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LINGUISTIC HEDGING IN THE LIGHT OF POLITENESS THEORY

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Abstract

Fuzziness is one of the objective characteristics of human language, which makes it flexible and reliable. The core of fuzzy language is hedging. Hedging has received much attention in the pragmatics literature in recent years in relation to conversational rules and social conventions as it is the main strategy used to facilitate turn-taking, show politeness and mitigate face-threats. The paper reviews the meaning and classification of hedges and analyzes their properties from the perspective of politeness. It discusses hedging as a negative and positive politeness strategy and its broader pragmatic functions in politeness discourse. The present study approaches hedging as a strategy by which a speaker can indicate degrees of less than full commitment toward an accuracy of conceptualizations of the world. Hedging represents a crucial aspect in the study of language as the appropriate use of hedges reflects a high degree of efficiency in social interaction, facilitates face-saving and redressive effects in verbal communication, and helps maintain harmonious communicative relations between the interactants.

1. Introduction

Many concepts we use in natural language are inherently fuzzy, uncertain and vague (car speed, height and age, product quality, equipment reliability, etc.). One of the amazing properties of human mind is the ability to make right decisions in an environment of incomplete and fuzzy information. The sentence *He is young* is true to some degree – the lower the age of the person, the more the sentence is true. Truth of a fuzzy proposition is a matter of degree. The degree of truth or degree of complexity of each fuzzy statement takes the interval [0,1], with 0 representing false and 1 representing true. So the truth degree of the statement *He is young* would vary, being 1 today and decreasing to something very close to 0 in 20 years' time.

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2. Problem Statement

2.1. The concept of hedging

The concept of hedging in linguistics was first introduced by G. Lakoff in his article "Hedges: A Study in Meaning Criteria and the Logic of Fuzzy Concepts" (Lakoff, 1973). He based his work on Zadeh's *Fuzzy Sets Theory* (1965). According to G. Lakoff, hedges are "*words whose meaning implicitly implies fuzziness – words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy*" (Lakoff, 1973, p. 471).

a) It's just *sort of* a good idea.

b) *Actually,* I think he was relieved.

This definition became the starting point for several studies on this phenomenon.

G. Lakoff offered the following as examples of hedges in English: sort of, kind of, loosely speaking, more or less, roughly, pretty (much), relatively, somewhat, rather, mostly, technically, strictly speaking, essentially, in essence, basically, principally, particularly, par excellence, largely, for the most part, very, especially, exceptionally, quintessentially, literally, often, more of a ___ than anything else, almost, typically/typical, as it were, in a sense, in a real sense, in a way, in a manner of speaking, details aside, so to say, practically, a true, a real, a regular, virtually, all but technically, practically, actually, really, all but a, anything but a, (he as much as...), -like, -ish, can be looked upon as, can be viewed as, pseudo-, crypto-, in name only, etc. (Lakkoff, 1973, p. 472).

Initially, hedging was considered by G. Lakoff from the point of view of formal semantics within the ideational function of language. In real situations, you rarely see objects that exactly match a particular class or category. Some categories do not have clear borders and their membership is not a simple yes-no question but a matter of degree (Lakoff, 1973). Hedges are appropriate to use in relation to the concepts, that are remote from the prototype. For example, for most English speakers *robins* are more typical of birds than *penguins.*

a) A robin is sort of a bird. (False – it is a bird, no questions about it)

b) A chicken is sort of a bird. (True, or very close to true)

c) A penguin is sort of a bird. (True, or close to true)

d) A bat is sort of a bird. (Still pretty close to false)

e) A cow is sort of a bird. (False) (Lakoff, 1973, p. 471).

2.2. Classification of hedges

Brown and Levinson offered a broader definition of the term *hedge* – "a particle, word or phrase that modifies the degree of membership of a predicate or noun phrase in a set; it says of that membership that it is *partial* or true only in certain respects, or that it is *more* true and complete than perhaps might be expected" (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 145).

Prince points out two classes of hedges: approximators and shields. The first type involves the propositional content and affects the truth conditions of the proposition conveyed (propositional hedging), and the second type involves the relationship between the propositional content and the speaker and serves as an index of the commitment of the speaker to the truth of the propositional content conveyed (speech act hedging) (Prince, 1982). Examples of propositional hedges are the following words and expressions: *somewhat, kind of, sort of, a little bit, etc.* To speech act hedging refer *I think, probably, as far as I can tell, according to her estimates, mother says that, etc.* (Prince, 1982).

Hübler made a similar two-way distinction of hedging, between what he called *understatements and hedges*, although he uses understatement as a cover term for both (Hübler, 1983).

Hedges do not form a separate grammatical class. They can be expressed by various lexical, morphological and syntactic means.

Table 01. Classification of hedges

Linguistic expression	Hedge
modal verbs	may, might, can, could, would, should
modal words: adjectives, nouns, adverbs	possible, probable, un/likely; assumption, claim, possibility, estimate, suggestion; perhaps, possibly, probably, practically, likely, presumably, virtually, apparently
approximates of degree, quantity, frequency and time	approximately, roughly, about, often, occasionally, generally, usually, somewhat, somehow, a lot of
epistemic verbs	to believe, to assume, to suggest, to estimate, to tend, to think, to argue, to indicate, to propose, to speculate
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	strictly speaking, so to say, exactly, almost, just about
tag questions	..., isn't it?
negative constructions	didn't...?
agentless passive	it might be suggested
compound hedges	seems reasonable, looks probable

2.3. Pragmatic aspect of hedging

Hedging has received much attention in the pragmatics literature in recent years in relation to conversational rules and social conventions as it is the main strategy used to facilitate turn-taking, show politeness and mitigate face-threats (Ariel, 2012; Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2017; Holmes, 2013; Kranich, 2015).

Politeness and hedging have become forms of social interpretation of verbal and non-verbal behaviour revolving around the concept of *saving face*, thus playing a crucial role in social interaction strategies.

Leech defines politeness as forms of behaviour that establish and maintain comity. That is the ability of participants to engage in interaction in an atmosphere of relative harmony (Leech, 1983).

Creation of a favorable psychological climate is also achieved through the use of non-categorical and fuzzy statements.

George Lakoff writes that some performative verbs and syntactic constructions can mitigate the illocutionary force of an entire speech act as in *I suppose Harry is coming,* where *I suppose* reduces the force of the assertion, thus reducing the degree of truth.

On the basis of this observation Fraser (1975) introduced the term *hedged performative*, where certain performative verbs such as 'apologize'*,* 'promise'*,* and 'request' when preceded by specific modals such as 'can', 'must', and 'should', result in an attenuated illocutionary force of the speech act designated by the verb. In the examples below, the modals are considered as hedges:

a) I **should** apologize for running over your cat.

b) I **can** promise that I will never again smoke grass.

c) I **must** request that you sit down (Fraser, 2010).

Hedging is a pragmatic phenomenon and its interpretation depends on the context. Virtually any linguistic unit can function as a hedge. It depends on pragmatic factors.

I think it's a little odd. (think is a hedge)

I think about you all the time. (think is not a hedge)

3. Research Questions

Based on the theoretical overview above, the research question for this study is:

What are the pragmatic functions of hedging as markers of politeness?

4. Purpose of the Study

The present study approaches hedging as a strategy by which a speaker can indicate degrees of less than full commitment toward an accuracy of conceptualizations of the world. The focus of this study is the pragmatic functions of hedges used as markers of politeness. I argue that though hedging is closely connected with politeness, not all hedges result in making the utterance more polite.

5. Research Methods

The data of this study were spoken dialogues, recorded by the author, as well as dialogues included in British National Corpus (BNC). This study utilized a descriptive method to analyze the pragmatic functions of hedges used as markers of negative and positive politeness strategies, as well as contextual interpretation of linguistic phenomena.

6. Findings

In recent years attention has also been paid to hedging in the framework of social interaction, since it is the main strategy for manifesting politeness and saving 'face'. Brown and Levinson's politeness theory is based on Goffman's notion of 'face', defined as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact; not a specific identity but successful presentation of any identity" (Goffman, 1967).

Brown and Levinson regard all speech acts as potentially face-threatening – either to the speaker's or the hearer's face, or to both. They further distinguish between positive and negative face. Positive face: the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others. Negative face: the want of every 'competent adult member' that his actions be unimpeded by others) (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 61-62).

The important feature of positive politeness is to share some degree of familiarity with people. It can be considered as the code or language of intimacy. It is usually seen in groups of friends, or where people in the given social situation know each other fairly well. Positive politeness is meant to establish a feeling of solidarity between the speaker and the hearer by choosing from number of strategies.

Negative politeness strategies function to increase the social distance between interlocutors. It is essentially avoidance-based, it dictates that the speaker respects the addressee's negative face and will not interfere with his or her freedom of action.

According to the authors, hedging is one of the strategies of negative politeness, which is aimed at avoiding directness in expressing their opinions, mitigating categorical statements and judgments.

So you think he was kind of working through some personal issues there?

Mitigation in a pragmatic aspect is traditionally defined as a rhetorical device which softens the impact of some unpleasant aspects of an utterance on the speaker or the hearer (Danet**,** 1980).

Your attitude is a little rude.

In communication, speakers tend to express themselves inexplicitly with hedges in order to avoid being assertive and make their words sound more polite. 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.

One of the means of mitigating a categorical utterance is interrogative indirect speech acts.

'Could you pass me the ketchup, please, hun?'

'Here we go!'

'Thanks.'

Despite being known as a negative politeness strategy, hedging can also be used as positive politeness strategy aimed at harmonizing communication, demonstrating the unity of views, feelings, relationships, reciprocity and mutual understanding.

In a way, that painting is beautiful.

Very often, the grammatical means of realization of this strategy are tag questions, which do not necessarily require a response, but are used to confirm a common point of view.

'It's not your fault, is it?'

'What d'you want me to do about it then?'

In these situations, hedges are used as markers of positive politeness and reduce the threat to the hearer's positive face.

7. Conclusion

Thus, hedging helps to maintain and regulate relations between communicants and plays an important role in harmonizing communication. The main functions of hedging include: avoiding conflicts, saving the face of both the speaker and the hearer, softening the illocutionary force of the utterance, protecting the propositional content of the utterance.

Hedges are the most typical components of fuzzy language and play a significant role in maintaining politeness in communication. Hedges can make communication euphemistic, moderate, polite and flexible, which effectively helps to maintain and adjust the relationship between speakers and hearers and keep communication smooth. Hedging can be used both as a negative and positive politeness strategy, depending on the speakers' goals in a verbal exchange.

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