Hedging in News Stories and Editorials in The Jakarta Post and The Washington Times[1]

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Abstract

The use of hedges in academic discourse is important because academic writers need to present their findings and arguments accurately but carefully so that they are academically appropriate. Many researches have been conducted on this topic; however, not many studies have explored the use of hedges in other discourses such as newspaper discourse. Newspapers contain different types of articles with different linguistic characteristics. These different characteristics may include the different uses of hedges. The use of hedges in newspapers is no less important as their use in academic discourse, as newspapers serve as an important source of information. This research is an attempt to find out the frequency and the different types of hedges used in two newspapers, i.e. The Jakarta Post and The Washington Times newspaper. The types of articles that are used as the object of study are news stories and editorials. This study also compares the use of hedges in the two types of articles from both newspapers. The findings show that hedges are used more frequently in editorials compared to news stories in both newspapers. However, the Indonesian writers tend to use hedges more frequently compared to the American writers, especially in news stories.

Keywords: *hedges, news stories, editorials*

1.   Introduction

The use of hedges has become an integral part of academic discourse. Academic writers have to be careful of how they present their findings and arguments, and one way of doing so is by employing hedges in their writing. At present, there are numerous studies that have been conducted on this topic, including the use of hedges by non-native speakers of English (Atai and Sadr, 2006; Nivales, 2011; Abdollahzadeh, 2011). Beside academic discourse, hedges are also widely used in

other discourses such as in newspapers or magazines. However, not many studies have explored this particular topic.

Newspapers are important sources of information and are widely read by people all over the world. The manner in which information is presented in these newspapers may influence the public's opinion. Therefore, linguistic devices such as hedges play an important role here as they may affect how strongly readers accept the truth of the information presented in this media.

A newspaper consists of various types of articles, e.g. news stories, editorials, letters, advertisements, etc. These different types of discourse have different linguistic characteristics, which may include the different uses of hedges. For instance, an advertisement may employ different hedging strategies compared to a news story article since they both have different functions. Advertisements may have the purpose of convincing readers to buy a certain product, whereas news stories normally present information and facts of events.

This paper is an attempt to investigate the use of hedges in two different types of articles in the newspaper, namely news stories and editorials. More specifically, it explores the frequency and the types of hedges employed in these two discourses. In addition, the articles are taken from two newspapers, i.e. The Jakarta Post and The Washington Times. The purpose is to find out whether hedges are used similarly or differently in these two newspapers, as one is made by non-natives while the other is made by native speakers of English. This research is similar to a previous study by Santrauka (2008) that also investigated hedges used in news stories and editorials in newspaper. The difference of the current study lies in the comparison of newspapers made by non-natives and native speakers of English.

2.   Review of Related Literature

Hedges are commonly understood as words whose function is to downgrade or mitigate utterances and statements. One of the pioneers in the study of hedges, Lakoff (1973: 471) states that hedges are "words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy." Richards et al (2002: 237) define hedges as "linguistic

devices that writers use either to indicate the writer's lack of commitment to the truth of a statement or a desire not to express that commitment categorically." Additionally, Hyland (2000: 179) underscores that hedges allow the writers to express the degree of accuracy of their statements. Thus, we can say that hedges serve as linguistic devices that allow writers to determine the level of accuracy of their propositions by making their statements more or less tentative.

Although there is a general consensus on the function and purpose of hedging devices, the classification of hedges is not very clear. It is difficult to classify them as there is no specific grammatical class of hedges since they can be taken from any syntactic category (Fraser, 2010: 23). This is supported by Markkanen & Schröder (2006 cited in Santrauka, 2008: 13) who declare that "no clearcut lists of hedging expressions are possible" because "no linguistic items are inherently hedgy but can acquire this quality depending on the communicative context or the co-text." Therefore, it can be said that a word can serve as a hedge depending on the context.

Nevertheless, there are those who try to classify hedges for various study purposes. One classification of hedges is the one proposed by Fraser (2010: 23-24). He categorizes hedges into the following:

a) Adverbs / adjectives: *approximately*, *roughly*, *about*, *often*, *occasionally*, *generally*, *sort of*

b) Impersonal pronouns: *one*, *it*

c) Concessive conjunctions: *although*, *though*, *while*, *whereas*, *even though*, *even if*

d) Hedged performative (use of modal to hedge performative verb): *must*

e) Indirect Speech Acts: *Could you speak a little louder*?

f) Introductory phrases: *I believe*, *to our knowledge*, *it is our view that*, *we feel that*

g) Modal adverbs: *perhaps*, *possibly*, *probably*, *practically*, *presumably*, *apparently*

h) Modal adjectives: *possible*, *probable*, *un/likely*

i) Modal noun: *assumption*, *claim*, *possibility*, *estimate*, *suggestion*

j) Modal verbs: *might*, *can*, *would*, *could*

k) Epistemic verbs: *to seem*, *to appear*, *to believe*, *to assume*, *to suggest*

l) Negative question convey positive hedged assertion: ***Didn't*** *Harry leave*?

m) Reversal tag: *He's coming,* ***isn't he***?

n) Agentless Passive: *Many of the troops were injured.*

o) Conditional subordinators: *as long as*, *so long as*, *assuming that*, *given that*, *unless*

p) Progressive form: ***I am hoping*** *you will come*.

q) Tentative Inference: *The mountains* ***should be*** *visible from here*.

r) Conditional clause refers to the condition under which the speaker makes the utterance: ***If you're going my way***, *I need a lift back*.

s) Metalinguistic comment: *strictly speaking*, *so to say*, *exactly*, *almost*, *just about*

3.   Research Methodology

The articles used as the object of study are taken from the online version of The Jakarta Post and The Washington Times newspaper dated from September 17, 2012 until October 10, 2012. The data is taken from news stories and editorials from both newspapers. Each group of article is approximately 4,000 words in length, which totals to 16,000 words for both groups from the two newspapers. The articles are analyzed to find out the frequency of the hedges and the types of hedges used. The classification of the hedges is based on Fraser's (2010: 23-24) classification described above. Furthermore, after analyzing the hedges from the articles, the findings for each newspaper are compared with one another.

4.   Findings and Discussion

Types of Hedges	The Jakarta Post		The Washington Times	
	News Stories	Editorials	News Stories	Editorials
Adverbs / Adjectives	5	6	5	3
Impersonal pronouns	-	1	-	1
Concessive conjunctions	1	8	6	4
Hedged performative	-	5	-	-
Introductory phrases	2	-	-	-
Modal adverbs	1	2	-	1
Modal adjectives	-	-	-	1
Modal verbs	17	23	10	22
Epistemic verbs	5	1	1	7
Agentless Passive	4	-	-	4
Conditional subordinators	-	1	-	-
Conditional clause	7	8	6	7
Total	**42**	**55**	**28**	**50**

Table 1: Types and Frequency of Hedges

Table 1 above shows that the writers employed more hedges in editorials compared to news stories. This is true for both newspapers. There is a total of 55 hedging devices in editorial articles in The Jakarta Post and 50 in The Washington Times. On the other hand, 42 hedges are found in news stories in The Jakarta Post and 28 in The Washington Times. This finding is similar to that of Santrauka (2008) where it was found that more hedges were employed in editorials compared to news stories. This is probably due to the fact that editorials are basically the writer's opinion on a subject matter, so it has more hedging devices

to 'mitigate' the 'force' of the writer's statements. In contrast, news stories present information objectively, so hedges are not required as frequently here. Furthermore, although hedges are found more frequently in editorials in both newspapers, it should be noted that the frequency of hedges found in the Washington Times is much less than the ones in The Jakarta Post. In other words, it can be said that Indonesian writers use hedges in news stories more frequently than American writers.

In terms of the types of hedges used, it can be seen that modal verbs are the most frequently employed hedging device in both types of articles from both newspapers. Conditional clause is the second most frequently used. A probable explanation for this is that modal verbs are common linguistic devices that appear frequently in many discourses. Moreover, in terms of distribution, epistemic verbs and agentless passive are distributed slightly differently in the two newspapers. In The Jakarta Post, epistemic verbs appeared more often in news stories; whereas in The Washington Times, they appeared more often in editorials. As for the agentless passive, they only appeared in news stories in The Jakarta Post; while in The Washington Times, they appeared only in the editorials. This shows that the writers tend to employ hedges somewhat differently.

5. Conclusion

This study has revealed that hedges are used differently depending on the discourse. In this case, hedges are found more frequently in editorials compared to news stories. This is true for both newspapers, which means that non-native and native speakers of English employ similar hedging strategies in their writing. Nonetheless, there are also some differences which should be noted, such as the distribution of some of the hedges, i.e. epistemic verbs and agentless passive. Additionally, it would seem that Indonesian writers tend to use hedges more often than American writers, especially in news stories. News stories serve to present information objectively, and so the American writers did not employ too many hedges in this discourse. In contrast, the Indonesian writers used a lot of hedges even in their news stories. A possible reason for this is the influence of culture.

Indonesian are generally considered to be more 'polite' or perhaps more indirect. Therefore, even in discourses where hedges may not be necessarily required, they still use many hedges to 'mitigate' or downgrade the 'force' of their statements.

To conclude, this research is limited to two types of articles in newspaper discourse. Furthermore, the corpus analyzed in this study is relatively small. Hence, the findings of this research should not be considered as a generalization of the way hedges are employed in these discourses. Further study with a bigger corpus would yield a more conclusive finding.

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