

Original Paper

An Exploration of Hedging and Boosting Devices Used in Academic Discourse Focusing on English Theses at the University of Namibia

Naftal K.T. Haufiku¹ & Jairos Kangira^{2*}

¹ Lecturer, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, The International University of Management, Namibia

² Associate Professor, Department of Languages and Literature Studies, University of Namibia, Namibia

* Jairos Kangira, Department of Languages and Literature Studies, University of Namibia, Namibia

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Abstract

This paper explored the application of hedges and boosters in all ten theses of the Master of Arts in English Studies submitted and examined at the University of Namibia between 2014 and 2015. A mixed research approach was chosen because of the descriptive nature of this study. This method also gave an in-depth understanding of issues such as why research writers prefer some types of hedging and boosting devices over the others, and why some theses chapters have certain types of hedges and boosters. The study only examined three chapters of the theses: the Introduction, Discussion, and Conclusion. Hyland's (2004) taxonomy of hedges and boosters was used to analyse the types of hedges and boosters used. Kaplan's (1997) Contrastive Rhetoric Theory was used to explain how researchers use hedges and boosters to express their uncertainties and certainties respectively. The study revealed that writers prefer Type 3 of hedges and boosters in all the three chapters. It further revealed that there is an unequal distribution of hedges and boosters among writers. Finally, the paper concluded that the preference of Type 3 may have been caused by the fact that since Type 3 does not have boosting devices writers find it less threatening to employ it in order to conform to the accepted academic writing style. The unequal distribution may also suggest that writers in academic discourse are not proficient in the English language.

Keywords

hedges, boosters, downtoners, contrastive rhetoric

1. Introduction

Different authors have used various phrases and opinions to define hedges and boosters. For example, Lakoff (as cited in Rabab'ah, 2013, p. 196) defines hedging as “words whose job is to make things more or less fuzzy”. Hyland (1998) defines hedges and boosters as communicative tactics used by writers to either minimise or maximise the force of their statements.

According to Holmes (as cited in Vazquez & Giner, 2009), hedges or *downtoners* are words and phrases used to indicate the writers' or speakers' tentativeness or uncertainties in their claims. Words and phrases such as *may*, *might*, *could* and *seems to suggest* are examples of hedging devices used in academic writing. It was also found that the application of hedges in academic discourse creates a platform for writers to register their claims without the risk of receiving Face Threatening Acts from the discourse community (Yuksel & Kavanoz, 2015). This study examined all the theses of the Master of Arts in English Studies submitted and examined at the University of Namibia between 2014 and 2015 in order to explain how hedges and boosting devices are used.

Nikula (as cited in Bonyadi, Gholami, & Nasiri, 2012, p. 1187) argues that hedges are not merely communicative tactics used to soften writers' utterances, but also enable these utterances to be accepted in interpersonal relationships. These devices play a pivotal role in academic discourse, not only because they carry the author's degree of confidence, but also an attitude to the discourse community.

Martin (2001) used the term “*epistemic modalities*” to refer to “*hedges*”. Martin (2001) states that writers use epistemic modalities as a way of communicating their academic knowledge in a manner that will enable them to gain community acceptance of their academic contribution without the risk of Face Threatening Acts.

While Martin (2001) used the term “*epistemic modalities*” to refer to hedges, Takimoto (2015) posits that although there is a close connection, there is a difference between *modality*, *hedges*, and *boosters*. Takimoto (2015) concurs with Hyland's (2000) definitions of hedges and boosters, but goes further to suggest that “*modality*” is “concerned with a speaker's/writer's attitude towards the truth-value or factual status of a proposition” (p. 95).

Authors such as Markkanen and Schroder (as cited in Takimoto, 2015, p. 95) argue that hedges can be used as a way of manipulating a text in the sense that the reader is left in the wild regarding the truth of the writer's claim. In some instances hedges and boosters can be found together in a text (Hyland, 1998). For example:

Although it is a fact that some cultures prefer the application of some hedges, the results of the present study indicate that the application of some hedges may be attributed to other factors such as the sex and the research topic (Hyland, 1998, p. 2).

Hyland (1996) posits that the existence of hedges and boosters in this cluster serves the purpose of creating a platform where the writer seeks to create different rhetorical effects. The phrases “*it is a fact*” and “*indicate*” are used to show a degree of certainty from the writer. Whereas, the phrase “*may*” is used to show that the writer is not certain that the application of some hedges is indeed as a result of

sex and research topics.

Hassani and Farahani (2014) argue that the frequency of hedges in research articles is not only influenced by disciplinary background (Ebadi & Khaskar, 2015; Lu & Fu, 2015; Nasiri, 2012), or nationality (Yagiz & Demir, 2015), but by a combination of many factors such as language, discipline, culture, and language proficiency.

This study made use of Hyland's (2004) categorisation of hedges and boosters. Kaplan's (1997) Contrastive Rhetoric Theory was employed to explain why various hedges and boosters were employed by the different authors.

Hyland (2004) categorises five types of hedges and boosters. Type 1, also called Tentative Verbs and Modals, Type 2, also called Tentative Adjectives and Adverbs, Distancing phrases, the use of impersonal third person, and the Unnamed are categorised under Type 3. *Solidarity features* such as *it is a fact* and *it is well known* are categorised under Type 4. Also, Hyland (2004) suggests that rhetorical questions signified by words such as *can*, *may*, *would* fall under Type 4. Under Type 5 of hedges and boosters, Hyland (2004) suggests *Self-mention reference*. This category includes pronouns and nouns such as *I*, *we*, *researcher*, *writer* or *author*. The following table summarises Hyland's (2004) taxonomy of hedges and boosters:

Table 1. Hyland's (2004) Taxonomy of Hedges and Boosters

Type	Hedges	Boosters
Type 1: Tentative Verbs and Modals	may, might, could, seem, suggest, appear, seems to	should
Type 2: Tentative Adjectives and Adverbs	possibly, likely, probably	certainly, definitely
Type 3: Distancing phrases, Impersonal Third Person, and the Unnamed phrases	This study, The study, he/she, it, they, the researcher	
Type 4: Solidarity features		It is a fact that... despite the fact that... due to the fact that... the fact that
Type 5: Self-mention reference	I, We	Writer, Researcher

Connor (1996) defines Contrastive Rhetoric as “an area of research in second language acquisition that identifies problems in composition encountered by second language writers and, by referring to the rhetorical strategies of the first language attempts to explain them” (p. 5). The theory of Contrastive Rhetoric was first introduced by Kaplan (1966) as a solution to the challenges learners experience in the organisational structures of a second language, also known as L2 (Matsuda, 1997).

Kaplan (as cited in Xinghua, 2011) identifies four important types of knowledge a writer needs to be taught through formal education in order to compose through writing. These are: knowledge of the

language, knowledge of the subject, knowledge of writing conventions, and knowledge of the readers.

2. Method

2.1 Design

The present study is a mixed methods research approach, and a desktop study in nature, which made use of primary data to critically examine and analyse existing written and published theses. Creswell (2009) argues that mixed methods research approach uses the strengths from qualitative and quantitative approaches in order to adequately address the complexity of a social phenomenon when the complexity of this social phenomenon could not be addressed by employing either a qualitative or a quantitative approach alone. Hence, in this case, the mixed approach was necessary.

2.1.1 Population

The population of this study was all the ten theses of the Master of Arts in English Studies submitted and examined at the University of Namibia between 2014 and 2015. The study only examined three chapters of the theses: Introduction, Discussion, and Conclusion. These chapters were selected to give a representation of academic practice. Each thesis was between 25 000 and 35 000 words in length. The Master of Arts in English Studies theses were downloaded from <http://www.unam.edu.na/library/>. In order to identify the hedging and boosting devices, a corpus analysis software, *AntCon*, was used.

The researcher used alphabetical letters, A to J, to represent the ten theses. In order to match these theses to the authors, a systematic naming system of “Author 1” to “Author 10” was used. This means that Thesis A was written by Author 1 and Thesis J was written by Author 10.

2.1.2 Procedure

Firstly, the researcher used the Adobe Acrobat Reader DC software to convert the targeted three chapters of the theses from their original PDF format to Text Document format. Secondly, the researcher used corpus analysis software to identify hedges and boosters used in the theses. In order to ensure that all the hedging and boosting devices used in each chapter were analysed according to Hyland’s (2004) taxonomy of hedges and boosters, each of the three chapters was analysed separately; the introduction chapter was analysed first, followed by the discussion chapter and then the conclusion chapter. The researcher analysed these chapters by looking at how each of the five types of hedges and boosters were used by the authors.

3. Result

The findings of this paper revealed that all authors prefer the application of Type 3 of Hyland’s (2004) taxonomy of hedges and boosters. The findings of this paper further found that none of the authors whose thesis was based on Literature employed Type 4 of Hyland’s (2004) taxonomy of hedges and boosters. However, Author 4 used this type (Type 4) more than the other authors (71 times). Author 9 used this type the least, with 24 appearances.

The findings of this study also established that Type 2, Type 4, and Type 5 of Hyland’s (2004)

taxonomy of hedges and boosters are preferred the least, with a 0% interest in Type 2, for example, in the case of the Linguistics theses.

However, this study further revealed that Type 1 is preferred the most in the Conclusion chapter of the Linguistics theses; out of the 45 occurrences from the 10 theses, 23 occurrences (51%) were from the Linguistics theses.

Finally, the findings of this paper revealed that although Type 3 of Hyland's (2004) categorisation of hedges and boosters is preferred the most by authors whose theses were based on Rhetoric, only Authors 3 and 5 employed it 134 and 118 times respectively. The other authors employed this type between 8 and 36 times.

4. Discussion

4.1 Literature Theses

The similarities in the preference of Type 3 suggest that authors found it necessary to be as cautious as possible in the introduction of their Literature based theses. The absence of Solidarity features (Type 4) suggests that authors are aware of the implications of employing boosters in claims for which they lack substantial supporting evidence.

The difference in the appearance of the same type of hedges and boosters in this chapter may have been caused by the authors' different capabilities to fully comprehend the meaning of the subcategories of the hedges and boosters.

The dominance of Type 3 of Hyland's (2004) taxonomy of hedges and boosters in the Discussion chapter of the Literature based theses suggests that authors in this genre discuss their findings in a manner that will leave the readers with the impression that their discussions are mere educated guesses, and not necessarily based on any substantial evidence. The findings of this study are in accordance with Serholt's (2012) who argues that statements that are not properly hedged could have devastating effects because they leave readers with the impression that there is no room for further investigations. Since these Literature theses were all desktop studies and none of the authors used primary data to analyse and discuss the findings of their studies, this paper found it befitting for the Literature based theses to contain more Distancing phrases, Impersonal third person, and the Unnamed phrases (Type 3) than the Linguistics, and Rhetoric based theses.

The fact that there is a discrepancy with regards to the appearance of Type 3 between Author 4 and other authors could prove the argument by Hassani and Farahani (2014) who state that language proficiency could be another factor influencing the frequency of hedges in research articles. Type 3 appears 187 times in Author 4's discussion chapter, while it appears 102 times (Author 1), 144 times (Author 9), and 33 times (Author 10).

Although Type 3 (Distancing phrases, Impersonal Third Person, and the Unnamed phrases) received the second preference in the Conclusion chapters of the Literature theses, the fact that its appearance is less than Type 5 of Hyland's (2004) taxonomy of hedges and boosters could suggest that authors found

it less significant to employ Type 3 as rhetorical tactics to persuade the readers to believe their propositions. Instead, authors found it necessary to conceal their identities in the conclusion chapter. The application of Type 5 (Self-mention reference) may have been necessitated by the need to avoid provoking Face Threatening Acts from the discourse community.

However, the findings of this study discovered that the opposite may be true. Authors might have employed Type 5 in this chapter to create a platform for various rhetorical effects. In this case, the authors opted to employ the Self-mention reference, *researcher*, as a rhetorical tactic to indicate their level of education to the readers and hence, convince them to believe their claims. Readers are likely to be convinced by authors who apply the word “*researcher*” instead of the word “*I*”.

Therefore, the dominance of Type 5 in this chapter confirms the claim of Hyland (1996) who said that existence of hedges and boosters in a text creates a platform where writers seek to generate different rhetorical effects. The findings of this study also found that the existence of Hyland’s (2004) Type 5 of hedges and boosters is in accordance with the claims of Choi and Ko (2005) who claim that in order to conform to a generally accepted academic writing style, there is a need for writers to use hedges in their propositions.

4.1.1 Linguistics Theses

The similarities in the preference of Type 3 by the authors, as found in this chapter, confirm Choi and Ko’s (2005) argument that the presence of hedges in a text serve multiple functions: to reduce the risk of criticism, create awareness in the readers that the writer’s claim is not the final word, strengthen the reader-writer relationship, and to conform to a generally accepted academic writing style.

The findings of this paper further found that the 0% preference of Type 2, *tentative adjectives and adverbs*, in the Introduction chapter of the Linguistics based theses suggests that authors are not fully proficient in the English language. Hence, the application of some hedges and boosters is a challenge. However, readers might not attribute this 0% preference to the writer’s insufficient English language proficiency. Instead, they are likely to assume that Linguistics does not require the authors to be tentative in their claims because their claims are supported by substantial evidence.

The application of Type 3 of hedges in this chapter is likely to leave the readers with the impression that the writers are attempting to be cautious in their claims, and hence, inviting the readers to carry out further investigations. The dominance of Type 3 in the Discussion chapter of the Linguistics theses confirms the claims that writers in academic settings use hedges, not only as a way of presenting their findings in a cautious manner, but also as a tactical way of minimising the effects of Face Threatening Acts (FTA’s) from the discourse community (Bonyadi, Gholami, & Nasiri, 2012; Fraser, 2010; Namsaraev; as cited in Rabab’ah, 2013, p. 197).

The preference of Type 1, Tentative Verbs and Modals, in the Conclusion chapters of the Linguistics based theses suggests that writers deemed it necessary to employ Type 1 as a tactical way of distancing themselves from their claims. The application of Tentative Verbs and Modals in the Conclusion chapter is likely to give the readers some assurance that although there is evidence to support the writers’

claims, there is still a platform for the reader to investigate further. Furthermore, this study revealed that the dominance of Type 1 in the conclusion chapter leaves the readers with the impression that the writers are making mere assumptions because they (the writers) did not base their arguments on primary data.

4.1.2 Rhetoric Theses

The similarities in the preference of the Type 3 and Type 1 suggest that authors try to be as cautious as possible in their claims. An example of a tactical method authors employ in an attempt to be cautious is avoiding the application of words and phrases which they are not normally exposed to and hence, have little knowledge of. The fact that none of the authors employed Type 2, tentative adjectives and modals, confirms Serholt's (2012) view that the incorrect application of hedges or boosters could cause severe damages to the text. For this reason, authors may be reluctant to employ words and phrases whose meanings are not familiar to them.

From the analysis of this study, it is clear that the similarities in the preference of Type 3 and Type 1 of Hyland's (2004) taxonomy of hedges and boosters suggest that authors use these types (Type 3 and Type 1) a rhetorical tactic to convince readers to continue reading their work, hence, confirming the argument by Biook and Mohseni (2014). The fact that none of the authors employed Hyland's (2004) Type 4 of hedges and boosters, Solidarity features, in the Introduction chapter confirms the findings of this paper. Furthermore, the 0% preference of Type 4 in the Introduction chapter of the Rhetoric theses confirms the findings of Vande and Crismore (as cited in Sedaghat, Biria, & Amirabadi, 2015, p. 38) who state that readers read hedged texts critically and with keen interest compared to texts that are not hedged. Finally, the findings of this study confirmed the findings of Šeškauskien (2008) who said that the introduction chapter of a thesis is heavily hedged because it creates a platform for readers to analyse the background of the study which includes aspects such as the contexts, reasons, and purpose of the study.

The high occurrence of Types 1 and 3 between Authors 3 and 5, confirmed Fraser's (2010) argument that the presence of hedging devices in a text minimises the effects of *vagueness* (the assumption that there is a shared knowledge between the speaker/writer and the interlocutors), *evasion* (the communication breakdown between the speaker and the interlocutor or reader), *equivocation* (when the speaker or writer uses a word that has more than one meaning, with the aim of misleading the interlocutor or reader), and *politeness* (the action toward the interlocutor or reader's positive or negative face).

Furthermore, the findings of this paper discovered that the differences in occurrences of Type 3 and Type 1 among authors depend on the nature of the data being analysed. Although all 5 theses are Rhetorical based, there is still a difference in the type of data. Author 3, for example, analysed the selected epideictic speeches in an attempt to study the language of persuasion employed. Author 7 analysed the language of persuasion used in print advertisement. Hence, there is an imbalance in the frequency of Type 3 between the two authors. Author 6 employed the type 134 times, and Author 7

employed it 8 times. The findings of this study confirmed the arguments of Vaguez and Giner's (2009) who state that sometimes the application of more boosters could be attributed to the nature of the data being analysed because some data require the writers to show full commitment to their claims, while other data require writers to distance themselves from their claims.

Although the type of data determines the frequency of hedging and boosting devices in a text (Vaguez & Giner, 2009), this paper discovered that Type 1 and Type 3 were preferred less by Authors 6, 7 and 8 in the Discussion chapter possibly because the authors lack sufficient proficiency in the English language, thus, confirming the argument that research writers have not mastered writing proficiency, either in academic register or in reader-writer register (Dahme & Sastre, 2015; Hassani & Farahani, 2014).

Finally, the findings of this paper revealed that the 0% preference of Type 4 of Hyland's (2004) taxonomy of hedges and boosters is contrary to the argument postulated by Vazquez and Giner (2009) who argue that research writers should employ more boosters than hedges in Chapter 4 (Data Presentation and Analysis) because it is in this chapter that writers analyse their data and discuss their findings.

The dominance of Type 1 (Tentative Verbs and Modals) confirms the arguments by Ebadi and Khaskar (2015) who state that research writers do not employ personal doubts and direct involvement in the Conclusion chapters. This is because in academic writing writers are expected to base their conclusions on academic findings and not merely on their personal ideas/opinions. Hence, authors deemed it necessary to be as cautious as possible by employing tentative verbs and modals as illustrated in the previous chapter. This study also discovered that the authors found it necessary to employ Type 1 of Hyland's (2004) taxonomy of hedges and boosters in their Conclusion chapters in an attempt to not only distance themselves from their claims, and hence, save themselves from receiving negative criticisms from the discourse community, but also as an attempt to write and disseminate their academic knowledge in the academic register that is considered acceptable by the discourse community. The latter finding confirms the argument of Berkenkotter, Huckin and Ackerman (as cited in Ebadi & Khaskar, 2015, p. 156) who state that students have to master the academic register through learning the linguistic register and the rhetorical conventions that are considered convincing by the discourse community.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings indicate that the similarities and differences in the application of various types of hedges and boosters depend on four main factors: the nature of the data being analysed, the writer's level of English language proficiency, the need to conform to the accepted academic writing style, and the need to minimise the effects of Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) from the discourse community. This research makes a contribution to the study of hedges and boosters, most particularly in Namibia where, according to the researcher's observation, no similar studies have previously been conducted.

Based on the findings derived from the data examined, the writers recommend that a guideline of hedges and boosters be created for students to use in their academic writing. The writers further recommend that research be conducted to compare how various these genres such as Literature, Linguistics and Rhetoric use hedges.

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Appendix A

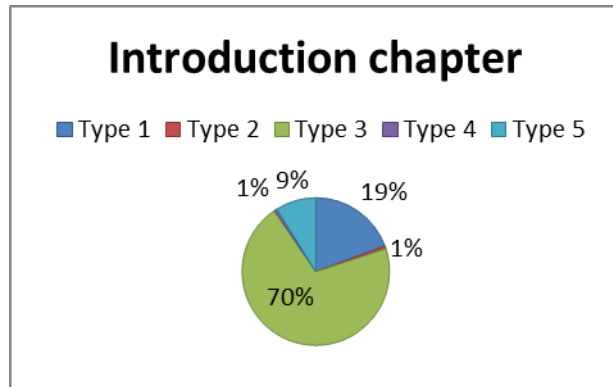


Figure 1. Overall Preferences of Hyland's (2004) Taxonomy of Hedges and Boosters in the Introduction Chapter

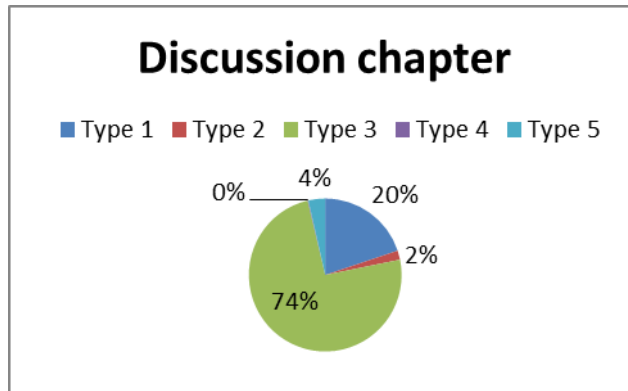


Figure 2. Overall Preferences of Hyland's (2004) Taxonomy of Hedges and Boosters in the Discussion Chapter

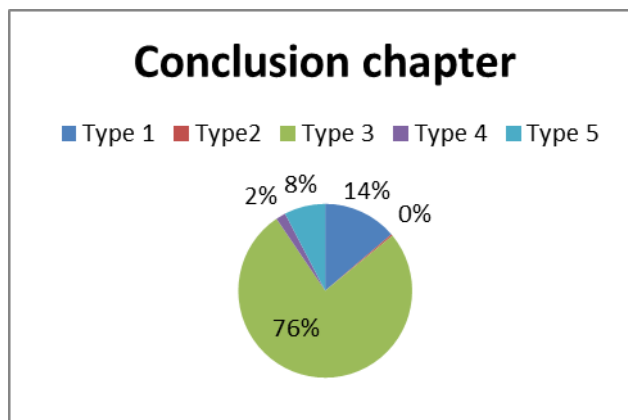


Figure 3. Overall Preferences of Hyland's (2004) Taxonomy of Hedges and Boosters in the Conclusion Chapter