategy or a communicative category. Given this, Karakulova (2016) argues that mitigation is a communicative category which includes mitigative prescriptions, as well as various ways of communicative attenuation determined by social, ethnic, cultural and situational parameters of communication and implemented in the form of discourse-specific communicative strategies and tactics.

2.2. Hedging

Even though hedging has been part of linguistic vocabulary for over 30 years, there is no common definition for it. There were a lot of attempts to generalize definitions of what hedging is, but researchers continue to view it in different ways.

Lakoff (1973) drew attention to the problem of correlation between natural phenomena and natural linguistic concepts, which, he claimed, have "fuzzy borders". The subject of G. Lakoff's research was linguistic phenomena that could be used for peripheral concepts belonging to more generalized conceptual categories. Lakoff (1973) carefully studied the group of words, which he called hedges. He defined hedges as words whose meaning implies fuzziness - words whose purpose is to present objects more or less clearly. In this way, he writes that hedges are phrases or words whose primary function is to present objects and phenomena with ambiguity. Their use indicates that the speaker is not fully confident in the accuracy of the information he or she provides in the process of communication. Instead of sounding like a fact (This medicine will help you), the speaker comes to the aid of hedging in order to purposefully avoid a direct saying (I believe that this medicine could help you) (Lakoff, 1973, p. 471).

Lakoff's (1973) work and his definition of hedging became the starting point for several later studies of this phenomenon. Although the meaning of "hedging" has been broadened to include other types of words that were not previously on Lakoff's list, his work is nevertheless considered basic in exploring this concept.

Namsaraev (1997) considers hedging to be an independent phenomenon. He writes that many linguists consider this concept within the framework of other linguistic phenomena such as modality, metadiscourse, and politeness strategies. However, he emphasizes that if the hedging concept is viewed through the prism of other concepts, many of the means by which hedging is expressed may be missed. Thus, the description of this phenomenon would be incomplete. Namsaraev (1997) writes that hedging is a pragmatic category, which includes linguistic means that function on the level of interpersonal metadiscourse.

Fraser (2010) sees hedging as a rhetorical strategy that points to the uncertainty of what the speaker is saying, as well as his attitude towards the illocutionary power of speech. By choosing a word, structure, or special form of a sentence, the speaker hints at the absence of his or her direct obligations. B. Fraser writes about weakening the meaning of the sentence if there is a hedge. In his view, the use of a hedge is a deliberate choice of the speaker. He uses certain linguistic means - hedges - to change the perception of the sentence. Hedges are thus linguistic tools - lexical or syntactic structures that soften the context. Moreover, hedges do not form grammatical categories.

The newest research of hedging includes the study of relations between hedging and euphemisation (Pastukhova, 2018), the hedging function of exemplification and vague category markers (Barotto, 2018; Malyuga & McCarthy, 2018), relations between hedging and politeness theory (Vlasyan, 2018), hedging and boosters in academic discourse (Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2017), hedging devices in Romanian online media discourse (Florea, 2017) and others.

Hedging can be considered as a pragmatic strategy that performs a protective function of a statement at the expense of representation of subjects and phenomena fuzzy and ambiguous.

3. Research Questions

3.1. How is mitigation related to hedging?

3.2. What are the most frequent hedges in the speeches of Boris Johnson?

4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the current study is to identify the correlation between hedging and mitigation as in some cases these phenomena can be viewed as interchangeable notions. We also aim to see which hedges are frequently used by Boris Johnson in his speeches and whether they are used for mitigating purposes.

5. Research Methods

The data of this particular study were taken from the Boris Johnson's interviews posted by such online news media sources as BBC News (2019 a,b,c), Sky News (2019), PoliticsHome (Ashmore, 2017), Timeout…, (2020), ITV News (2019). Seven interviews with Boris Johnson were chosen for analysis. Method of classification was used to classify hedges based on their pragmatic features. Quantitative method then was used to calculate the total number of hedges and detect the most frequent. Finally, contextual method was used to analyse the use of hedges in particular contexts.

6. Findings

6.1. Mitigation and hedging

The basis of human communication is language. When we talk, every word does not just have a meaning, but at the same time it acts as a link between people. In modern linguistics one of the pressing problems is better communication in certain situations, contexts. Hedging and mitigation play an important role in people's communication. They are important aspects of language because they help to express oneself in a way that does not create communicative discomfort for the person you are talking to.

There have been several attempts to classify types of hedging and mitigation in linguistics. As both mitigation and hedging share similar means of expression, we tried to trace the correlation between their types in the Table 01 below:

Table 01. Correlation of Mitigation and Hedging Devices

Author of the concept, year of publication	Type of studied concept	Devices affecting the proposition itself	Devices affecting relations between the speaker and the propositional content	Devices used to shift the responsibility for the proposition	Other types of relevant devices
Prince, Frader, & Bosk, (1982)	Hedging	Approximators (adaptors + rounders)	Shields (plausibility hedges)	Shields (attribution hedges)	-
Fraser (1980)	Mitigation	Content mitigation	Force / Speech act mitigation	-	-
Fraser (2010)	Hedging	Propositional hedging	Speech act hedging	-	-
Caffi (1999)	Mitigation	Bushes	Hedges	Shields	-
Takhtarova (2010), Karakulova (2016)	Mitigation	Propositional mitigation	Propositional mitigation	Deictic mitigation	Illocutionary mitigation (e.g. indirect speech acts, subjunctive mood, modality, etc.)
Hübler (1983)	Indetermination	Understatements	Hedges	-	-

Though hedging and mitigation are two different concepts, functionally they correlate at some point. They both use devices that affect the proposition itself and the relations between the speaker and the propositional content and devices that shift the responsibility for the proposition. These devices can be hedges.

Hedges do not belong to some specific class of words.

Vlasyan and Shusharina (2018) argue that hedges are "linguistic devices, such as various lexical units, syntactic structures, prosodic features and the like, used as mechanisms for implementation of this [hedging] strategy. Here it should be mentioned that none of these linguistic devices are used exceptionally in the capacity of hedges. When they do not perform hedging function, they may have grammatical categories" (p. 747).

Hedging is first of all a pragmatic phenomenon and its interpretation depends on the context. Practically any linguistic unit can function as hedge depending on pragmatic factors (Vlasyan, 2019, p. 621). The same is true for mitigation. Despite a seeming resemblance between mitigation and hedging, they are two separate concepts.

Firstly, hedging and mitigation may be expressed by different linguistic means. Though generally mitigation uses hedges as the most effective means of its implementation, the overall set of mitigation devices is more abundant and goes beyond hedges. Traditionally hedging is represented by either lexical units or particular syntactic constructions, whereas mitigation may not have any specific lexical representation and at the same time attenuate the meaning. For instance, in the conversation with a child who was found guilty of misbehaviour, a mother could say "In what way is it OK to do so?". Formally no hedges or other lexical markers are used here, though the use of the interrogative indirect speech act instead of a direct assertive (You did it wrong / You behaved badly) mitigates the meaning of this utterance. Besides, in some contexts mitigation may be expressed by omitting part of the utterance. It is often the case of altruistic mitigation, when the speaker wants to reduce the negative effect on the hearer and omits the part of the sentence which may hurt their feelings (e.g. Well, if he doesn't make it through the operation… [he will die] / If they make the wrong choice…[they will lose all their possessions]). Again, no hedges are used, though the meaning is mitigated.

Secondly, if hedging is viewed as a rhetorical strategy, then mitigation is one of the functions that hedging performs. When used for mitigating purpose, hedging does not only attenuate the proposition, but it also avoids possible conflicts between the speaker and the hearer and saves the speaker's and the hearer's face (Vlasyan, 2019, p. 622). Though being the core function of hedging, mitigation is not the only function hedging performs. According to Kozhukhova and Pastukhova (2019), hedges also serve to add fuzziness to the sentence and improve accuracy so not to tell lies.

Thus, mitigation is a communicative category that combines a set of functions aimed at reducing the risks an utterance can put the speaker of hearer at. It is at the same time the main function of hedging - a broader concept which besides mitigating purposes is used to add fuzziness, improve accuracy, veil undesirable information, evade responsibility for an action, appear modest and ready for disagreement. Both mitigation and hedging are context-based and both share a common means of expression - a hedge.

6.2. Hedges in Boris Johnson's Speeches

Prince, Frader, and Bosk (1982), introduced pragmatic classification of hedges in linguistics. According to this classification hedges can be divided into two big groups: hedges-approximators and hedges-shields. Approximators affect the proposition itself, whereas shields affect relations between the speaker and the propositional content and shift the responsibility for the proposition. These two groups are then each subdivided into two subgroups. Approximators are divided into adaptors (make certain amendment to the original meaning of the proposition) and rounders (provide proposition with a certain range of variation), whereas shields are divided into plausibility hedges (affect speaker's attitude to the proposition) and attribution shields (affect the deictic coordinates of the utterance).

In Boris Johnson's speeches all four groups of hedges were discovered. Table 02. shows the distribution of hedges according to their types, as well as each type's percentage out of general number of hedges. The total number of hedges used is 240, and this figure was taken for 100%.

Table 02. Types of hedges found in the speeches of Boris Johnson

Approximators (73) - 30.4%		Shields (167) - 69.6%	
Adaptors (45) - 18.7%	Rounders (28) - 11.7%	Plausibility hedges (152) - 63.3%	Attribution hedges (15) - 6.3%
Can (13)	Some (16)	I (don't) think (113)	Passive voice (4)
Would (12)	About (7)	I would (not) + V (6)	Conditional 2 (4)
Sort of (3)	Sort of (1)	I / we can (4)	Conditional 1 (4)
(Some) kind of (3)	Around (1)	(If) I may say (4)	Shift of source of information (1)
(Don't) need to (3)	Any (1)	I (don't) wish to (4)	Shift of action's agent (1)
May (2)	A bit of (1)	I believe (4)	Impersonal sentence (1)
Might (1)	(Quite) a few (1)	I hope (2)	
Probably (1)		I / we should (2)	
Ought to (1)		I / we have to (2)	
Somehow (1)		Possibly (2)	
Could (1)		Probably (1)	
This or that (1)		Perhaps (1)	
Possibly (1)		In my view (1)	
Slightly (1)		I'm hopeful that (1)	
Quite (1)		I'm not (so) sure (1)	
		If you don't mind (1)	
		I humbly + V (1)	
		I would + V + you (1)	
		I could + V + you (1)	

The most frequent hedges used by Boris Johnson are plausibility shields, in particular the hedge 'I think':

> But **I think** that every day we are making progress. And **I think** we can get Brexit done. And **I think** we can get the country to... I know we can get Brexit done. **I think** we can get the country to focus on what we're trying to do for people who care about the NHS, for people who care about

> *their kids' education for people who want to see the opportunity extended across this country through infrastructure, education and technology. **I think** this is going to be a fantastic government and we want to get on and deliver for the people of this country* (BBC News, 2019a).

With the help of the plausibility hedge 'I think' Boris Johnson moderates his tone. The hedge points out to his opinion and speculation of a particular subject. Boris Johnson avoids imposing his ideas on others.

Attribution hedges are less popular in speeches of the Prime Minister. The most frequent attribution shields are conditionals and passive voice. Such hedges help Boris Johnson avoid personal factor and mitigate his responsibility when he makes the statement:

" ***I was being told*** *that there was absolutely no way that the UK could leave the Single Market and the Customs Union and that we would have to stay run by the EU, and I don't think that is the case"* (Sky News, 2019).

The Prime Minister also uses a lot of approximators in his speech, in particular adaptors. They help to minimise the degree of truth of the original proposition.

*"Well, I mean, if I made the proposals are not yet made, I **probably** ought to make them to the EU…"* (BBC News, 2019b).

Adaptor 'probably' points to the speaker's uncertainty and thus makes the proposition fuzzier. If we take the hedge out of the proposition, it sounds more assertive – "... I ought to make them to the EU…".

Rounders are used two time less than adaptors. Their main function is to express the proximity when the exact number is unknown or uncertain. The following example shows that Boris Johnson does not give the exact number when he is asked about the living wage in the country:

*"It's **at or around £10 or so**"* (Sky News, 2019).

Thus, to conclude, shields are the most frequent hedges in Boris Johnson's speeches. They make up almost 70% of all hedges. Though there is a great difference in the use of plausibility and attribution hedges.

7. Conclusion

Mitigation is a communicative category whose macrostrategy is attenuation of communicative force of the utterance. This macrostrategy is implemented through hedging. Based on the classification of hedges suggested by E. Prince, we classify hedges into two major groups (approximators and shields), each having two subgroups (adaptors and rounders and plausibility hedges and attribution hedges correspondingly). All four minor types of hedges were discovered in the speeches of Boris Johnson. The most abundant (and thus effective) type of hedges is plausibility hedges. The hedge "I think", which is the most frequent hedge in this group, is used in the majority of contexts, as it helps the speaker to save his face and reduce responsibility for the utterance. It is a good example of self-serving mitigation. Adaptors and rounders are also effective as they help the speaker veil his/her uncertainty. The most complex and thus least productive group is attribution hedges which shift the focus of the utterance. Though not all hedges were used for the purpose of mitigation, the overall style of Boris Johnson's communication is characterised by the tendency to mitigate, especially in a self-serving manner.

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