

Translating hedging devices in news discourse

Agnes Pisanski Peterlin^{*}, Marija Zlatnar Moe



Department of Translation and Interpreting, Faculty of Arts, University of Ljubljana, Aškerčeva 2, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia

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Abstract

Though pragmatic elements such as hedging have been recognised as potentially challenging in intercultural communication, translation of hedging devices has received limited research attention. To gain a better insight into the impact of translating on the use of hedging, it is necessary to explore both translated texts and the reasons for modifications. The paper investigates trainee translators' performance in translating hedging devices; it also investigates their perceptions of the pragmatic role that these devices play in a journalistic text. The translation task analysis reveals a considerable degree of omission and modification of hedging devices in translation. The analysis of the target texts, combined with subsequent discourse-based interviews, showed that several factors, including pragmatic competence, the discourse position and form of hedging devices, as well as intentional interventions, contributed to modifications. Our findings offer important insight into the challenges that pragmatic elements may present in translation.
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1. Introduction

Hedging and similar pragmatic phenomena – such as attenuation and mitigation – have received considerable attention within the context of pragmatics and related fields in recent decades (cf. Holmes, 1984; Myers, 1989; Salager-Meyer, 1994; Markkanen and Schröder, 1997; Hyland, 1998; Vass, 2004; Burrough-Boenisch, 2006; Fraser, 2010b; Thaler, 2012). As well, hedging has been recognised as a potential problem in intercultural communication (cf. Vassileva, 2001; Hu and Cao, 2011; Yang, 2013; Itakura, 2013; Sedaghat et al., 2015) due to the pragmatic differences across languages and cultures. It is therefore not surprising that the acquisition of such pragmatic devices has been studied by researchers in the field of second/foreign language learning (e.g., Hyland and Milton, 1997; Wishnoff, 2000; Hinkel, 2003). There has, however, been much less research interest in the challenges associated with hedging in another area of language contact where intercultural pragmatic differences also play a role: translation.

The potential of exploring translation in order to gain a new perspective on pragmatic elements has been pointed out by Aijmer and Simon-Vandenberg (2004). Since hedging as an attenuation strategy modifies the illocutionary force of speech acts (cf. Holmes, 1984; Vassileva, 2001; Hu and Cao, 2011), it might be argued that changes to hedging devices in translation result in modifications of the illocutionary force of the text. Such modifications are especially problematic when they are inadvertent and caused by a lack of pragmatic competence. However, as translation inevitably entails re-contextualization (cf. Sidiropoulou, 2013: 96), it would be wrong to automatically interpret all modifications of hedging devices in translation as pragmatic failure. It therefore seems that, in order to gain a better insight into the impact of

^{*} Corresponding author. Tel.: +386 01 241 15 00; fax: +386 01 241 15 01.

E-mail addresses: agnes.pisanski@guest.arnes.si (A. Pisanski Peterlin), marija.zlatnarmoe@ff.uni-lj.si (M. Zlatnar Moe).

translation on the use of pragmatic elements such as hedging, it is necessary to explore both modifications of hedging devices in translation and the reasons for such modifications.

The empirical study presented in this paper addresses the translation of pragmatic devices in the context of translator training by focusing on trainee translators' approaches to translating hedging devices. Employing task analysis and semi-structured discourse-based interviews, the study attempts to examine trainee translators' performance in translating hedging devices in a newspaper commentary and their perceptions of the pragmatic role of hedging devices in a journalistic text. In particular, the following research questions are investigated:

- (1) To what extent are hedging devices translated using pragmatically equivalent¹ elements?
- (2) What are the reasons for retaining, omitting or modifying hedging devices in translation?

2. Hedging in journalistic discourse

Hedging as a pragmatic phenomenon (cf. [Markkanen and Schröder, 1997](#)) expressing epistemic modality (cf. [Hu and Cao, 2011](#)) is used to reduce the degree of the author's commitment to an assertion (cf. [Vande Kopple, 1985](#); [Hyland, 1998](#)). As [Yang \(2013: 23\)](#) points out, it is "one of the most prominent strategies of mitigating knowledge claims by allowing the writer to express tentativeness and possibility." [Hyland \(1996: 433\)](#) underlines the central role of hedging in academic discourse "where the need to present unproven propositions with caution and precision is essential."

It is precisely because hedging is such a key element of academic writing that its use has been studied extensively above all in academic discourse (cf., [Salager-Meyer, 1994](#); [Hyland, 1998](#); [Hu and Cao, 2011](#), etc.). However, hedging has also received some research attention in other genres, such as legal discourse ([Vass, 2004](#)), political discourse ([Fraser, 2010a](#)), book reviews ([Itakura, 2013](#)), etc.

Moreover, the pragmatics of hedging has been addressed within the framework of metadiscourse in journalistic genres (e.g., [Dafouz-Milne, 2008](#); [Khabbazi-Oskouei, 2013](#)). In her paper focusing on epistemicity and stance in English and Spanish journalistic discourse, [Marín Arrese \(2015: 211\)](#) observes that epistemic stance acts are "aimed at the legitimisation of the assertions, through the expression of speaker/writer's degree of certainty regarding the realisation of the event and/or the reference to the sources and modes of access to that knowledge."

Another important role of hedging in journalistic discourse has been highlighted in pragmatic studies: hedging is used to establish a dialogue with the audience in order to enhance the persuasive effect of the text. [Dafouz-Milne's \(2008\)](#) study focuses on the persuasive effect of metadiscourse in newspaper discourse; she observes that when hedging is used, persuasion is achieved "by means of identification and negotiation with the audience rather than by imposition" ([Dafouz-Milne, 2008: 105](#)). [Dafouz-Milne's \(2008\)](#) findings show that hedging has a significant role in opinion columns; she points out that in this type of text "the writer needs to strike a difficult balance between commitment to his/her ideas and respect and dialogue with the reader" ([Dafouz-Milne, 2008: 107](#)). Hedging thus enables writers to "anticipate possible opposition to their claims (by expressing statements with precision but also with caution and modesty), while simultaneously, enabling the reader to follow the writer's stance without the writer appearing too assertive" ([Dafouz-Milne, 2008: 107](#)).

Also focusing on the persuasive function of journalistic discourse, [Khabbazi-Oskouei \(2013: 94\)](#) points out that the persuasive character of editorials demands "conscious structuring of the text in order to create a bond between the writer and the readers," observing that "[p]ersuasiveness might affect the number of interactional devices used in order to strengthen this relationship." She examines the role of hedging in the context of interactional metadiscourse, although she opts to replace the term hedging with "uncertainty markers" to maintain a clear distinction between propositional and non-propositional material.

In the context of translation studies, shifts in hedging have been examined in translations of a variety of genres, including scientific texts ([Markkanen and Schröder, 1989](#)), political texts ([Schäffner, 1998](#)) and popular science writing ([Kranich, 2011](#)). While not specifically focusing on hedging, [Gumul's \(2011\)](#) analysis of changes in the translations of English-language newspaper articles on the conflict in Iraq published in a Polish magazine reveals that shifts in epistemic modality contribute to an altered point of view of the target text. Of course, published translations of journalistic discourse are quite specific: [Schäffner \(2012: 874\)](#) points out that news translation in fact involves adaptation of the text "to suit the target audience, the in-house style, and/or ideological positions of the newspaper" (see also [Valdeón, 2008](#)). It is therefore

¹ It should be noted that while a number of theorists (cf. [Catford, 1965](#); [Koller, 1995](#)) have used equivalence to define translation, equivalence remains a somewhat controversial concept (cf. [Pym, 1995](#); [Halverson, 1997](#)), as different authors give it radically different scopes and functions, some rejecting it all together (cf. [Snell-Hornby, 1988](#)). In the context of pragmatics, the fundamental significance of pragmatic or functional equivalence for translation is highlighted by [House \(2006\)](#), who argues that "appropriate use of language in communicative performance is what matters most in translation" ([House, 2006: 345](#)).

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