

On the functions and forms of metadiscursive hedging in applied linguistics

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Metadiscourse, defined as discourse about discourse, has been borrowed from philosophy into applied linguistics and has evolved as a new area of research in this field. Although metadiscourse is a relatively new subfield in applied linguistics, it has been researched by a range of scholars around the world. The current paper reports the findings of a qualitative library research conducted to identify the functions and forms of metadiscursive hedging in applied linguistics. First, it defines the topic briefly. Then, it establishes an interface between fuzzy logic, linguistics, pragmatics, politeness, and applied linguistics. Finally, it elaborates on the future directions of research on metadiscursive hedging in applied linguistics.

Keywords: Academic Writing; Applied Linguistics; Hedging; Heritage English Speakers; Metadiscourse; Non-Native English Speakers

1. Introduction

Metadiscourse was first used in philosophy as a term to denote discourse about/on discourse—in contrast to discourse about/on a given topic. The term has been borrowed into applied linguistics—and specifically into English for Specific Purposes (ESP); it refers to the forms and functions of words and phrases that describe and comment on sentences and utterances (Ädel, 2006;

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Hyland, 2007). One of the topics covered under metadiscourse is hedging. Dictionaries often define hedging as a ‘barrier’, ‘limit’, ‘defense’, or ‘the act or means of protection or defense’ (see *The Oxford English Dictionary*). By the same token, metadiscursive hedging in academic writing in applied linguistics has been defined to include the mechanisms, tools, and strategies that academic writers in applied linguistics employ to protect themselves against boastful claims, harsh criticism, professional goofs, and so forth.

The sub-field of metadiscourse—although still young—has received acceptable attention on the part of researchers and scholars in applied linguistics. There is a modestly sizeable, but still burgeoning, literature on the topic. This paper (1) reviews the existing literature, (2) establishes an interface between fuzzy logic, linguistics, pragmatics, politeness, and applied linguistics, and (3) delineates the future directions of research on metadiscursive hedging in applied linguistics.

2. Background

The words ‘*hedge*’ and ‘*hedging*’ in dictionary are *sporadically* defined as a barrier, limit, defense, or the act or means of protection or defense (see *The Oxford English Dictionary*). As will be illustrated below, no unified description of the concept of hedging is to be found in the literature on metadiscourse which seems satisfactory over the years. As Hyland (1998, p. 1) contends, “straightforward definitions of the notions are rather rare.” in the literature, the concepts of *hedge* and *hedging* are used in different ways by authors, using a variety of terms like *stance marker* (Atkinson, 1999), *understatement* (Hubler, 1983), *downtoners* (Quirk, Greenbaum, Leech & Svartvik, 1985), and *downgraders* (House & Kasper, 1981). Hedging is considered as a linguistic concept including such processes as *mitigation* (Labov & Fanshel, 1977; Stubbs, 1986), *indirectedness* (Hinkel, 1997; Lakoff, 1990; Tannen, 1982), *tentativeness* (Holmes, 1983) and *vagueness* (Channel, 1994; Myers, 1996).

Almost all of the existing *hedging* studies are rooted in Zadeh’s (1965) work on fuzzy logic which claims that some objects of the natural world do not easily fit into the linguistic categories available for describing the universe. In this connection, George Lakoff’s (1973) primarily and linguistically drew people’s attention to the problem of relating natural phenomena to natural language concepts” and claimed that natural language (concepts) have “vague boundaries and fuzzy edges” (p. 458). To illustrate the practical possibility and viability of studying such linguistic items in natural languages in terms of formal logic, Lakoff (1973) regarded hedges as a group of “words whose meaning implicitly involves fuzziness—words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy” (p. 471). As such, Lakoff’s claim (1973) establishes an interface between metadiscursive hedging and fuzzy logic; since

metadiscursive hedging is part and parcel of politeness, pragmatics, ESP, and applied linguistics, Lakoff's claim (1973) tacitly establishes an interface between all of these (sub-)disciplines.

3. Functions of hedging

Perhaps the earliest study of hedging in the field of linguistics can be attributed to Lakoff (1973); his initial treatment of hedges involved semantics and covered linguistically uncertain means that could express natural phenomena that are peripheral to the core conceptual categories of natural language. Thus, it can be said that Lakoff has dealt with the role of hedges in conceptualization, as regards the *experiential* metafunction in Halliday's (1978) conception of the so-called 'content' function of language—that is, language as the expression of the processes and other phenomena of the external world, roughly corresponding to Widdowson's (1984) *conceptual* function of language.

Lakoff's (1973) claims on the status of hedges in conceptualization paves the way to emphasize the functions of hedging in social interaction between discourse participants. It is, therefore, no surprise that hedging has more recently been approached as a pragmatic strategy rather than a purely semantic strategy. Hedging as pragmatic strategy has often been perceived as contributing to the *interpersonal* metafunction of language, by which is meant ". . . the type of offer, command, statement, or question, the attitudes and judgments embodied in it, and the rhetorical features that constitute it as a symbolic act" (Halliday and Hasan, 1989, p. 45).

Hedges also perform a *metadiscoursal/metadiscursive* function; they reflect "discourse that calls attention either to the relationship between the author and the claims in the text or to the relationship between the author and the text's readers" (Geisler 1994, P. 11)—more specifically, as a subtype of interpersonal metadiscourse (Crismore, 1989). In the same way, Halliday and Hassan (1989) mention that sentences in a discourse always have both ideational and interpersonal components. As such, hedging as part of utterances in a discourse has been treated with a view to both of these elements.

Nevertheless, based on Lakoff's (1973) assumption, hedging as a writing strategy is used to perform two apparently contradictory functions: (1) making things fuzzier, or (2) less fuzzy. A review of the existing literature indicates that hedges as an academic writing strategy make things semantically fuzzier rather than decreasing linguistic fuzziness; by virtue of their vagueness and imprecision, hedges can render writers'/speakers' claims less strongly and more conservatively. As Salager-Meyer (1994, p. 150) has rightly pointed out, "hedging is often used to provide vagueness and

tentativeness”, which tacitly suggests that hedges can increase linguistic fuzziness. In other words, hedges can place “natural language sentences somewhere on the continuum between absolute truth and falsehood, which are not often 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” (Lakoff, 1973, pp. 458-459). As such, another functions of hedging, in addition to their in conceptualization, is to increase fuzziness.

Nevertheless, there are also studies that have given evidence to support the idea that hedges may also be thought to render things in less fuzzy manner; this latter interpretation is often used in factual discourse, where hedges may be employed to give the right representation of the state of knowledge under discussion—that is, to achieve greater preciseness (Rounds. 1981; Salager-Meyer 1994, p. 151). This interpretation can be linked to Hyland’s (1998, p. 162) concept of *content-oriented hedges*, which:

mitigate the relationship between propositional content and a non-linguistic mental representation of reality; they hedge the correspondence between what the writer says about the world and what the world is thought to be like”, the subtype of *accuracy-oriented hedges* being concerned with achieving precision by either “marking a departure from an ideal” or “indicating that a proposition is based on plausible reasoning or logical deduction in the absence of full knowledge.

The semantic aspect of hedging is also quite prominent in some other studies (Hübler, 1983; Prince, Frader & Bosk, 1982). Prince et al. (1982) divided hedges into *approximators* and *shields*. This system of naming is functional in that the names point to the functions of hedging devices (i.e., ‘approximating’ and ‘shielding’). The names also reflect class membership; hence, semantic conception of hedging. Approximators themselves are divided into two main types: (1) *adaptors*, which modify a term to suit a non-prototypical situation (e.g., *sort of*); and (2) *rounders*, which indicate that a term is not exactly precise (e.g., *about*). Shields, equally, pertain to pragmatics by inducing implicatures that convey markedness with respect to speaker commitment; (1) *plausibility shields* indicate different degrees of uncertainty on the part of the speaker (e.g., *I think, probably*); (2) *attribution shields* (e.g., *according to her estimates, . . .*) attribute the degree of uncertainty to another party.

The approach advocated by Prince et al. (1982) was later criticized because it seems that the division between approximators and shields may be very difficult to make in analyses of authentic language use. Skelton (1988, p. 38) stated that the distinction is “sustainable only in the abstract”. Markkanen and

Schröder (1997, p. 5) are also doubtful about the usefulness of this division. For them, since hedging is used to modify group membership or truth value, its role is pragmatic rather than semantic—but this must be determined by the context. Likewise, Hübler's (1983, p. 10) presumed that in language use "there are oppositions to all sentences," and the use of hedging phenomena provides an opportunity to prepare for possible opposition. Hübler dealt with linguistic indeterminacy as a means of reducing the negatability of sentences. Drawing on Hare's (1970) and Lyons' (1977) treatments of semantics and the speech act theory, Hübler distinguished two types of indeterminacy from a semantic point of view within the *phrastic* and *neustic* components of a proposition. When indeterminacy occurs within the phrastic component, Hübler speaks of '*understatement*' because concerns are related to the propositional content and its correspondence with the outside world. On the other hand, when indeterminacy reducing the negatability of a sentence is found within the neustic—that is, within "that part of the illocution which expresses the attitude of the speaker to the hearer regarding the proposition"—Hübler speaks of hedging. Both understatements and hedges appear to be aimed at the same pragmatic goal: reducing the risk of negation.

It is clear that Lakoff (1973), Prince et al. (1982), and Hübler (1983) had to do with the semantics of hedging rather than its pragmatic functions. Nevertheless, their ideas provided a theoretical basis for a more pragmatics-oriented approach to hedging. Pragmatics, roughly defined as the 'dialogics' of speaker/hearer meaning (Allan, 2018; Allan & Salmani Nodoushan, 2015; Salmani Nodoushan, 1995, 2012b), has to do with the totality of the 'interactional rationale' underlying the 'use' or 'non-use' of hedges in interaction between senders and addressees in different communication situations—i.e., with a more thorough analysis of the pragmatic potential of hedging devices (Holmes 1995; see also Brown & Levinson, 1978; Crismore & Vaude Kopple, 1988; Salager-Meyer, 1994; Zuck & Zuck, 1985). Needless to say, language is an interpersonal element in social interaction apart from its central role in the conceptualization of the universe. As Widdowson (1984, p. 71) says, language serves a social purpose in that it "provides the means for conveying basic conceptual propositions, for setting them in correspondence with those in the minds of other people, and for using concepts to get things done in the business of social interaction."

In this connection, Brown and Levinson (1987) noted that hedging is oftentimes used in social interactions for politeness purposes. Performing any speech act, even when in accordance with Grice's (1972) cooperative principle, is face-threatening, and this often forces speakers to resort to hedging as a way of showing politeness. The basic tenet underlying Brown and Levinson's claim is that "a face-bearing rational agent will tend to utilize

the FTA-minimizing strategies according to a rational assessment of the face risk to a participant” (1987. p.91). As such, hedging has a ‘politeness’ and/or ‘face-saving’ function (Capone & Salmani Nodoushan, 2014; Salmani Nodoushan, 2014, 2019). All of these studies accentuate Brown and Levinson’s (1987) contention that in interpersonal communication, hedging can be used to avoid “presuming or assuming that anything involved in the FTA is desired or believed by the hearer” (p. 144).

Likewise, in academic communication (including academic writing), too, academic members use hedging to indicate that they do not want to impose upon their audience’s opinions or beliefs. In addition, hedging is a “self-protection” strategy and provides a protected ground for academic members in which they limit their responsibility for presented information, and so obviously avoid potential burdens on their own claims, in the form of readers’ criticism. As such, hedging is seen as a strategy that protects the sender’s negative face on occasions when the sender “indicates that he [or she] thinks he [or she] had good reason to do . . . an act which [the addressee] has just criticized” (Brown & Levinson, 1987. P. 67).

4. Analysis frameworks

Since its introduction in the 20th century, hedging has been studied by a large group of scholars. A discussion of these is beyond the scope of this paper, so we just mention a number of them and describe the most important frameworks for the analysis of hedging that have been presented to date. Some of the studies on hedging include Aijmer (1986), Bloor and Bloor (1993), Coates (1987), Crompton (1997), Dubois (1987), Grabe and Kaplan (1997), Hu and Cao (2011), Lachowicz (1981), Leech and Svartvik (1994), Lyons (1977), Martín (2008), Nuyts’ (1993), Palmer (1990), Šeškauskien (2008), Simpson (1990), Thomas (1995), Weber (1994), Yang (2006), and Yang, Zheng, and Ge (2015). Two of the studies which provided a theoretical framework for the analysis of hedging devices and strategies are Varttala (2001) and Hyland (1998)—which will be described here.

4.1. Varttala’s (2001) typology of hedging devices

Varttala’s (2001) typology of hedging devices considers hedging as an academic strategy by means of which academic members indicate degrees of ‘less-than-full’ assurance towards the accuracy of their conceptualizations of the universe. Varttala’s analytic framework has been developed for the analysis of writers’ or speakers’ hedging strategies, and it can be used to identify hedging devices in (academic) writing and speech. In fact, it is mainly used in discussions of ESP (See Johns & Salmani Nodoushan, 2015; Salmani Nodoushan, 2007, 2016) and academic genres (See Bhatia & Salmani

Nodoushan, 2015; Salmani Nodoushan, 2012a).

Hedging devices, as described by Varttala's (2001) typology, include parts of speech (i.e., nouns, adjectives, adverbs, verbs) as well as other linguistic forms (e.g., auxiliaries, determiners, clauses, phrases, etc.) that can mitigate the intensity of claims in speech and writing. Such devices indicate epistemic possibility. The model sees hedges as not only an open-ended category but also as an epistemic phenomenon (Varttala, 2001). Figure 1 displays Varttala's (2001) typology of hedging devices.

1. Modal auxiliary verbs
2. Full verbs
 - 2.1. Nonfactive reporting verbs
 - 2.2. Tentative cognition verbs
 - 2.3. Tentative linking verbs
3. Adverbs
 - 3.1. Probability adverbs
 - 3.2. Adverbs of indefinite frequency
 - 3.3. Adverbs of indefinite degree
 - 3.4. Approximative adverbs
4. Adjectives
 - 4.1. Probability adjectives
 - 4.2. Adjectives of indefinite frequency
 - 4.3. Adjectives of indefinite degree
 - 4.4. Approximative adjectives
5. Nouns
 - 5.1. Nonfactive assertive nouns
 - 5.2. Tentative cognition nouns
 - 5.3. Nouns of tentative likelihood
6. Clausal elements
7. Questions
8. Other

Figure 1. Varttala's (2001) typology of hedging devices.

4.2. Hyland's (1998) polypragmatic model of hedging functions

Another useful analytic framework is Hyland's (1998) polypragmatic model of hedging often used to identify the multi-functional nature of hedging.

According to this model, hedges can cover an array of purposes. This model is used to capture and classify these purposes; hence, the multi-functional model of hedging. According to Hyland (1998), hedges are used for a good number of purposes and seek to weaken force of statements, introduce modality, express deference, signal uncertainty, and so on. Hedging devices range from content oriented hedges to reader oriented hedges. A brief account of the polypragmatic model of hedging (Hyland, 1998) is depicted in Figure 2.

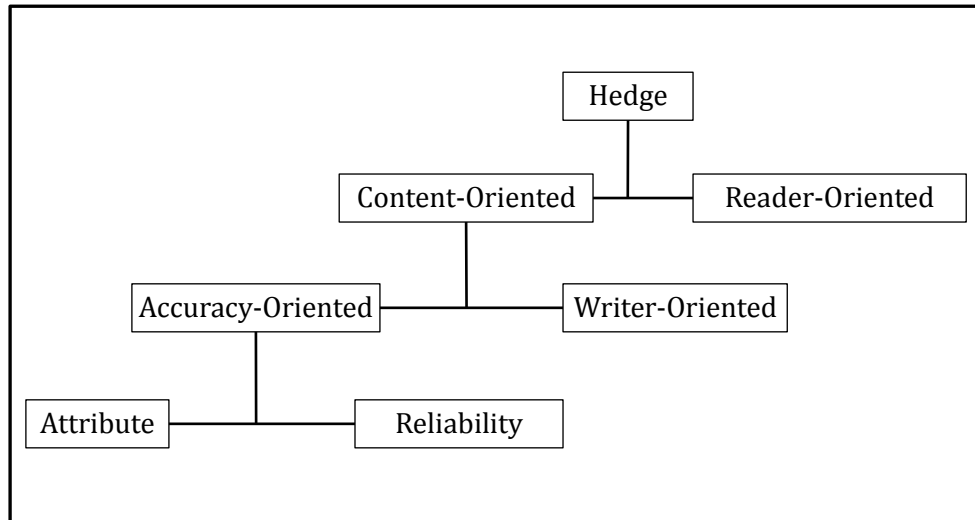


Figure 2. Polypragmatic model of hedging (Hyland, 1998, p. 156).

The distinction between the two main categories of hedges (i.e., content-oriented hedges and reader-oriented) is based on the rationale that content-oriented hedges “mitigate the relationship between propositional content and a representation of reality; they hedge the correspondence between what the writer says about the world and what the world is thought to be like” (Hyland 1996; p. 439, see also 1998, p. 162). Hyland’s reader-oriented hedges, on the other hand, have more to do with the relationship between author and audience in that they “confirm the attention writers give to the interactional effects of their statements” and “solicit collusion by addressing the reader as an intelligent colleague capable of participating in the discourse with an open mind” (1996, p. 446).

In addition to the sender-addressee relationship, reader-oriented hedges also pertain to the more normative scientific “obligation on the writer to defer to the views of colleagues, adhere to limits on self-assurance and engage in debate with peers” (Hyland, 1996, p. 446). Hence, the essence of the distinction between content and reader-oriented hedges is that the former

have more to do with accuracy *vis-à-vis* the world whereas the latter are associated with a certain regard for the audience and the established rules of conduct of the scientific community.

5. General discussion

In brief, hedges are possibly being used to express uncertainties and inaccuracies potentially lurking behind the results to shield authors against the threat of being proven wrong, or to indicate that full agreement does not exist, to allow for alternatives, and to enhance the validity of authors' claims in the eyes of their discourse communities. Thus, hedging devices, as subject-specific discourse, play as intra-communal rather than interpersonal role. The importance of hedging in academic discourse accentuates the need for nonnative academic members to be familiarized with the role and importance of hedging devices in academic writing and communication; hedging is indeed a crucial communicative strategy that helps authors to develop effective arguments and establish a relationship with their readers to gain acceptance and professional feedback from them.

Considering the importance of hedging as an inseparable tool in academic writing, there might be a need for greater and more systematic attention from instructors and syllabus designers, particularly in second language and foreign language contexts. Hedging should receive due attention to its importance as an interpersonal strategy in academic settings, and nonnative academic members should be familiarized with the norms that govern native English writers' academic productions. Nonnative academic members should specifically be familiarized with the different forms and types of hedging devices, and the relationship among hedging functions and language in specialist discourse—applied linguistics included. This will help them to find a justifiable stance in their discipline through the quality and quantity of their publications and presentations.

By considering the remarkable role of hedges in applied linguistics, the education system should provide more effective writing courses to expose nonnative English writers to authentic materials and genuine contexts. This accentuates the points emphasized by Anderson, Vanderhoff and Donovan (2013), Salmani Nodoushan (2011a,b;), Svensson (2018), Wyatt (2014) and Zhang (2017). Academic settings as genuine contexts—where the primary emphasis is on the effects and purpose of language use and on the nature of special-subject discourse as well as addresser-addressee relationships—can be managed to raise learners' awareness regarding the actual forms and types of hedging devices that are beneficial to them.

It is therefore suggested that Skelton's (1988) three broad types of exercise in the teaching of metadiscursive hedging devices be implemented in academic

settings in Iran: (1) sensitization exercises, (2) rewriting exercises, and (3) sets of hedging phenomena—that may be employed as a starting point in elementary courses. A future practical pedagogical solution for nonnative English writers from specific cultures is to invite them to study and compare the use of hedges in two or more languages and cultures, and to master the conventions of the scientific communities of those languages and cultures. Metadiscursive studies of hedging in academic discourse can help learners to improve their metacognitive awareness of them and to become a member in a professional discourse community—in our case, applied linguistics.

6. Conclusion

In sum, this paper presented the findings of a qualitative library research carried out to identify the functions and forms of metadiscursive hedging in applied linguistics; it can be emphasized that there should be special attention to the use of hedges in special-subject discourses in academic settings. It is suggested that it may be fruitful to include courses in applied linguistics programs that raise learners' awareness of hedging devices in academic discourse.

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