

III PMMIS 2019
Post mass media in the modern informational society
"Journalistic text in a new technological environment:
achievements and problems"

DISCOURSE MARKERS AND THEIR FUNCTIONS IN NEW
DIGITAL MEDIA (BASED ON BUZZFEEDNEWS)

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Abstract

Hedges, being able to make a text more or less fuzzy are an inherent part of a language. Fuzzy language is implemented into both texts and speech by various means. In the article we will discuss hedges aiming at transforming responsibility and saving the author's face. On the material of new digital media source (Buzzfeednews) the present study presents a research of hedging. New (digital) media is highly characterised by being able to give feedback, write commentaries, post news in a high speed, modify the information presented (thus being up-to-date) and give links to open sources. As for the methods of research, structural-semantic method was used thanks to which it became possible to describe the structure of the studied phenomenon in close connection with the functions expressed by it, the contextual method is necessary for the identification of the hidden communicative intentions of a speaker in a certain context. Amongst the most productive hedges are those expressed by modal verbs (expressing probability and possibility), modal words, approximates of degree, quantity, frequency and time (usually used with numbers when exact amount is not known), parenthetical constructions and metalinguistic comments. Functionally the stated above hedges add to accuracy, flexibility and efficiently conveyed information. Knowledge and skills connected with the usage of correct, appropriate, adequate to a situation hedges softening communication are an important part of communicative competence.

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Keywords: New digital media, hedging, euphemisation, mitigation, face-saving.



1. Introduction

Hedges, being mere functional words play crucial role in our text/speech perception. They modify the meaning of the message, general slant and give additional shades. Moreover, hedges tend to act as a face-saving means acting as mitigators providing euphemistic effect. As the main difference between new and traditional media suggest, new media is associated with feedback/commentaries, up-to-dateness, speed and open sources. Traditional media is more about criticism, equity, reliable sources, experience and general reliability (Tikhomirova, 2017). Fuzzy language as widely implemented into the texts/speech with the help of hedges not only leads to vagueness of a message or statement but thus transform responsibility and save the author's face. So, analyzing hedges as a means of fuzzy language in new digital mass media would present its certain pragmatic functions.

2. Problem Statement

As the subject of new digital mass media is of extreme topicality and up-to-dateness, the need of research of its characteristics is of all means important. As for the functions of new digital mass media, they correspond to those of traditional media still the way of presentation may vary. News presentations is often connected with subjectivity, not adequate amount of information a journalist has and some other peculiarities that make the necessity of fuzzy language a must. Some of strong and weak points of fuzzy language are: 1) improving accuracy, 2) improving flexibility, 3) conveying information efficiently, 4) conveying information politely and appropriately. Negative points of fuzzy language include 1) harm to communication, 2) lack of exactness, 3) cheating, deceiving, 4) misleading (Hennecke, 2015).

The newest reseaches of new digital media include the study of the role of new media in modern conflicts (Grachev & Baranova, 2018), issue of political manipulation (Kunshchikov, 2018), the study of modern media consupcion (Chernavskiy, 2015; Manta, Polanko, & Tusev, 2017), overview of new digital media evolution (Rogaleva, 2015), production and distribution (Morozova, 2016).

The notion hedging in linguistics is rather new. In the Oxford Learner's Dictionary the concept "hedge" is defined as "a row of bushes or small trees planted close together, usually along the edge of a field, garden/yard or road" (a number of bushes or the small trees planted closely to each other, usually along fields, gardens or roads) (Cambridge Dictionary, URL). From this definition, the word "hedge" is understood as "green hedge" or "barrier". In this value this phenomenon was and still is considered by many linguists.

It is considered that the phenomenon hedging was introduced by Zadeh (1965) for the first time. Zadeh writes about the fuzzy set's theory. Though in his works he never uses the word hedging itself. Further, Lakoff (1973) dealt with a problem of hedging. He attentively studied the group of words which he called hedges, and the role of which was to make things more or less uncertain. Among other linguists who also developed the phenomenon of hedging are Prince, Fraser, and Bosk (1982), Fraser (2010), Brown and Levinson (1987), Vlasyan (2018) and others.

In every day communication, people tend to express themselves inexplicitly with the help of hedges, so they can avoid being assertive and confident. Hedges make speaker's words sound politer. Such hedges

as a little, kind of, to some extent, somewhat, quite, more or less, almost are effective to show politeness to the hearers in conversations (Vlasyan, 2018).

The usage of hedging in speech helps the speaker to exclude the absolute accuracy of the statement. They want to save their face from criticism. Thus, it is possible to claim that hedging can and has to be considered as an independent concept as it possesses a certain mere verbiage – hedges – which are used to achieve a goal (Pastukhova, 2018). Moreover, hedging, as well as other linguistic concepts, have certain properties and functions.

3. Research Questions

The usage of hedges in new digital media can be studied from two standpoints - functional and structural (part of speech). So, the aim of the study is to identify 1) the most effective (language) means of conveying fuzzy concepts and 2) reasons for their usage.

Hedges do not belong to any grammatical class. They can be expressed by various syntactic, lexical and morphological means. That is why it is necessary to identify which word in which context performs a mitigating function. One and the same word may and may not be a hedge. Context is very important in such cases. For instance, the verb ‘think’ may perform the mitigation function in the following sentence: *I think you are right*. It expresses the author’s opinion. On the contrary in the sentence “*I think about this problem all the time*” the verb think does not express any mitigation. It just expresses the process of thinking.

The following classification of hedges was used the research:

- modal verbs (*may, might, can, could, would, should*);
- modal words that express attitude of a speaker to the utterance pronounced (adjectives, nouns, adverbs *possible* and alike; assumption, *claim, possibility, estimate, suggestion, etc.*);
- approximates of degree, quantity, frequency and time tend to soften or weaken the meaning of the utterance pronounced. Used when the amount of something is not precise, the information about the quantity is not relevant or unclear (*about, generally, usually, etc.*)
- epistemic verbs are used when the source of knowledge is somewhat not certain or indirect;
- parenthetic constructions (*I believe, I guess, to our knowledge if clauses if true, if anything*);
- indirect speech acts (*Could you open the window?*);
- metalinguistic comments as a means of metalinguistic awareness, tag questions.
- negative constructions carrying face-saving functions (*didn't...?*);
- agentless passive having the purpose to avoid specifying agent thus not sharing and putting responsibility on a person (*it might be suggested*);
- compound hedges – double, treble, quadruple hedges from it seems likely that to it may appear somewhat speculative that (Vlasyan, 2018).

Therefore, the study of functional and structural features of hedges are a necessary part of this research.

4. Purpose of the Study

The study of hedges and their functions in new digital mass media is an integral part of successful communication between the media and the audience. Therefore, the purpose of the study is to reveal whether hedges are used in the media, what hedges are the most frequently used and what are their primary functions when used in a particular utterance or context.

5. Research Methods

The study presents the research of randomly taken articles retrieved from buzzfeednews.com from the period starting from November 2018 to February 2019. By using a mixed research approach, that is by combining pragmatics and elements of critical discourse analysis the article discloses the realisations within the study in view of hedging devices (modal verbs; modal words; approximates of degree, quantity, frequency and time; epistemic verbs; parenthetical constructions; indirect speech acts; metalinguistic comments; negative constructions; agentless passive; compound hedges).

Research methods include general scientific methods of synthesis and analysis, the definitional method applied to research the phenomenon of hedging; the method of linguistic description used to select and systematize language units; the method of quantitative data processing needed to calculate the frequency of usage of the analyzed units. Also, structural-semantic method was used thanks to which it became possible to describe the structure of the studied phenomenon in close connection with the functions expressed by it, the contextual method is necessary for the identification of the hidden communicative intentions of a speaker in a certain context.

6. Findings

It is by all means accepted that the way the news is conveyed by an online digital media can have a strong impact on societal attitudes which can have a significant role on social behaviour.

Author-reader interaction leads to understanding and merging into a text that rest on the act of communication. However, their subjectivity arising from the fact that they are not inherent characteristics of texts. May be variably controlled by culture and people who share the same education or views (Florea, 2017).

Having analyzed structural and functional peculiarities of hedges in randomly taken articles retrieved from buzzfeednews.com we have noticed that the most frequently used hedges are those expressed by modal verbs, modal words, approximates of degree, quantity, frequency and time, parenthetical constructions and metalinguistic comments.

Modal verbs such as *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *would* used as hedges usually express possibility or probability that something might happen and, therefore, they do not convey certainty and help the speaker to save his face.

Asked who killed Masters, Woody said he didn't know, but added, "It would be the person that was carrying the box. The other person that was carrying the box": Islam ("Down The Rabbit Hole I Go": How A Young Woman Followed Two Hackers' Lies To Her Death).

In the context given above the modal verb *would* is considered to be a hedge as it expresses fuzziness and uncertainty. The speaker supposes and is not sure. If we change the modal verb in the sentence to another verb it will convey more certainty:

"... It was the person that was carrying the box".

In the next sentence the modal verb *may* is used to save the speaker's face as he is not exactly sure about what he is saying:

"Woody and Islam may have spent some time working on Luxr, but they had gone to the Philippines, Komori said, "to party" ("Down The Rabbit Hole I Go": How A Young Woman Followed Two Hackers' Lies To Her Death).

It is probable that Woody and Islam spent some time working on Luxr, but it is not proved, so the author does not have the right to state the idea.

Here are some more examples of sentences with modal verb *may* with the function of a hedge:

The California presidential candidate's signature issue may not be a single policy but instead an overriding contrast (Kamala Harris's Appeal To Democrats: She's The Antithesis Of Donald Trump).

Twenty years may seem extreme but it is still twenty more than Conrad will ever have ("Down The Rabbit Hole I Go": How A Young Woman Followed Two Hackers' Lies To Her Death).

Biden can count on similar relationships in South Carolina, another early-voting state (Top Democrats In The Early 2020 Primary States Haven't Heard Anything From Joe Biden).

The sentence written above also helps the author to save face as it expresses possibility. If we change the verb in the sentence, the meaning will also change - *Biden will count on similar relationships in South Carolina, another early-voting state (Ibid.)*

Modal words are also quite often used by the media that is obvious by the fact that modal words include adjectives, adverbs and nouns that express probability or possibility. One of the most frequent adjectives with the function of hedge is *possible*.

If Woody or Islam were already controlling Tomi's phone that night, it's possible she was already dead, casting further doubt on the veracity of the texts ("Down The Rabbit Hole I Go": How A Young Woman Followed Two Hackers' Lies To Her Death).

I and my firm were retained by the Lieutenant Governor in January 2018 with respect to a possible story in a media publication and we are currently representing him as well (Virginia Lt. Gov. Justin Fairfax's Accuser Spoke Out In A New Public Statement).

In both examples adjective *possible* with the meaning of a hedge tell us that the author is not secure of the words he is expressing thus the used hedge adds to uncertainty of the whole meaning.

While the judge did not give credence to the psychiatrist's contention in his verdict, it is likely he considered Carter's mental health issues and medication as mitigating factors in the sentencing (The Woman Who Urged Her Boyfriend To Kill Himself Has Been Sentenced To 2 And A Half Years In Prison).

Likely is another hedge often used in the media, it also expresses uncertainty (i.e. something is expected or will probably happen).

Approximates of degree, quantity, frequency and time are also common among hedges used in articles retrieved from buzzfeednews.com. The approximates are usually used with numbers when the exact amount is unknown:

They broke into the billing service WHMCS by impersonating a company spokesperson, and then leaked account data for more than 500,000 people ("Down The Rabbit Hole I Go": How A Young Woman Followed Two Hackers' Lies To Her Death).

At Insite, a government-run facility in Vancouver, officials report more than 3.6 million clients have injected drugs under the watch of nurses since 2003, and there have been "6,440 overdose interventions without any deaths" (The Justice Department Is Taking Its Hardest Line Yet To Stop Heroin Injection Sites).

For about a year, Woody's Twitter and Instagram were a catalog of a 20-year-old suburban hacker's idea of luxury ("Down The Rabbit Hole I Go": How A Young Woman Followed Two Hackers' Lies To Her Death).

All the examples above underline uncertainty concerning the amount of people or time. If the author mentioned the exact number and it was incorrect, the consequences could be not very pleasing.

Parenthetic constructions are also frequently used in the media with the aim to underline that the ideas expressed belong to the author and these are just his ideas not statements. The following examples proves the idea:

I think that we all know that the vice president marches to the beat of his own drummer (Top Democrats In The Early 2020 Primary States Haven't Heard Anything From Joe Biden).

I think she's exactly what we need right now (Kamala Harris's Appeal To Democrats: She's The Antithesis Of Donald Trump).

Last but not least hedges in the media researched are those expressed by metalinguistic comments. They also add vagueness to the meaning of the utterance:

He had almost 200,000 followers on Instagram. He described himself as an "Early Crypto Investor" ("Down The Rabbit Hole I Go": How A Young Woman Followed Two Hackers' Lies To Her Death).

The word *almost* used as a metalinguistic comment is used with the amount of people to show that the exact number of followers is not clear.

Metalinguistic comments are often seen with numerals as they underline that the exact number is unknown, or it is not necessary to mention it for different reasons. Though there are cases when metalinguistic comments are used before other parts of speech, but their function is still the same. They add uncertainty to the sentence and make it fuzzier.

The Justice Department's lawsuit takes an almost apologetic tone, noting the "good intentions" of the defendants and underscoring the difficulty of acting tough on crime while responding to a surge of narcotics overdoses (The Justice Department Is Taking Its Hardest Line Yet To Stop Heroin Injection Sites).

In this context the hedge *almost* is not used with any amount, but it still adds some vagueness and fuzziness to the utterance. The tone is not apologetic, it is almost apologetic. If we compare the difference between the sentences with and without the hedge *almost*, difference is obvious:

The Justice Department's lawsuit takes an ~~almost~~ apologetic tone, noting the "good intentions" of the defendants and underscoring the difficulty of acting tough on crime while responding to a surge of narcotics overdoses.

Some epistemic verbs that function as hedges (to believe, to assume, to suggest, to speculate), indirect speech acts (Could you open the window?), negative constructions (didn't...?), agentless passive (it might be suggested) and compound hedges (seems reasonable, looks probable) are also used in the media to express uncertainty but they are as frequent as modal verbs, modal words, approximates of degree, quantity, frequency and time, parenthetic constructions and metalinguistic comments.

All in all, it is important to underline that hedges are frequently used in the media and their main functions are to add fuzziness to the sentence, save the speaker's face and improve accuracy so not to tell lies. It is also important to notice that hedging is first of all a pragmatical phenomenon and its interpretation depends on a context. Practically any linguistic unit can function as hedge depending on pragmatical factors. The main stumbling blocks to effective communication are language, non-verbal communication, preconceptions, anxiety, tendency to a quick evaluation (Kozhukhova & Vlasyan, 2016). Such blocks can be also observed in media perception and hedging is one of the means of face-saving practices.

7. Conclusion

In general, mitigating style of communication is a universal facility in any type of communication. Communication between the media and the audience also takes place when the media is the transmitter of information and the audience is the receiver. It is certain that hedges are mostly used to reduce possible communicative risks. Their main aim is to soften speech and thus make it successful. The received results demonstrate that for the media as the participant of the communication provoking conflict situations, relevant facility isn't the categoricalness. Knowledge and skills connected with the use of correct, appropriate, adequate to a situation unit (hedges in our research) softening communication are an important part of communicative competence.

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