



HEDGES IN THESIS ABSTRACTS OF GRADUATE STUDENTS OF SEMARANG STATE UNIVERSITY

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Abstract

This study is meant to describe the hedges used by the English, Mathematics, Science, Social and Education Management graduate students of State University of Semarang in writing their thesis abstracts, find out whether or not there is a difference in the use of hedges, and explain why they used hedges in the ways they do. It used a descriptive qualitative-quantitative approach and the data were taken from the thesis abstracts. The unit of analysis is lexical hedges analyzed based on the Salager-Meyer's (1994) taxonomy as well as Hyland's taxonomy (1998) and non-lexical hedges as suggested by Navratilova (2013). The results show that hedges both lexical and non-lexical hedges were used. There is a difference among these graduate students in using hedges. Those in English, Social and Education Management had the tendency to use more hedges than those in Mathematics and Science. This tendency of using more hedges by those in English might be influenced by their cultures. Meanwhile, the preferences of those in Social and Education Management in using more hedges are possibly caused by its nature in which these two programs are categorized as 'soft sciences' that are surely not very numerical.

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INTRODUCTION

Theses are avenues for graduate students to publicly propose and share new ideas which are likely to support or contradict findings of others. Hence, the employment of cautious language as the acceptance of the graduate students' research contributions depends widely on how these are presented to the academic community. According to Vassileva (2001) in Mojica (2005), using cautious language means mitigating the strength of a proposal by increasing or decreasing its illocutionary force through hedging and boosting devices. Moreover, related to the academic discourse, Hyland (2000) advocates that one of the most important features of it is the way that writers seek to modify the assertions that they make, toning down uncertain or potentially risky claims, emphasizing what they believe to be correct, and conveying appropriately collegial attitudes to readers.

As a matter of fact, theses are academic papers involving a process in which the writers in this case, the graduate students, review the works of experts regarding to their topic and then formulate their own argument in relation to the work of others. In addition, theses require not only the way to present propositional information but also how the writers build the relationship to the readers in such way that their academic papers are acceptable. With regard to this, in writing theses, it is possible that the writer has successfully presented textual information but failed in constructing interpersonal aspects such as building up the writers – readers' relationship.

The growing interest on hedges in academic writing is apparent in various studies. Among of those studies is the one done by Nivales (2011) extending the study of hedging in college research paper to examine how the students of the Institute of Arts and Sciences of Far Eastern University show their commitment and detachment to their ideas as revealed in

introduction and conclusion sections. Another study was conducted by Abdollahzadeh (2011) extending hedging in postgraduate students' theses to examine the way of how Iranian and British postgraduate students of applied linguistics hedge their propositions in the discussion section of their dissertations. In this study the writer tries to examine hedges in graduate students of State University of Semarang especially in their thesis abstracts. Different from other parts of theses, abstract writing has received less attention and the focus has largely on length, summary and keywords.

It is often believed that academic writing, particularly scientific writing, is factual. However an important feature of academic writing is the concept of cautious language, or "hedging". It is necessary to make decisions about the writers' stance on a particular subject, or the strength of the claims he or she is making. The appropriate use of hedging strategies for academic argumentation is a significant resource for student writers and plays an important part in demonstrating competence in a specialist register.

Myers (1989) has suggested that academic writers employ hedges to minimize the potential threat new claims make on other researchers by soliciting acceptance and challenging their own work. Equally however, engagement in disciplinary forums involves norms of interpersonal behavior underpinned by the sanctions inherent in a system of academic recognition and rewards which hinges on publication (Hyland, 1997). Writers may thus find it easier to satisfy disciplinary gatekeepers when negotiating peer review procedures by observing community expectations concerning collegial deference and limits on self-assurance.

In line with Myers, Hyland (2005: 52) highlights that hedges belongs to interactional resources which helps control the level of personality in a text as writers acknowledge and connect to others, pulling them along with their argument, focusing their attention,

acknowledging their uncertainties and guiding them to interpretations.

Hedges are devices such as possible, might and perhaps, which indicate the writer's decision to recognize alternative voices and viewpoints and so withhold complete commitment to a proposition. Hedges emphasize the subjectivity of a position by allowing information to be presented as an opinion rather than a fact and therefore open that position to negotiation. Writers must calculate what weight to give to an assertion, considering the degree of precision or reliability that they want it to carry and perhaps claiming protection in the event of its eventual overthrow. (Hyland, 1998a in Hyland, 2005: 52).

Salager-Meyer (1997) suggests that hedges in scientific English are typically expressed through the following strategic stereotypes.

1. Modal auxiliary verbs:

e.g., may, might, can, could, would, should.

For example: Advances in technology *could* allow exploration of the anatomical basis of subjective fatigue

2. Modal lexical verbs:

So-called speech acts verbs used to perform acts such as doubting and evaluating: e.g., to seem, to appear, to believe to suggest, to assume, to indicate, etc. For example: Our analyses suggest that high doses of the drug can lead to relevant blood pressure reduction.

3. Adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrases:

Probability adjectives: e.g., possible, probable, unlikely

Nouns: e.g., assumption, claim, possibility, estimate

Adverbs: e.g., perhaps, possibly, probably, likely, presumably

For example: The setting of the neural mechanisms responsible for this sensation is *possibly* altered in patients with chronic fatigue syndrome.

4. Approximators of degree, quantity, frequency and time:

e.g., approximately, roughly, about, often, generally, usually. For example: Fever is present in about a third of cases and *sometimes* there is neutropenia.

5. Introductory phrases:

e.g., I believe, to our knowledge, it is our view that, we feel that. For example: *We believe* that the chronic fatigue syndrome reflects a complex interaction of several factors. There is no simple explanation.

6. If clauses:

e.g., If true, if anything

For example: *If true*, then our study contradicts the myth that fishing attracts the bravest and strongest men.

7. Compound hedges:

These are phrases made up of several hedges. Salager-Meyer (1997:110) distinguishes double hedges (*it may suggest*), treble hedges (*it seems reasonable to assume that*) and quadruple hedges (*it would seem somewhat unlikely that*).

The alternative categorization of surface realization is proposed by Hyland (e.g. 1995, 1996a, 1998). He then suggests the following categories as principal realizations of hedges in research journals:

1. Category of lexical hedges, Modal verbs (e.g. would, may, could), Epistemic lexical verbs (e.g. indicate, suggest, appear, and propose), Epistemic adjectives (e.g. likely, possible, apparent), Epistemic adverbs (e.g. apparently, probably, relatively, generally), Epistemic nouns (e.g. possibility)

2. Category of strategic hedges

"Limited knowledge": For example: *It is not known*, whether such a weak temperature response...

"Limitations of a specific model, theory or method": For example: *In spite of its shortcomings*, the method has been widely employed to evidence this type of...

"Doubts surrounding experimental conditions": For example: *Under these conditions* phosphorylations of PEPC by...

METHODS

This study used qualitative-quantitative descriptive approach. The data were obtained from the graduate students' thesis abstracts of State University of Semarang consisting of 25 abstracts. Only the most recent texts that were used (2012-2013) and only the abstract section which was analyzed where its function is to save time in reading and gives a salient information about the article enabling the readers to decide as to whether they would want to further pursue a full reading. Technique of data analysis includes identifying hedges, classifying hedges, describing findings and drawing conclusions.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Lexical Hedges

According to Salager-Meyer (1994) and Hyland (1998) as cited in Navratilova (2013), the categories of lexical hedges were grouped into modal auxiliaries, epistemic lexical verbs, epistemic adverbs, epistemic adjectives, epistemic nouns and numerical hedges. With regard to it, I provided the table showing the frequency and percentage of lexical hedges used by the graduate students from five different study programs (English, Mathematics, Science, Social and Education Management) in their thesis abstracts.

Table 1. The Relative Frequency of Categories of Lexical Hedges in Thesis Abstract

No	Categories of Lexical Hedges	English		Mathematics		Science		Social		Education Management	
		F	P	F	P	F	P	F	P	F	P
1.	Modal Auxiliaries	17	33.3%	6	31.6%	6	2.5%	8	24.3%	13	41.9%
2.	Epistemic lexical verbs	12	23.5%	8	42.1%	13	54.2%	14	42.5%	6	19.4%
3.	Epistemic adverbs	10	19.6 %	2	10.5%	1	4.2%	3	9 %	3	9.7%
4.	Epistemic adjectives	1	2%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0 %	0	0%
5.	Epistemic nouns	0	0 %	0	0%	0	0%	1	3 %	3	9.7%
6.	Numerical hedges										
	Adj. and Adverbs of indefinite frequency	1	2%	0	0%	2	8.3%	1	3.0%	0	0%
	Adj. and adverbs of indefinite degree	7	13.7%	1	5.3%	2	8.3%	5	15.2%	4	12.9%
	Approximators	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%	1	3.2%
	other numerical hedges	3	5.9 %	2	10.5%	0	0%	1	3 %	1	3.2%
	Total	51	100 %	19	100 %	24	100 %	33	100%	31	100%

The table above shows that the graduate students from five different study programs (English, Mathematics, Science, Social and Education Management) used the lexical hedges in their thesis abstract. However, the types of lexical hedges they used are not always similar. English graduate students used modal auxiliaries, epistemic lexical verbs, epistemic adverbs, epistemic adjectives, and numerical hedges, except approximators, encompassing adjectives and adverbs of indefinite degree,

adjectives and adverbs of indefinite frequency and other numerical hedges.

Further, the table indicates that the type of lexical hedges of epistemic noun was not used by the English graduate students. Unlike the English graduate students who used the lexical hedges except epistemic noun and one of the numerical hedges that was approximators, the Mathematics graduate students had the tendency to use the lexical hedges of modal auxiliaries, epistemic lexical verbs, epistemic adverbs, and numerical hedges of adjectives and

adverbs of indefinite degree and other numerical hedges. In this matter, they did not use epistemic adjectives, epistemic nouns and numerical hedges of adjectives and adverbs of indefinite frequency as applied by the English graduate students in writing their thesis abstract. However, none of the English and Mathematics graduate students used approximators in their thesis abstract.

From the table above, it also demonstrates that the graduate students from the Science study program used the types of lexical hedges of modal auxiliaries, epistemic lexical verbs, epistemic adverbs, epistemic adjectives and numerical hedges of adjectives and adverbs of indefinite frequency and adjectives and adverbs of indefinite degree. In this case, epistemic nouns, approximators and other numerical hedges were excluded in their thesis abstract.

Different from the graduate students of the English, Mathematics and Science study programs who did not use epistemic noun, those from social and Education Management study programs used epistemic noun in writing their thesis abstract. With regard to it, the graduate students of Education Management study programs exhibited more usage of epistemic noun than the graduate students in the Social study programs.

The types of lexical hedges used by the graduate students in the Social study program cover modal auxiliaries, epistemic lexical verbs, epistemic adverbs, epistemic nouns, and numerical hedges of adjectives and adverbs of indefinite frequency, adjectives and adverbs of indefinite degree and other numerical hedges. In this matter, approximators were not used by them. Meanwhile, the graduate students in the Education study programs were the ones who had the tendency to use the six types of lexical hedges except in numerical hedges of adjectives and adverbs of indefinite frequency.

Non-Lexical Hedges

Non-lexical hedges consist of 'compound hedges', 'Introductory phrases', 'if clauses', 'questions', 'personal attribution', 'agentless

passive and impersonal constructions' and treated as 'non-lexical hedges'.

Non-Lexical Hedges in English Study Program

The occurrences of non-lexical hedges in English study program are not as significant as lexical hedges. The graduate students from English study program used three kinds of non-lexical hedges, namely, agentless passive (94.4 %), personal attribution (2.8 %) and compound hedges (2.8 %).

Non-Lexical Hedges in Mathematics Study Program

Those from mathematics study program only used one of non-lexical hedges, namely agentless passive. The use of this agentless passive is as a strategy to protect themselves from the risk of being wrong.

Non-Lexical Hedges in Science Study Program

In line with the graduate students from Mathematics study program, those from Science study program only used one of non-lexical hedges, namely agentless passive.

Non-Lexical Hedges in Social Study Program

Unlike in mathematics students employing 'agentless passive' as the only kind of non-lexical hedges, those from the Social study program employed two kinds of non-lexical hedges. They encompass 'agentless passive' and 'compound hedges'.

Non-Lexical Hedges in Education Management Study Program

With regard to the previous study programs (English, Mathematics, Science, and Social), those from the Education Management study program mostly employed agentless passive as their strategy to diminish their own role in order to be protected from consequences of being wrong.

The Differences of the Use of Hedges

In term of lexical hedges, English graduate students used widely this kind of hedges with the occurrences (51), followed by the Social students (33), Education Management (31), Science (24) and Mathematic

(19). Meanwhile, in term of non-lexical hedges, agentless passives are more widely used by the graduate students from the five study programs. Further, the distribution of these agentless passives is relatively significant. Those in English used agentless passives (34) occurrences, Mathematics (28) occurrences, Science (25) occurrences, Social (20) occurrences, and Education Management (38) occurrences.

The Reasons Why the Graduate Students Use Hedges in the Ways They Do

The graduate students from English study program are more prone to a style of presentation that favor hedging than the others from the other four study programs. In the case of those in English study program, to some extent, there might be some influences from their cultures since they learned and used English in their teaching and learning process. Meanwhile, the preferences of those in Social and Education Management in using more hedges are possibly caused by its nature in which these two programs are categorized as 'soft sciences' that will surely not be very numerical or mathematically verifiable, but rather based on opinions, arguments and interpretations. On the other hand, Mathematics and Science used the least hedges in their thesis abstract. It may be caused by the nature that these two programs are considered as hard science in which the results are demonstrated by using more exact research methods such as measurements or calculations of numerical data.

CONCLUSION

To sum up, hedges both lexical and non-lexical hedges were used by the graduate students from the five different study programs in writing their thesis abstracts in English. However, it is presumed that there is a significant difference among these graduate students in using hedges in their thesis abstract. Lexical hedges were more frequently used by those in English than those in other study

programs. Meanwhile, in term of non-lexical hedges, agentless passive was the most widely used by these graduate students.

The findings also show that the tendency of using more hedges by those in English might be influenced by their cultures since they learned and used English in their teaching and learning process. Meanwhile, the preferences of those in Social and Education Management in using more hedges are possibly caused by its nature in which these two programs are categorized as 'soft sciences' that are surely not very numerical or mathematically verifiable, but rather based on opinions, arguments and interpretations.

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