UNIVERSITI TECHNOLONGI MARA

Lexical hedges: A study of cultural and disciplinary variation in academic research articles

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ABSTRACT

There is a widely held belief that academic writing is purely objective, impersonal and informational, designed to disguise the author and deal directly with facts and the search for independent truth. But effective academic writing is like any other type of discourse in that it is interactive; it involves writers trying to influence their reader by persuading them of the correctness of their claims (Hyland, 1998a, p. iii). One important means of achieving this is the use of hedges to present claims with caution, precision, and humility. Hedging is one of the features associated with academic writing.

This study examines the distribution of forms and functions of lexical hedges in a corpus of 24 research articles written in English. A total of almost 48,000 words are analyzed from two different disciplines namely biochemistry and applied linguistics, and from two rhetorical sections namely introduction and discussion sections. I also explore how the writers from different cultures employ these means in their academic writing.

The results show that the American authors use 14% more hedging forms than Arabic authors in biochemistry discipline and almost 15% in the applied linguistics discipline. On the other hand, the results also reveal that linguists used hedges considerably less than the scientists in both genres. In terms of hedging functions, the results show that American authors employed more hedging function than Arabic authors in both disciplines. The discussion sections of RAs contain more hedging forms and functions than the introduction sections in both disciplines. In the overall incidence of hedging, however, the results indicate that noticeable disciplinary variation in the use of lexical hedges is found in the RA corpus, hedging becoming more frequent in the field of biochemistry in comparison with the field of applied linguistic.

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Declaration

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of University Technology MARA, It is original and it is the result of my own work, unless otherwise indicated and acknowledged as reference work. This thesis has not been submitted to any other academic institution or non-academic institution for any other degree of qualification.

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Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

One linguistic strategy, familiar, surly, to us all, is when instead of stating directly: "You are not right"; "This is bad music"; "An elephant has a nice voice"; we impart to our utterance a vague/fuzzy/subjective or formally objective colouring by adding to the proposition certain modifying linguistic devices: "I would say that you are not right"; "It seems to me that this is bad music"; "Probably/possibly/perhaps an elephant has a nice voice".

<div align="right">(Namsaraev, 1997: 64)</div>

This introduction touches briefly on just a few of the linguists' views and beliefs about their understanding of the relationships between culture and language. It seems to be very difficult for people whose vocabulary is so limited that they cannot get on without the supplementary use of gesture so that intelligible communication between members of such group is impossible in the dark (Sapir, 1949). In the first place, language is primarily a system of phonetic symbols for the expression of communicable thought and feeling (Sapir, 1949). It is an essentially perfect means of expression and communication among every known people (p. 1). In the same way, Halliday (1978) articulates a language as a 'meaning potential'. Therefore, any sentence is not perceived literally in isolation but is understood from the perspective of what they can mean given the external factors which are the controlling environments. However, Sapir (1949) concludes that a language and the culture of its speaker cannot be analyzed in isolation (Hinkel, 1999).

However, all languages use is interpersonal in the sense that the message expressed is meant for other people to read or hear, and its meaning is always a result of negotiation between the participants (Luukka & Markkanen, 1997: 168). This leads a writer or a speaker to select numerous communicative strategies. One of these strategies is hedge/hedging. Through using hedges, the speakers or writers can avoid taking full responsibility for their statements. Hedging has been defined as a basic feature of academic discourse that enables writers to restrict their certainty towards their claims. Nevertheless, claims should be made as strong as possible. The stronger they are, the easier they are to falsify (see Meyer, 1997: 21).