

The Use of Hedges in Females Versus Males Speeches

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Abstract:

This sociolinguistic study aims at investigating the linguistic concept of hedges from a sociolinguistic point of view where it manifests a comparison between the types and frequency of hedges used by males and the types and frequency of hedges used by females in a certain spoken task attributed to them in a procedural classroom work. The procedure was through recording and calculating the types and number of hedging expressions used by each group. The corpus supplying data for this study is chosen from university students. The participants were randomly selected from a fourth year university students group of different majors who study English language as a first foreign language and it is considered one of the credited subjects besides the essential subjects in their majors. A body of 36 speeches were analyzed by the researcher for the number and types of hedges used. The speeches were separated into two equal groups. Females speeches 18 / Males speeches 18. The results indicate that females are more inclined toward using hedges in their speeches than males. This study also recommends that hedges be given more attention for their benefit for language enrichment in student speeches, especially when used in argumentation and persuasion due to the adequate linguistic and rhetorical role they perform.

Key Terms: Sociolinguistics, Hedges, pragmatic particles, women's language, impromptu speech.

Introduction:

It has taken much discussion that speakers and listeners follow a certain way of unconscious cooperation. For example, when a speaker says "My car" the listener unconsciously assume that

the speaker really has a car and that he/she is not trying to mislead the listener (Yule, 1996). Language as a tool of communication, cooperation and participation has always been argued by scholars. It is used for successful collaboration between human beings due to certain linguistic structures as “they have been encoded in the child’s brain” (Chomsky, 2009).

What is Sociolinguistics and what does it study?

Sociolinguistics is the study of the relationship between language and society. Sociolinguistics is concerned with how language use interacts, or is affected by, social factors such as gender, ethnicity, age or social class. There are two branches of sociolinguistics: The interactionist and the variationist.

For an investigation to be carried out about whether the use of a linguistic feature is caused by a particular social factor, gathering examples of a situation in which the feature has a chance of being used is needed. Provided that investigating gender usage is being done, the investigator must have two groups of informants who are as alike as possible in every respect except that one group is female and the other is male. They should share the same age, education, social class, political viewpoint and so on (Stockwell 2002).

Women’s Talk Vs Men’s Talk in Sociolinguistics:

Men and women differ in many areas and characteristics of their life, mainly in the way they use language. This case has been the interest of many researchers mainly sociolinguists who focused on the distinctions between women’s and men’s social behavior and the way they use language to interact with the surrounding society to know what affects them to take certain choices and decisions. One particular point to focus on is the use of hedging and boosting in speech and writing.

have argued that communities are responsible of the linguistic practices that lead to the use of language in a sexist way. Thus language is not in itself inherently sexist and/or controlled by men. Thereafter, linguistic choices and meanings are a matter of personal choices and preferences, (that can’t be fixed by anyone). The term **genderlect** is used to refer to the different syntactic and lexical choices that are particularly made by men or women. Robin Lakoff (1975) has indicated exact features that she defined as “women’s talk” They are: Lakoff’s eight linguistic features of women’s speech: “Lexical hedges and fillers (you know, sort of, well, you

see), tag questions (she's very nice, isn't she?), Rising intonation and declaratives (it's really good), frequency of certain evaluative and empty adjectives (divine, charming, cute), precise color terms (magenta, aquamarine), intensifiers such as just and so (I like him so much), 'Hypercorrect' grammar (consistent use of standard verb forms), 'Super-polite' forms (indirect requests, euphemism), Avoidance of strong swear words (fudge, my goodness), Emphatic stress (it was a BRILLIANT performance) with hesitant intonation or pitch accompanied with surprise. Many of her claims have been largely discussed and sometimes criticized. (Stockwell, 2002)

Moreover, she considered hedges as "words or phrases whose job is to make things more or less fuzzy". Moreover, Hyland (1998) views them as the "communicative strategy for increasing or reducing the force of statements". Since they are used by the writer to balance the trustworthiness and truth value of his sentence directed to his audience. So, to avoid claiming and meeting unexpected situations, they tend to be cautious in displaying the information. So instead of asserting: All snakes are poisonous. Say: Some snakes are poisonous

Women's Language:

"She is an ideological artifact-a stereotype. A woman who strives to be refined and super-polite, who mitigates her stances and exaggerates positive affect. The simple existence of that kind of women at one end of the array of kinds of woman one can be is definitional – it is the main thing that makes women different from men" (Lakoff, 1975).

Robin Lakoff's (1975) *Language and women's place* pivotal publications expressed in detail some linguistic forms that she classified as 'Women's Language' She designated an energetic search for differences in speech between women as a group and men as a group. After thorough elucidation; and ongoing related research investigations; these differences were noticed to be seen as caused by the power relations that form the gender order. Lakoff (1973) noticed that women use more forms expressing politeness and uncertainty than men, mainly in informal speech situations. They tend to use more intensifiers, and strengthening particles than men. This could be related to the low-ranking status of women and the inferior role assigned to them in conversations. Peter Trudgill (1972), the first variationist sociolinguist (studies variations in usage among different speakers of a particular language) accredited women's habitualness to lack of obtaining entrance to advancement through work in the trade and economic field, arguing

that women's relative lack of access to advancement through work in the world of business restrains them from seeking improvement through symbolic methods. Taking into consideration the kinds of jobs that are obtainable and allowed to women and the importance of the 'good woman' in cultural discourse, this makes it quite reasonable.

What is Hedging?

Hedging has gained a significant interest in the work of many scholars (Hyland, 1998, Myers, 1989, Lewin, 2004, Salager-Meyer, 2000, Skelton, 1988). This concept refers to linguistic strategies that qualify categorical commitment to express possibility rather than certainty. In scientific writing, hedging is central to effective argument: it is a rhetorical means of gaining reader acceptance of claims, allowing writers to express claims with precision, caution, and modesty, they are significant resource for academics (Hyland, 1996).

It is viewed as a way of softening the language by making their claims or conclusions less absolute. Crystal and Davy (1975) defined *sort of* and *kind of* as "softening connectives". They are phrases used to introduce any word or utterance which contains any kind of 'uncertainty, vagueness, or idiosyncrasy'. They insistently added that their categorization should be narrowed down and that thorough research studies should be pursued to specifically indicate the exact roles they play in discourse and the 'specific functions of these softeners' (1975, 92).

It can be achieved by using (introductory verbs): example: tend to, assume, indicate, estimate, seem to, appear to be. (Modal verbs): may, can, could. (Adverbs): probably, possibly, seemingly. (Adjectives): probable, possible, likely, doubtful, (Nouns): probability, possibility, likelihood, assumption, and other phrases such as: adverbs of frequency, If clauses. To a certain extent, it is called **caution, cautious language, tentative language, or vague language**. Lakoff, (1972) specifies: "Hedges are words whose job it is to make things more or less fuzzy". It is also considered as a way of softening the language by making the claims or conclusions less absolute. It is especially common in the sciences, for example when giving a hypothesis or presenting results. Furthermore, it is used in other disciplines to avoid presenting conclusions or ideas as facts, and to distance the writer from the claims being made. Selinker (1979) explained hedges as practice that tries to give a given phenomenon an alternative explanation instead of defining it directly, generally introduced by the phrase 'but may be'. This is the case since it is considered that usually, especially in Scientific Language, there is a basic distinction between observed fact

and interpretation. Observed facts are mentioned straight forward (e.g., we have found that) ... Interpretations are in all cases introduced by (may be). Skelton (1988), clarified that hedges are a “resource, not a problem”. In his view, it is appropriate to use vagueness in situations where precision may not be guaranteed. Hence, it is a good skill for students to be “confidently uncertain”. Hyland (1995), emphasized that Hedging is the expression of “tentativeness and possibility in language use” and that, “it represents an absence of certainty and is used to describe any linguistic item or strategy employed to indicate either a lack of commitment to the truth value of an accompanying position or a desire not to express that commitment categorically”

Example: (Text 1)

Although duration of smoking is also important when considering risk, it is highly correlated with age, which itself is at risk factor. So separating the effects can be difficult; however, large studies tend to show a relation between duration and risk. Because light smoking seems to have dramatic effects on cardiovascular disease, shorter duration might also be associated with a higher than expected risk.

The pragmatic particles’ role:

As cited in Holmes (1984), pragmatic particles such as *you know* and *sort of* often function as what Brown (1977:107), calls ‘verbal fillers’ and Edmondson (1981:153) ‘fumbles’. He adds that they serve to give the speaker time to plan ahead or: “plug speaking-turn-internal conversational gaps”

Review of related literature:

Lakoff (1972) and Coates (1986) were interested in epistemic modality or degrees of certainty about the validity of a proposition. This interest led to the investigation of the ways women and men use epistemic devices, including pragmatic particles such as: *you know*, *I mean*, *I think*, *sort of* and the tag questions.

Holmes (2014), investigated devices for expressing epistemic modality by collecting data on the distribution of such forms in a variety of contexts. Similar to Lakoff (1972), she

endeavored to identify the complex functions that these forms serve and the distribution of the different functions in women's and men's speech. She provided data on the distribution and use of some hedging and emphatic linguistic devices in the speech of women and men. She focused particularly on evidence of similarity and differences between New Zealand English speakers and British English Speakers. The corpus used for the analysis consisted of equal quantities of female and male, and of New Zealand and British speech, collected both in formal and informal situations. The contributors were all middle class people ranging in age about 18 to 65.

Similarly, a number of researchers (e.g., Schourup, 1985, Ostman, 1981, Edmondson, 1981) started from different points and reached correspondent conclusions. (James 1983) supported the general conclusion that a difference can be figured out between a propositional related function of hedges or 'compromisers' (modal meaning) and social or interactional directed meaning, manifesting politeness (affective meaning).

Samaie, Khooshnavian, Boghayeri (2014) examined types and frequency of hedges employed by Persian and English native speakers in the introduction section of academic research articles on the field of literature.

Statement of the problem:

The distinctions in the speech of men and women and the reasons behind the different linguistic choices such as use of "hedges and boosters" they make while communicating with others has long occupied the minds of sociolinguists and other scholars. Aiming to catch links, many researchers have conducted investigations in this field. (Trudgil, 1995, Lakoff, 1998) and others.

Significance of the study:

The use of hedges to mitigate claims is of major importance to academic writing and speech. It is very well documented in research articles and several works of researches. There have not been many cross-linguistic studies on hedges and their use in relation to gender differences. Almost all the studies that were carried out mainly focused on western cultures. The findings of this study pave the way to further sociolinguistic investigations on the differences between men

and women's language and the causes of social influence on women which lead to hesitation, vailing, and willing to please, especially in Arabic communities.

Research questions:

Taking into consideration what has been discussed before, and related to the objective of this research, the following research questions are put forward to answer.

1. Do female speakers use hedging expressions in their talk and discussion more than male speakers?
2. Are females' talk more tentative and careful than men's talk due to social influence and cultural norms?

Hypothesis:

Based on the first research question above, the research hypothesis is:

H: There is a significant difference between the types and number of hedging expression females use in their speeches, and the types and number of hedging expressions males use in their speeches.

Method:

In this study, a descriptive approach was utilized. A particular feature of discourse 'Hedging' was studied, compared, and analyzed to discover to what extent does a particular group of speakers (females) recourse to employ it in their talk, more than another group (males), And to highlight possible sociolinguistic effects behind this exploitation.

The corpus

The corpus consisted of a collection of 36 speeches, of which 18 were written by the female students' group and 18 written by male students' group. As aforementioned, the participants in this study belong to the same academic year (third year LMD) majoring in Law, engineering and

business. They all belong to a similar cultural and socioeconomic background and almost from the same age group (Late adolescence 18 through 21-year-old). They were randomly selected to be the participants in this research study. Ethical issues were ensured and the students were told about the conditions and reasons of the study. They were additionally informed of its valuable contribution to the world of knowledge and science. A further note was given to establish trustworthiness which is that they can withdraw at any time if the task caused them any annoyance. And they were ensured that confidentiality will be implemented if required by any of them. English language is their first foreign language. As well as being one of the basic topics they should pass to ensure graduation.

Data collection and analysis:

A corpus of 36 diverse speeches were assigned to the participants in this case study. The participants were asked to write a speech (ranging between 200 to 250 words) about several topics (informative, persuasive, inspirational, or impromptu) and submit it to the researcher before it was delivered in front of the audience. The topics of the speeches ranged from serious ones about: war, environment, and science, to light, interesting, and even humorous ones like: ‘why should someone pursue an electric car instead of a fuel car’, to: ‘how to persuade an ant eater not to eat u if you were an ant’.) They were also given two minutes each to discuss their point with the other participants in the classroom.

In order to exhibit the frequency of hedging devices across the speeches of male and female participants, the researcher induced the choice of using a standardized size of 2000 words. Since the size of the speeches in each group varied, hence the number of words is not identical. Thus the idea of converting the raw scores into meaningful figures and calculating the relative frequency per 2000words provided a basis for comparison.

Results:

To analyze the data, the number of words of all the speeches in the two groups was calculated. The following table provides the total number of words in the speeches of both groups males and females.

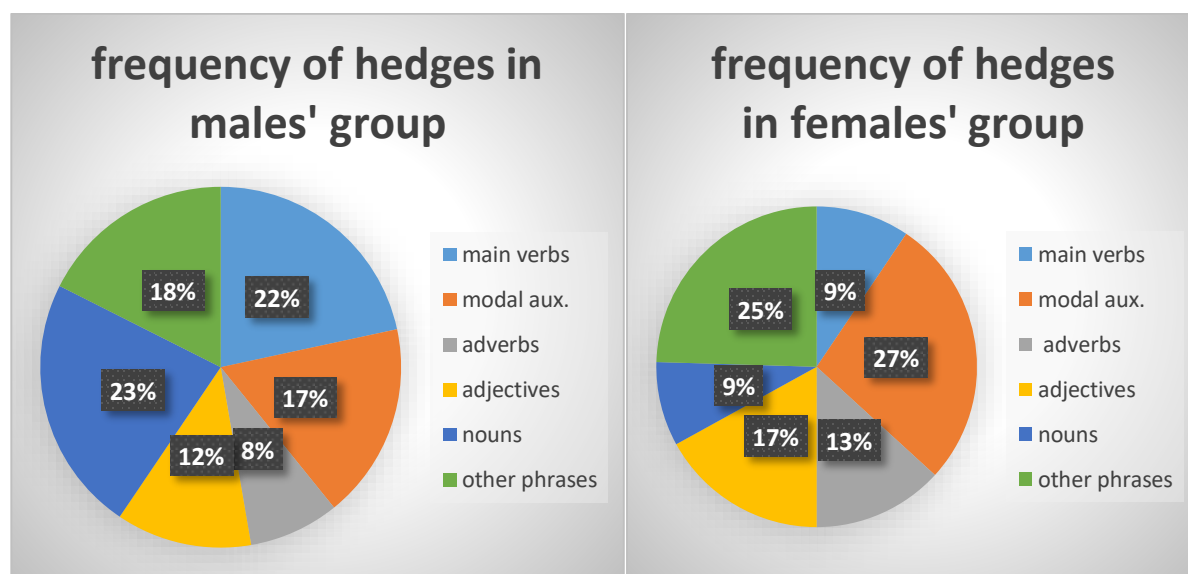
<i>Speeches</i>	<i>General topics</i>	
<i>Groups</i>	Males	Females
<i>Number of words</i>	3676	4012

The table indicates that the number of words in the speeches of the males group is 3676, and the number of words in the speeches of the female group is 4012. The frequency of hedging types was counted and distributed based on their categories. The categories are: Main verbs: (wonder, seem, feel, tend, look like, appear to be, think, believe, doubt, assume, indicate, suggest), modal auxiliaries such as: (may, could, would, might, will, must, can), Adverbs (probably, possibly, perhaps, maybe, apparently), Adjectives (probable, likely, unlikely, doubtful, certain, possible), Nouns (assumption, estimation, tendency, indication, evidence), Other phrases or pragmatic particles: (kind of, sort of, I think, Sometimes, in general, somehow, about, approximately, to my knowledge, as far as I know, I expect that, usually, in general, in my opinion, I think, I agree that, I believe that).

Table two shows the results of the hedging categories across the speeches of males and females groups written about general topics.

<i>Forms of hedges</i>	<i>Males</i>		<i>Females</i>	
	Frequency F	Per 2000 words	Frequency F	Per 2000 words
<i>Main verbs</i>	16	8.70	10	4.98
<i>Modal auxiliaries</i>	13	7.07	29	14.45
<i>Adverbs</i>	6	3.26	14	6.97
<i>Adjectives</i>	9	4.89	18	8.97
<i>Nouns</i>	17	9.24	9	4.48
<i>Other phrases</i>	13	7.07	26	12.94
<i>Total</i>	74	40.23	106	52.79

Due to table 2, the speeches written by the male participants group show a frequency of hedges: 40.23 (n = 74) per 200 words. The frequency of hedges in the speeches written by the female participant is; as evident in table 2; 52.79 (n = 106) per 2000 words. The types of investigated hedges are; according to the table: main verbs, modal auxiliaries, adverbs, adjectives, nouns, and other phrases. The female participants' group employed four types of hedges in their writing more than the other group. They are modal auxiliaries, adverbs, adjectives, and other phrases. However, the male participants' group used two types of hedging expressions more than female participants' group: main verbs and nouns.



Following the thorough analysis of results about the use and types of hedging expressions by the two groups, Chi-Square calculation was performed to elaborate the possible distinctions. The results are clearly shown in (table 3):

Table 3 chi square results:

	Numbers
Chi-Square	15.2648
Degree of freedom	5
Asymp.Sig.	0.009275

P<0.05

Table 3 above has shown that the obtained significance of .000 indicates that there is a significant difference between the employment of hedges in the speeches of males and females.

Discussion:

As hypothesized at the beginning of this study, and based on Lakoff's publications (1973, 1975) about the Linguistic forms she considered characteristic of 'women's language' in which she suggested that women use forms expressing uncertainty and politeness more than men. She attributed that to the inferior status and powerlessness of women in their societies and their tendency to please rather than offend. Hence they are likely to express themselves tentatively and politely. In the data under study, females used Modal auxiliary hedging expressions such as (May, would, could, might ..), Adverbs (probably, possibly, perhaps, maybe, apparently), Adjectives (probable, likely, unlikely, doubtful, certain, possible), and other phrases or pragmatic particles: (kind of, sort of, I think, Sometimes, in general, somehow, about, approximately, to my knowledge, as far as I know, I expect that, usually, in general, in my opinion, I think, I agree that, I believe that), abundantly in their speeches, to express speculations, and uncertain claims. While males used main verbs: (wonder, seem, feel, tend, look like, appear to be, think, believe, doubt, assume, indicate, suggest), and nouns (assumption, estimation, tendency, indication, evidence) more than females.

Conclusion:

A descriptive analysis of a sociolinguistic topic was provided in this research study targeting the use of hedges by males' versus females' discourse. Participants in the Females group were away from being described as confident. They tended to mitigate most of their claims. They, to certain extents, raised controversial issues, and expressed that these issues can be seen from different perspectives and carry more than one possibility. They showed readiness to argue with or against their ideas in a flexible way. They were more inclined to use terms such as: Maybe, in some cases, probably, possibly, sometimes, I think (to express doubt and insufficiency). While the participants in the males group, on the other hand, used to establish a strong point of view and defend it vehemently. They were more direct and tended to be assertive being most of their arguments on factual information. They used utterances like: I think (to express certain opinion), It can (to refer to a factual idea) of course (to mention a certain conception), for sure (about a realistic issue). Although in some cases they showed some yielding to use tactful language that showed caution and awareness, most of their expressions could be labeled as boosters rather than hedging expressions. Finally, the gained results can possibly pave the way for enthusiastic researchers to conduct more studies and investigation about the gender differences in language use.

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