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Hedging Patterns Used as Mitigation and Politeness Strategies

Irina Janina Boncea¹

Abstract: *Hedging* has received much attention in recent years in relation to conversational rules and social conventions as it is the main strategy used to facilitate turn-taking, show politeness and mitigate *face*-threats. For linguists, *hedging* has aroused interest and curiosity because it is a means of conveying vagueness purposely. *Hedging* is used by speakers and writers to convey *certainty* or *doubt* towards a statement and to show the degree of confidence they assign to their claim. By using hedges, writers allow their readers to evaluate the truth value of the assertion. Politeness and hedging have become forms of encoding verbal and non-verbal behaviour with the purpose of *saving face*, thus playing a crucial role in social interaction strategies. *Hedging* represents a crucial aspect in the study of language as the appropriate use of hedges reflects a high degree of efficiency in social interaction by demonstrating the ability to express degrees of certainty and mastering rhetorical strategies required in conversational circumstances. In this paper, we seek to investigate and compare the main hedging strategies in English and Romanian and the social and communicational roles they fulfill.

Keywords: *hedging, mitigation, politeness, face, certainty, doubt, vagueness.*

1. What is *hedging*

Hedging has received much attention in relation to conversational rules as a means to facilitate turn-taking, show politeness, mitigate *face*-threats, but it is also considered a means of conveying vagueness purposely. Politeness and hedging have become forms of social interpretation of verbal and non-verbal behaviour revolving around the concept of *saving face*, thus playing a crucial role in social interaction strategies.

In language studies, hedging has come to designate a manifestation of language by means of which speakers take precautionary measures to protect themselves from the negative effect of their sayings or to protect themselves or their interlocutors from any harm to the concept of *face* caused by their utterances.

Lakoff analysed hedges as “*words whose meaning implicitly involves fuzziness-words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less*”

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fuzzy” (1972: 271) and he discussed words and phrases manifesting hedging power (like *rather, very, in a manner of speaking*) setting some boundaries in how to interpret linguistic items as hedges. Lakoff also discussed the fact that hedges “*interact with felicity conditions for utterances and with rules of conversation*” (1972: 213), thus setting the coordinates for interpreting hedges as manifestations conditioned by pragmatic factors.

A *hedge* has later been defined by Brown/Levinson (1978: 145) as: “a particle, word or phrase that modifies the degree of membership of a predicate or a noun phrase in a set; it says of that membership that it is partial or true only in certain respects, or that it is more true and complete than perhaps might be expected.”

The boundaries of hedging are, thus, extended to “negative” politeness which is used for avoiding threats to the face of the participants. This definition includes in hedges both *detensifiers* and *intensifiers*, which was how Lakoff also saw hedges. Nonetheless, hedges are often limited only to expressions showing that “the match between a piece of knowledge and a category is less than perfect.” (Chafe, 1986: 270)

Hedging represents a crucial aspect of language as the appropriate use of hedges reflects a high degree of efficiency in social interaction by demonstrating the ability to express degrees of certainty and mastering rhetorical strategies required under conversational circumstances: “Hedging refers to any linguistic means used to indicate either a) a lack of complete commitment to the truth value of an accompanying proposition, or b) a desire not to express that commitment categorically.” (Hyland 1998a: 1)

The study of hedging has deepened over the past twenty years. Literature includes various works on the topic and various labels are used to denote this category, such as *softeners* (Crystal & Davy, 1975), *weakeners* (Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987), *downgraders* (House & Kasper 1981), *compromisers* (James, 1983), *tentativeness* (Holmes, 1983), *understatement* (Hübler 1983), *evidentiality* (Chafe 1986), *downtoners* (Greenbaum et al. 1990), *diminishers / downtoners* (Biber & al., 1999), *stance markers* (Atkinson 1999).

Namasaraev (1997: 67) identifies 4 parameters that characterize hedging strategies:

- Indetermination – adding a degree of fuzziness or uncertainty to a single word or chunk of language;

- Depersonalisation – avoiding direct reference by using “we” or “the authors” or some other impersonal subjects;
- Subjectivisation – using *I + think/ suppose, assume* and other verbs of thinking with the purpose of signaling the subjectivity of what is said, as a personal view instead of the absolute truth;
- Limitation – removing fuzziness or vagueness from a part of a text by limiting category membership.

According to Hübler (1983) hedges are used to increase the appeal of the utterance, to make it more acceptable to the interlocutor and thus increase the probability of acceptance and reduce the chances of negation. This could also explain the actual term *hedge* as the attitude of the speaker trying to protect him/herself from potential rejection on the part of the interlocutor. House & Kasper believe (1981) that “both these functions – one defensive and ego-oriented, the other protective or alter-oriented are fulfilled by politeness.” (1981: 157)

By using hedging devices and displaying uncertainty and reservation, authors and speakers alike may be attempting to suggest the absence of absoluteness or the varying amount of accuracy of their statements. At the same time, they may try to save face in case of any possible falsification of their judgments. By using hedges and not attributing the ideas to oneself, writers can also invite readers to evaluate the truth value of the proposition as an independently thinking individual without the possibility of being biased by the absoluteness of a non-hedged statement.

2. Lexical and grammatical patterns of *hedging*

Our analysis will be focusing on the main lexical realizations of hedges as well as on epistemic modal elements functioning as politeness markers or/and as hedges in the discourse of Jane Austen’s novels. The examples extracted from our corpus will be analysed in parallel with their Romanian translations so as to demonstrate whether the same politeness strategies appear in Romanian. Also, it is within our area of interest whether the two languages play the game of politeness by the same pragmatic rules, i.e. whether the utterances display the same illocution, perlocution or abide by the same maxims etc.

Hedges are roughly considered to be represented by lexical verbs (*seem, tend, appear*), modals (*may, might*) and some adverbs

(*probably, perhaps*), although conditional clauses, passive voices, and impersonal phrases can also be proven to have hedging powers.

The following section discusses some of the most frequent occurrences of hedges and some examples from our corpus with the purpose of finding out whether hedging strategies employed in English make use of the same lexical items for their realization in Romanian. Hedges, therefore, are most commonly realized under the form of:

- Modal auxiliaries
- Lexical-modal verbs
- Adjectival, adverbial and nominal phrases
- Approximates of degree, quantity, frequency and time
- Discourse epistemic phrases
- If clauses
- Negative constructions
- Compound and multiple hedging

2.1 Modal auxiliaries: may, might, can, could, should, would, must, particularly in their epistemic senses. Modal verbs reflect the speaker's attitude and help them express ideas indirectly, which makes modal verbs perfect candidates as hedging devices. Moreover, they allow speakers to be fuzzy about an informational content, avoid face threatening acts and formulate illocutions so as not to offend the hearer.

We believe that the modal verbs *shall* and *will* in their epistemic stances expressing *probability* that X will happen or *certainty* of the speaker about the truth of his statements cannot be understood as hedges because they have an *I am telling you so* component rather than *I am telling you I am not sure* one. *Should* and *would*, on the other hand display varying degrees of hesitation and tentativeness on the part of the speaker in vouching for the absolute accuracy of his statement and therefore can be considered to play a hedging role when this reading is present.

Example

E: "*But **if** a woman is partial to a man, and does not endeavour to conceal it, he **must** find it out.*"

"*Perhaps he **must**, if he sees enough of her.* (P&P: 246)

R: - *Dar **dacă** o femeie are înclinație pentru un bărbat și nu încearcă să i-o ascundă, el **trebuie** să-și dea seama de acest lucru.*

- *Poate că **trebuie**, dacă o vede îndeajuns.* (2009: 28)

Comment: The value of *must* is *certainty* arrived at by *logical inference on the basis of available information* and the modal functions as a hedge in both instances: in the first instance, *must* reads “*I do not say that X*” but rather “*I am bound by the available evidence to conclude that must be X.*” The speaker is thus partially absolved of blame in case of being proven wrong later on. These instances of *must* are translated as *trebuie*.

The presence of the If clause and of the epistemic adverb *perhaps* is notable because they are also hedges by the hypothetical understanding they assign to the sentence: the speaker is not willing to take the states of affairs as certain but rather as an assumption. *Perhaps* is translated by its Romanian equivalent *poate*.

2.2 Lexical verbs with modal meanings, mainly the so-called *speech act verbs* used to perform acts like *evaluating, assuming* or *doubting* rather than merely describing: the epistemic *seem* and *appear*, also *believe, assume, suggest, estimate, tend, think, argue, indicate, propose, speculate, suppose* etc. When used epistemically as hedging elements these verbs express the speaker’s strong belief in the truth of the utterance or, on the contrary, the speaker’s unwillingness to vouch for understanding the utterance as more than a personal opinion.

Example

E: “*Your sister, I understand, doesn’t approve of second attachments.*”

“*No,*” replied Elinor, “*her opinions are all romantic.*”

“*Or rather, as I believe, she considers them impossible to exist.*” (S & S: 35)

R: - *După câte am înțeles, sora dumneavoastră crede că omul nu poate iubi decât o singură dată în viață.*

- *Da, are păreri din cale-afară de romantice, răspuse Elinor.*

- *Sau cred, mai degrabă, că ea-și închipuie că a iubi a doua oară în viață este ceva cu totul imposibil.* (1995: 57)

Comment: *I understand* is a hearsay evidential marker shielding the speaker against public disrepute for claiming as his own words what he has heard from additional sources. The Romanian translation is more tentative because it used the verb *to understand* in the remote past (*După câte am înțeles*), a device which has a clear hedging power, demonstrating the speaker’s wish to be contradicted on grounds of his statement being outdated and contrary to the present state of affairs.

As I believe introduces the speaker's personal opinion, contrary to the hearsay mentioned before, aimed at providing a mere personal interpretation of some available information. The translation is interesting, "**cred, mai degrabă, că**" and it can be equated to "*I think it is more likely that...*"

2.3. Adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrases:

i. (modal) adjectives have hedging power when they are used epistemically to diminish the strength of the nouns they determine and they usually form a predicate with the verb to be: (It is) *possible, probable, unlikely*:

Example

E: I wonder you should think it possible for me to have such feelings. [...] That she is a gentleman's daughter is indubitable to me; that she associates with gentlemen's daughters, no one, I apprehend, will deny. (E.: 807)

R: Mă întreb cum crezi că e posibil să am asemenea sentimente. [...] După mine e clar că tatăl ei e un gentleman. Iar că prietenele ei sunt de familie bună, nu cred că poate nega cineva. (1992: 46)

Comment: "*I wonder you should think it possible*" in fact reads "*it is impossible*" and the speaker used this intricate hedge to criticise her interlocutor for having such terrible thoughts. The modal adjective *possible* is translated by its Romanian equivalent *posibil* in combination with *a fi* (to be). The adjective *indubitable* is translated as if it were *clear* by the phrase *e clar* to render the speaker's *certainty* and commitment to what she is saying. This expression of *certainty*, though, is hedged by the phrase *to me (după mine)* expressing *certainty* as a matter of personal opinion which may or may not be shared by others.

ii. Modal nouns render epistemic *certainty* or, on the contrary, *doubt*: *assumption, claim, doubt, possibility, probability, estimate, suggestion, likelihood, etc.:*

Example

E: "I was told that not only your sister was on the point of being most advantageously married, but that you, that Miss Elizabeth Bennet, would, in all likelihood, be soon afterwards united to my nephew, my own nephew, Mr. Darcy. Though I know it must be a scandalous falsehood, though I would not injure him so much as to suppose the truth of it possible, I instantly resolved on setting off for this place, that I might make my sentiments known to you." (P & P: 450)

R: **Mi s-a spus** că nu numai sora dumitale este pe punctul de a face o căsătorie foarte avantajoasă, ci că dumneata - domnișoara Elizabeth Bennet, **după toate probabilitățile** - se va uni curând după aceea cu nepotul meu, cu propriul meu nepot, domnul Darcy. Cu toate că știu că **trebuie să fie o minciună sfruntată**, cu toate că **lui nu-i pot face marea ofensă de a presupune că e posibil să fie adevărat**, m-am hotărât să pornesc încoace pentru a-ți face cunoscute simțămintele mele. (2009: 377)

Comment: The modal noun *likelihood* appears in the adverbial phrase *in all likelihood* and is translated identically to the adverbial *in all probability*, i.e. *după toate probabilitățile*. In the above example the meaning of certainty expressed by *likely* is reinforced by the presence of the modal *would* interpretable as a future in the past form of *certainty will*, translated into Romanian by the future indicative (*se va uni curând*), a signal of *certainty* that an event will occur at some point in the future. The passive evidential (*I was told*) in the beginning of the excerpt is also used as a hedge to account for the source of knowledge the speaker possesses and attribute a low level of certainty to the information in question on account of being hearsay. The translation retains the passive form (*Mi s-a spus*) and, equally, the hedging strategy.

The excerpt contains a second modal noun *scandalous falsehood* demonstrating strong disbelief. This low degree of certainty is reinforced by the presence of *must* aimed at inferring that such information is impossible. Interestingly, the negative meaning of impossibility is embedded in the noun *falsehood* rather than in the modal. In Romanian, *must* is translated by the indicative to show the highest amount of certainty and *scandalous falsehood* is translated as “*minciună sfruntată*” – “*a blazing lie*.”

The text also contains an interesting accumulation of hedges in “*I would not injure him so much as to suppose the truth of it possible*,” all of which contribute to rendering the high degree of disbelief on the part of the speaker that the hearsay might be true. *Wouldn't* may be understood as refusal to perform the act of injuring and is translated as *nu pot* (I cannot).

Also, the presence of the verb *to suppose* relates to insufficient information processed so as to result in an unreliable conclusion, which further enhances the idea that the speaker has no reason to take the information for granted or “*suppose the truth of it possible*.”