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An Analysis on Hedges in Spoken and Academic Genres Based on BNC Corpus

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Abstract:
This study is based on the BNC corpus and analyzes the frequency and functional differences of hedges in spoken and academic genres. In spoken genres, adaptors and plausibility shields are used more frequently, primarily to express the speaker's attitudes and subjective opinions, while in academic genres, rounders and attribution shields are more common, aiming to enhance the accuracy and rationality of the content. The study also highlights the important pragmatic functions of hedges. The appropriate use of hedges in different genres helps reduce communication barriers and enhance efficiency. The findings indicates that both teachers and students should consciously learn and master the correct application of hedges in the teaching process. Teachers should demonstrate the proper use of hedges in instruction and encourage students to apply them flexibly in different contexts to enhance the accuracy and effectiveness of their language expression.

Keywords:
hedges, corpus, genres, pragmatics

1.Introduction

Hedges, as an important concept in linguistics, has strong practicability and abundant pragmatic functions and characteristics, and is also an important topic in linguistic research. Joanna Channell mentioned the importance of vague language in his book, he emphasized the ability to employ strategic vagueness is an essential component of the communicative competence exhibited especially by native English speakers.[1] In many cases such as daily conversations and academic writing, people are unable to describe every detail precisely so they often use relatively vague forms and phrases to express themselves. Such vague expressions are called hedges. This study will use the BNC corpus (British National Corpus) as the object of study to analyze the usage of some typical hedges in spoken and academic genres based on the classifications of hedges, and aims to provide some implications for teaching.

The purpose of this study is to help English users identify the usage of hedges in different contexts and to choose suitable hedges to improve their expression. As an inherent feature of language, hedges plays an important role in both spoken and written communication. By examining hedges and their functions in various contexts, users can recognize the importance of hedges. The study also seeks to empower language users with practical strategies for selecting context-sensitive hedging devices, thereby enhancing their ability to convey propositions with appropriate precision, express opinions with suitable hedges, and engage in interpersonal

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communication with necessary politeness markers. Furthermore, this study aims to help users select appropriate hedges for different contexts, thereby enabling them to express their views and ideas more effectively and engage in verbal communication more appropriately.

2.Literature Review

The first scholar who proposed the concept "hedges" is Lakoff in 1973. He believed that the main function of hedges is to make the content expressed in a more vague or clearer way. [2] From Hyland's perspective, it can be inferred that hedges serve as a linguistic strategy used to reflect individual's attitude and cognitive stance toward the truth value of a situation. [3] Based on this concept, scholars have made some classifications of hedges, among which a four-category classification of hedges has been widely agreed. This classification is based on two categories proposed by E.F.Prince in Linguistics and the Professions. Prince divides hedges into two categories: approximators and shields. [4]

Approximators refer to linguistic devices that modify the precision of quantitative expressions, including those related to quantity, frequency, and scope. These hedges either alter the original meaning of the utterance, adjust its semantic content to some degree, or establish a flexible range for the proposition in order to reduce the absoluteness and certainty of the statement. In contrast, shields maintain the truth conditions and fundamental meaning of the utterance while mitigating its force or intensity. The incorporation of shields adds a qualifying dimension to the statement, indicating that the expressed view represents either the speaker's personal perspective.

The two categories are divided into four categories: Approximators are divided into adaptors (e.g. sort of, kind of, very, somewhat, really) and rounders (approximately, roughly, essentially). Adaptors are typically used to indicate the fluctuation in the veracity level of an utterance. In verbal communication, these linguistic devices serve to modify expressions that are nearly accurate but cannot be asserted with absolute certainty, rendering them more flexible and better aligned with actual circumstances. Rounders are typically used to indicate modifications in the range of expression or interpretation within discourse. When utilizing this category of hedges, readers or listeners need not concern themselves with the precise correspondence between the actual situation and the discussed topic.

Shields are also divided into two types: plausibility shields (e.g I think, I suppose, as far as I can tell) and attribution shields (e.g according to, the possibility, as is well known). Plausibility shields communicate the speaker's viewpoint and attitude, but they specifically characterize the expressed ideas as subjective interpretations or speculative thoughts rather than absolute statements. Attribution shields do not express the speaker's opinion or guess directly, but quotes the opinion of a third party. This type of hedges uses some well founded and sourced statements to moderate the things so as to indicate the speaker's attitude and reducing their subjectivity.

Some scholars have also explored the role and pragmatic significance of hedges. Zadeh held the view that hedges serve to limit and regulate the degree of fuzziness in vague terms.[5] Salager-Meyer believes that hedges plays a role in avoiding overly absolutive expressions, especially in academic writing. Therefore, hedges should be properly used to enable researchers to have greater freedom and be more open to accept

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some explanations and supplements. [6] Li Shuangling also mentioned that the utilization of vague expressions fulfills various communicative objectives in different genres. Such linguistic strategy merits acknowledgment as an essential, specialized tool for effective legal communication. [7]

After reviewing relevant literature, most studies on hedges focus on single genre or context, or contrast the different uses of hedges in two languages. There are few analyses of the same hedges in different contexts. Combined with previous studies and research purpose, this essay has two main research questions:

1.What is the frequency and distribution of the use of hedges in spoken English genres and Academic English genres?

2.What are the functions of hedges in the two different contexts?

3.Research Methods

The corpus-based method is mainly adopted in this study. The data in this study are all from the sub-corpus of BNC corpus: Spoken corpus and Academic corpus. BNC, comprising 100 million words, is a comprehensive and diverse resource that includes a wide range of genres. As a large-scale corpus encompassing both written and spoken texts, the BNC is highly representative and reliable for linguistic research. This study focuses on comparing the hedges used in spoken and academic genres.

3.1 Linguistic Features

According to Bhatia, genres constitute socially recognized communicative patterns that effectively accomplish specific purposes through conventionalized linguistic and discourse system.[8] Yang Huizhong gives a definition about genres, it refers to the use of language in different contexts, reflecting the variations in linguistic expression that emerge from diverse situations, professional fields, and spoken language in daily communication. [9] Although the general function of hedges is to introduce vagueness or enhance subjective emotions to increase authenticity, spoken and academic genres produce different features. Spoken genres tend to be informal and colloquial, whereas academic genres emphasize precision and detail. Therefore, hedges also demonstrates different linguistics features according to different contexts and genres.

According to the classification, the features of hedges mainly divided into two aspects: semantic level and pragmatic level. The two levels are divided into four categories.

At the semantic level, the features of adaptors and rounders mainly include: (1) Ability to affect the truth conditions of content, potentially altering the factual basis of statements. (2) Impact on the authenticity of language content, influencing the perceived reliability of information. (3) Function in restricting the extent or scope of language content, setting boundaries for the conveyed information.

At the pragmatic level, features of plausibility shields and attribution shields mainly include: (1) Non-interference with the truth condition of content, maintaining the original propositional value. (2) Generally used to expressing either subjective emotions or objective feelings, reflecting the user's attitude. (3) To serve as evidences, providing supplementary justification for the language content.

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3.2 Specific Methods

The research method used in this study combines qualitative and quantitative approaches. First, a total of 24 hedges were collected and categorized into four types. From these 24 hedges, 8 (two from each type) that exhibit significant frequency differences across genres were selected as the research targets. These hedges were then searched under the Chart function in the BNC corpus, and their frequencies per million words (per mil) were observed and recorded to analyze the differences in their usage between spoken and academic genres. Excel is also used to make the results graphic. Based on the literature and search results, the following 8 hedges, which show notable differences between the two genres and are less likely to cause ambiguity due to their lexical properties, were selected for comparative study:

Table 1. Eight hedges selected for comparative analysis

Adaptors	kind of, very
Rounders	approximately, roughly
Plausibility shields	I think, I believe
Attribution shields	according to, as is well known

4.Analysis and Results

4.1 Adaptors

"Kind of" and "very" are selected as typical examples for adaptors. Figure 1 and Figure 2 show the results:

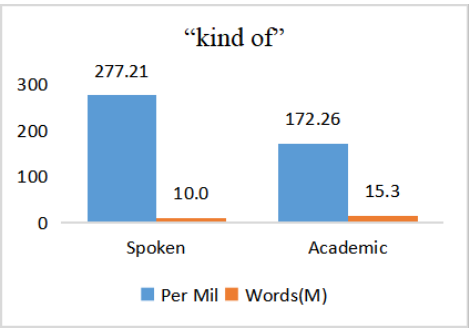


Figure 1. Frequencies of the Hedges "Kind of" in Spoken and Academic Genres

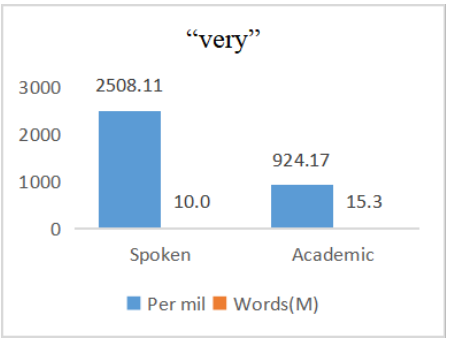


Figure 2. Frequencies of the Hedges "very" in Spoken and Academic Genres

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The results indicate that both types of hedges are used more frequently in the spoken genres than in academic genres. This is related to the linguistic features of adaptors. This phenomenon can be attributed to the distinctive linguistic characteristics and communicative demands of each genre. Spoken genres, characterized by their spontaneous and interactive nature, naturally accommodate a greater use of hedges as they facilitate real-time communication management, face-saving strategies, and interpersonal relationship maintenance. Compared with spoken genre, academic genres require users to express objective and precise meanings as much as possible. Words like "very" are inherently vague in terms of degree, so hedges of this kind are used more frequently in Spoken. The main feature of adaptors is to limit the extent of content. While this type of hedge does not affect the truth value of the content, it is often employed to mitigate the speaker's uncertainty about the accuracy of the information. As a result, adaptors are frequently used when presenting factual content or related details.

4.2 Rounders

"Approximately" and "roughly" is chosen as the typical examples in rounders. The results are shown below:

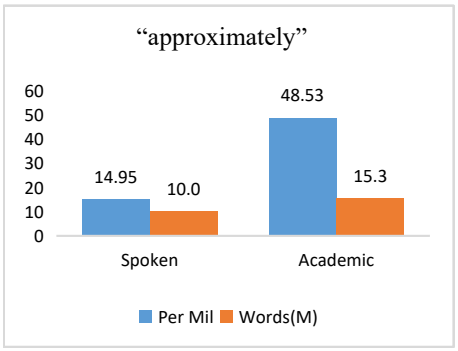


Figure 3. Frequencies of the Hedges "approximately" in Spoken and Academic Genres

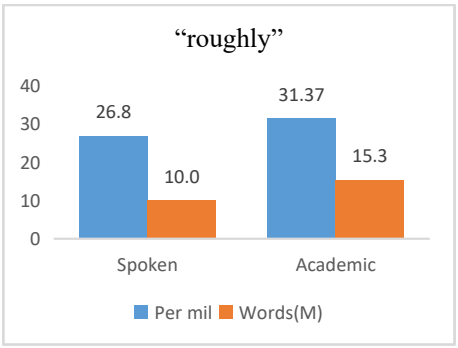


Figure 4. Frequencies of the Hedges "roughly" in Spoken and Academic Genres

Figure 3 and figure 4 reveal that "approximately" is used much more frequently in academic genres than in spoken genres. Both "approximately" and "roughly" serve as strategic devices for indicating the imprecision of quantitative data while maintaining the integrity of the presented information. Their primary function as scope-limiting devices allows writers and speakers to establish reasonable parameters around numerical values, thereby enhancing the comprehensibility and reliability of the communicated information. "Roughly"

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shows less variation in frequency between the two different genres, it is still slightly more frequently used in academic genres. The results also show that "approximately" and "roughly" are typically used to describe the uncertainty about precise numbers. The main feature of rounders is to limit the scope of the content being expressed. When the expression cannot be presented with accurate information, this type of hedges is often used to provide a range or boundary for better understanding. In academic genres, where precision is highly valued, the use of such terms helps define a specific range, thereby enhancing the accuracy and clarity of the content.

4.3 Plausibility Shields

Two typical examples of plausibility shields are selected for analysis: sentences beginning with "I think" and "I believe".

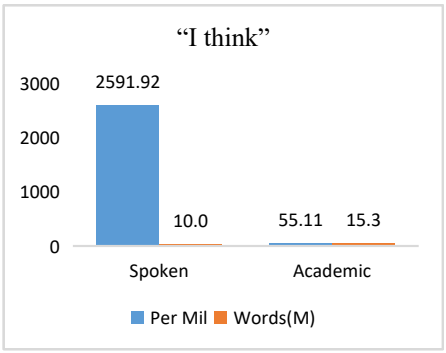


Figure 5. Frequencies of the Hedges"I think" in Spoken and Academic Genres

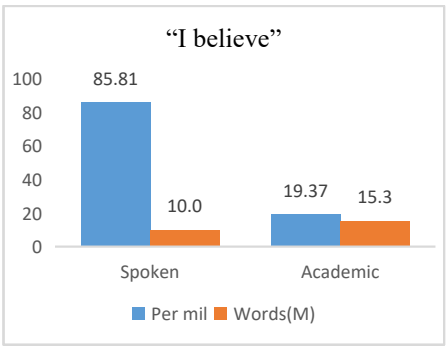


Figure 6. Frequencies of the Hedges"I believe" in Spoken and Academic Genres

The results show that the frequency of plausibility shields in spoken genres is much higher than that of academic genres. This difference can be attributed to the fundamental characteristics of spoken communication, which is inherently more spontaneous, interactive, and subjective in nature. The conversational context naturally accommodates a greater use of plausibility shields as they facilitate the expression of personal perspectives and emotional engagement. This expression is typically used when the speaker tend to express their own subjective opinion or attitude. As a pragmatic-level hedges, the main feature of plausibility shields is the prominent use of first-person pronouns. Therefore, this type serves as an effective means for expressing personal viewpoints and conveying the speaker's emotions and attitudes. Additionally, listeners do not necessarily expect a rigorous verification of the truthfulness of the content in such contexts.

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4.4 Attribution Shields

"According to" and "It is said that" is chose to be two typical examples for attribution shields. Figure 7 and figure 8 give the following results:

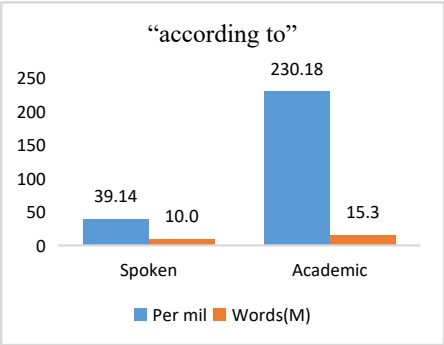


Figure 7. Frequencies of the Hedges"according to" in Spoken and Academic Genres

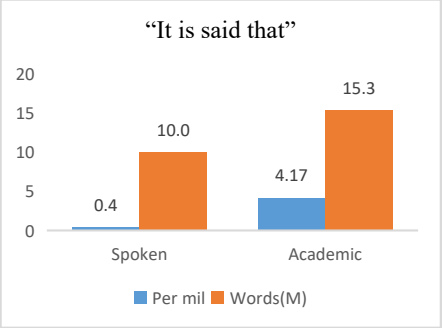


Figure 8. Frequencies of the Hedges"I think" in Spoken and Academic Genres

The retrieval results indicate that these two expressions are used more frequently in academic genres than those in spoken genres. In academic genres, such expressions are typically used to support the theoretical foundation of the author's argument. In spoken genres, these phrases also serve an indirect role in conveying uncertainty. Speakers often use attribution shields to express doubts about the authenticity of the content. At the same time, these expressions also provide supporting functions that help enhance the credibility of the conveyed information. Despite these functional differences, attribution shields in both genres share the common characteristic of enhancing the credibility of communicated information. In academic genres, this is achieved through systematic citation of authoritative sources, while in spoken discourse, it is accomplished by referencing generally accepted knowledge or widely recognized authorities. This dual functionality underscores the versatility of attribution shields as pragmatic devices that adapt to different communicative contexts while maintaining their core function of information source management.

5.Discussion and Pedagogical Implications

The results indicate that different types of hedges are used with varying frequencies across different contexts. Generally, adaptors are more frequently used in spoken genres, while rounders are predominantly used in academic genres. Plausibility shields, which primarily convey users' subjective thoughts, are significantly

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more common in spoken genres than in academic genres. Attribution shields are mostly utilized in academic genres to enhance authenticity by referencing external sources.

Hedges plays a crucial role in pragmatic functions. As a linguistic tool, hedges enable speakers to navigate face-threatening situations and express politeness. The appropriate use of hedges in spoken genres helps reduce communication barriers and improve efficiency, while in academic genres, hedges contribute significantly to the precision and credibility of scholarly discourse by allowing writers to appropriately qualify their claims, acknowledge limitations, and demonstrate epistemic caution. By guiding students to understand the pragmatic functions of hedges and teaching them to accurately use hedging vocabulary to express uncertainty, teachers can help learners use English more naturally in diverse contexts. The effective teaching of hedges requires a comprehensive approach that addresses both linguistic competence and cultural awareness.

The use of hedges is closely related to cultural background, making it essential for students to learn about their role in cross-cultural communication to avoid misunderstandings caused by inappropriate language use. Given that the use of hedges is deeply rooted in cultural and communicative conventions, it is imperative for educators to guide students in understanding the cultural dimensions of hedging strategies. Teachers should pay attention to students' use of hedges in daily practice and enable In addition, teachers should integrate cultural explanations with linguistic instruction, helping students recognize how different cultures employ hedges to convey politeness, uncertainty, or tentativeness. Teachers can help students master the proper use of hedges by providing feedback and correcting mistakes. Simultaneously, students should be encouraged to actively experiment with hedges in various communicative situations, gradually developing the ability to select appropriate linguistic strategies based on contextual factors such as power relations, social distance, and communicative purposes.

In summary, both teachers and students should consciously strive to master the correct application of hedges. Teachers should model their appropriate use in teaching to enhance the accuracy and flexibility of expression, while students should practice using them strategically to communicate more effectively in both spoken and academic genres.

6.Conclusion

This study, based on the British National Corpus (BNC), examines the typical usage of hedges by categorizing them and analyzing their frequency and functions in both spoken and academic genres. By integrating the linguistic features of hedges with the characteristics of these two distinct genres, the study indicates that adaptors and plausibility shields are more common in spoken language. These types of hedges are primarily used to convey the speaker's attitudes and subjective viewpoints, reflecting the informal and interactive nature of spoken genres. In academic genres, users tend to use rounders and attribution shields to enhance the accuracy and validity of the content, which aligns with the formal and evidence-based requirements of academic discourse.

The findings of this study provide implications for both teaching and daily communication. Teachers should emphasize the importance of selecting different kinds of hedges to help students achieve more effective and accurate expression. Learners can use adaptors and plausibility shields to express personal opinions in spo-

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ken genres. In academic genres, the strategic use of rounders and attribution shields can help students present their arguments with greater precision and support their claims with credible references.

In conclusion, this study makes significant contributions to the understanding of hedging strategies across both spoken and academic genres, shedding light on their diverse pragmatic functions and contextual applications. The findings emphasize the importance of strategic hedge selection as a crucial component of communicative competence, particularly in linguistically and culturally diverse environments. Language users, whether native or non-native speakers, should develop a conscious awareness of hedge usage patterns and their contextual appropriateness to ensure precise and effective communication.

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