

Functions of Hedges and Boosters in Academic Writing

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Abstract. Hedges and boosters as meta-discourse markers have been the focus of many studies. In academic writing, the effective and balanced use of hedges and boosters can help the writer communicate both the ideational meaning and interpersonal meaning with readers to more precise degrees of accuracy in his/her truth assessments. The ways that writers distinguish their opinions from facts and evaluate the certainty of their assertions are central to the meaning of academic texts, yet this is an area that EFL students often find extremely problematic. This paper, by analyzing a TESOL Quarterly article, explains and demonstrates how hedges and boosters are used and function in all parts of academic writing. The analysis finds that, as a typical academic article, there are more boosters than hedges in introduction and literature review parts, relatively fewer hedges and boosters in method and results parts, and much more hedges and boosters in the last two parts. Moreover, by keeping a balance between hedging and boosting, the writers invest a convincing degree of assurance in their propositions, yet avoid overstating their case and risk inviting the rejection of their arguments. The research is to cultivate EFL learners' awareness of metadiscourse devices when reading in the target language and to develop their ability to effectively employ these devices in their own academic writing.

Keywords: Hedges; Boosters; Academic writing; Case study

1. Introduction

One of the most crucial aspects of academic discourse is how authors attempt to alter their claims by downplaying unclear or potentially dangerous assertions, highlighting what they think to be true, and expressing proper collegial attitudes to readers. Hedges and boosters are the collective names for these representations of uncertainty and certainty (Holmes, 1990). While boosters allow writers to show conviction and to mark their involvement and solidarity with an audience, hedges signal a cautious judgment of referential information and communicate collegial respect for the perspectives of peers.

The goal of this essay is to examine how interactional metadiscourse tools, such as hedges and boosters, assist writers in academic writing in effectively transmitting both their interpersonal and ideational meanings. A tentative analysis of a sample research article from TESOL Quarterly will demonstrate the functions of hedges and boosters in all parts of academic writing.

2. Literature Review

Academic writing is generally a persuasive endeavor that seeks to advance knowledge by settling on interpretations and statements with readers (Hyland, 2005). In addition to just delivering propositional facts, writers also need to take into account the expectations of their audience and what they are likely to find interesting, believable, and clear. Metadiscourse is a method of comprehending the interpersonal resources that writers employ to communicate propositional contents, and is a crucial rhetorical tool for writers to engage and persuade readers in ways that adhere to a discipline's norms, values, and ideology. It conveys interpersonal and textual meanings that their audience is likely to find convincing and credible. "Its role in academic writing is to galvanize support, express collegiality, resolve difficulties and avoid disputation" (Hyland, 2005, p. 90).

A variety of linguistic techniques can be used to realize metadiscourse, which is fundamentally a heterogeneous category. The interactive and interactional metadiscourse subcategories are the two

main divisions in the taxonomy of metadiscourse, according to Hyland (2005). Interactive metadiscourse is mainly to lead the reader through a text. A few examples of interactive metadiscourse devices are transitions (additionally, but, thus, and), frame markers (finally, to conclude, my purpose is), endophoric markers (as noted above; see Fig; in section 2), evidentials (according to X; Z states), and code glosses (specifically, e.g., such that, in other words). Interactional metadiscourse devices try to draw the reader into a text by striking a balance between reluctance and insistence, as well as the expression of an appropriate relationship to one's data, arguments, and audience. They include hedging words (might, perhaps, about), boosting words (in fact, definitely, and it is obvious that), attitude words (sadly, shockingly), self-mentions (I, we, and my), and engagement words (consider, note, and you can see that). Interactive metadiscourse devices are more textual while interactional metadiscourse devices are more interpersonal.

Among all these metadiscourse devices mentioned above, hedges and boosters are the devices most frequently employed by writers to establish an appropriate relationship with readers (Hyland, 1998a, b). Academic writing is not "objective". It does more than merely relay objective information and facts. Rather, it conveys the claims, attitudes, and subjective viewpoints of human agents. Therefore, the employment of hedges and boosters can show how certain/uncertain a writer is about the claim he/she is making, and what kind of attitude or self-image a writer wishes to convey to his/her audience.

The language usually used in hedging and boosting can be divided into the following categories:

- modal auxiliaries (e.g. may, might, could, must);
- verbs stressing doubt/certainty/involvement (e.g. show, demonstrate, suggest, believe, assume);
- other modifiers including approximators (e.g. roughly, kind of, quite, around), modal nouns (e.g. possibility, certainty), temporal adjuncts (e.g. sometimes, frequently, seldom), and modal adjuncts (e.g. possibly, perhaps, probably, certainly, definitely, plainly);
- that-clauses (frequently used together with modal verbs) (e.g. it may be the case that, it is unquestionably the case that, there is every reason to believe that, and it appears that...).

3. A Case Study of a Sample Article

Based on the theoretical framework discussed above, the following analysis of a research article will serve as a concrete example to illustrate how hedges and boosters function in academic writing.

The article, entitled "*EFL Learners' Receptive Knowledge of Derived Words: The Case of Swedish Adolescents*" (P. Snoder. & B. Laufer, 2022), is taken from TESOL Quarterly, an academic journal on English language teaching. The purpose of this study was to examine how well Swedish teenagers understand the meaning of derived terms in English and whether learner proficiency, word frequency, or affix type affects this understanding. Participants were 88 school pupils from two proficiency levels. There were two assessments designed for receptive vocabulary knowledge. The main implication of the study results is that the word family, which subsumes basewords and their related forms under word knowledge, is an appropriate unit of counting in L2 pedagogy and research for learners with extensive exposure to English and a Germanic first language.

Like all typical academic discourses, this article contains six parts—introduction, literature review, method (participants, instruments, data collection, and scoring), results, discussion, and concluding remarks. On the whole, there are more boosters than hedges in introduction and literature review parts, relatively fewer hedges and boosters in method and results parts, and much more hedges and boosters in the last two parts.

3.1 Introduction and Literature Review Parts

Table 1. Hedges and Boosters in Introduction and Literature Review Parts

	Hedges	Boosters
Modal auxiliaries	may, would	will, cannot be
Verbs	assume, beg, suggest	support, present, show, conclude, investigate,
Modifiers	perhaps, at least, possible, partially, plausible	widely, most, mainly, strongly, markedly, clearly, significantly, largely, typically, higher, more

From Table 1, we can see clearly that the writers use more boosters than hedges in these two parts. The purpose of these two parts is to work together to build a research area by developing a region and establishing a niche. To achieve the purpose, the writers need to show a higher degree of certainty about their claims and assertions.

The hedges like “may”, “assume” and “perhaps” are used just to convey deference, modesty, or respect for colleagues’ views (Hyland, 2000, p. 88). They show that material is provided as opinion rather than verified truth and candor about how the research will specifically aid to uncover uncharted terrain.

On the other hand, there are more boosters in the first two parts of the article, mostly verbs expressing certainty (support, show, and present, etc.), and modifiers (widely, most, markedly, and significantly, etc.) indicating a convincing degree of assurance in the assertions and claims made by the writers. These boosters assist authors in progressively establishing their study areas, demonstrating the significance of the particular research, and enabling writers to show assurance in their arguments while emphasizing common knowledge, group participation, and direct reader interaction (Hyland, 2000, p. 87).

Besides, the writers also use many comparative degrees, which is a mild way of boosting, to demonstrate their commitment, as well as their engagement and solidarity with audiences (Hyland, 1998a, b).

3.2 Method and Results Parts. Usually, there are fewer hedges and boosters in method and results parts in academic writing because in these two parts writers are supposed to describe their research methodology and research findings objectively without involving too much membership. However, in this research article, we do find quite a number of hedges and boosters in these two parts as shown in Table 2 below.

Table 2. Hedges and Boosters in Method and Results Parts

	Hedges	Boosters
Modal auxiliaries	may, could	can, will, should,
Verbs	do not necessarily, suggest,	show, illustrate, note, yield, support
Modifiers	also, acceptable, normally, unlikely, second best, partial	Significant, most, rather, quite well, much lower, higher, lowest, the more...the better, only

When we take a closer study on the locations of these hedges and boosters, we can find that most of them appear in the results part. In the method part, there are only two boosters and two hedges. The employment of the two boosters here is to emphasize the reliability and validity of his research method while the using of the hedges is to make clear that the writers are only presenting what their opinion is and to open up a discursive space.

In the results part, we have a lot more hedges and boosters, basically falling into two categories—verbs and modifiers. But we cannot ignore one interesting point, that is, many modifier hedges and boosters are supported by specific figures or endophoric markers like “see Table 1”,

“Table 2 shows”, “Table 3 shows” etc. In this sense, the writers use boosters to convey more exact degrees of precision in their truth assessments and hedges when they are confident in what they are saying but want to look modest or show deference to the readers.

The verbs highlighting certainty are used when the results are in consistence with previous research or with literature backing. But when it comes to making the writers’ own assertion, they become very cautious of the wording, expressing their tentativeness and possibilities concerning the factuality of the statements and indicating deference to readers.

3.3 Discussion and Concluding Remarks Parts. Discussion and concluding remarks parts are the places where hedges and boosters, especially hedges, are most frequently used in academic discourse. The writers hedge to convey that they are negotiable people, that they are willing to be flexible about their ideas, and that they are open to other viewpoints. The hedges and boosters that appeared in these two parts are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3 Hedges and Boosters in Discussion and Conclusion Parts

	Hedges	Boosters
Modal auxiliaries	may (appearing 3 times), would (appearing 2 times), could (appearing 5 times)	can/cannot (appearing 7 times), should
Verbs	suggest, imply, entail, seem, may account for	demonstrate, evidence, align with, show, conclude, provide, indicate, claim, reject, advocate, contribute
Modifiers	possible, all but, also, almost, not surprising, less, probably, additional	considerable, detailed, very high, exceptionally good, only, further, even, significantly, apparently

There are two distinctive features of the employment of hedges and boosters in these two parts.

One is more use of modal auxiliaries. By using more modal auxiliary hedges and boosters, the writers can modulate the force of statements while appropriately conveying what they want to say without being too certain over some potentially disputable issues, and successfully convey to the readers their self-images, showing sufficient deference, modesty, or respect for colleagues’ views. Modal auxiliaries are the word class frequently connected to “epistemic meaning” (Varttala, 1999) expressing speculative potential as that of modal auxiliaries. That explains why the words “may” and “could” are used so frequently in this section. Hedging might be viewed in this sense as a manifestation of the so-called “negative politeness” Brown & Levinson (1978) described in their theory, or, more broadly, as a strategy for “gaining ratification for claims from a powerful peer group” (Hyland, 1996b, p. 434).

Another feature is that the writers deliberately keep a balance between the employment of hedges and boosters. By doing so, the writers tone down or up at the right time and place and to the appropriate extent. When we take a closer look at these hedges and boosters, we may find that the boosters are not only quite mild in degree of certainty, but also usually balanced by some hedges in the same utterances.

This is, actually, a common feature of academic writing which is about the exchange of ideas within a discourse community. Therefore, intellectual flexibility, or at least an appearance of flexibility is attractive in academic writing because academic readers regard themselves as intelligent, critical, independent, who do not like to be preached at. Academic writers invest a persuasive degree of assurance in their claims by striking a balance between hedging and boosting, but they also avoid overstating their case and running the risk of having their arguments rejected.

4. Conclusion

Through a case study, the paper explains and demonstrates how hedges and boosters are used and function in all parts of academic writing. The analysis finds that the effective and balanced use of

hedges and boosters can help the writer communicate both the ideational meaning and interpersonal meaning with academic readers to more precise degrees of accuracy in his/her truth assessments. The study demonstrates how writers' commitment to the argument is altered through hedges, and how they highlight their beliefs in the truth by using boosters to communicate the proper collegial attitudes to readers. By striking a balance between conviction and caution and by projecting an acceptable disciplinary character of modesty and assertiveness, these tools aid academics in gaining acceptance for their work. However, more corpus-based researches are necessary before the conclusions are more generalized, for this research is only based on one case.

This analysis also offers some pedagogical implications for EFL teachers in China. It seems that most EFL learners at most universities in China are simply unaware of these metadiscourse devices, a phenomenon Low (1996) calls the "Lexical Invisibility Hypothesis". Therefore, there will be a large research space on how to cultivate EFL learners' awareness of metadiscourse devices and how to develop their ability to effectively employ these devices in their own academic writing.

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