

MAYBE, PERHAPS, I BELIEVE, YOU COULD - MAKING CLAIMS AND THE USE OF HEDGES

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ABSTRACT

The study of hedges is well linked to pragmatics which Spencer-Oatey and Zegarac (2002) define as the study of the relationships between language forms, messages and language users. They further reiterate that one of the broad questions pragmatics seeks to answer is: How do people perceive the contextual factors (such as who the interlocutors are, what their relationship is and what circumstances they are communicating in) that influence the process of producing and interpreting language. In other words, it focuses on a communicative act that engages in reasoning about each other's intentions, and it exploits the use of signals in the language code to contend with people's sensitivities. In this paper, the concern is with sensitivities to face as it is recognised as an unattended area for language learning as seen from investigations in textbooks and responses from learners. The paper provides insights into a typology for claim mitigation and offers suggestions for some approaches that could be incorporated in this area of learning thereby enhancing the repertoire of skills for social interactions in the functionality of positioning oneself in giving suggestions and opinions, feedback, and criticisms.

Introduction

In social interactions, there are constraints that influence the flow of communication. Goffman's proposition, quoted by Hatch (2000), emphasises that each of us must empower ourselves with social conventions for 'presentation of self and presentation of other.' One aspect of these constraints is also encapsulated in Grice's maxims. One of the maxims relates to truthfulness which is important to be observed; otherwise, the listener or reader could be misled and misunderstood. In communicative competence, there is also the notion that grammar needs to be reformulated to encompass lexical enquiry as a complement to achieving pragmatic meaning and in the process establish its function in the system of language use. (Nyyssonen, 1997)

Making claims as an aspect of language uses hedging which is a linguistic resource for both oral and written discourse. Salager-Meyer (1997) investigates hedges as threat minimising strategies, strategies to deal with certainty of knowledge which include politeness strategies in the social interactions and negotiations between writers (speakers) and readers (listeners). As such, the communicative act is accompanied by

attitude markers which reflect social phenomena situated in the need to express uncertainty, doubt and skepticism.

As teachers who are constantly searching for ways and methods for the teaching of language, there is always the continual process of matching what is presented to learners as classroom experiences of the target language and the actual use of that language use outside the classroom. Time and again, Widdowson (1983, 1984) has emphasised the need to take into account discourse in the teaching of the language. One needs to move away from mechanical conversion exercises and venture into discourse features that would help in the realisation of the constraints that operate on communicative ability.

The understanding of hedges as a parameter that affects communicative ability has been well highlighted by Hyland (1996a). His study on hedging in academic writing revealed that generally non-native writers (NNWs) lacked the ability to hedge their claims. This led to his assertion (Hyland, 1996a:278) that NNWs 'invariably require training in the appropriate use of hedging. The reason given was that NNWs often had difficulties in expressing their commitment to and detachment from their propositions in their academic writings.

This inability to hedge propositions would definitely impede the NNWs' language use and Hyland (1996b) further observes that the inability to hedge statements appropriately is an obstacle to the NNW to participate actively in the academic world, which has always been dominated by English. In support, Kaplan (1987) also notes that there is a lack of subtle writing skills among NNWs. He discusses the differences between NNWs' and NWs' (native writers') texts and concludes that a non-native writer does not have a list or inventory that would allow him or her to make choices, nor did he or she have the sociolinguistic ability to identify these choices. Furthermore, a NNW generally fails to recognise the constraint a choice imposes on a text.

Understanding Hedges for Teaching Purposes

As mentioned, sensitivities to face could be realised through the use of hedges. Stating a claim is a face-threatening act that warrants mitigation. As a result, a writer or speaker is said to employ appropriate hedging devices as a strategy to mitigate the claim. The term 'hedge' was first used by Lakoff (1972:194) to mean "words whose job is to make things more or less fuzzy." Since then, hedging has become more defined. The speech act theory establishes the need to attend to social functions in speech and a similar concern could be translated into writing as a social act. Since the 1980s, the use of hedging devices has been viewed as a pragmatic phenomenon that permeates academic writing. Writing in the expository mode is an important medium by which writers report their claims, while at the same time anticipating

acceptance or rebuttal of the claim. A sub-mode is the writing of argumentative essays which according to McEnery & Kifle (2002), has a long history in academic discourse. They note that quality of argument is related to the efficient use of modality. Among the forms modal verb, adverb, noun and adjective, the first three were found to be more significant. They also compared native and non-native language users and revealed native speakers to be more assertive in their claims. One reason for the non-speakers' inability to hedge well could be attributed to the lack of emphasis given in prescribed English texts for the teaching of English in that particular environment.

This finding is supported by answers received from a questionnaire survey administered by the writers to some academicians (10) who had done their postgraduate studies. To a question as to whether they know what hedging is – only a small percentage replied in the affirmative. To another question about whether hedging has been taught to them in their writing class, almost all the respondents replied in the negative. Only one indicated that hedging was taught indirectly in the writing class. This shows that the use of language forms for the purpose of making claims has yet to receive due emphasis while it is generally agreed that it is an important area of language skills required to engage the audience in interactive speaking or writing.

Hedges (1996a) can be investigated using a number of approaches. According to Hyland, hedges can be categorised as content-oriented hedges and reader-oriented hedges. The content-oriented hedges can be further classified into a number of sub-classifications according to perceived functions. Salager-Meyers (1997) provides a list of 'strategic stereotypes' for hedging which goes by grammatical forms such as modal lexical verbs, approximations and introductory phrases. McEnery & Kifle (2002) add a word list which itemises 100 items for the most frequent epistemic devices used in academic writing. However, as Salager-Myer notes, categories may not be totally comprehensive or watertight. From the pedagogical perspective, what is important is that it should be teacher and learner friendly.

Aim of the Paper

This paper presents hedges in relation to grammatical functions. It explores each type of construction to meet the functional forms for making claims. It makes use of word class as well as clausal construction to categorise the forms of hedges. We propose that they could be examined as adverbials, epistemic verbs and modal verbs, clausal use of nouns and adjectives. Together with the categories are some suggestions for classroom practice as this area of language use is said to be disregarded in textbooks and classroom teaching. The categories are accompanied by examples to illustrate variety of use. Some elaborations accompany the examples to show the operating constraints.

Typology of Hedging Construction

Hedges can be examined as adverbials, epistemic verbs and modal verbs, clausal structures, hypothetical constructions and the anticipatory it-clausal constructions.

1. *Adverbials*

Examples:

The length of the metal bar was *approximately* 22 cm.

Generally, girls are more eloquent speakers compared to boys.

His views on the matter were *quite* well received.

In the use of these hedges, some adverbials are placed immediately after the verb form such as *approximately*, but others such as *quite* modify an adjective. The word *generally*, however, modifies a complete idea expressed in a clause.

2. *Epistemic Verbs*

Examples:

The graph *suggests* that there was a dip in the sale of Proton Saga cars between the months of January to March.

It *seems* that the football team manager will be replaced soon.

The new regulations *appear* to safeguard the interests of women, but they do not.

The epistemic verbs are a class on their own as they do not show action such as *kick*, *wash*, *eat*, etc. In the use of these verbs, a continuation is obligatory in the form of a 'that' clausal structure or in the instance of 'appear', the use of the infinitive is obligatory if the subject is not of the cleft structure.

3. *Modal verbs*

Examples

Gases *may* be changed into liquids.

It *would* be inappropriate to discuss the matter with your colleagues.

The experiment on cloning *could* be dangerous to humanity.

Your teacher *may* have been able to help you with that application.

The modal verbs are verbs that allow the writers to express the tentativeness of the proposition. In the use of the modals, there should be a realisation of a gradation in terms of the strength of the claims made. Generally, the order that is followed is as follows (from the weakest to the strongest): *might*, *could*, *should have*, *had better*.

An area of confusion could be in the choice of the modals with reference to the tense such as *can* and *could*. Both are examples to express possibility in the future, but the use of *can* denotes a slightly more definite possibility. More often than not, the two forms are often seen as interchangeable. *Could*, *would* and *might* may not be the past form. The use of the modals may be realised in perfective forms which express unfulfilled or unrealised actions or events. Attention should be given to the use of modals with perfective and those without to suit the appropriate communicative act.

4. *Cognition Verbs*

Examples

I *believe* that we need to further explore the causes behind child abuse.

I *surmise* that there is a need for a more intensive English language programmes.

I *think* it is not a sound method for increasing productivity.

The choice of cognition verbs appears connected to a stronger stance taken in mitigating the proposition. Personal pronouns always precede the use of such verbs giving a focus to the writer's assumption of personal responsibility. These structures are always followed by a *that* clause.

5. *Hypothetical Constructions*

Examples

If we agree on the report, then it can be handed up now.

Unless we attend to it now, we will not get the target results.

The machine could *possibly* be repaired for RM500.

In making a hypothesis, the hypothetical constructions using *if* and *unless* are found in the subordinated clauses. Words like *possibly* and *probably* are more mobile as they can be inserted into the verb phrase or in the initial position preceding the clause.

6. *Anticipatory it- clause*

Examples

It is likely that the experiment will stretch on for another hour.

There is a tendency to under-declare the amount of taxes to be paid.

With English becoming more important, *it is probable* that more students will take the subject seriously.

The constructions make use of a dummy subject to begin a sentence. It helps to front the claim giving it more prominence in the proposition. These constructions also necessitate the use of a *that* clause to complete the sense of the proposition. There is a gradation in the intensity of the claims made. Words like *seem*, and *appear* are not as strong as words like *believe* and *surmise*. Each structure therefore illustrates a specific stance chosen by the writer or speaker in conveying the intended message.

Suggestions for Classroom Use

It has been found that practice on hedging is limited in most writing manuals. Therefore, the teaching of hedging in the classroom is sometimes omitted or it may sometimes be done in a prescriptive manner. For hedging to be taught more meaningfully, some suggestions are provided below to give initial direction to the task.

Task 1

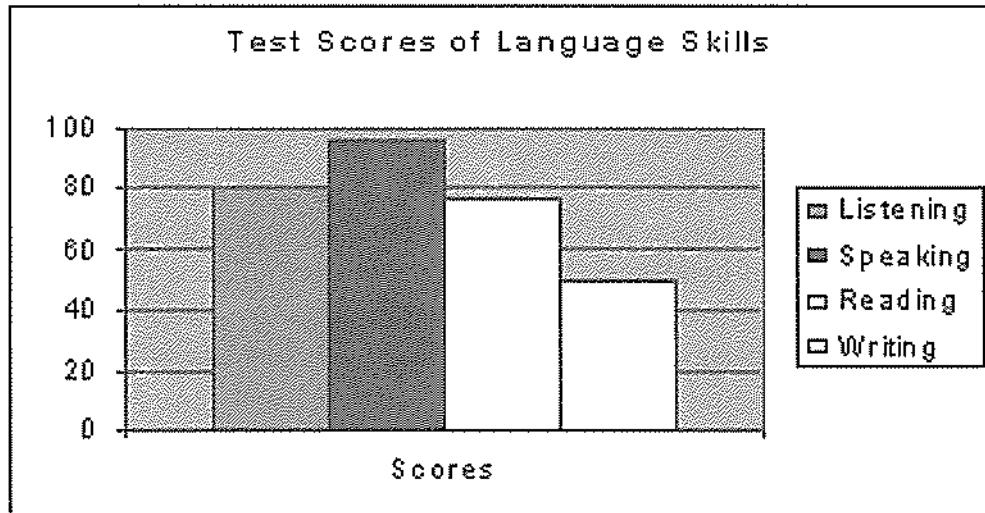
Ask the students to fill in appropriate words to show how a writer makes claims to his propositions.

Do you think you are a descendent of hunters? Here's news for you — the image of cavemen hunting animals for food (1) _____ soon change. Remains unearthed in archaeological sites have started to paint a very different picture – one of man as scavenger rather than hunter. The cavemen (2) _____ not have been as brave as we (3) _____ he was. (4) _____, bones of animals found at campsites have both cut marks from stone tools and the teeth of other animals. It (5) _____ that the marks are similar to those left behind by human scavengers today. The sites where these bones are found are also (6) _____ near rivers and at makeshift camps, not permanent homes. It is (7) _____ that man simply came to an animal that had been killed, scared away the predator and ate the leftovers.

(Adapted from *The New Straits Times: The Next Step*; P. 1 January 15, 2003.)

Task 2

Based on the graph given, give possible reasons for the language performance shown.



The above exercise draws upon the use of hedging devices such as: *It appears that ...*, *The findings indicate that...*, *It could be inferred that...*, *The results suggests that...*, etc. Transferring information from non-linear to linear texts could entail interpretations that need to be hedged as it shows the sensitivities of the language user to constraints of truthfulness.

Task 3

Complete the dialogue in about 50 words for the situation given below. Use as many modals as you can in the dialogue.

Mabel is discussing with Sheela the qualities that they would like their life partner to have.

Mabel: We are conducting a survey on the qualities of a life partner. Could you give us your opinion?

Sheela: Oh! I would

The task emphasises oral manifestation in the use of hedges. It could be controlled or open depending on students' ability. The situation activates a schema that is drawn from possible life experiences for interactive discussion.

Conclusion

What it is that people do when using language is in part one of the reasons for this exploration. As the interlocutors make choices, they are in effect, evoking three key notions underlining the description of language use. These key notions are variability, negotiability and adaptability (Verschueren, 1999). In the use of hedges, there is a range of possibilities that the speaker or writer could draw upon for use. The language is negotiable in that form-function relationships are not static; rather the choice is flexible, influenced by the degree of acceptability perceived by the user. Finally, users must also adapt to the situation of use in relation to audience, discourse style and politeness system. Learning a language is more than using formulaic expressions. Learners must be put into a dynamic environment of language use where conscious choices at discourse level need to be exercised.

We have tried to demonstrate an understanding of a particular area of language use which could enhance ESL learning and attempted to provide suggestions for pedagogical use. More could of course be added to the repertoire of skill-building tasks. For example, another useful task is to focus on nominalisation, which provides choices in the activation of making claims; for instance: assume — assumption; suggest — suggestion, speculate — speculation, explain — explanation. Another area lies in the use of the passive. Tasks on the use of the passive in claim mitigation could be further designed. Thus concerted practice in appropriateness with reference to style, variation and sensitivity to language nuances is augmented to promote greater efficiency in language use.

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