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The hedging function of exemplification: Evidence from Japanese

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the usage of three Japanese exemplifying markers (i.e. *tari*, *toka*, *nado*) as hedging strategies. At the theoretical level, the investigation allows to discuss the functional extension of exemplifying strategies to hedges. Since exemplification construes elements as examples of larger sets, we argue that the relationship between these two core units can be exploited by speakers to perform several communicative functions, including semantic approximation and pragmatic hedging. At the empirical level, first we provide a detailed account of the types of hedging operations performed by these markers, that is, affecting the semantics of a proposition or operating on pragmatic aspects such as the illocutionary force or the speaker's commitment. Then, using data from a web corpus of Japanese, we examine how the usage of exemplifying markers as hedges in actual occurrences gives rise to other discourse effects such as vagueness and politeness.

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Keywords: Exemplification; Hedging; Japanese; Vagueness; Politeness

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to investigate how Japanese exemplifying markers can be employed as hedging strategies to affect the truth value of a proposition or to attenuate pragmatic aspects such as the illocutionary force of an utterance or the speaker's commitment. The discussion will be based on data gathered from a web corpus of Japanese.

Traditionally, exemplification has been studied mainly as a linguistic device that conveys reformulation (Halliday and Hasan, 1976; Hobbs, 1985). Only recently some language-specific studies have suggested that exemplification can be used to achieve other communicative functions such as semantic approximation (Mihatsch, 2010). Despite this, the discursive and pragmatic roles of exemplification remain under-examined within linguistic studies. Analyses have usually focused on Romance epistemic markers or expressions that can also convey exemplification (e.g. *ponhamos* in Portuguese, *magari* in Italian).

In this paper, we consider three Japanese markers (i.e. *nado*, *tari*, *toka*) whose dedicated function is to signal exemplification, that is, they indicate that the modified element should be construed as a representative member of a larger set of similar elements. It will be shown that this characterizing function of exemplification is the basis for a heterogeneous range of functions and can be exploited by speakers with a high versatility. In particular, the inferred set can be interpreted in certain contexts as a paradigm of equally valid options in order to perform hedging at the semantic or

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pragmatic levels. In these cases the set has a subordinate status to the example and acts as a cognitive tool to achieve a fuzzy effect.

Finally, we will also examine how exemplifying markers used as hedging strategies are employed in real-life occurrences to achieve important discourse effects, such as vagueness and politeness (Fraser, 2010).

2. Exemplification and hedging

2.1. Definition of hedging

The term *hedging* refers to “a discourse strategy that reduces the force or truth of an utterance and thus reduces the risk a speaker runs when uttering a strong or firm assertion or other speech act” (cf. Kaltenböck et al., 2010: 1).

The term became popular in linguistics after Lakoff (1973) used it primarily as a semantic concept, drawing on the developments of prototype theory in cognitive psychology (cf. Rosch, 1973). Lakoff focused on the capability of some linguistic elements (e.g. *sort of*) of signaling different degrees of category membership. He defined hedges as linguistic expressions “whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy” (1973: 195). Since all the examples examined by Lakoff involved predicate adjectives or predicate nominals in declarative sentences, Fraser (1975) proposed to refer to these type of hedges as *propositional hedging*, “since it is the truth value of the whole proposition that is affected” (Fraser, 2010: 17). For instance, in a sentence like *A penguin is sort of a bird*, the non-prototypical concept ‘penguin’ can be included in the category ‘bird’ owing to the use of the hedge *sort of*. Thus, hedges such as *sort of* affect the truth value of the propositional content.

Despite his focus being mainly semantic, Lakoff also addressed the pragmatic value of hedges, noting that their interpretation is context dependent (1973: 213). This observation was investigated further by Fraser (1975) and by Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) to include expressions that modify the force of the speech act (e.g. modals such as *should*). This led to the identification of a second type of hedging, namely *speech act hedging* (Fraser, 2010), which encompasses devices that attenuate the strength of the speech act and, more generally, the speaker’s commitment toward the utterance. Brown and Levinson (1978: 169–176) considered hedges as linguistic expressions that indicate primarily that the speaker is not adhering to one of Grice’s maxims (1975) and they investigated their use mainly as a means of negative politeness (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 116).

Later studies (Prince et al., 1982; Hübler, 1983) confirmed and further investigated this distinction between two types of hedging: those that affect the semantics of a proposition as in (1), and those that affect pragmatic aspects such as the illocutionary force of the utterance or the speaker’s attitude as in (2).

- (1) *Snowflakes are sort of blue.*
- (2) *I think snowflakes are blue.*

Prince et al. (1982) referred to the former type as *approximators*, which is further subdivided into *adaptors* (used with lexical conceptual meanings, e.g. *sort of*) and *rounders* (used to round measurements, e.g. *about*, *around*); while the latter type is referred to as *shields* and is further subdivided into *plausibility shields* (expressions that relate doubt, e.g. *I think*) and *attribution shields* (which attribute the responsibility of the message to someone other than the speaker, e.g. *according to her estimates*).

Caffi (2007) proposed a tripartite model identifying three different components of the utterance on which mitigation can operate and three corresponding classes of strategies: *bushes* (on the propositional content), *hedges* (on the illocution) and *shields* (on the deictic origin of the utterance).

These classificatory models are important heuristic tools to understand the heterogeneity of the domain of hedging. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that “in actual language use individual linguistic items may prove difficult to pigeon-hole, often as a result of their multi-functionality” (Kaltenböck et al., 2010: 6). In other words, this heterogeneity arises from the fact that hedging functions can be achieved through a wide range of semantically different expressions: not only discourse markers (Schiffrin, 1987; Bazzanella, 2003; Hashemi and Shirzadi, 2016) and modal verbs (Mur-Dueñas, 2016), but even generic expressions (Andersen, 2010) and indefinite hyperbolic quantifying expressions (Lavric, 2010). In this paper, we will focus on the mechanisms through which exemplification is employed to achieve hedging. For this reason, before moving on to the analysis, it is necessary to examine in depth the relationship between these two phenomena.

2.2. Exemplification: from the inference of a set to hedging

Exemplification is a universal strategy to elaborate and communicate complex information starting from more concrete material. It implies the generalization of particular cases by suggesting that they should be construed as representative members of a wider (given or potential) set of elements (cf. Lyons, 1989: x; Manzotti, 1998: 108).

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