

HEDGES USED IN “YOUR LETTERS” OF THE JAKARTA POST

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Abstract

*To convey meaning, ideas, and attitude, someone may use a written form besides the spoken one. Even though speaking and writing are similar, both have differences, one of them is the difference in style. Expressing impersonal statement of facts in speaking is different from the one in writing. To achieve the rhetorical and impersonal objectives of the writer, hedges can be used. Hedges are mostly verbal and adverbial expressions such as **could**, **perhaps**, **may**, **suggest** which deal with degree of probability. Hedges can be considered as the interactive elements which serve as a bridge between the propositional information in the text and the writer’s factual interpretation. This study is aimed at describing the hedges found in “Your Letters” of The Jakarta Post and the reasons why the writers used those hedges. “Your Letters” is one of the columns provided in The Jakarta Post where the readers of the newspaper may give their personal opinions and attitudes toward the newspaper and others. The method used in collecting the data is the documentation one. The data were taken from “Your Letters” of The Jakarta Post dated January 1st-31st, 2007. The steps to analyze the data are reading the letters, finding the hedges, classifying the types of hedges, and finding the reason why the writers of the letters used those hedges. The result shows that the types of hedges mostly used in those letters are modal auxiliary verbs, such as **may**, **might**, **could**, **would**, and **should**. The other types of hedges belong to adjectival, adverbial, and nominal modal phrase; approximators of degree, quantity, frequency, and time; and compound hedges. The reasons why the writers used those hedges are to meet the style of writing and to show politeness strategies in their letters.*

Keywords: *hedges, Jakarta Post, style of writing, your letters.*

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important features of academic discourse 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. These expressions of doubt and certainty are collectively known as hedges. Hedges such as *might*, *probably*, and *seem* signal a tentative assessment of referential information and convey collegial respect for the view of colleagues, and allow writers to express conviction and to mark their involvement and solidarity with an audience.

The crucial important of hedges lies in the fact that readers expect claims to be warranted in terms of assessment of reliability they carry, and appropriate in terms of the social interactions they appeal to. These devices help academics gain acceptance for their work by balancing conviction with caution, and by conveying an appropriate disciplinary persona of modesty and assertiveness (Hyland:1996a). Hedges, therefore, express both

interpersonal and ideational (conceptual) information (Halliday, 194), allowing writers to communicate more precise degree of accuracy in their truth assessments. Indeed, in carrying authorial judgement, hedges can actually convey the major content of an utterance. Hedges may intentionally or unintentionally be employed in both spoken and written language since they are crucially important in communication.

The study of hedges is well linked to pragmatics which Spencer-Otey and Zegarac (2002) define as the study of relationship between language forms, messages and language users. The use of *hedge* as a linguistic term goes back at least to the early 1970s, when G. Lakoff published his article entitled *Hedges: A Study in Meaning Criteria and the Logic of Fuzzy Concepts*. At that time, Lakoff was not interested in the communicative value of the use of hedges but was concerned with the logical properties of words and phrases like *rather*, *largely*, *in a manner of speaking*, *very*, in their ability to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy (Lakoff, 1972:195).

Markkanen and Schröder (2000:2-3) explained that the term of *hedge* has moved far from its origins, particularly since it has been adopted by pragmatists and discourse analysts. The term is no longer used only for expressions that modify the category membership of a predicate or a noun phrase. They then explained that in accordance with Lakoff's main concern, however, the term later been defined, for example by Brown and Levinson as a particle, word or phrase that modifies the degree of membership that is partial or true only in certain respects, or that it is more true and complete than perhaps might be expected. They also quoted Vandekoppe's view of hedges that considers the use of hedges as showing a lack of full commitment to the propositional content of an utterance. In other words, hedges (e.g. *perhaps*, *seem*, *might*, *to certain extent*) are by him seen as modifying the truth-value of the whole proposition, not as making individual inside it more imprecise.

As to the motivation for the use of hedges, a lot of the discussion has concentrated on their use in spoken discourse, and the most frequently mentioned motivating factor is *politeness*, as defined by Brown/Levinson (1987). In their view, hedges are mainly used for negative politeness in face-saving, in which they are put to elaborate use. In positive politeness they figure only in expressions of extremes, like *marvellous* and *appalling*, which are typical of this form of politeness, 'safely vague' because they leave it to the addressee to figure out how to interpret them.

Hedges can also be considered as the interactive elements which serve as a bridge between propositional information in the text and the writer's factual interpretation. As Skelton remarks, hedges can be viewed as part of the larger phenomenon called commentative potentials of any language. Natural languages are reflective: not only saying things, but also reflecting on the status of what they say.

Research on LSP (Language for Specific Purposes) has repeatedly shown that hedges are crucial in academic discourse because they are central rhetorical means of gaining communal adherence to knowledge claims. Indeed, scientific "truth" is as much the product of social as that of an intellectual activity, and the need to convince one's fellow scientific of the facticity of the experimental results explains the widespread use of hedges in this type of discourse.

Typically, hedges are expressed through the use of the following "strategic stereotypes":

1. Modal auxiliary verbs

Modal auxiliary verbs are the most straightforward and widely used means of expressing modality in English academic writing, the most tentative ones being: *may*, *might*, *can*, *could*, *would*, *should*.

2. Modal lexical verbs

Modal lexical verb (or so called “speech act verb” used to perform act such as doubting and evaluating rather than they merely describing) of varying degree of illocutionary force: *to seem, to appear* (epistemic verbs), *to believe, to assume, to suggest, to estimate, to tend, to think, to argue, to indicate, to propose, to speculate*. Although a wide range of verbs can be used in this way (Banks, 1994), there tends to be a heavy reliance on the above-mentioned examples especially in academic writing.

3. Adjectival, adverbial, and nominal modal phrases

These forms of hedges include probability adjectives: *e.g., possible, probable, unlikely*, nouns: *e.g., assumption, claim, possibility, estimate, suggestion*, and adverbs (which could be considered as non-verbal nouns): *e.g., perhaps, possibly, probably, practically, likely, presumably, virtually, apparently*.

4. Aproximators of degree, quantity, frequency and time

This can be realized through for example: *approximately, roughly, about, often, occasionally, generally, usually, somewhat, somehow, a lot of*.

5. Introductory phrases

Introductory phrases can be realized through phrases such as: *I believe, to our knowledge, it is our view that, we feel that*, which express the author’s personal doubt and direct involvement.

6. “If clauses”

This is usually realized through the use of the following phrases: *if true, if anything*.

7. Compound hedges

These are phrases made up of several hedges, the commonest forms being: A modal auxiliary combined with a lexical verb with a hedging content (e.g., it would appear) and a lexical verb followed by a hedging adverb or adjective where the adverb (or adjective) reinforces the hedge already inherent in the lexical verb (e.g., *it seems reasonable/probable*). Such compound hedges can be double hedges (*it may suggest that; it seems likely that; it would indicate that; this probably indicates*); treble hedges (*it seem reasonable to assume that*); quadruple hedges (*it would seem somewhat unlikely that, it may appear somewhat speculative that*), and so on.

Hedges are used for some purposes. Here are four reasons for hedging based on the theory of Salager-Meyer (1994):

1. Minimizing the “thread-to-face”

Since one of the functions of hedges is to minimize the threat-to-face, the theory of Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) is very important to understand. The term “face” in linguistics refers to the respect that an individual has for him or herself, and maintaining that “self-esteem” in public or in private situations. Usually someone try to avoid embarrassing other person, or making them feels uncomfortable. In their book, *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage*, Brown and Levinson (1987:61) explain the term face as follows:

Our notion of 'face' is derived from that of Goffman (1967) and from the English folk term, which ties face up with notions of being embarrassed or humiliated, or 'losing face'. Thus face is something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction. In general, people cooperate (and assume each other's cooperation) in maintaining face in interaction, such cooperation being based on the mutual vulnerability of face.

2. Being a way of being more precise in reporting results

Salager-Meyer and Banks (1994) claim that the exclusive association of hedges with evasiveness can obscure some important functions of hedging, and that expressing a lack of certainty does not necessarily show confusion or vagueness. Indeed, one could consider hedges as ways of being more precise in reporting results. Hedging may present the true state of the writers' understanding and may be used to negotiate an accurate representation of the state of the knowledge under discussion. In fact, academic writers may well wish to reduce the strength of claims simply because stronger statements would not be justified by the experimental data presented. In such cases, researchers are not saying less than what they mean but are rather saying precisely what they mean by not overstating their experimental results. Being too certain can often be unwise. Academics want their readers to know that they do not claim to have the final word on the subject, choosing instead to remain vague in their statement.

Hedges are not a cover-up tactic, but rather a resource used to express some fundamental characteristics of modern science (uncertainty, skepticism and doubt) which reveal the probabilistic nature science started acquiring during the second half of the 19th century (during the 17th and the 18th centuries and the first half of 19th century, science was more deterministic). Moreover, because of the close inter-connection between different scientific fields, no scientist can possibly claim to wholly master the field of knowledge of given discipline.

3. Being positive or negative politeness strategies

According to Brown and Levinson, politeness strategies are developed in order to save the hearers' "face." In other words, politeness strategies are developed for the main purpose of dealing with these FTA's. Brown and Levinson in Paltridge (2000:49) also state that politeness is based on the notions of positive and negative face. The definitions of both face is stated as follows:

Positive face refers to a person's need to be accepted, or liked, by others, and to be treated as a member of a group knowing that their wants are shared by others.

Negative face refers to a person's need to be independent and not be imposed on by others.

Positive Politeness Strategy means that someone recognizes that someone else has a desire to be respected. It also confirms that the relationship is friendly and expresses group reciprocity. While Negative Politeness Strategy is a politeness strategy which similar to Positive Politeness in that someone recognizes that they want to be respected; however, it is also assumed that someone is in some way imposing on them. Some other examples would be to say, "I don't want to bother you but..." or "I was wondering if ..."

For example:

"I'm sorry to bother you but, I just wanted to ask you if I could use one of those pens?"

In everyday conversation, there are ways to go about getting the things we want. When we are with a group of friends, we can say to them, "Go get me that plate!", "Shut-up!" However, when we are surrounded by a group of adults at a formal function, in which our parents are attending, we must say, "Could you please pass me that plate, if you don't mind?", "I'm sorry, I don't mean to interrupt, but I am not able to hear the speaker in the front of the room." In different social situations, we are obligated to adjust our use of words to fit the occasion. It would seem socially unacceptable if the phrases above were reversed. It is, however, possible to turn up the other side of the coin and emphasize the importance of hedges for the speaker's own face. Their use may be motivated, for example, by the fear of being proved wrong later on. Being imprecise or mitigating one's commitment to the truth-value of a proposition or a claim makes it possible to say, if proved wrong, that the claim was only tentative or an approximation.

Myers (1989) argues that hedges are better understood as positive or negative politeness strategies, i.e., as sophisticated rational strategies" used to mitigate two central positions expressed in scientific writing: to present claims (or findings) pending acceptance by the international scientific community, and to deny claims presented by other researchers. Indeed, to express an opinion is to make a claim, and to make a claim is to try to impose one's opinion on others. The authors are usually presenting a claim to the scientific community while trying to convince their readers of the relevance of their findings. But, in doing so, they remain somewhat vague because they can not claim to have final word on the subject. In the social interaction involved in all scientific publishing, hedges permit academics to present their claims while simultaneously presenting themselves as the "humble servants of the scientific community" (Myers, 1989: 4). As soon as a claim becomes part of the literature, it is then possible to refer to it without any hedging.

Thus because new result or conclusions have to be thoughtfully fit in to the existing literature, hedging is not simply a prudent insurance against overstating an assertion, but also a rational interpersonal strategy which both supports the writer's position and builds writer-reader (speaker/listener) relationships. A hedged comment could reflect a polite and diplomatic disagreement, or it might also display genuine uncertainty on the speaker's part (definition 2).

4. Conforming to an established writing style

Banks (1994) argues that a certain degree of hedging has become conventionalized, i.e., that the function of hedges is not necessarily to avoid face-threatening acts (definition No. 1), but simply to conform to an established writing style. This established style of writing arose as a consequence of the combination of the needs and stimuli mentioned in definition 1, 2 and 3 above. A totally unhedged style would not be considered seriously by journal editors.

It should be made clear at this stage that it is difficult to be sure in any particular instance which of the four above-mentioned concepts is intended nor need we assume that the authors of hedged utterances always know why they hedge their statements in the first place. Salager-Meyer (1994) states that hedges which are the first and foremost the product of a mental attitude and decisions about the function of a span of language are bound to be subjective.

As stated before, hedges can be used in any texts both spoken or written one. One of written texts is newspaper. Jakarta Post is an English daily newspaper published in Indonesia. It contains much information around the world. Besides giving much information, this newspaper also allows the readers to give their personal opinions ad

attitudes toward the newspaper and others. Their personal opinions are provided in one of its columns called ‘Your Letters’. In writing their letters to this newspaper, the writers frequently used hedges. They did this because they had several reasons. This research, therefore, is aimed at describing the hedges found in “Your Letters” of the Jakarta Post, and the reasons why they used those hedges.

RESEARH METHOD

This research is descriptive qualitative because it is intended to describe types of hedges found in “Your Letters” of the Jakarta Post. The unit of analysis of this research is every sentence found in “Your Letter” containing hedges. The method used in collecting data is documentation one. The data were taken from “Your Letters” of the Jakarta Post dated Januari 1st -31st, 2007. The steps to analyze the data were based on the framework given by Salager-Meyer in Miller (1994), those are finding the hedges, classifying the types of hedges, and describing the reasons why the writers of the letters used those hedges.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Hedges Used in “Your Letters” of The Jakarta Post

The types of hedges used in “Your Letters” of The Jakarta Post can be seen in table 1.

Table 1. Hedges Used in “Your Letters” of The Jakarta Post issued in January 2007

NO	TYPES OF HEDGES	Σ	%
1	Modal Auxiliary Verb	133	54.28
2	Modal Lexical Verbs	23	9.39
3	Adj., Adverb, & Nominal Modal Phrases	32	13.06
4	Approximators of degree, quantity and time	15	6.12
5	Introductory Phrases	29	11.84
6	If Clauses, if anything	6	2.45
7	Compound hedges	7	2.86
Total		245	100

Table 1 reveals that the total number of hedges found in “Your Letters” of The Jakarta Post is 245. The writers of this column are fond of using modal auxiliary verbs as one type of hedges with the frequency of 133 (54.28%). The next considerable type of hedges found in this column is the category of adjectival, adverbial, and nominal modal phrases, which appear 32 times (13.06%). Modal lexical verbs and introductory phrases share quite similar number in the column, that is 23 (9.39%) and 29 (11.84%). On the other hand, the writers of “Your Letters” seem to reluctantly use aproximators of degree, quantity, frequency, and time; if clause; and compound hedges since each of them appears less than 10%.

Modal auxiliary verbs

The examples of hedges in the form of modal auxiliary verbs can be seen in the following sentences:

1. *On the basis that the Indonesian government’s real objective is to promote the safety of air travel in Indonesia, a far more effective approach **would** be to provide for the automatic suspension of the operating license of any airline which suffers a fatal air crash. (Saturday, January 13, 2007)*

2. *All exit doors on all passenger ships **should** always be open under any circumstances.* (Monday, January 22, 2007)
3. *By slightly modifying our post graduate education system, we **could** attract those students to study in Indonesia rather than Malaysia or Singapore.* (Monday, January 22, 2007)

Adjectival, adverbial, and nominal modal phrases

The examples of hedges in the form of adjectival, adverbial, and nominal modal phrases can be seen in the examples below:

1. *The driving force behind most of these tragedies is **likely** to be money, irrespective of what the authorities will say.* (Friday, January 19, 2007)
2. *There are **probably** many Southeast Asia students who would like to study there, but who most choose Malaysia or Singapore instead of economic reason.* (Friday, January 19, 2007)
3. *To suggest that “none of the chemicals used in the food industry are good for us” is **simply** an incorrect statement.* (Friday, January 12, 2007)

Introductory Phrases

Hedges in the form of introductory phrases used in the letters can be seen in the following examples:

1. ***I feel** that Antasari is not capable of handling any more traffic.* (Thursday, January 11, 2007)
2. *But **I think** we could all learn lots more about what really is important in life, by visiting these places where we can leave our phones and busy lives behind.* (Wednesday, January 10, 2007)
3. ***It is our opinion that** all countries where aspartame is sold need to consider banning this dangerous artificial sweetener which has hidden far too long behind grossly misleading label: “Safe and natural”.* (Monday, January 29, 2007)

Modal lexical verbs

1. *The news that the Decentralized Basis Education Project (DBEP) has been successful in increasing public participation in managing education (The Jakarta Post, Dec. 16) **seem to be** one of the reflection of the globalization era in education.* (Friday, January 5, 2007)

Aproximators of degree, quantity, frequency, and time

1. *The new daytime light rule will **certainly** increase the practice of demanding bribes on the part of policemen.* (Saturday, January 13, 2007)
2. *We **regularly** travel with Garuda and would like to emphasize that their service has improved considerable.* (Tuesday, January 30, 2007)
3. *All these vehicles stop **frequently** and block the traffic.* (Friday, January 12, 2007)

If clauses, If anything

1. *He gave no mention to what, **if anything**, the pharmaceutical industry can do to reduce the huge cost of medicines.* (Wednesday, January 17, 2007)
2. *There is a lot of time between now and April 2009 but maybe enough, **if everyone concerned pulls together**, to make enough impact and progress to secure a successful election bid.* (Thursday, January 4, 2007)

Compound hedges

1. *That **may seem** a lot to accomplish in our country.* (Monday, January 8, 2007)

Reason for Hedging

There are 4 reasons of hedging that can be revealed from the finding:

Minimize the “threat-to-face”

It is the most widely used of hedges, whereby authors tone down their statements. It is also called “the politician’s craft”, not only a wild mitigation, but an obfuscation for dubious purposes. The following sentence which is taken from the statement of Press Attache Iran Embassy, Hamid Soltan Salekti, (Your letters, January 6, 2007) illustrates the use of hedging:

*As a last point, we have seen some opinions and articles in the Post that have been written by those who **seem to be** Zionist and have a particular purpose in the most populous Muslim country in the world.* (January 12, 2007)

The epistemic verb **seem** allows the speaker to avoid making a categorical statement and to negotiate some degree of flexibility for his claims. In such a way, a verb also secures the author from being narrow-mindedness and discriminatory.

Be a way of being more precise in reporting results

Hedging may present the true state of the writer’s understanding and may be used to negotiate an accurate representation of the state of the knowledge under discussion. In this case, the writer could say precisely what they mean, not more or less.

***I feel** it is safe to state, categorically, that we **would** all be better off and healthier, and **would** live longer, if we never ate any processed food with strange-sounding chemicals listed in the ingredients.* (January 9, 2007)

In the sentence above, the writer could display his genuine uncertainty and thus allow him to offer a very precise statement about the extent of his confidence (or lack thereof) in the truth of the propositional information he presented.

Be positive or negative politeness strategies

Hedges can be used to reflect a polite and diplomatic disagreement (as well as agreement), or it might also display genuine uncertainty on the speaker’s part.

*Please! Shaw **suggests** that I do more reading on the subject of nutrition.* (January 22, 2007)

The writer of the sentence above moderately says that he did not agree with Shaw’s opinion. The verb **suggests** in the sentence puts him in the position that he looks like to accept what Shaw suggested. He tactfully adds the word **please** before the statement. It is such a polite way to accept as well as discard other suggestion.

Conform to an established writing style

Writing and speaking are different in some tones that writing needs to be lexically dense and the writer should be aware of writing mechanics and style. Writing is not

speaking written down. It gives more emphasize on the formal characterization than speaking. Hedges can be used to meet the condition. Moreover, this established style of writing arose as a consequence of the combination of the needs and stimuli mentioned in definitions 1,2, and 3 above.

It is our opinion that all countries where aspartame is sold need to consider banning this dangerous artificial sweetener which has hidden far too long behind the grossly misleading label: "Safe and nature." (January 29, 2007)

CONCLUSION

Hedges allow language users to say or to write something and comment on what they are saying or writing. As social beings, we feel need to modulate our speech act in order to guarantee a certain level of acceptability and possibility of coexistence. Hedges meet the condition; they help someone moderate his thought.

As "Your letters" column is a free column used by the readers of The Jakarta Post to express meaning and opinions, the content of it may be something threatening someone else's face or authority. The writers may use modal auxiliary verbs; modal lexical verbs; adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrases; approximators of degree, quantity, frequency, and time; introductory phrases; if clause; and compound hedges to moderate the tone of the writing. However, it is obvious that the writer prefer to use modal auxiliary verbs a lot compared to other types of hedges.

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