HEDGING IN WRITTEN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE: POLYPRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS, COOPERATION AND POLITENESS

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the use of hedges as rhetorical tools in present-day written academic discourse, especially research articles. The aims are to explore the polypragmatic functions of hedging in the academic context and to carry out a theoretical analysis of hedges against the cooperation and politeness maxims. The polypragmatic character of these rhetorical tools is confirmed by the available literature while the present analysis concludes that hedges can be viewed as politeness strategies able to promote interaction as part of the cooperative endeavor that characterizes communication in today's dynamic and competitive written academic discourse.

Keywords: hedging, written academic discourse, polypragmatic functions, cooperation, politeness.

Although hedging as a linguistic phenomenon has been studied since the 1970s, a consensus was not reached as far as the pragmatic functions and linguistic realizations of hedges are concerned. However, based on the numerous studies on hedging in written academic discourse in general, and in scientific research articles in particular, the following description summarizes the term: a hedge can be any linguistic device (word, expression or sentence) used by scientific writers in order to present propositional content as accurately and reliably as possible, avoid taking direct personal responsibility for the content presented and express knowledge claims as personal opinions in order to avoid denial and encourage reader participation (Hyland, 1996a, 1996b, 1988a).

The literature also indicates that hedges are an open functional class (Fraser, 2010) with a polypragmatic character (Hyland, 1996a, 1996b, 1998a, 1998b, 2005c; Markkanen and Schröder, 1997; Varttala, 1999, 2001; Hyland and Salager-Meyer, 2008; Alonso-Alonso *et al*, 2012). Moreover, hedges can occur under numerous linguistic forms, such as epistemic lexical verbs, adverbs, adjectives, modal verbs and nouns, but also phrases or sentences referring to limited knowledge, limitations of model, theory or method, or to experimental limitations (Hyland 1996a, 1996b, 1998a)

The literature on hedging in written academic discourse revealed that hedges are used in various genres, disciplines, socio-pragmatic contexts and have therefore been assigned numerous pragmatic values, out of which no single function was found to prevail. They

constitute routine rhetorical and interpersonal features of scientific discourse regardless of whether their function is to hedge propositional content, writer commitment or writer assertiveness.

The polypragmatic nature of hedges is reinforced by their use in various contexts, situations and genres by language users with different backgrounds and characteristics. Therefore, the socio-pragmatic context in which hedges occur has gained increasing importance for the appropriate analysis and interpretation of hedges and has been closely intertwined with pragmatic competence as well as with cross-linguistic, cross-disciplinary or cross-cultural variation.

Given the realities of today's highly competitive academic environment, the publication of original research articles widened its scope from the spread of novel scientific information to the creation of academic hierarchies at both institutional and individual level. In this context, the image and international ranking of higher education institutions and their staff members depend on the impact of publication output. Therefore, research articles must not only contain scientific breakthroughs but also have the power to persuade the target readers, fellow members of the same discourse community, of their accuracy and relevance for the progress of science. The knowledge claims introduced in the *Discussion* sections of research articles must receive the approval of the discourse community prior to becoming established scientific facts ready to be further used and cited as such by other researchers. As a result, appropriate hedging has proven to represent one rhetorical strategy heavily employed in the *Discussion* sections of scientific research articles for the purpose of avoiding the denial of claims and ensuring their acceptance by target readers.

By choosing appropriate discipline-specific ways of introducing claims, the authors of scientific research articles place the focus on themselves, thus stressing the expressive dimension of academic writing, if we were to consider that discourse can be classified into four major types according to which communicative component is given the most importance (Kinneavy, 1971 in Swales 1990: 42). According to this classification, discourse can be expressive, when the focus is on the sender, persuasive, when the focus is on the receiver, literary, when the focus is on the linguistic form or code, and referential, when the aim of discourse is to represent the realities of the world.

Based on the initial role of a scientific paper, i.e. to present states of fact, scientific developments, discoveries and their relevance for daily practice, the discourse of research articles seems to be mainly referential. However, given the current importance of international scholarly publication the focus seems to shift away from the referential aspect towards the other dimensions of academic discourse, which thus appear to gain equal weight in a complex and multifaceted equation. The sender (writer) becomes a crucial element in the attempt to present valuable, strong knowledge claims which, if accepted by particular discourse communities, will bring the much desired recognition and reward that scientists ultimately seek. This is where the focus on the referential dimension of academic discourse fades away in favor of writers' "private intentions" and "strategic manipulation" (Bhatia, 1993 in Swales, 2004: 3), which can be achieved through several rhetorical strategies, including hedging.

The occurrence of hedges in scientific articles was chronologically associated with the fulfillment of the following functions: precision strategy meant to increase the accuracy of propositional content (Adams Smith, 1984; Skelton, 1987, 1988); tool for creating an image

of modesty and honesty (Swales, 1990); politeness strategy with a protective role (Myers, 1989; Crompton, 1997); a combination of both (Salager-Meyer, 1994); or polypragmatic phenomenon with overlapping functions (Hyland, 1996a, 1996b, 1998a). This last view also seems to be the most pertinent given the numerous linguistic forms and frequently overlapping pragmatic functions of hedges, the complex characteristics of the current academic environment, as well as the multitude of writers and readers whose individual, linguistic, disciplinary or cultural background shape their use and perception.

Extensive research on hedges in written academic discourse was carried out by Hyland (1996a, 1996b, 1998a), who classified hedges according to their pragmatic function into two main types: content-motivated and reader-motivated. The distinction depends on how writers anticipate the possible objections of the target audience in an academic context that grants readers of scientific research articles the power to accept or deny the knowledge claims introduced by these hedges. Content-motivated hedges were further subdivided into accuracy-based hedges, which include attribute and reliability hedges, and writer-based hedges.

Content-motivated hedges are generally related with the writers' wish for their claims to meet adequacy conditions in order to be accepted by the target audience while reader-motivated hedges work towards the fulfillment of acceptability conditions for facilitating the successful acceptance of newly introduced information. Thus, while content-motivated hedges must be expressed in such a way that the target readers perceive claims as adequate (appropriate, accurate, precise, objective), through the use of reader-motivated hedges, claims can be accepted by the audience because they were assigned a provisional character and introduced as personal opinions pending the ratification of the writer's peers within the interactive process of knowledge creation.

Although context and the characteristics of specific discourse communities must be taken into consideration when attempting to establish the pragmatic function of the hedges used in scientific research articles, clear distinctions are difficult since functions often overlap. The same hedge may be assigned different pragmatic interpretations by different readers whose experience in the field, cultural background or personal interpretation often influences the analysis.

However, the polypragmatic nature of hedges allows researchers to formulate study hypotheses and questions relevant for the particular settings in which the production or reception of hedges will be investigated. Since the approach used in the current paper is a polypragmatic one, a few general remarks on the opportunities provided by a polypragmatic acceptance of the concept of hedges is included, followed by a theoretical analysis of hedges against cooperation and politeness maxims.

Starting from the premise that "people engage in communicative activity whenever they use language" and that linguistic behavior is based on people's desire to communicate, "to be understood correctly, and avoid giving false impressions", as outlined in the Communicative Principle proposed by Mey (1993: 68-69), scientific articles reflect a basic need to communicate. It is already widely-accepted that the purpose of research papers is not only to spread information and contribute to the progress of science, but also to allow researchers to establish a good reputation as valuable members of their respective discourse communities, and by doing so to improve the image and funding opportunities of their

universities or research institutions. Given their communicative, rhetorical and interactive nature, hedges represent appropriate tools to this end.

Communication also requires interaction and cooperation. The interactive character of scientific communication was already established. Although there seems to be no immediate reaction to what an author claims in the *Discussion* sections of a research article for instance, responses from fellow researchers can vary from citing results or adopting methods and techniques in case of claim acceptance, to ignoring one's work or even criticizing it in future articles, reviews, etc. in case of claim rejection.

The courtesy that generally characterizes written academic discourse supposes that all the participants engaged in the process of writing research articles are regarded as equal contributors, despite one's seniority or prestige. Therefore, they should observe the same disciplinary norms and show deference to the other participants. At the same time, discourse participants who engage in reading scientific articles display a cooperative attitude, first of all through their interest in a fellow researcher's work and then through their response to it. Research articles contain contributions whose originality, after first being generally assessed by journal editors and reviewers must be acknowledged as such by the members of the target discourse community, unlike textbooks for instance, which include already-established scientific truths that can be introduced in unmitigated form by more experienced and prominent members of the academic community. Therefore, it seems that the very nature of written academic discourse determines both the polypragmatic character of hedges as well as their much-debated function as politeness strategy.

Although hedges aid scientific communication, few references were found on the link between the use of hedges in written academic discourse and Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle or Leech's (1983) Interpersonal Rhetoric. Even if these principles were initially designed to characterize spoken interaction, their maxims are essential for successful communication in general, and could therefore be applied to the study of written texts, since "principles introduce communicative value, such as truthfulness into the study of language" (Leech, 1983:9).

Reference to Grice's maxim of quantity was made by Hyland (1998b: 362) in his illustration of the role of attribute hedges, whereas in a theoretical approach to hedging as indirectness strategy, Hinkel (1997: 372) briefly mentioned the hedging of beliefs according to the Tact Maxim. Similarly, Varttala (2001) reviewed the concept of hedging as an interpersonal politeness strategy by referring to the contributions brought by Grice and Leech. However, no analyses of the functions of hedges in connection with the maxims belonging to these principles were found in the literature.

First, a few considerations on the issue of hedging as politeness strategy should be made. The literature offers conflicting views on this topic. In brief, Brown and Levinson (1987) viewed linguistic politeness as unrelated to the Cooperative Principle, positive and negative politeness as two distinct and mutually exclusive categories, and negative politeness as a possible function of hedging. According to them, hedges can protect the hearer's/ reader's negative face by not imposing categorical assertions/ claims. Myers (1989) also viewed hedges as a possible negative politeness strategy in his analysis of scientific research articles. In contrast, Hyland (1998b: 358) rejected politeness as an adequate explanation for the use of hedging in science by considering that it "neglects the exercise of power and conformity in the

discourse culture, for while writers weigh up their rhetorical choices and the potential effects of their statements, they do so with the awareness that publication, reputation, and career may ride on the outcome."

However, as much as Hyland's polypragmatic view on the functions of hedges can be regarded as a viable one, I consider that such a complex approach cannot exclude the politeness factor. Moreover, despite the fact that only negative politeness was usually associated with hedging in the literature, the complex nature of written academic discourse and the multiple functions of hedges allow for speculation on the positive politeness function of hedges, as also suggested by Varttala (1999).

If by introducing claims tentatively, writers protect the readers' negative face by not imposing information that may come against already-established facts or beliefs, it could also be considered that they may do so out of positive politeness reasons like receiving the approval and praise of the target discourse community. In other words, hedges could serve to protect the readers' negative face and desire to not be imposed on, while at the same time they may support the writers' positive face and wish to be recognized as valuable contributors. The readers' positive face might also have something to gain since an invitation to ratify claims could be a token of appreciation of the audience's ability to decide on the truthfulness and acceptance of claims.

Another link between hedges and politeness might be established by interpreting hedging devices as attempts to adhere to the maxims of the Politeness Principle described by Leech (1983: 132). In this respect, the use of hedges could be connected with the following maxims: the Tact Maxim through the desire to "minimize cost to other" by not imposing information in a categorical manner and to "maximize benefit to other" by involving the readers; the Approbation Maxim by minimizing "dispraise to other" and maximizing "praise of other"; the Modesty Maxim, by minimizing "praise to self" (but not through maximizing "dispraise of self", since this would contravene the purpose of research articles); and the Agreement Maxim by minimizing "disagreement between self and other" and maximizing "agreement between self and other", which leads to claim acceptance. The maxims of Generosity and Sympathy would not be applicable in the context of academic discourse, unless sympathy equaled recognition. However, the nature of scientific communication requires the application of objective criteria for analyzing the truthfulness and value of statements instead of subjective factors related with sympathy or antipathy.

Since hedges modify the quantity or quality of accompanying propositions, they also relate to the maxims belonging to the Cooperative Principle. For instance, accuracy-oriented hedges, whose role is to introduce information as precisely as possible, conform to the maxim of *quantity*: "make your contribution as informative as is required" and "do not make your contribution more informative than is required", as well as to the "avoid obscurity of expression" and "avoid ambiguity" requirements belonging to the maxim of *manner* (Grice, 1975: 45-46).

If accuracy-oriented hedges aim to increase the accuracy of accompanying propositions, the very fuzziness possibly suggested by them actually serves the opposite purpose: it presents information as precisely as possible given the data available at the time of writing. On the other hand, writer-oriented hedges, which modify the writer's commitment to claims adhere to the maxim of *quality*: "do not say what you believe to be false" and "do not

say that for which you lack adequate evidence" (Grice, 1975: 46). Thus, impersonal expressions and references to the work of other scientists characteristic of writer-oriented hedges can actually be regarded as an attempt to build an authorial image of honesty.

In light of these considerations, hedges may be regarded as politeness strategies not necessarily because of their protective value in relation with writers and readers, but because they promote interaction as part of the cooperative endeavor that characterizes communication in today's written academic discourse.

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