HEDGING IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

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Abstract: Hedging has become a topic of interest among discourse-oriented linguists. The paper will discuss ways in which the term “hedge” has been understood and defined in the literature within the academic writing discourse. As epistemic devices with significant characteristics, hedges are often seen as features in academic writing practices that may cause problems, being often a serious source of pragmatic failure in written discourse in a foreign language. It is suggested that the appropriate use of hedging, which clearly requires subtlety and awareness of pragmatic competence of written discourse, is utterly important in avoiding “communicative failure” (Thomas, 1983) and allowing authors to find a way of expressing their true voice in a target discourse.

Key words: hedging, academic writing, foreign language

1. Context

It has been widely recognised that publishing research means making a contribution to the ongoing dialogue in a particular discipline or field. The focus of research stems from problem-solving and collaboration since it is based on a great amount of ‘give’ and ‘take’ in any critical discussion. It is common knowledge that any written text involves potential interaction between writer and reader, so that academic genres, like all forms of writing, require writers to consider the expected audience and anticipate their background knowledge, processing problems, and reactions to the text (Widdowson, 1984: 220). In the same line, readers seek to predict the writer’s ideas, question their claims, and assess the usefulness and importance of research to their own perspective (Bazerman, 1985). As a consequence, writers evidently indicate their attitude in what they write or say. Stubbs (1986:1) argues that “all sentences encode a point of view” implying that any academic text contains the author’s presence.

While academic writing is mostly viewed as a series of impersonal statements or facts which describe or present ideas, requiring an objective and informational style, the most useful contributions in the academic community are made in such a way that writers not only receive credit for their original contribution, but they also allow others to add to the dialogue, to refine or interpret the ideas put forth, to question or challenge claims, or come up with new ones. This process is achieved through the effective use of hedging which provide expressiveness and credibility. These linguistic devices are frequently used in rational and neutral scientific discourse, because academic writing discourse obeys the same mechanisms as ordinary everyday communication, being socially situated and following precise rhetorical objectives (Gilbert & Mulkay 1984).

2. Hedges - definition

The definition of hedging has evolved through the years, from the everyday meaning found in dictionaries (protection or defence to non committal or evasive statements) to different

complex definitions given by numerous researchers (Crompton, 1997; Hyland, 1994, 1995; Myers, 1989; Nash, 1990, Salager-Meyer, 1994).

Lakoff (1972) introduced the notion of hedges into linguistics by defining them as “words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy”, thus rendering ideas in a less clear or absolute way. Hyland (1995) defined the term as “the expression of tentativeness in language use that represents an absence of certainty in describing any linguistic item or strategy employed to indicate either a lack of commitment to the truth value of an accompanying proposition or a desire not to express that commitment categorically. In academic writing, hedges “imply then, that a statement is based on plausible reasoning rather than certain knowledge, and allow readers the freedom to dispute it”. Crompton (1997) sees hedging “a linguistic strategy allowing the author to avoid committing the [absolute] truth of a proposition, statement or claim”. Other definitions of hedging regard it as a number of words that show uncertainty or limitation (Crystall, 1997), modify a proposition directly (Verschueren, 1999), while others refer to them as ‘metalanguage’ (Weirich, 1996) or cautious, annotative expressions of words (Yule, 1996)

As a process, academic writing is viewed as “pragmatically sophisticated” and it is teemed with instances of hedges (Wishnoff, 2000).

From the above definitions one can realise that through hedges, within the academic writing context, the researchers succeed to put some salient distance between themselves and the absoluteness of any claim, modulating their statements and allowing the reader to participate in the academic dialogue, as an intelligent colleague capable of participating in the discourse with an open mind. (Hyland, 1996)

In other words, hedging techniques are writing strategies that allow the researcher some flexibility in making claims without considering it an absolute or categorical one, nuancing claims and implicit meaning.

3. The Importance of hedging

Academic writing is also the language used to convey answers to research questions, by creating arguments based on claims supported with evidence or examples. Hedging is an essential part of academic writing because it allows the writer to formulate good research answers that are not absolute or applicable in all situations, pinpointing, for example, problems with the answers of the research. Hedges allow the research to address possible problems, raise objections or anticipate opposition to the research claims, while still contributing something new to the ongoing dialogue in a research field. Being a balance of facts and evaluation, academic writing requires the researchers to strike a balance between the data collected and the interpretation of the process of phenomenon uncovered as fully accurately and objectively as possible, while also showing how they themselves interpret the results. Thus, one can better understand why researches do not say „X **is** the cause of Y” but rather „X **may be** the cause of Y” to show the current state of knowledge in a domain, and, subsequently to tell the researcher that while they feel strongly about the findings or answers to the research questions, they also realise that it is not the end of the academic dialogue.

Defined as “downtoners” (Quirk et al., 1972), “compromisers” (James, 1983), “weakeners” (Brown and Levinson, 1987), “softeners” (Crystal and Davy, 1975), “backgrounding terms” (Low, 1996) or “pragmatic devices” (Stubbe and Holmes, 1995) hedges are commonly used to reducing commitment and negotiating meanings between the reader and the writer, especially in academic discourse.

In conclusion, hedging is important because it allows the writer of the research to:

a) submit new arguments or make claims in a subject matter while acknowledging that there might be other valid or effective points of view;

- b) make a new contribution to scientific research in a productive, and more important, cooperative way;
- c) have the flexibility to avoid making absolute or categorical statements which claim that the researcher has found the only true answer;
- d) participate in ongoing academic dialogue in fields where new evidence is generated all the time, being almost impossible to stay up-to-date with all new findings;
- d) leave room for other voices or research perspectives.

“It is by means of the hedging system of a language that a user distinguishes between what s/he says and what s/he thinks about what s/he says. Without hedging, the world is purely propositional, a rigid, and rather dull place, where things either are the case or are not. With a hedging system, language is rendered more flexible and the world more subtle” (Skelton, 1998) Thus, hedging allows researchers to be confidently uncertain in their claims, encouraging them to state how precisely they can be in their claims, but also leaving room for lack of absolute precision especially where it is difficult or absolutely impossible to achieve it.

4. Hedging techniques

The most frequent hedging strategies make use of:

1. *Lexical verbs* (indicate, estimate, propose, assume, suggest, appear, seem, tend to, argue, doubt)

e.g. Research proves the link between alcohol drinking and liver disease. (categorical claim)

Research suggests/indicates a (possible) link between alcohol drinking and liver disease. (hedged claim)

In the second sentence the lexical verbs *indicates/suggests* allow the researcher to share the results of a study without making the claim that these findings are absolute.

2. *Adverbial constructions* (often, quite, almost, usually, sometimes, occasionally, probably, certainly, clearly, possibly)

e.g. The fire was caused by the lightning storm. (categorical claim)

The fire was probably caused by the lightning storm. (hedged claim)

The hedged claim, using the adverb *probably*, allows the writer to share his/her view without making an absolute claim.

3. *Modal verbs* (must, will/would, should, may, can/could, might) which are often used to express a logical probability of a claim.

e.g. In the future e-books will be widely available. (categorical claim)

In the future e-books might be widely available. (hedged claim)

The modal verb *might* in the above example allows the writer to state an idea without taking an absolute stance.

5. Conclusion

In academic writing authors often have to be cautious about the way they present a piece of research, their research questions findings, results, conclusions a.s.o. In order to avoid categorical or absolute phrases research writers use hedges whenever necessary. The main functions of hedging are to tone down research statements in order to reduce the threat of opposition from other researchers, and to avoid overstating the results of a study which might not be valid in all circumstances. Since the results of a piece of research are hardly generalisable in all circumstances, the use of hedging is a part of salient academic writing practices, which can be done in a variety of ways. Typically, hedging is expressed through use of modal auxiliary

verbs such as *may, might and could*, adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal expressions (*possible, perhaps, probability*), modal lexical verbs (*believe, assume*).

Hedging is utterly important in avoiding “communicative failure” (Thomas, 1983) and allowing authors to find a way of expressing their true voice in a target discourse. Academic discourse contains many fuzzy expressions which introduce imprecision into statements, enabling the reader to get the gist of the writer’s point of view, thus playing a major role in efficient communication.

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