

THE PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS OF HEDGES AND THEIR LINGUISTIC REALIZATION

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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, which aims at establishing an interaction among the members of an interprofessional dialogue. Science indeed is skepticism, doubt, refutation, speculation, formulation of hypothesis, criticism. Academic knowledge is now generally acknowledged to be an agreement between a writer and a potentially skeptical discourse community. As a consequence, scientific writing is teemed with mitigating devices and expressions that encode the writer's point of view and serve as mediators between the information presented in the text and the writer's factual information. In academic writing these systematic features are known as 'hedges'. The significance of hedging lies in the fact that transforming claims into accredited knowledge requires reader acceptance and therefore linguistic and rhetorical means of persuasion. This, at least in part, depends on the appropriate use of various rhetorical and interactive features, of which hedges are among the most essential. The general aim of this study is to identify the pragmatic functions of hedges and their linguistic realization.

Since George Lakoff published the first research on hedging in 1972 an abundant literature has demonstrated the increasing weightiness of this phenomenon in academic writing. The applied linguists have presented different viewpoints and different theoretical assumptions of the concept of hedging. There is variation between studies as to the actual items treated as hedges and it can be observed that there are as many approaches as there are researchers who studied the phenomenon of hedge.

The use of the term 'hedge' has seen a change from a narrowly semantic concept to a wider pragmatic one. Lakoff started from a purely semantic perspective and for him a hedge is a word "whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy". He also mentioned the possibility of hedges to act on performatives [10: 195]. This concept was later developed by Fraser - the idea that performatives can be hedged by modal verbs [6: 341-350]. In 1978 Brown and Levinson showed that hedging also acts on illocutionary force and speaker commitment [1: 47]. Thus, by 1978 the concept of 'hedge' was fully established in the domain of pragmatics.

Taking into account the pragmatic bias Prince et al. distinguish between two types of fuzziness expressed by a hedge: *approximators* (fuzziness within the propositional content proper) and *shields* (fuzziness between the propositional content and the speaker) [14: 85]. Further they subdivide approximators into *adaptors* (markers such as *sort of*) and *rounders* (imprecision markers such as *approximately*). Shields in their turn can be subdivided into *plausibility shields* (expressing doubt) and *attribution shields* (attributing the belief to someone other than the speaker). Hübler made the same distinction that is between *understatements* (fuzziness in propositional context) and *hedgies* (speaker's attitude towards his or her utterance) [7: 57].

Skelton proposes the abandonment of the term 'hedge' in favour of a distinction between proposition and comment and places hedging strategies within the framework of what he calls 'commentative language', characterized by the modulation of propositions [17: 37-43]. Crompton criticizes Skelton's approach pointing out that hedging language is no more than a subset of what Skelton describes as a 'commentative language' [4: 271-287]. Crompton makes a distinction between propositions which have the status of *facts* (information already shared by the discourse community) and propositions which have the status of *claims* (presented for evaluation by the target audience of the message). Crismore and Farnsworth [3: 118-136] state that "it is a very dangerous myth that sees professional scientific writing as impersonal statements of fact that all add up to the truth". They argue that scientific texts consist of two layers - primary discourse, which functions on a referential, informational plane and metadiscourse, which functions on an expressive, attitudinal plane; that is, it indicates how to understand the author's perspective or stance towards the context or structure. It is

realized with the help of modality markers e.g. hedges, emphatics, attributers, attitude markers and commentary. Caffi distinguishes between *bushes* (which correspond to Prince et al. approximators), *hedges* (covering both speaker commitment and indication of illocutionary force) and *shields* (similar to Prince et al.'s attribution shields) [2: 325-373].

In many later studies of hedging items characteristically seen as epistemic have been at center stage. Epistemic modality is the most useful expression of hedge. Palmer's categorization of modals includes hedges [13: 133-171]. His classification consists of dynamic, deontic and epistemic categories. Epistemic modals express the writer's or speaker's subjective evaluation, thus including hedges. Apart from the most central indications of epistemic possibility, then, it is also evident that attention should be given to the hedging potential of other items conveying epistemic meanings. Granted the above, it seems that hedging may be quite usefully approached by associating it with the notion of epistemic modality understood in broad terms. In English, this means that a number of lexical categories, including certain modal auxiliaries (e.g. *may*, *might*, *could*), full verbs (e.g. *suggest*, *think*, *seem*), adverbs and adjectives (e.g. *perhaps*, *probably*, *potential*, *presumable*) and nouns (e.g. *possibility*, *probability*, *assumption*) become central items of interest for the linguist.

The multiplicity of the forms that hedging may take is indeed one of the main problems in the analysis of the phenomenon, as it appears that the devices cannot be classified exhaustively by referring to any clearly delimited traditional linguistic categories. There exist different taxonomies concerning hedging devices. Salager-Mayer's taxonomy, which has been widely adopted by other researchers, includes shields (modal auxiliary verbs and modal lexical verbs), adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrases, approximators of degree, quantity, frequency and time (adjectives and adverbs), introductory phrases (author's personal doubt), *if* clauses and compound hedges [15: 149-170], [16: 121-132]. Studying hedging in newswriting, Zuck and Zuck, for example, draw attention to an array of devices [18: 172-180]. They first discuss how vagueness in presenting the sources of news items may amount to hedging and then proceed to presenting a list of other items typically used as hedges. Most of the items on the list are verbal or adverbial expressions that involve different degrees of probability or otherwise play down the responsibility of the sender as concerns propositional content. The main categories consist of auxiliaries (e.g. *may*, *might*, *can*, *could*), semi-auxiliaries (*appear*, *seem*), full verbs (*suggest*), the passive voice, various adverbs and adverbials (*probably*, *almost*, *relatively*), some adjectives (*probable*), and indefinite nouns and pronouns. Similar items are also mentioned by Markkanen and Schroder, according to whom modal verbs, modal adverbs and particles, the use of some pronouns and even the avoidance of others, agentless passives, other impersonal expressions, and certain vocabulary choices may be seen as central manifestations of hedging in English and German [11: 3-20].

Myers taxonomy includes modal expressions, *if* clauses, question forms, passivisation, impersonal phrases and time references, copulas other than *be*, modal auxiliaries, lexical verbs like *believing*, *arguing* and adjectivals and adverbials [12: 235-247]. Crompton's taxonomy proposes that hedged propositions contain copulas, epistemic modals, sentences containing reported propositions (verbs such as *show*, *demonstrate*, *prove*), etc [4: 271-287]. Hyland identifies hedging with epistemic modality [8: 239-256]. Hyland's taxonomy omits approximators but includes epistemic modals, *if* clauses, question forms and passivisation, impersonal phrases and time reference. In his further works Hyland distinguishes between *content-oriented hedges* and *reader-oriented hedges* [9: 38]. Content-oriented hedges are further subdivided into *accuracy-oriented hedges* (which can be of attributive type or the reliability type) and *writer-oriented hedges*. Diwald suggests a distinction between *characterizing* (Prince et al.'s approximators) and *perspectivizing* (Prince et al.'s shields) [5: 25].

When we look at the linguistic items that researchers have associated with hedging, it becomes clear that the scope of hedging has broadened considerably since G. Lakoff's initial work, there nevertheless being no absolute uniformity between studies as to which linguistic phenomena should be regarded as falling within the category. The limited set of items dealt with by Lakoff has expanded to cover a wide range. This has evidently been a result of the widening of the notion of hedging. With the widening of functional scope, researchers also became interested in a wider array of devices, it now being commonly recognized that delimiting the items that can be associated with hedging is difficult.

Thus following the evolution of the concept and considering all the above mentioned researches, the following functions of hedges can be put forward:

1) to show that you recognize the status of the researcher by presenting your argument respectfully, modestly, and with courtesy, even if the researcher's work corroborates your own;

2) to protect the subject and anticipate negative feedback (or the so-called 'boomerang effect'); 3) to make things vague and to indicate probability, which is related to the author's avoidance of the personal involvement and prevents misleading the audience when there is a lack of solid, consistent research on a topic, or there is disagreement in the field about that issue;

4) to keep from appearing biased or opinionated;

5) to open a discursive space in which readers are able to dispute the writer's arguments and interpretations, thereby enabling writers to take a position with respect to an audience as well as to facts.

These functions are realized with the help of **modal verbs** (the most tentative ones being *may, might, could, would, should*); **semi-auxiliaries** (these verbs are the so-called speech act verbs used to perform such acts as doubting and evaluating rather than merely describing, and they are regarded as having varying degrees of illocutionary force). Examples are *seem, appear* (epistemic verbs), *tend, believe, assume, suggest, estimate, think, argue, indicate, propose, speculate*; **probability adjectives** like *possible, probable*, and nouns such as *assumption, claim, possibility, estimate* etc; **probability adverbs** like *perhaps, possibly, probably, likely, virtually, apparently*; **agentless passive, compound hedges** such as *seem to suggest, probably indicate*; **conditionals, introductory phrases** such as *to our knowledge, I believe*.

E.g. *It seems that a new study, done in Northern Iran, would appear to confirm that drinking extremely hot tea (70°C or more) can increase the risk for a certain type of oesophagus cancer.*

It was found that eating two and a half ounces of baby broccoli daily for two months could help prevent a stomach bug that is linked to gastritis, ulcers and stomach cancer.

The latest researches at Columbia University seem to suggest that depression may actually lead to heart disease.

It becomes obvious from the various functions mentioned above that hedges are among the main pragmatic features which researchers use to produce a closer fit between their statements about new discoveries and the pre-existing understandings within the scientific community. They are therefore both cautious and interactive devices enabling writers to take a position with respect to an audience as well as to facts.

In spite of the list of hedging devices realized with the help of linguistic expressions presented above, it is worth mentioning that there is no limit to the linguistic expressions that can be considered as hedges. Almost any linguistic item or expression can be interpreted as a hedge depending on the communicative context. This also means that no clear cut lists of hedging expressions are possible.

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Ամփոփում

Սույն հոդվածում դիտարկվում են հնչի պրագմատիկ գործառնությունները գիտական խոսքում: Հնչավորված արտահայտությունները կարող են ենթադրել քննարկվող փաստերի ոչ բացարձակ ճշտությունը /արժանահավատությունը, տեղեկատվությանը ոչ լրիվ տիրապետումը, այսինքն՝ զգուշությունը, հեռատեսությունը, անուղղակիությունը, շրջահայեցությունը, գրուցակցի շահերի նկատմամբ մտահոգությունը, ձգտումը համաձայնության և այլն: Հնչի բացակայությունը մյուս կողմից կարող է ցույց տալ, որ խոսողը համարում է իր տեսակետն առավել ճշմարիտ և անտեսում է գրուցակցի կարծիքը: Հոդվածում ներկայացված են նաև տարբեր լեզվական միջոցներ, որոնք գործածվում են որպես հնչ: