

Assertions and lexical invisibility in EFL learners' academic essays

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Abstract

The two studies presented here analyzed English academic essays written by Japanese learners of English and native speakers of English. A corpus-basis analysis indicated that the Japanese learners of English used more boosters than hedges, using straightforward and explicit expressions in English, whereas native speakers of English tended to express themselves more tentatively, using more hedges than boosters. Furthermore, a follow-up study sought to discover whether the Japanese learners of English were aware of the important pragmatic roles of hedges and boosters. The quantitative results suggested that although the certainty items were more visible to the Japanese learners of English, the learners had greater difficulty in identifying the pragmatic roles of the possibility and probability items and misapprehended their meanings. The relationship between possibility and probability items and metaphors of spatial relations for EFL learners is also considered.

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1. Hedges and boosters: an overview of the concepts

Lakoff (1972) defined hedges as “words whose job it is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy” (1972, p. 195). According to his basic concept, hedges modify words or phrases within a proposition and make them fuzzier or less fuzzy. After Lakoff’s popularization of the concept of hedges, his theory attracted the attention of many scholars and inspired a significant amount of research (e.g., Brown and Levinson, 1987; Fraser, 2010). Brown and Levinson (1987) later defined the term hedge as “a particle, word or phrase that modifies the degree of membership of a predicate or noun phrase in a set; it says of that membership that it is *partial* or true only in certain respects, or that it is *more* true and complete than perhaps might be expected” (1987, p. 145). Like Lakoff, they considered hedges to have the function of both attenuation and reinforcement, although Fraser (2010) viewed hedges as having only the former role, labeling modifiers with the latter role as boosters. To date, the literature and research regarding hedges has generally focused more on the attenuation aspect (Fetzer, 2010).

The concept of hedging has moved far from its origins since the early 1970s and includes not only the modification of words or phrases within a proposition but also the modification of commitment to the propositional content. Writers express their judgments, opinions and commitments toward the propositional content of the text and toward their readers through the use of hedges or boosters, modifying the truth-value of the whole proposition. While hedging devices reduce

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the strength or force of an expression, communicating tentativeness and possibility, boosting devices intensify or emphasize the force, expressing conviction and asserting confidence in a proposition (Holmes, 1995). The original concepts of hedge and booster have been further broadened to include the approaches in which hedges and boosters are used to realize an interactional/communicative strategy. Hyland (2012) explained that hedges can offer a possibility for textual manipulation in that they are used not only as a strategy to gain readers' acceptance of the writers' provisional statements but also as the writers' invitation to the readers to get involved in open discussion about the nature of the propositions. Boosters, on the other hand, are used as a strategy not only to persuade the readers of the writers' confident assertion but also to restrict the negotiating space available to the readers. In the present study, a "hedge" is defined as a mitigating word which attenuates either full semantic value of a particular expression or the full force of a speech act, whereas a "booster" as an intensifying word which reinforces either semantic value of a particular expression or the full force of a speech act. In other words, a "hedge" modifies meaning by making the message less forceful, while a "booster" modifies meaning by making the message more forceful.

Learners' expressions of hedges and boosters indicate different degrees of cognitive ability. To compare the use of hedges and boosters by second language (L2) learners and native speakers, the present study used epistemic categories ranging from maximum to minimum certainty.

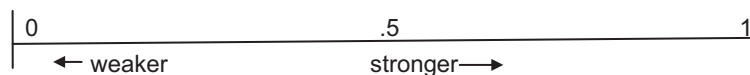
2. Categorizations of certainty, probability and possibility

The present study adopted the epistemic categories proposed by Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) and Hyland and Milton (1997) for adjectives and adverbs. In addition, to establish a more precise epistemic scale ranging from maximum to minimum certainty, the present study also utilized Horn's (2001) neg-raising theory for auxiliaries and verbs.

Horn (2001, p. 324) developed a meta-scale between zero and one, with zero being the weakest and one the strongest, incorporating both epistemic and deontic operations:

the weakest and one the strongest, incorporating both epistemic and deontic operations:

may, might	believe, suppose, think	know, realize
can, could	seem, appear, look like	must, have to
	should, ought to	



Lassiter (2011) considered verbs and auxiliaries at the weakest and strongest levels on the meta-scale to be minimum certainty and maximum certainty, respectively, whereas verbs and auxiliaries at the intermediate level are relative certainty because they are involved in neg-raising. According to Horn (2001, p. 308), neg-raising involves the "availability of a lower-clause reading or understanding for a higher-clause negation," as shown in the following schema:

$$\text{Not [Pred [S]]} \Rightarrow \text{Pred[Not [S]]}$$

Auxiliaries and verbs occupying the mid-range position on the meta-scale are neg-raising triggers, with the classic example being the verb *think*.

- James doesn't think Maria is here.
- James thinks Maria isn't here.

Intuitively, sentence (a) implies sentence (b). This relationship contrasts with the inferences associated with non neg-raising triggers at the weakest and strongest levels on the meta-scale.

- *James doesn't know that Maria is here.
- James knows that Maria isn't here.

In the above case, sentence (a) does not imply the corresponding sentence (b).

Neg-raising triggers are considered vague and lacking in sharp boundaries, reducing the strength or force of expressions and communicating tentativeness; they are also context-dependent (Lassiter, 2011). Lassiter (2010) semantically analyzed the epistemic adjectives such as *possible*, *probable*, *likely* and *certain* and argued that the

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