

## THE PECULIARITIES OF HEDGING LANGUAGE IN ACADEMIC WRITING

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High schools encourage students to use academic papers when writing their assignments. Most students are not able to write their academic papers well because discipline curricula don't contain this aim. Therefore, they do not have the right skills to write academic papers. This has led to poor performance among the students.

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 your stance on a particular subject, or the strength of the claims you are 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. Hedge as a linguistic concept was introduced by G. Lakoff in 1972. Hedging can be defined as the use of linguistic devices to show hesitation or uncertainty and to display politeness and indirectness. Hedging is absolutely crucial in good academic writing and hedged words are said to account for 1 in every 100 words. When writing for academic disciplines it is necessary not only to show that the student is able to write in a formal, abstract fashion, but also that he is able to show the extent to which he believes in, or is prepared to stand up for, what he is reporting.

In discursive essays, or when writing up research, students must draw conclusions and make evaluative comments, and they are expected to take a stance on a particular issue or on the strength of the claims they are making [1, p.8].

Strong claims are rare in academic writing. Claims need to be less assertive so that they cannot easily be challenged. Therefore, words like *never*, *always*

and *obviously* are usually avoided, as are expressions like *there is no doubt that* and *as we all know*.

This is because a strong claim can be construed as a fact and is, therefore, open to dispute. For example,

“*Obesity leads to overweight babies*” implies that the statement is true in every case. Such a claim cannot be supported with evidence - we cannot be 100 percent sure that this is true for all cases; there are inevitably exceptions.

Although hedging is often called vague language, in our academic culture claims must be accurate, not vague generalisations. The above statement, couched in cautious language, becomes: “*Studies suggest that obesity leads to overweight babies.*”

As this example illustrates, the use of hedging language enables writers to distance themselves from the findings so as to avoid making unsubstantiated claims. Unless there is evidence to show that a statement is 100 percent certain, for instance when quoting proven facts or statistics, claims need to be qualified in some way to make them less assertive.

A wide range of words and phrases can be used in hedging:

- Modal auxiliary verbs: can, could, may, might, should, would
- Other hedging verbs: appear, look, seem, tend, suggest, indicate
- Probability adjectives: likely, possible, probable, unlikely, certain
- Probability adverbs: perhaps, possibly, probably
- Frequency adverbs: generally, occasionally, often, seldom, usually
- Hedging expressions: to a certain extent, for the most part, there is a tendency to, it could be argued that, evidence indicates that
- Qualifying adverbs: primarily, mainly, predominantly, apparently, presumably, conceivably [1, p.9].

We conducted the lessons on hedging in academic writing. It was adapted for use with adult learners who studied language on the basis of our department. The students had to identify hedging expressions and categorise

these in a table to be kept for future reference. We created different tasks. Depending on the level of the class, these tasks can be used in different ways.

We cut up the sentence pairs and gave one statement to each student in the class and asked the students with strong claims to stand on one side of the room, those with cautious statements on the other. The students read out their statements. They paired up with the groupmate who had the matching statement and noted down the words or expressions used to make the less assertive statement more cautious. Pairs then exchanged sentences with another pair and continued as before.

The next task was devoted to paraphrasing. The learners were given the sentences which were absolute statements. The task was to rewrite the sentences using one of the methods of hedging.

The next class was devoted to text work. The students identify and highlight cautious language in authentic texts sourced from the articles in the students' subject area (medicine).

It was pointed out that hedging language had both advantages and disadvantages. We highlighted the fact that if the reader or listener knew and was interested in the subject, then qualified statements might persuade them more than unqualified statements; however, for people who did not know the subject or who were uninterested or who were too busy to really pay attention, then hedge words could deplete the strength and meaning of the whole message.

In conclusion we'd like to say that the use of impersonal, passive constructions, lexis expressing personal involvement, other politeness strategies and facts in evaluating the claims of other researchers are important points in academic writings. People use hedged language for several different purposes but perhaps the most fundamental are the following:

1. to minimise the possibility of another teacher/lecturer/colleague/student opposing the claims you are making;

2. to enable you as a writer to be more precise when reporting results, e.g. you can show that something is not 100% proven, but rather that it is indicated and subsequently assumed;

3. to conform to a now accepted practice writing style;

4. to enable you to execute a politeness strategy in which you are able to acknowledge that perhaps there may be flaws in your claims.

### **References**

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