

## *Original Paper*

# A Study on the Pragmatic Functions of Hedges in Xinhuanet English News on Culture

Jiaojiao Huang<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> School of Foreign Languages, Xinjiang University, Xinjiang, China

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### ***Abstract***

*Hedges, as an inherent phenomenon of natural language, are ubiquitous in news discourse. Drawing upon the theoretical framework of Adaptation Theory, this study constructs a specialized mini-corpus to investigate the pragmatic functions of hedging devices in Xinhuanet's English-language cultural news reports. Quantitative and qualitative analyses reveal that hedges occur with high frequency, with adaptors and rounders constituting the dominant subtypes. The findings indicate that the strategic deployment of hedges not only foregrounds the epistemic rigor of journalistic texts but also accommodates the cognitive expectations and mental models of the target readership.*

### ***Keywords***

*Hedges, Xinhuanet English News on Culture, Adaptation Theory, pragmatic functions*

## **1. Introduction**

The media plays a pivotal role in information dissemination. As an integrated news and information service portal, Xinhuanet stands as one of the most influential global news platforms, with the information it disseminates representing the official voice of China. The English version of Xinhuanet serves as a crucial channel for the international communication of Xinhua News Agency, providing authoritative and accurate information to readers worldwide. Among its various sections, the cultural module showcases China's rich cultural heritage to a global audience, covering a wide range of topics. Against this backdrop, the linguistic choices in the cultural English news on Xinhuanet are of particular significance—any imprudence in language use may easily lead to misunderstandings. The employment of hedging devices, however, can enhance the rigor of the news, enabling it to better narrate China's stories, convey China's voice, and facilitate the mutual learning among global civilizations.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. Classification of Hedges

The construct “hedge” was first rigorously operationalized by Lakoff (1972) as “a word or phrase that makes things fuzzier or less fuzzy.” This definitional formulation has since achieved canonical status in linguistic inquiry. Building on the seminal taxonomy proposed by Prince et al. (1982), this study categorizes hedges into two types: approximators and shields. Approximators operate within the semantic domain, modifying the degree or scope of a proposition based on actual circumstances. In contrast, shields function within the pragmatic domain; they do not alter the truth conditions of a proposition but serve to modulate communicative effect by introducing speaker attitude or mitigating tone.

**Table 1. Classification of Hedges by Prince et al.**

Taxonomy of Hedges	Sub-categories of Hedges	Definition	examples
approximators	adaptors	Hedges that modify the truth conditions of a proposition.	entirely, some, somewhat, almost, more or less, sort of, quite, in a sense, to some extent, really,
	rounders	Hedges that restrict the scope or range of a proposition	slightly, nearly, approximately, over, around, roughly, about, at least Something between... and...
	plausibility	Hedges used to convey the speaker’s direct speculation about a topic or indicate the attitude held by the speaker	probably, may, might, likely, as far as I can tell, I think, I wonder, I suspect, I believe, I suppose
	shields	Hedges that index the speaker’s stance indirectly by attributing the proposition to an external epistemic source.	it seems that..., it’s said that..., as it is well known, the probability would be, according to,

### 2.2 Adaptation Theory

Adaptation Theory was first proposed by Jef Verschueren in his 1987 work *Pragmatics as a Theory of Linguistic Adaptation*. This theory examines language use from a novel approach and perspective. In 1999, Jef Verschueren further developed and refined the theory in his published book *Understanding Pragmatics*—a milestone marking the maturity of Adaptation Theory. Verschueren argues that language use is a process in which communicative participants make conscious or unconscious choices under the

influence of both internal linguistic structures and external linguistic factors. Language possesses three key properties: variability, negotiability, and adaptability. Among these, the adaptability of language is primarily manifested in four dimensions: adaptation to context, adaptation to linguistic structure, the dynamics of adaptation, and the salience of adaptation. During the process of language use, speakers' linguistic choices must adapt to various contextual factors, including the social world, the psychological world, and the physical world.

### 3. Research Design

#### 3.1 Research Questions

Guided by Adaptation Theory and integrated with the classification framework of hedges proposed by Prince et al. this study investigates the pragmatic functions of hedges in Xinhuanet English News on Culture. The research questions are formulated as follows:

- 1: What are the distributional characteristics of hedges in Xinhuanet English News on Culture?
- 2: How do hedges in these news texts achieve pragmatic functions by adapting to the physical, social, and mental worlds?

#### 3.2 Data Collection and Research Methodology

This study constructed a specialized corpus comprising 60 English-language cultural news texts sampled from Xinhuanet in 2024, with a total of 27,625 words. The research procedure consisted of the following steps: First, all cultural news texts published on Xinhuanet in 2024 were crawled using the Octoparse collector, from which 60 texts were randomly selected as the research corpus. Second, the selected texts were processed using WordSmith to identify and tag various types of hedges. Instances of hedges that were inconsistent with the context were excluded. Quantitative data on different categories of hedges were then aggregated to determine their distribution and frequency patterns. Furthermore, a qualitative analysis was conducted within the framework of Adaptation Theory to examine the pragmatic functions of hedges in the cultural news texts.

### 4. Research Findings and Discussion

#### 4.1 Distributional Characteristics of Hedges in Xinhuanet English News on Culture

**Table 2. Statistical Distribution of Hedges in Xinhuanet English News on Culture**

Hedges types	count	frequency	Sub-categories of Hedges	count	frequency
shields	278	0.54	plausibility shields	36	0.07
			attribution shields	242	0.47
approximators	239	0.46	rounders	194	0.38
			adaptors	45	0.09

As shown in the Figure, the usage frequencies of shields and approximators in Xinhuanet English News on Culture are generally similar, yet distinct preferences for specific types are evident. Within the category of approximators, the use of rounders are significantly more frequent than adaptors. This distribution characteristic reflects that, in order to effectively convey their own positions and viewpoints, news writers tend to adjust the scope of propositions to ensure the rigor and accuracy of discourse expressions. In terms of shields, the frequency of using attribution shields is notably higher than that of plausibility shields. This indicates that news writers more frequently adopt indirect approaches to soften the tone of expressions—an approach that not only achieves the effect of reducing the responsibility for statements but also fulfills the necessary function of self-protection.

#### *4.2 Analysis of Pragmatic Functions of Hedges in Xinhuanet English News on Culture from the Perspective of Adaptation Theory*

As a crucial pragmatic strategy, hedges effectively modulate the precision of information to achieve specific communicative goals. According to Verschueren's Theory of Linguistic Adaptation, linguistic choices and context are interrelated in a dynamic relationship. The process of adaptation involves continuous decision-making in language use, manifesting at all levels of linguistic structure (He, 2007). Within the framework of Adaptation Theory, this study investigates the pragmatic functions of hedges in English-language cultural news on Xinhuanet through three dimensions: the physical world, the social world, and the mental world.

##### *4.2.1 Adaptation to the Physical World*

According to Adaptation Theory, the physical world constitutes a tangible and perceptible context encompassing five key elements: specific objects, actors, time, space (setting), and topics. Verschueren emphasizes that language use must adapt to temporal and spatial factors in reality, noting that choices related to these dimensions significantly influence linguistic expression. Language users should therefore employ hedges in accordance with actual circumstances to enhance the appropriateness and precision of their utterances.

Example 1: Archaeologists have discovered the remains of an ancient city road dating back over 3,000 years at Yinxu, or the Yin Ruins, in central China's Henan Province. The journalist employs the rounder “over” to indicate the temporal range of the ancient road's age. Given the inherent limitations of archaeological science, it is often impossible to determine an exact date. The phrase “over 3,000 years” avoids committing to a specific timeframe, thereby resolving the tension between the need for precision and the constraints of archaeological evidence. Moreover, the primary communicative goal of this news item is to convey the discovery of a road remnant dating back more than three millennia—emphasizing its historical significance rather than numerical exactness. By using “over,” the text effectively focuses attention on the core message (the remarkable antiquity of the find) while simplifying secondary details. This strategy enhances public comprehension and aligns with the principle that archaeological claims must remain consistent with evidential limitations. Thus, the use of “over” allows the report to adhere to professional standards of accuracy while successfully communicating the central idea of the

discovery's historical depth.

Example 2: "China was among the first nations to recognize the Comoros as an independent state and has supported my country in nearly every sector." Faouzia said. In this instance, the speaker uses the rounder "nearly" to modify "every sector", thereby fuzzifying the absolute boundary of "every sector". Although China's support covers the vast majority of sectors, "nearly" avoids the overgeneralized statement that might be caused by using "every", making the utterance more aligned with the complex reality of the physical world. Although China's support covers the vast majority of sectors, "nearly" avoids the overgeneralized statement that might be caused by using "every", making the utterance more aligned with the complex reality of the physical world. By fuzzifying the boundary of the spatial scope through "nearly", the utterance not only emphasizes China's active fulfillment of its international responsibilities as a responsible major country against the backdrop of an era themed around peace and development, as well as the extensiveness of its support for the Comoros, but also reserves room for explanation regarding potential exceptions. This reflects the dynamic adaptation of language to the uncertainties of the objective world. Furthermore, the use of this scope approximator prevents disputes that could arise from absolute assertions, rendering the statement more flexible and credible within the political context.

#### 4.2.2 Adaptation to the Social World

Communication always occurs within specific social contexts, and linguistic choices are inevitably constrained by multiple factors of the social world. As Verschueren (2000) points out, the adaptability of language to the social world is omnipresent. In interpersonal communication, every social group possesses distinct norms governing linguistic behavior, necessitating that speakers carefully consider social factors such as the interlocutor's personality, identity, cultural background, religion, motivation, among others. To achieve communicative goals, interlocutors must adeptly discern these social elements and employ appropriate linguistic forms to establish and maintain social relationships.

Example 3: "I want to break the stereotype that surrounds athletes, particularly track-and-field athletes. There's this notion that they should have short hair, not wear makeup and maintain a very ordinary appearance. But now, in the 21st century, I believe that athletes should be able to express their own style and a different kind of tranquil beauty." said Wu in an interview with CGTN. Wu Yanni stated in an interview with China Global Television Network (CGTN). Her use of "I believe" exemplifies a strategic adaptation to the social world. Within a communicative context where traditional sports norms coexist with modern individualistic values, she must both challenge entrenched stereotypes and avoid appearing overly confrontational. The plausibility shields "I believe" explicitly marks the subjectivity of her assertion, mitigates potential impositions, and creates a discursive distance between her personal views and her professional identity. This formulation allows room for interpretation among audiences with divergent perspectives, thereby reducing the risk of ideological friction and reflecting a respect for cognitive diversity. By doing so, she not only maintains communicative harmony but also effectively conveys innovative ideas, demonstrating her acute awareness of social conventions and pragmatic

wisdom as a public figure.

Example 4: Among the audience was 25-year-old Kiki, who was drawn by the sound of gongs and drums. After watching the exciting competition, she remarked, “I’m very happy to see the inheritance of traditional culture. I had only seen performances in China before, and I didn’t realize that different countries each have their own unique features.” Among the spectators was 25-year-old Kiki, who was drawn by the sound of gongs and drums. After watching the exciting competition, she remarked with emotion: “I am very happy to see the preservation of traditional culture. I had only seen such performances in China before and had no idea that each country has its own distinctive characteristics.” The use of “very” as an adaptor not only encapsulates the intensity of Kiki’s joyful emotions and conveys to the reader the influence of traditional Chinese culture abroad, but also reflects the speaker’s humility regarding her own cultural heritage and her respect for cultural diversity. The root of her delight lies in the act of cultural dissemination itself, rather than in making evaluative judgments from a superior stance. This subtly aligns with the caution and inclusiveness expected of individuals from a culture of origin in cross-cultural communication, avoiding any potentially offensive assessment of other cultures’ adaptations or transformations. Thus, the use of the hedge “very” exemplifies the mature and tactful communicative wisdom demonstrated by the news author when addressing the complex and delicate social topic of cultural heritage and diversity. The author successfully conveys the Chinese audience’s joy while mitigating potential social risks.

#### 4.2.3 Adaptation to the Mental World

The mental world constitutes a crucial component of contextual structure, encompassing emotions, personality, cognition, needs, and other psychological factors of the communicative participants. Speakers must continuously adjust their discursive strategies in response to the mental worlds of both parties involved, striving to achieve a balance between self-expression and audience psychology. This ensures that the discourse not only aligns with the speaker’s communicative goals but also elicits active empathy from the listener.

Example 5: Faouzia said her experiences in China have expanded her musical horizons. You’re new to a lot of new people, so you have to work a little bit harder, and it makes you not as stagnant in your career and not as comfortable. It pushes you to a new height.” Against the backdrop of cultural diversity, Faouzia must exercise caution regarding the influence exerted by international artists. The use of “a little bit”—an adaptor—not only authentically conveys the reality of professional challenges but also prevents her from appearing overly complaining or unduly self-regarding, thus preserving a positive and professional public image. Furthermore, the lightweight nature of the expression “a little bit” mitigates the audience’s psychological defensiveness, rendering her perspectives more accessible and receptive. Consequently, Faouzia’s utterance achieves dual adaptation to the psychological world: it safeguards her personal image while simultaneously attending to the emotional needs of the audience.

Example 6: “Based on previous findings of archaeological excavations, it has been confirmed that the roads in the Shang capital city can be generally classified into three levels according to their width, or

referred to as main roads, streets and alleys.” Niu said. Within the specific context of news reporting, the writer is required to simultaneously adapt to the multiple and distinct psychological worlds of Professor Niu, the target readership, and the journalist themselves. To achieve this, the news report directly quotes Professor Niu’s original statement and strategically employs the attribution shields “confirmed”—a linguistic choice that flawlessly reproduces the cautious yet authoritative tone inherent to Professor Niu’s identity as a professional expert in the field. This single term not only endows the conclusion with sufficient academic weight and credibility to reflect the rigor of archaeological research but also retains the inherent conditionality that characterizes all academic conclusions—acknowledging that such findings are grounded in current evidence rather than absolute certainty. In essence, “confirmed” emerges as a term capable of simultaneously meeting the dual expectations of reliability and strictness in academic and journalistic contexts. On one hand, it explicitly clarifies that the conclusion is derived from empirical archaeological research, thereby distinguishing it from unfounded subjective speculation or arbitrary assumptions. On the other hand, it implicitly signals that the conclusion applies specifically to the current stage of research, fully embodying the meticulous rigor and necessary openness of academic reasoning—leaving room for potential revisions or refinements as future excavations yield new evidence. Through this deliberate linguistic selection, the news writer not only fulfills their professional responsibility of conducting objective and impartial reporting, a core tenet of journalistic ethics but also subtly circumvents the potential credibility crisis that could arise from overstating the certainty of the conclusion. By avoiding absolute or unqualified claims, the writer safeguards the news outlet’s reputation for trustworthiness while ensuring that the information presented remains both academically sound and accessible to the general public.

## 5. Conclusion

This study employs a mixed-method approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative analyses, to examine the distribution patterns and pragmatic functions of hedges in cultural English news on Xinhuanet. The findings reveal that rounders and attribution shields are widely distributed in this type of news discourse. The use of hedges is a result of adaptation to the physical world, social world, and psychological world. Specifically, the study identifies the following pragmatic functions of hedges in Xinhuanet English News on Culture: first, enhancing the rigor and accuracy of language, focusing on key information, and making the language more concise and clear; second, softening the writer’s tone to evoke readers’ empathy; third, balancing identity recognition and emotional needs in cultural communication, thereby promoting cultural empathy and constructing a positive national image. In conclusion, as an important pragmatic strategy, hedges can effectively reconcile the accuracy of news information and the appropriateness of communication, providing a crucial linguistic pathway for cross-cultural communication.

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