PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE: THE CASE OF HEDGING

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1. INTRODUCTION

PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE is the ability to communicate your intended message with all its nuances in any socio-cultural context and to interpret the message of your interlocutor as it was intended. As critical as this ability is for communication success, it is often not given the emphasis it deserves in the teaching of a second language, with the result that second-language speakers, who lack pragmatic competence, may produce grammatically flawless speech that nonetheless fails to achieve its communicative aims.

One area in which the lack of pragmatic competence can create serious problems for a second-language speaker is that of HEDGING, a rhetorical strategy that attenuates either the full semantic value of a particular expression, as in He's sort of nice, or the full force of a speech act, as in I must ask you to stop doing that. When non-native speakers fail to hedge appropriately, they may be perceived as impolite, offensive, arrogant, or simply inappropriate. Failing to recognize a hedged utterance, they may misunderstand a native speaker's meaning. This is especially unfortunate when speakers are otherwise fluent, since people typically expect that someone who speaks their language well on the grammatical level has also mastered the pragmatic niceties.

In this chapter I look at hedging as an aspect of pragmatic competence. In Section 2, I describe the evolution of hedging from the point at which it was introduced into the linguistic literature in 1972 until today. In Section 3, I address the properties of hedges, the devices through which hedging is implemented, and in Section 4, I discuss the relationship between hedging and the discourse effects of vagueness, evasion, equivocation, and politeness. In Section 5, I present
examples of hedging from a range of sources, including everyday conversation, formal academic writing, and mass media (radio and television). These examples illustrate the ubiquity of hedging and highlight the perils its misuse holds for non-native speakers.

2. THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF HEDGING

As far as I can determine, Weinreich (1966: 163) was the first person to write about hedging in the linguistic research literature when he talked about “metalinguistic operators,” arguing that for every language “metalinguistic operators” such as (in) English true, real, so-called, strictly speaking, and the most powerful extrapolator of all, like, function as instructions for the loose or strict interpretation of designata.

However, it was Lakoff (1972) who had the greatest initial impact, and it was his papers that popularized the concept. He drew on the work of Zadeh (1965), and that of Rosch (1973). Zadeh worked with fuzzy sets and noticed that categories such as animals, which were thought to have a fixed membership criteria, had a “continuum of classification grades.” Rosch-Heider challenged the notion that properties defining a category are shared by all members equally. For example, a robin is not just a “sort of a bird” but rather a “bird par excellence,” whereas a penguin is a “sort of bird.”

Lakoff suggested that any attempt to limit truth conditions for natural language sentences to true, false, and “nonsense” would distort the natural language concepts by portraying them as having sharp rather than vaguely defined boundaries. Suggesting that this is an area that deserves study, he wrote that

> For me, some of the most interesting questions are raised by the study of words whose meaning implicitly involves fuzziness – words whose job it is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy. (Lakoff, 1972: 195)

He was interested in the properties of words such as rather or sort of and how they make things fuzzy or less fuzzy (vague or less vague). For Lakoff, hedging involved the attenuation of the membership of a particular expression, for example,

(1) a) John is sort of smart.
    b) That is technically a bookcase.

or the reinforcement of the class membership, for example,

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1 None of the examples in this chapter were invented but came from the BNC, texts, papers, overheard conversations, and the like. I sometimes made modifications in length. I have not cited the sources since I do not believe they are relevant for this chapter.
Lakoff began with a semantic discussion of sort of, pointing out that this predicate modifier and others like it reveal different distinctions of category membership. In the sentences below,

(3) a) A robin is sort of a bird. [false, no questions it’s a bird]
   b) A chicken is sort of a bird. [true, or very close to true]
   c) A penguin is sort of a bird. [true, or close to true]
   d) A bat is sort of a bird. [false, or very close to false]
   e) A cow is sort of a bird. [false]

the degree of truth must be “rejected” for a real bird, “possibly” accepted for a non-prototypical bird like a chicken or penguin, but “rejected” again when the animal of which bird was being predicated was simply not a bird or not much of a bird. Lakoff discussed other hedges such as par excellence, typically, strictly speaking, loosely speaking, and in essence, showing that these hedges interact with the term they modify, but in different ways. All his examples involved predicate adjectives or predicate nominals, and all were declarative sentences. This type of hedging I refer to as propositional hedging, since it is the truth value of the proposition that is affected.

It is relevant that Lakoff was primarily interested in hedges, not hedging. He offered the following as examples of hedges in English.²

(4) real, regular, actually, almost, as it were, basically, can be view as, crypto-, especially, essentially, exceptionally, for the most part, in a manner of speaking, in a real sense, in a sense, in a way, kind of, largely, literally, loosely speaking, more or less, mostly, often, on the tall side, par excellence, particularly, pretty much, principally, pseudo-, quintessentially, rather, really, relatively, roughly, so to say, somewhat, sort of, strictly speaking, technically, typically, very, virtually.

He also showed that the interpretation of hedges is dependent on context and that the effect of hedging is a pragmatic not a semantic phenomenon. For example, the interpretation of (5),

(5) Technically, Dale and Lee are married.

depends crucially on the hearer’s knowledge of the gender of the two subjects as well as what constitutes marriage.

² Although he does not mention it, he presumably is aware that these terms were involved in hedging only some of the time.
Finally, Lakoff touched upon, but did not delve into, several notions that were developed later by others. For example, he wrote of hedges interacting with *performatives*, as in

(6) Technically, I *said* Harry was a bastard [ = I said Harry was a bastard, but I didn’t mean it]

where *technically* is canceling the implication that if you say something, it is assumed that you mean it. He also attributes to Robin Lakoff the observation that certain verbs and syntactic constructions “convey hedged performatives – that is, they modify the force of a speech act” (195) For example, in

(7) I suppose that Harry is coming

we have a modified claim. He did not follow up on her observations, but Fraser (1975) and Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) did so.

Fraser (1975) introduced the term **HEDGED PERFORMATIVE**, where certain performative verbs such as *apologize*, *promise*, and *request* when preceded by specific modals such as *can*, *must*, and *should*, as in

(8) a) I *should* apologize for running over your cat.

b) I *can* promise that I will never again smoke grass.

c) I *must* request that you sit down.

result in an attenuated illocutionary force of the speech act designated by the verb. In these examples, the modals were considered as hedges. Example (8a) is still an apology, just one less strong than if *should* were not present.

It was Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) who developed fully the speech act aspect of hedging. Whereas Lakoff considered only propositional hedging, and Fraser touched only on performative verb hedging, Brown and Levinson treated the hedging of the illocutionary force of a speech act in great detail in their efforts to account for politeness phenomena. This second type of hedging I refer to as **SPEECH ACT HEDGING**.

They commented that in the literature,

A hedge is 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 respect; or that it is *more* true and complete than perhaps might be expected. (145)

and then moved to a discussion involving illocutionary force hedging, where the hedge attenuates the strength of the speech act. They write:

Now, the thrust of our argument is that ordinary communicative intentions are often potential threats to cooperative interaction. Communicative intentions are regulated and encoded in speech
acts, and if one looks at the conditions on the felicitous use of speech acts, the sources of threat become clear... Consequently, to hedge these assumptions – that is, to avoid commitment to them – is a primary and fundamental method of disarming routine interactional threats. (146)

It is interesting that Brown and Levinson maintain both the attenuation and the reinforcement aspects of hedging, although they wrote little of the latter aspect.

Prince et al. (1982) made a clear distinction between two types of hedging, one type that involves the propositional content and affects the truth condition of the proposition conveyed (propositional hedging), and a second type that involves the relationship between the propositional content and the speaker and serves as an index of the commitment of the speaker to the truth of the propositional content conveyed (speech act hedging).³

These authors divided up the hedging world into two classes. The first, approximators, operate on the propositional content proper and contribute to the interpretation by indicating some markedness, that is, non-prototype, with respect to class membership of a particular item. There are two subclasses: adaptors (acknowledged to be what Lakoff called hedges), relate to class membership; for example, somewhat, sort of, almost describable as, some, a little bit, etc.,

(9) a) He also has a somewhat low interior larynx.
   b) She noticed that he was a little bit blue.

and rounders, convey a range, where the term is typical, for example, about, approximately, something around, etc.

(10) a) His weight was approximately 3.2 kilograms.
   b) The baby’s blood pressure was something between forty and fifty.

Both sub-classes occur when the speaker is attempting to correlate an actual situation with some prototypical, goal-relevant situation, where the hedging indicates that actual situation is close to but not exactly the expression modified.

Shields, their second class, change the relationship between propositional content and the speaker by implicating a level of uncertainty with respect to speaker’s commitment. Here, again, there are two subclasses. plausibility shields are expressions that relate doubt, such as I think, I take it, probably, as far as I can tell, right now, I have to believe, I don’t see that, etc., illustrated by the following.

(11) a) I think we can just slow him down to a little over maintenance.
   b) As far as I can tell, you don’t have anything to lose by taking that path.

³ Although they discuss only statements in their chapter, their discussion can be easily extended to other syntactic types.
Prince *et al.* point out that whereas the unhedged versions imply that the speaker has knowledge via observations and/or logical reasoning, statements marked by a plausibility shield imply that the speaker is making the assertion based on plausible reasons.

The second subclass, *Attribution Shields* are expressions such as *according to her estimates, presumably, at least to X’s knowledge*, etc., which attribute the responsibility of the message to someone other than the speaker, often via plausible reasoning.

(12) a) He was not very ill, *according to her estimates*.

b) There was no reason to worry, *as far as anyone knew*.

The authors also point out that one usually does not impose belief on another when the speaker believes that the proposition at issue is false. For example, in (13),

(13) *According to Dr. Jenkins, we should take out the shunt before* *we move him.*

the speaker is typically committed to the truth of the statement.4

Hübler (1983) made a similar two-way distinction of hedging, between what he called *Understatements* and *Hedges*, although he uses *Understatement* as a cover term for both. Understatement means that “the emotional negatability (of sentences) is restricted through the indetermination of the phrastic,” that is, they concern the propositional content of the sentence. *It is a bit cold in here*, contains an understatement. *Hedging* “is restricted through the indetermination of the neutastic,” that is, it concerns the speaker’s attitude to the hearer regarding the proposition, the claim to validity of the proposition the speaker makes. *It is cold in Alaska, I suppose*, contains a hedge. Hübler’s division resembles that of Prince *et al.* (1982), whose *Approximators* correspond to Hübler’s *Understatements* and whose *Shields* correspond to his *Hedges*.

Finally, Caffi (1999, 2007) wrote about *Mitigation*, the attenuation of unwelcome effects on the hearer (cf. Fraser, 1980), and proposed a classification of mitigating mechanisms (mostly hedging devices) based on her view of the three components of the utterance on which mitigation can operate: the proposition, the illocution, and the utterance source. She called these *Bushes*, *Hedges*, and *Shields*, respectively.

(14) *Bushes*, which are lexical expressions that reduce the commitment to the propositional content of the utterance and may introduce vagueness in the interpretation of the utterance and affect the truth value of the proposition.

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4 Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) do acknowledge the existence of this last sub-class, Attribution Shields, but they do not call them hedges but rather refer to them as impersonal verbs (196); replacement of *I and you* by indefinites (202); pluralization of *I and you* (203); use of address terms as you avoidance (208); use of reference terms as I avoidance (209); and point-of-view distancing (209).
Hedges, which are lexical expressions whose scope is the illocutionary force of the speech act and attenuates the strength of the force by reducing the speaker’s commitment.

Shields, which are devices to avoid the self-ascription to the utterance and realize an overall shift of responsibility, for instance by introducing a different speaker or by deleting the deictic origin of the utterance.

Caffi’s mitigators covered the same concepts as Prince, Frader, and Bosk, although the labels are applied differently. However, Caffi was quite clear that mitigation is not the same as politeness. She wrote,

Far from being limited to a matter of politeness, mitigation captures a rationally grounded behavior which is chiefly aimed at avoiding unnecessary risks, responsibilities and conflicts. At the same time, mitigation indexes the type of speaker we want to be taken for in a given encounter. (1999: 12)

and suggested that a mitigating speaker can be perceived as impolite, and conversely, a non-mitigating, direct speaker can be perceived as exquisitely polite. In Caffi’s view, politeness is one of many possible effects of a mitigating operation, an effect that is both calculable and uncertain, that is, not guaranteed.

In Caffi’s approach, there is no space for a sharp distinction between approximators belonging to semantics and shields to pragmatics. For her, the operation of bushes on the propositional content has repercussions on the whole speech act. In other words, a weakened (marked) precision in the reference act has the effect of weakening the commitment to the truth of the proposition, and this in turn has the effect of weakening the subscription to the whole speech act.

It is relevant that the Plausibility Shields and Attribution Shields of Prince, Frader, and Bosk and Hedges and Shields of Caffi have the same overall effect: they both attenuate the force of the speech act, the former of each applying to the scope of the speech act, the latter applying to the source of the contribution.

In the 1980s, there was considerable effort to sub-classify the class of hedges, based on certain class membership criteria. The following list reflects the array of proposals involving attenuating hedges.

Adaptors, agent avoiders, approximators, attenuators, attribution shields, bushes, committers, compromisers, consultative devices, deintensifiers, diffusers, diminishers, down-toners forewarners, indicator of degrees of reliability, minimizers, mitigators, plausibility shields, play-downs, politeness markers, scope-staters, understaters, validity markers, vocal hesitators, weakeners, etc.

Since the 1980s, there has also been an emphasis on the properties of individual hedges, for example, see Kay (1984), Aijmer (1984), and Fetzer (this volume). In addition, there has been
considerable interest in exploring the use of hedging within different genres of language use, for example, the research article, mathematics talk, politician talk, negotiation talk, and the speech of language learners, to name but a few of the areas. I do not explore these areas (cf. Schröder and Zimmer, 1997).

3. Hedging Today

There is general agreement today that hedging is a rhetorical strategy, by which a speaker, using a linguistic device, can signal a lack of commitment to either the full semantic membership of an expression (propositional hedging),

(18) a) He’s really like a geek.
   b) The pool has sort of a L-shaped design.
   c) Peter’s house is almost 100 feet wide.

or the full commitment to the force of the speech act being conveyed (speech act hedging),

(19) a) Come over here, can you?
   b) I guess I should leave now.
   c) That type of comment isn’t made around here. [Agentless passive]
   d) Perhaps you would sit down a minute.

The notion of reinforcement, initially considered a part of hedging, has pretty much been laid aside. Thus, sentences such as

(20) a) I certainly do insist that you sit down.
   b) He is extremely tall.

are not generally viewed today as instances of hedging but rather of reinforcement. I believe that the reason for this narrowing of the concept stems from the fact that the sense of hedging on the positive side of a concept (be it to involve a proposition or a speech act) seems counterintuitive: hedging is simply not a symmetrical notion, and it does not connote reinforcement.

Linguistic hedges include linguistic devices, both morphological and syntactic forms used in the process of hedging. These include

(21) adverbs, adjectives, impersonal pronouns, concessive conjunctions, indirect speech acts, introductory phrases, modal adverbs, modal adjectives, hedged performatives, modal nouns, modal verbs, epistemic verbs, negation, tag questions, agentless passives, parenthetic constructions, if clauses, progressive forms, tentative inference, hypothetical past, metalinguistic comments, etc.
Although I am concerned here with linguistic devices, for example, lexical expressions such as sort of, technically, and I think, and syntactic configurations such as agentless passive, tag question, and hedged performatives, vocalizations such as aww, uhhh, and weeellll, and gestural devices such as a dismissive wave of the hand or a shrug of the head can be used in hedging as well. I am not discounting them, but they are not a focus of this chapter.

The fact that an expression may be used as a hedge is not part of its definition. In fact, an expression is usually only recognized as a hedge when it is used in hedging. Thus, it should not be surprising that there is no grammatical class of hedges, since hedging devices are drawn from every syntactic category. At best we might say that hedges form an open functional class. As Clemen (1997: 6) comments:

There is no limit to the linguistic expressions that can be considered as hedges . . . The difficulty with these functional definitions is that almost any linguistic item or expression can be interpreted as a hedge . . . no linguistic items are inherently hedges but can acquire this quality depending on the communicative context or the co-text. This also means that no clear-cut lists of hedging expressions are possible.

Nevertheless, I offer below some examples of English hedges and their associated linguistic analysis, drawn from a variety of sources.

(22) a) Adverbs/Adjectives approximately, roughly, about, often, occasionally, generally, . . .
He looks sort of sick.
b) Impersonal pronouns (one, it, . . .)
One can imagine that . . .
c) Concessive conjunctions (although, though, while, whereas, even though, even if, . . .)
Even though you dislike the beach, it's worth going for the view.
d) Hedged performatives (use of modal to hedge performatives verb)
I must ask you to sit down.
e) Indirect Speech Acts
Could you speak a little louder?
f) Introductory phrases (I believe, to our knowledge, it is our view that, we feel that, . . .)
I believe that he should go, if possible.
g) Modal adverbs (perhaps, possibly, probably, practically, presumably, apparently, . . .)
I can possibly do that,
h) Modal adjectives (possible, probable, un/likely, . . .)
It is possible that . . .
i) Modal noun (assumption, claim, possibility, estimate, suggestion, ...)

*The assumption* here is that ...

j) Modal verbs (might, can, would, could, ...)

John *might* leave now.

k) Epistemic verbs (to seem, to appear, to believe, to assume, to suggest, ...)

*It seems that* ...

l) Negative question convey positive hedged assertion

Didn’t Harry leave? [I think Harry left]

I don’t think I’m going. vs. I’m not going. [Former hedges the meaning of latter]

m) Reversal tag

He’s coming, *isn’t he*? [I think he’s coming]

n) Agentless Passive

Many of the troops were injured (...)

o) Conditional subordinators (such as as long as, so long as, assuming that, given that)

Unless the strike has been called off, there will be no trains tomorrow.

p) Progressive form

*I am hoping* you will come.

q) Tentative Inference

*The mountains should be* visible from here.

r) Conditional clause refers to the condition under which the speaker makes the utterance.

*If you’re going my way,* I need a lift back.

s) Metalinguistic comment such as (strictly speaking, so to say, exactly, almost, just about)

*He has an idea, a hypothesis, if you will,* that you *may* find interesting.

In addition, Salager-Meyer (1995) proposed compound hedges such as the following:

(23) a) Modal with hedging verb (*It would appear that* ...).

b) Hedging verb with hedging adverb/adjective (*It seems reasonable that* ...).

c) Double hedges (*It may suggest that; This probably indicates that* ...).

d) Treble hedges (*It seems reasonable to assume that* ...).

e) Quadruple hedges (*It would seem somewhat unlikely that* John will tell anyone.

The focus of hedging may range from a single word to a speech act.

(24) a) Word – *He’s basically* a [bachelor.]

b) Phrase – *He has a somewhat* [elevated temperature.]

c) Proposition – *As far as I can tell,* [you won’t have problems.]

d) Speech Act – *I must* [request] that you sit down.

However, the focus of hedging is never an inference, an entailment, or a presupposition.
a) An inference – *It’s sort of warm in here = > sort of* [Shut the window]
b) An entailment – *I think that some of the boys stayed = > I think that* [More than two of the boys stayed.]
c) A presupposition – *It could be that Harry stopped beating his wife = > It could be that* [Harry had been beating his wife.]

The effect of hedging is found in the interpretation of the utterance rather than in the semantic meaning of the sentence uttered, where the interpretation depends on the context of utterance, the semantic meaning of the sentence uttered, the particular hedge(s) used, and the belief system of the hearer. Moreover, hedging often gives an indication of the speaker’s intentions. For example, in (26),

(26) All I know is that smoking is harmful to your health.

the expression “All I know” indicates that the speaker is saying that the proposition following is true only as far as he can judge, not in any absolute sense. But the speaker is also indicating that Grice’s Maxim of Quantity is being followed (cf. Grice, 1975). Finally, the effect of hedges in initial vs. medial vs. final utterance position often creates a different interpretation, but this has not been examined in great depth (cf. Fetzer, this volume; Schneider, 2007).

4. THE RELATIONSHIP OF HEDGING TO OTHER DISCOURSE EFFECTS

Some instances of hedging give rise to other discourse effects. I address several of them here, recognizing that there are others not touched upon.

4.1. Vagueness

Most expressions are vague, although we do not realize it. The utterance *John is bald* is vague. How much hair must he have lost to be considered bald? It depends. Generally, we reduce our requirement of precision to accommodate the hearer, what we might call “common ground exploitation” (Jucker et al., 2003).\(^5\)

(27) a) John is bald [on top but has a fringe around the edges.]
    b) John is bald [for one so young.]
    c) John is [completely] bald.

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\(^5\) An expression is said to be ambiguous if it has at least two specific meanings that make sense in context whereas an expression is said to be vague if its meaning is not clear in context. If Jones does not know what is meant by a phrase, then that phrase is vague to him. He cannot identify exactly what the term is intended to mean or refer to. If Jones does not know which of two or more specific meanings is intended, then the term is ambiguous to him. Articles on vagueness include Channell (1994).
Simply stated, **vagueness**, a perlocutionary effect (cf. Austin, 1962), occurs *when the information you receive from a speaker lacks the expected precision*. For example, if two Americans encounter one another in Paris, and one asks the other where she lives, the answer *Boston* would be acceptable. In contrast, the answer *in the eastern part of the U.S.* would be vague. On the contrary, if these same two people met in Boston, the answer *Boston* to the query of where she lived would be heard as vague, and probably evasive.

Intentional vagueness occurs for a variety of reasons. For example, the non-vague contribution might offend someone, or the speaker does not know the precise details, or it really does not matter, or the intention is to evade. Worry of being charged with being wrong, might give rise to the hedged response *He visited Japan, Hong Kong, and so on* when asked *Where did he go on his trip*. The speaker, intending to evade when asked when she would return, might offer, *I’ll be back sometime around noon*, whereas the desire to create an informal atmosphere might result in *Your dog, Aristotle, or whatever his name is, is welcome here*, said to an acquaintance standing at your front door.

Intentional vagueness also arises to accommodate memory loss (*thingamabob, whatsit*), or when there is a desire to imply shared knowledge, “You know what I mean.” Finally, there are occasions when the speaker deliberately increases the vagueness, using terms like *and so on, in a way, or something like that, more or less, et cetera, in a sense, and things like that, or whatever, so to say, and so forth, somewhat, and everything, and stuff like.*

Propositional hedging may create propositional vagueness, as in

\[(28)\]
\[\begin{align*}
&\text{a) He’s } \textbf{sort of} \text{ a geek.} \\
&\text{b) I’ll be there } \textbf{around} \text{ six o’clock.}
\end{align*}\]

whereas speech act hedging, while creating a weakened illocutionary force, does not create vagueness, as the following show.

\[(29)\]
\[\begin{align*}
&\text{a) } \textbf{If you wouldn’t mind,} \text{ help me up.} \\
&\text{b) It appears} \text{ that we should go.}
\end{align*}\]

Some hedging results in vagueness,

\[(30)\]
\[\begin{align*}
&\text{a) A: What score did you receive on the test? B: I } \textbf{kind of} \text{ messed up.} \\
&\text{b) A: Exactly how wide is the porch? B: The porch is } \textbf{about} \text{ 6 feet wide, give or take a foot.}
\end{align*}\]

whereas some hedging does not result in vagueness,

\[(31)\]
\[\begin{align*}
&\text{a) Help me lift this box, } \textbf{would you.} \\
&\text{b) [From an examining physician] } \textbf{As far as I can tell,} \text{ you’re in excellent shape.}
\end{align*}\]

and some vagueness does not come about from hedging
(32) a) He is bald.
    b) I will come back sometime.

4.2. Evasion

**Evasion** occurs when the information you receive from the speaker fails to meet your expectation. Like vagueness, whether an utterance is evasive depends on the information provided by the speaker and the information expected by the hearer. Like vagueness, evasion is a property of hearer interpretation and, as such, is a perlocutionary effect. The answer *I think you’d better ask your mother* to the question *Can I go out tonight?* is potentially evasive, depending on the father’s role in such matters.

Propositional hedging may result in vagueness, which may result in evasion,

(33) A: How is she? B: **In some ways** she is lovely.

and, unlike vagueness, speech act hedging may result in evasion.

(34) A: How much do you weigh? B: **One doesn’t ask** a woman such things.

Sometimes vagueness can result in evasion, as mentioned earlier. Some hedging results in evasion,

(35) a) A: What time can we leave? B: I hope we can leave by noon.
    b) A: Mr. President, what do you think of the general comment? B: **I think** it’s a wonderful country when we all enjoy free speech.

some hedging does not result in evasion,

(36) A: Ok, doctor, what do you think. B: **As far as I can tell**, you’re in excellent shape.

and some evasion does not come about from hedging

(37) A: Will you help me? B: I will have to consult with my principals.
    A: Who is here? B: I’m not going to tell you.

There are a variety of ways to evade using language. The following list, taken primarily from Partington (2003), provides some examples.

(38) Ways of Evading
    a) Bald, on record avoidance
    A: Who is here? B: I’m not going to tell you.
    b) Hedging, by providing a vague contribution
    A: Exactly what time will you be here? B: Oh, about noon or so.
    c) Claims of ignorance
A: Where is your daughter right now? B: Sorry, but I really don’t know.

d) In response to a question, stating that the answer is well known
A: What is the policy on that? B: Oh, everybody is aware of the policy.

e) Referring the questioner to another
A: May I go out this evening? B: Go ask your father.

f) Challenging the questioner or the source
A: What will you do now? B: Who wants to know?

4.3. Equivocation

Equivocation is the use of a word with more than one meaning, where the intention is to mislead the hearer. For example,

(39) No child should work.
   Every one is a child of someone.
   Therefore, no one should work.

The term has been defined as “non-straightforward communication . . . ambiguous, contradictory, tangential, obscure or even evasive” (Bavelas et al., 1990: 28). I think that the ambiguous use, as shown in the examples below, is illustrative of the discourse use as typically viewed.

(40) a) Hubert Humphrey upon losing the 1968 election to Richard Nixon, said, “I’d always wanted to run for President in the worst way, and now I have.”
   b) President Clinton on being question about his relationship with Monica Lewinsky, said “I did not have sex with that woman.”

I am not aware of examples where either propositional or speech act hedging results in equivocation, but there are numerous cases where equivocation does not arise from hedging.

(41) a) Well, that depends on what you call a good employee. (Person having to recommend someone he doesn’t like for a job)
   b) Our military operation in Panama was not, I repeat, not an invasion. That would violate the national sovereignty of one of our strongest friends and allies. “Operation Just Cause” was simply the result of my directing our armed forces to protect the lives of American citizens in Panama, to execute pre-planned missions in Panama, to conduct efforts to support the democratic processes in Panama, and to assure the integrity of the Panama Canal while creating an environment safe for American citizens. (President George H. Bush, 1989)

According to a theory of equivocation proposed by Bavelas et al. (1990), people typically equivocate when confronted with an avoidance–avoidance conflict, where they are posed a question to which all of the possible replies have potentially negative consequences, but where nevertheless a reply is expected. As far as I can tell, hedging does not result in equivocation.
4.4. Politeness

Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) were concerned with two types of politeness: **positive politeness** and **negative politeness**. Positive politeness is defined as redressive action directed to the addressee’s positive face (the desire that his/her wants should be thought of as desirable), where redress consists in partially satisfying that desire by communicating that one’s own wants are in some respects similar to the address’s wants. Negative Politeness is defined as redressive action addressed to the addressee’s negative face (the want to have his/her freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded), where redress consists in partially satisfying that need by weakening a challenge to negative face.

Brown and Levinson focused primarily on negative politeness strategies that include (i) hedging the illocutionary force of an utterance; (ii) hedging any of the felicity conditions on the speech act; or (iii) hedging any of the four Gricean maxims. For example,

(42) a) Hedged performative
   I **must** request that you sit down.
   b) A felicity condition on requesting: hearer is able to carry out the act
   Take the books off the table, **if you can manage it**.
   c) The maxim of quality indicates full responsibility for truth of proposition
   I **hope** the boat has already sailed.

Some hedging results in making the utterance more polite,

(43) a) **Would you be so kind as to** lift that up.
   b) I **must** apologize for doing that.

whereas some hedging does not,

(44) a) The length of the curtains is **approximately** 48 inches.
   b) Many of the soldiers were injured (**by the enemy**)

and some politeness does not result from hedging

(45) a) **Sir**, where is your hat.
   b) What a beautiful hat, Myrna.

5. The Occurrence of Hedging

There are instances when an expression such as **kind of**, **in a way**, or **I think**, typically used as a hedge, is used with its literal meaning. This is not hedging. For example,

(46) a) I will be coming in **a few** minutes.
   b) **I think** that politics is sleazy.
c) Can you see the deer over there.
d) I appreciate that kind of help.
e) Blair and I were able to talk in a way that reduced ambiguity.
f) I always admired the fact that a person who was relatively comfortable in life would be willing to help the less fortunate.

But I suggest that this literal use pales in comparison with the use of hedging in America’s speech and writing. Although Americans view themselves as being direct, straightforward, and not beating around the bush, this is a myth. [Note: the previous statement is not hedged.] Hedging in American culture (and I assume most others) is necessary in many circumstances, lest the speaker be perceived as impolite, offensive, or arrogant. As I stated initially, successful performance and interpretation of hedging are a mark of pragmatic competence.

I present some of the many occasions where hedging is expected, if not required. These examples are taken from speech, newspapers, research articles, and TV. They are not intended to be systematic or complete, rather illustrative of the ubiquity of hedging in spoken and written English, both formal and informal.

The most obvious situation where hedging is used is one in which the speaker wishes to convey a negative message, as in (47).

(47) a) It might be a good idea if we could move on to the next speaker. [Teacher to a student giving a presentation]
b) I must insist that you leave.

A second situation occurs when the speaker wants to evade responsibility for the truth of a statement that potentially brings bad news to the hearer. This occurs, for example, when the doctor conveys (48a) rather than (48b) to a patient.

(48) a) The CAT scan shows that you have a lump in your liver.
b) There is a lump in your liver.

By doing this, the speaker is able to reference another authority. The more confident a speaker is about his/her own position vis-a-vis the interlocutor, the less need there is for hedging for the purposes of self-protection. The same evading of responsibility occurs in (49), which were statements made in a newspaper.

(49) a) A car was reportedly burglarized in the suburb of Nicola last night.
b) The alleged perpetrator fled the scene in a green Buick.

When authority is cited, it may be unclear where it ends and the writer resumes, as this quotation from The Economist exemplifies:

(50) The OECD acknowledges that there are risks. First, inflation could prove more stubborn in Germany. Second, Japanese firms may take longer to adjust their heavy
dept-burdens and lower asset-prices. Third, high unemployment may increase protectionist tendencies. Even though a GATT deal has been agreed, some governments may still try to protect individual industries.

Related is the use of hedging to evade responsibility for an action.

(51) a) The decision was made on Friday (by Ø).
   b) Someone will let you know the outcome by 5 pm.

Another source of hedging is found in the language of negotiation. To appear conciliatory is not a sign of weakness but rather a strategy to appease the opposition and is often necessary for a successful resolution. In the following excerpt, a divorcing husband and wife are having a heated discussion about the sleeping arrangements during the time when their three-year-old son is with his father. The argument is not resolved until the wife conveys a hedged assertion that the issue is her business as well.

(52) W: Well, what if your girlfriend sleeps overnight. Then where is Jason going to sleep?
H: He’ll sleep with me, I guess.
W: I don’t think it’s a good idea having him sleep between you and your girlfriend. Wouldn’t it be a good plan for you to have another room for him?
H: Now listen, Jason is my son. What I do with my son is my business, not yours or anybody else’s as long as he is taken care of . . .
W: Yes, it is your business. I agree. But, without putting too fine a point on it, isn’t it possibly mine as well.
H: Well, I guess so. Ok, I’ll arrange for a bed in another room.

The wife, by hedging her last statement, reduces the challenge to the husband.

In another divorcing negotiation (53), by hedging his question the husband expresses a conciliatory (hedged) stance and receives his wife’s approval.

(53) W: Whatever you think, this child should be seeing you frequently.
H: Well I tried to make an effort to see her everyday but your mother kind of keeps me away.
W: Oh I love it . . . You would come down and see Rachel without telephoning that you were coming, you were coming in during Rachel’s dinner time . . .
[More bickering]
H: So, is what are you saying Constance, that is this a way of saying that, that if, there can be some kind of understanding and some kind of arrangement, that you would not object to my seeing Rachel?
W: Yes.

Hedging may also occur when also occurs when the speaker asks a potentially sensitive question. The following examples are from White House press briefings.
a) Q: The report, *I thought*, was clear about the medicinal value of *some of the compounds* in marijuana, so why the push back now?

b) Q: I want to go back to something previous. *I think* it’s a fair question and *maybe* deserves a thoughtful answer.

c) Q: *If I remember correctly*, these negotiations – *and please correct me if I’m wrong* – weren’t they seen as a way to avoid the situation was now find our self in? [Then the sentence is alright].

Not surprisingly, the president receives hedged questions when the topic is particularly sensitive.

a) Q. Mr. President, the Prime Minister has referred to terrorism as, quote, “a crime”, and he’s referred to it *in part* as a law enforcement issue. So for you, *I’m wondering*, does that underscore *any sort of* philosophical difference . . . ?

b) Q. Putin said – well, *at least the quote said* that he “sees no evidence to suggest Iran wants to build a nuclear bomb.” Were you disappointed with that message? And does that indicate *possibly* that international pressure is *not as great as you once thought* against Iran abandoning its nuclear program?

To the latter question, Mr. Bush replied that *Those are all legitimate questions that I’m sure historians will analyze*, a case of evasion without hedging.

Still another use of hedging is to show warmth and establish rapport with a stranger. This is illustrated in (56).

a) *Could I just* ask you to take your clothes off and put on this silly gown? [Nurse to nervous young patient]

b) *Even though* you dislike the medicine, and I don’t blame you, it’s worthwhile taking it. [Nurse to reluctant patient]

c) This is *sort of* a different kind of school but one which *I think* you’ll have no difficulty getting accustomed to. [Teacher to new student]

Being vague by hedging to conceal the truth is yet another hedging ploy.

a) It is *possible* that he arrived when you were in the kitchen and you didn’t hear him.

b) I don’t know when exactly John will come home.

as is hedging to convey powerlessness and to elicit sympathy.

a) *It seems* that the door is not going to open.

b) If you’re going my way, could you possibly give me a lift back.
Another situation is in academic speech or writing when direct assertion of your point – *There is no doubt that this is the correct answer* – might well turn off the audience and cause them to cease engaging in the debate. To appear modest, conciliatory, or open for disagreement, it is often politic that the author hedge what any claims made. I have gone through this paper and found many cases of hedging for just these reasons. For example,

(59)  
   a) **As far as I can determine**, Weinreich (1966) was the first person to write about hedging . . .  
   b) **There is general agreement today that hedging** is a rhetorical strategy, where a speaker, . . .  
   c) **I am not aware of examples** where either propositional or speech act hedging results in equivocation . . .  

Finally, there are cases in which the language spoken has no equivalent hedging expression in the non-native speakers’ language, and vice-versa. For example, English imperatives have a tag, as in (60)

(60)  
   English: Help me, **can you**.

while this hedging device is absent in Spanish and German though there are alternative means to convey the same message.

6. CONCLUSION

Pragmatic competence is necessary if one is to communicate effectively in a language. This includes mastering the art of hedging, one feature of this pragmatic ability. Hedging is all around us, with messages being attenuated both on the propositional level and the speech act level. Not only does hedging appropriately help us achieve our communicative goals, but, failing to hedge where it is expected, as well as failing to understand the meaning of the hedging, has great potential for miscommunication.

I hope that this chapter has brought into focus what hedging is and how it is brought about, thereby furnishing language teachers and non-native speakers alike with a better understanding of this critical aspect of pragmatic competence.

REFERENCES


