Hedging in postgraduate student theses: A cross-cultural corpus study

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Abstract: This study focuses on the way Iranian and British postgraduate students of applied linguistics hedge their propositions in the discussion section of their dissertations. 83 theses by British and Iranian postgraduates were analyzed for hedge marker categories and their individual types. The results showed that modal auxiliaries are the most frequently used in the corpus. Epistemic verbs of *can, would,* and *may* were the most frequently used ones for both groups of writers. However, Iranian writers used '*can*' significantly more than English postgraduates. English postgraduates on the other hand used '*would*' significantly more. Further, English writers also used more instances of copulas other than *'be'* and probability adverbials. The Iranian postgraduates in our study seemed to lack full access to a complete repertoire of hedges in comparison with their English counterparts.

1. Introduction

Academic writers need to distinguish between propositions already shared by the discourse community which have the status of facts, and those propositions to be evaluated by the discourse community, which have the status of claims (Crompton, 1997; Hyland, 2004). Salager-Myer (1994) found that non-native speakers of English have a difficult time when reading or writing academic texts in English distinguishing claims that are accepted within a scholarly community from those that are disputed. Hedges are signs whereby evaluative or tentative language as claims is distinguished from facts. As Myers (1989, p. 13) argues, "a sentence that looks like a claim but has no hedging is probably not a statement of new knowledge".

Hedging is a rhetorical device for demonstrating politeness and consideration for others, and a way of giving readers a chance to disagree (Holmes, 1982). It contributes to forming an appropriate rhetorical and interactive tenor conveying both epistemic (writers' confidence in the truth of the matter) and affective meanings (attitude towards the subject matter). Hedging allows a way of conveying deference, humility, and respect for colleagues' views (Meyers, 1994). The significance of epistemic comment related to the truth or definiteness of a thesis was demonstrated by Adams Smith (1984) who found one comment every 3.7 lines in medical discourse which rose to one every 2.2 lines in the Discussion sections. Crompton (1997) argues that much of this discussion is not related to academic writing as the main acts as we do in academic writing is staging a proposition rather than doing any of the above things Skelton believes that the term hedge has been used in *a pejorative* manner. He makes a distinction *between evaluativity and propositionality /factuality*. He uses the term "commentative language" instead of hedging. However using commentative language instead of hedging is also another cause for ambiguity. For instance the use of metadiscourse elements (it is raining unfortunately) expressing attitudes for instance can be an example of commentative language which is not hedge. In other words hedging is a subset of commentative language.

In the Anglo-American written texts hedges are used extensively to show "honesty, modesty, proper caution, and diplomacy" (Swales, 1990, p.174). Using hedges, writers may show a cautious commitment to the truth of the ideational material. To Crompton (1997), hedging "may be used to display not only or

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necessarily the degree of confidence speakers have in their propositions but also how much confidence they feel it is appropriate to display" (p.281). In his attempt to offer a more practical and less ambiguous taxonomy of hedges, Crompton came up with the following six types of hedged propositions: Sentences with (a) copulas other than be,(b) modals used epistemically, (c) clauses relating to the probability of the subsequent proposition being true, (d) adverbials which relate to the probability of the proposition being true, (e) reported propositions where the author(s) can be taken to be responsible for any tentativeness in the verbal group, or non-use of factive reporting verbs such as "show", "demonstrate", and (f) sentences containing a reported proposition that a hypothesized entity X exists and the author(s) can be taken to be responsible for making the hypothesis.

On the other hand, the conventions for scientific and academic writing and the style of argumentation have been shown to vary from culture to culture (Clyne 1991; Galtung 1979; Markkanen and Schroder, 1988). Cultures differ in what is considered suitable behavior in the same or similar communicative behavior (Crismore, et. al, 1993). As such, a cross-cultural study of the written discourse of professional and non-professional writers in different academic genres and disciplines seems warranted. Accordingly, this study tries to shed some light on the interactive and rhetorical features of academic writings of Iranian and English graduate students to discover the ways in which second language writers and native speakers control language resources to secure acceptance from the readers and conform to the norms of their disciplinary community. It investigates the extent to which Iranian postgraduate thesis writers are different from their English counterparts in terms of using hedging devices. Such a cross-cultural metadiscoursal analysis is vital in identifying the rhetorical behavior of graduate student writers who are on the edge of the discourse community. Findings from such analysis can help us realize how linguistically proficient postgraduate academic writers manipulate the sources of the target language beyond the lexicogrammatical aspects to their advantage and thus construct themselves as plausible members of the discipline. Further, studying hedges is significant in the sense that despite the fact that hedging has been found as a salient feature of academic discourse and that has exhibited a much higher level of frequency than many other linguistic features, it has not been adequately investigated in academic discourse (Hyland, 1994).

1.1. Research questions

More specifically, this study probes into the following research questions:

- How do Iranian and English postgraduate student writers in the field of applied linguistics hedge their propositions in the discussion section of their theses?
- Is there any difference between Iranian and English postgraduate student writers in the field of applied linguistics in their use of each of the subcategories of hedges in the discussion section of their theses?

2. Materials and method

Theses written by British and English postgraduate students of applied linguistics were targeted. 60 MA post graduates of applied linguistics whose native language was English were contacted through email about whether they would agree their thesis be included in our study. Out of these, 35 responded and agreed with our inclusion of their thesis in the study. The same procedure was followed for the Iranian subjects and the electronic version of their theses was sought from their university's central library. Out of the 60 MA theses in the field of applied linguistics written by Iranian graduate students 48 were found to have discussion sections and thus were included as our final corpus. The corpora needed to be comparable in terms of purpose, intended audience, and length. The theses written by English graduates were collected from the electronic resources held by the University of Birmingham; those written by Iranian graduates were collected from the electronic resources held by the University of Tehran and Iran University of Science and Technology; University of Ahvaz, and Azad University Science and Research Branch.

The two corpora were analyzed using Antconc software. Wordlist output showed that the total number of word types for the English corpus was 8438 and the total number of word tokens was 120 939.

The results also showed that modal auxiliaries are frequently used in the thesis corpus. In the word list for the theses by English postgraduates, five of the modal auxiliaries appear among the first hundred most

frequent words: may (position 32), would (36), could (49),will (64) and should(69). We could not find other instances of hedge in the first 100 most frequent words for the English corpus.

An analysis of the key words for the English corpus showed 1273 keywords, while this was 784 for the Iranian corpus.

Three of the modals in the Iranian corpus were found to be among the first one hundred most frequent words: can (position 24), may (44), and might (84).Amongst the key words 'can' was found to be at position 77, while this was not the case in the British corpus.

The two corpora were then searched for hedge marker categories and their individual types following Crompton's (1997) taxonomy (explained in the background section), which was believed to present a comprehensive and functional classification of hedges. Initially, Antconc software (a corpus analysis tool) was used to analyze the explicit realization of the hedging devices. Decisions on the function a writer had assigned to a particular marker in a certain context had to be made on the basis of the interpretation that is the most likely one in that particular context (Halliday, 1994; Crismore, 1989; Salager-Meyer, 1994). Thus, functional analysis was employed to tease apart the multi-functionality of some markers.

As a complementary source of information, interviews were held with 18 postgraduate students (none from each group) to let them discuss their attitudes about academic writing in general, and in particular as to whom they envisage as their audience and how they use hedges in the development and discussion of their findings. The assumption was that these interviews can be a resourceful device to explain the reasons for any significant differences unveiled by the research. This will allow us to gain some real information on what these novice researchers think as we find that such information is missing in the literature on the use of hedging language in academic writing.

3. Results ad discussion

Follwing Crompton's (1997) study, four categories of hedged were targeted: copulas other than 'be', epistemic modals, probability clauses, tentatively reported propositions and hypothetical propositions attributable to the author were highlighted. The individual instances of each of these devices were identified and a list was made from various sources of the common hedging devices under each category. For ease of analysis, the last two categories were merged as they were both referring to tentatively reported propositions or hypotheses referring to the existence of a proposition attributable to the author.

An analysis of the frequency of use of copulas other than 'be' is presented in graph 1 below. As can be seen , English postgraduates use each of the instances significantly more than their Iranian counterparts.
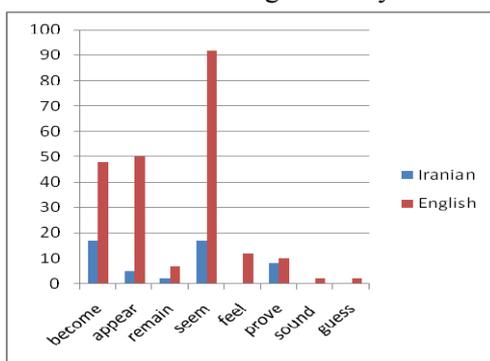
Graph1. The use of copulas in the theses by Iranian and English postgraduates

As can be seen, English postgraduates used copulas *become, appear, seem,* and *feel* significantly more than their Iranian counterparts in the discussion section of their theses. The highest portion of the copula employment goes to the verb 'seem', having the highest frequency of use by English postgraduates, while for the Iranian writers 'seem' and 'become' have the same frequency of use.

The use of epistemic modals by Iranian and English thesis writers was also examined. Can-may-should – would were found to be the most frequently used modals by both groups. However, in comparison with their Iranian counterparts, except for *can* and *could*, English postgraduates use more epistemic modals in each of the subcategories of modals (See graph 2).
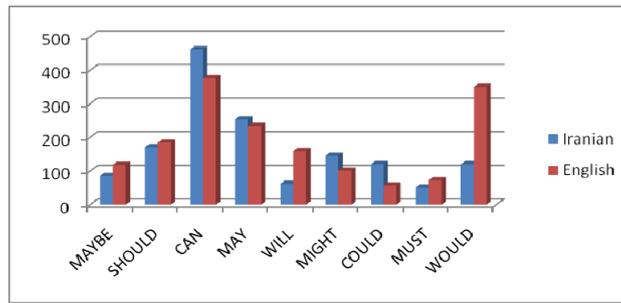
Graph2. The use of epistemic MODALS in the theses by Iranian and English postgraduates

The frequency of use of probability adverbials were also examined. As can be seen, the two groups are different, i.e. in almost all cases, English writers used probability adverbials more than their Iranian counterparts.

The most common adverbial markers by both writer groups were *perhaps, likely, probably, possibly, generally, certain extent/level/degree/etc,* and *some.* English postgraduates used *some* and *possibly* significantly more than other markers with *some* as the most highly frequent adverbial. English postgraduates were significantly different from their Iranian counterparts in their higher use of adverbials of *perhaps, probably, likely, possibly, essentially, relatively, almost, certain, unclear, not necessarily, and partly. Some* was the most frequently used marker by Iranian postgraduates. They also used adverbials *likely, possibly, almost, certain, some, generally* significantly more than other markers. However, from among these, except for markers *some* and *certain*, they used each of these markers significantly lower than their English counterparts.
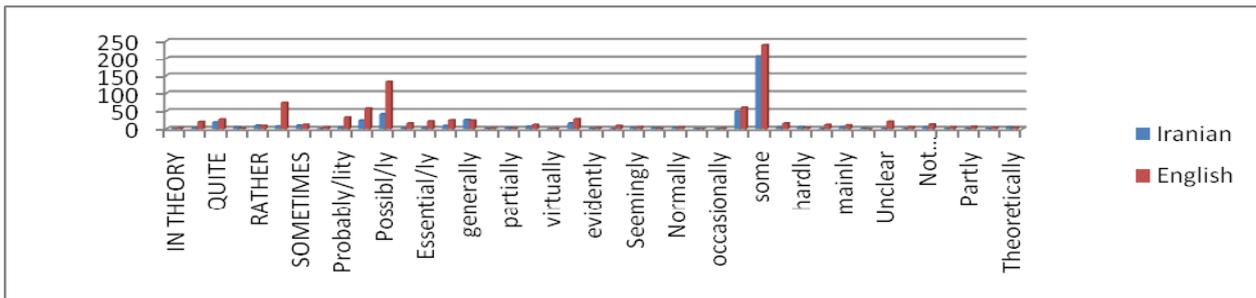
Graph3. The use of probability adverbials in the theses by Iranian and English postgraduates

Finally, the two groups were examined in their use of tentatively reported propositions, and hypothetical propositions attributable to the author (See graph4).
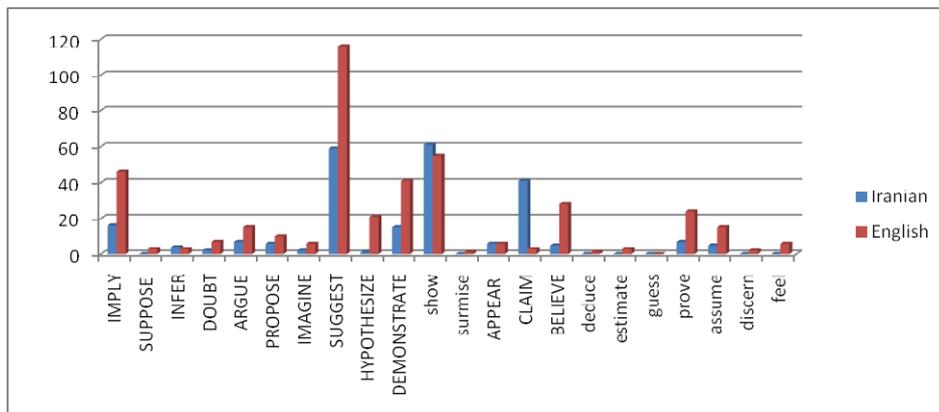
Graph 4. He use of TENTATIVELY REPORTED PROPOSITIONS in the theses by Iranian and English postgraduates

The most highly used tentative verbs reporting propositions by both groups were *suggest, imply, show,* and *demonstrate.* However, English writers used the following tentative verbs significantly higher than their Iranian counterparts: *suggest, argue, imply, hypothesize, demonstrate, believe, assume, prove, and feel.*

Meanwhile, Iranian postgraduates used the verb *claim* on significantly higher occasions than English thesis writers (about 13 times more).

English postgraduates used the following epistemic verbs significantly more than Iranian postgraduates: *imply, doubt, propose, imagine, suggest, hypothesize, demonstrate, believe, prove, assume*. On the other hand, Iranian postgraduates used the verb *claim* significantly more than their English peers.

4. Conclusion

The results of the study support the literature on academic writing which shows that *can* and *may* are the most frequent types of modal hedges (Biber et al, 1999; Hyland, 1999).However, the pattern of the differences between British and Iranians were noticeable. Epistemic verbs of *can, would,* and *may* were found to be the most frequently used ones in this category for both groups of writers. However, Iranian writers used '*can*' significantly more than English postgraduates. English postgraduates on the other hand used '*would*' significantly more (around three times more than Iranian writers).Interestingly, despite the differences between the two groups, both groups used all the categories of epistemic modals.

"Epistemic markers express the speaker's judgment about the certainty, reliability, and limitations of the proposition; they can also comment on the source of the information" (Silver, 2003, p. 359). A preliminary hypothesis about the more frequent use of '*can*' by Iranian writers might be that they prefer *can,* because they made more predictions and recommendations for further research as this could be corroborated when we look at its density of use in the concordance plots. It tends to occur mostly in the final parts of the discussions and conclusion sections where they are mostly making suggestions for further research and the possible connections between the output of their study with other related researches. This is not the case in the British theses as the concordance plots demonstrate that except for a few cases, '*can*' is distributed more evenly across the different parts of discussion and conclusion sections.

The results also show that modal auxiliaries are frequently used in the thesis corpus. In the word list for the theses by English postgraduates, five of the modal auxiliaries appear among the first hundred most frequent words: may (position 32), would (36), could (49),will (64) and should(69). This high level of frequency of the modal auxiliaries in academic prose is noted also in the Longman Grammar of Spoken and Written English (Biber, et al. 1999) and also in Thompson (2001) study of theses. Meanwhile, three of the modals in the Iranian corpus were found to be among the first one hundred most frequent words: can (position 24), may 44), and might (84). It is of course possible that several of the modals were added in the final draft at the request of the supervisor who might have recommended that there needed to be some qualification of the claims made in the discussions and conclusions, an observation confirmed in Thompson (2001) study.

As for the use of copulas other than 'be', English writers took over in all the instances of these markers from their Iranian counterparts. Some copulas like *feel, sound, guess* were never employed by Iranian postgraduates. This finding supports the research showing that non-native speakers have a limited lexical repertoire which often leads to a shortage of hedging devices in L2 written text (Crismore et al, 1993; Hyland, 2004). The same pattern of differences exists between the two groups when we look at the patterns of use of probability adverbials. Iranian postgraduates never used adverbials *maybe, potentially, occasionally, largely, unclear, arguably,* and *normally* while English postgraduates did, nor did the Iranians use tentative verbs of *suppose, hypothesize (used only once), estimate, feel,* and *discern*.

Since L2 writers have a limited vocabulary base, and a limited lexical means of expressing conviction and uncertainty (Hinkel, 2002; Hyland and Milton, 1997), the number of adverbial and tentative verbs used to refer to them is very low in the writings of Iranian postgraduates.

It should be emphasized that the Iranian postgraduates in this study were all assumed to be proficient learners of English as they had all passed the national MA entrance exam and this is good proof of their high language knowledge. However, as the results of this study show it seems that they find expressions of commitment and detachment more difficult in comparison with the native speaker counterparts and accordingly fail to hedge their statements adequately The main reason can be due to the fact that discourse feature of academic writing are culture-specific (Hyland, 1994). This can be due to the transference of L1

writing strategies to the L2 context whether these strategies are effective or not. This insecure perception of what constitutes a culturally appropriate behavior is thus manifested in their academic written productions which tend not to be as rhetorically effective as expected by an educated native speaker. This pragmalinguistic failure, as Thomas (1983) argues, is exacerbated by inadequate linguistic knowledge on the part these writers.

The Iranian postgraduates in our study lacked access to a complete repertoire of hedges in comparison with their English counterparts. Their inadequate awareness of the semantic function and distribution of hedges may lead to producing less appropriate, less formal, direct, and less polite linguistics behaviors. This sociopragmatic failure can also be rooted in their different ways of thinking, argumentation, and writing in their own culture. Accordingly, this may later hamper their participation in the research world due to the dominance of the English as a lingua franca.

The above findings enhance our knowledge about the rhetorical behavior of native and non-native graduate student writers and the extent to which they can construct themselves as plausible members of their community. As we found, the use of modality and tentative language "presents considerable problems for linguistically unsophisticated writers of academic texts, and is an important area of pragmatic failure in the work of second language speakers" (Hyland, 1994, p.244). Consequently, it is pedagogically justifiable to address hedging as an important linguistic element and raise awareness of the principles and mechanics of its appropriate use.

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