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Preserving face and the use of hedges in masculine world of men

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Abstract

Hedges or epistemic modal items are linguistic features which carry various functions. One of the important functions of hedges is preserving the interactants' faces in different social settings. In Sociolinguistics, hedges are mainly associated with women and their talk as protective devices for speakers and listeners' faces. Women use these features more frequently than men because they are more attentive to preserving their own faces and the addressees' in order to create solidarity. While men, on the other hand, avoid these features because they show uncertainty, leading to perceptions of weakness. This paper, however, looks at instances of hedges in men's interaction in order to determine the ways these features are employed by men. In order to conduct this study, 200 minutes of transcribed conversations of Iranian male interactants were used to examine how these elements are applied in their face to face informal interaction. The findings suggest that Iranian men, despite being masculine, use hedges in their speech. They opt to protect their faces by inserting hedges in their interactions. They also try to preserve the addressees' face which is an indication of solidarity. However, Iranian men in this study protect their own faces more than the addressees' faces.

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1. Introduction

In language and gender domain, the linguistic features which show tentativeness and uncertainty of an assertion are connected to women (Lakoff, 1975) or to powerless people regardless of their gender (O’Barr and Atkins, 2011). There are many debates which reveal that the linguistic differences between women and men are associated to the ways in which they are treated in society (Jinyu, 2014). For instance, society expects men to be in power. Therefore, men’s linguistic variations echo power (Lakoff, 1975; West and Zimmerman, 1983). On the other hand, politeness linguistic patterns in society are shaped by women (Holmes, 2013). This study looks at the language that men use to interact in informal interaction and discovers how the tentative devices which are mainly connected to women and their language are used by men. We also aim to discover what functions these tentative devices serve in masculine interaction of Iranian men.

2. Hedges/Epistemic Modality and its Functions

Epistemic modality are the linguistic forms which demonstrate speakers’ certainty or uncertainty about the truth of the proposition they express (Coates, 2004). Epistemic modality covers the qualifiers such as *sort of*, *a little* and the modals like *may* and *might*, expressions like *you know*, *I mean* and *I think* and *tag questions*. These elements are considered epistemic modal items since they show the degree in which the speaker is certain about the utterances he or she has expressed. These elements are also called *hedges* because the speaker hedges the assertive tone of the sentences.

Holmes (1984) argues that considering the contextual factors in an interaction assist identifying the functions of epistemic modality. Then, she asserts that epistemic modality express two types of meanings. The first one is the modal meaning, which deals with the uncertainty that the utterance intend to transfer. The second one is effective meaning, which pragmatically reflects the relationship between the interactants. In effective meaning, the epistemic modal items are used by the interactants to attenuate the force of an assertion which ultimately indicates the speaker’s concern about other people. When effective meaning is the primary function of epistemic modal items rather than modal meaning, it shows that the speaker intends to express politeness and save the addressees’ face.

Epistemic modality plays a dual mode with a bilateral effect in an interaction. It means that when epistemic modal forms are used, both the speakers and the addressees are affected positively. In informal friendly interactions, however, epistemic modality preserves the addressees’ face more than the speakers’ face (Coates, 1987). this is largely because the aim of an informal friendly interaction is to construct and maintain a good social relation between the interactants (Coates, 1987). As a result, the epistemic modal forms can play the role of keeping the addressees’ face in order to save it from any possible offences. This is an indication of a cooperative act among the interactants.

The other usage of epistemic modality is to decrease the sensitivity of the topics (Coates, 1987, 2004). The more sensitive the topics get, the more frequent epistemic modal items are used (Coates, 2011). It is basically due to the fact that sensitive topics naturally involve some self-disclosures and face-threatening statements and epistemic modal forms assist in neutralizing these effects (Coates, 2004). When a speaker is talking about something like his failures, he uses a lot of hedges to protect his face by attenuating the self relief he has made.

Among Iranian interactants, epistemic modality or hedges play the same role of attenuating the force of an utterance in addition to modal meaning. For instance, Izadi (2013) expresses that hedging helps the speakers to mitigate the negative connotation of disagreements. In another study on Iranian interactants, Sahragard and Javanmardi (2011) found that the offensive side of language can be decreased by hedges which ultimately demonstrate politeness and preserves the face of the listeners.

2.1 Epistemic modality and gender

Epistemic modality or hedges as Lakoff (1975) labels them are connected to women’s language. Lakoff (1975) believes that hedges are weak in nature, and women may use them in their language without any justifications. She further argues that women simply hedge their statements because of their lack of power. Lakoff’s findings have been challenged by many researchers who have proven that relating tentative devices to women because they are powerless is not justified (Holmes, 1984, 1986; Coates, 2011). In this regard, Holmes (1986) criticizes Lakoff’s assumption and disproves it by contradictorily discovering that women use epistemic modality to express their confidence and certainty in their knowledge that they discount out of politeness. Holmes (1984) also emphasizes that women aim to facilitate the interaction when they use tag questions, while men use these hedges to indicate uncertainty about their

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