

## **Linguistic Hedging: Conflict Management Tool in Academic Discourse**

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### **Abstract**

Focusing on the Nigerian academic discourse, the paper argues that scholars, universally, deliberately employ linguistic hedging as a conflict management stratagem to manage conflictual situations in the course of their work. Using corpus linguistics methodologies, the work examines inaugural lectures of the Nigerian academic discourse to establish the usage of linguistic hedging devices in analysing the data. Working with 40 purposively sampled inaugural lectures from 10 faculties/schools, from the Nigerian university, the study categorises the hedging devices into typologies to determine their frequency of usage in analysing the data. Four objectives and four research questions were drawn for the work. The study provides an awareness into the working and understanding of academic discourse generally and helps in the development of technical input in designing teaching materials for academic writing.

**Keywords:** academic writing, conflict management, corpus linguistics, linguistic hedging devices, Nigerian academic discourse

## 1. Introduction

As people of different backgrounds come together in collaborative relationships, conflicts are inevitable in their dealings (Scannell, 2010, p. 1). In managing human inter-relationship conflicts language plays a vital role as we inter-relate and disagree through language (Guerin, 2009). As language users, humans could choose to say less, be indirect, indicate tentativeness of their propositions among other devices so as to avoid face-threatening situations, minimize imposition, help in maintaining harmonious social relations, as well as reduce waste of time and effort on preliminaries (Channell, 1994). Using language to mitigate face-threats is part of linguistic hedging and linguists starting with Lakoff (1972) view hedging as part of vagueness present in human discourse in different fields of knowledge, be it in medicine (Prince, Frader, & Bosk, 1982), mathematics classroom, (Rowland, 2007, p. 80) courtroom (Cotterill, 2007, p. 98) among others, and our abilities to use language vaguely constitutes our linguistic metapragmatic and pragmatic awareness (Wishnoff, 2000).

The study analysed 40 purposively sampled inaugural lectures from 10 faculties/schools with four programmes per faculties/schools across the three types of universities – federal, state and private, in Nigeria. It is guided by the following objectives:

- i. Identify the linguistic hedging devices used in the Nigerian inaugural lectures.
- ii. Determine the frequency distribution of the hedging devices in the Nigerian inaugural lectures
- iii. Classify the hedging devices in the Nigerian inaugural lectures into types.
- iv. Explain the pragmatic functions of the identified linguistic hedging devices in the Nigerian inaugural lectures.

The following research questions shall be answered in the course of this study:

- i. What linguistic hedging device exists in the Nigerian inaugural lectures?

- ii. What is the total number of the hedging devices in the Nigerian inaugural lectures?
- iii. What are the types of the hedging devices in the Nigerian inaugural lectures?
- iv. Can the pragmatic functions of the linguistic hedging devices be determined in the Nigerian inaugural lectures?

## **2. Significance of the Study**

It could be said that most academics hold an erroneously wrong view of vagueness in academic writing. As Ewata & Mahmud (2014, p. 284) emphasise, teachers often criticise their students' works as vague without paying attention to the fact that the human language itself is the realm of vagueness. The study sets out to prove that vagueness is a key feature of academic discourse against the background that despite the emphasis on explicitness, academic writing actually thrives with inexplicit linguistic elements. This study thus emphasises the unique roles vagueness plays in academic discourse. The study will therefore be of great importance to language users, producers of academic discourse, trainers of academic writing producers, and students who would ultimately become producers and trainers in academic writing as it aims to show that vagueness is neither inappropriate in human discourse nor in academic discourse. Furthermore, the study will be of immense values to educational institutions in paying attention to the development of technical input in designing teaching materials for academic writings.

## **3. Theoretical Framework**

The academia is made up of different (sub)fields of knowledge working together “to facilitate the production of knowledge” (Hyland, 1998, p. 81). Academic writing includes essays, theses, dissertations, projects, research papers, term papers, faculty lectures, university guest lectures, and the inaugural lectures, among others. It is presented in an even textual form and done in a detailed, clearly thought-out, and is believed to be presented in non-fictional, impersonal, logical as well as objective manner. Though recent studies according to Hyland has proved otherwise as he argued that rather than the impersonal stance, the writing depends on “interactional elements which supplement

propositional information in the text and alert readers to the writer's opinion" (Hyland 1994, p. 240). The writing is delivered in an argumentative manner which must fit into the framework of existing theories, and contribute to an ongoing discourse within their particular (sub)fields through "appropriate references" to publicise "their findings, and their results" (Jalilifar & Dabbi, 2012, p. 91).

Academic writing is divided into recognizable sections and should be a formal-written genre different from either academic speech or conversation (Bazerman, 1991, 1998; Gopen & Swan, 1990; Hartley, 2008). It is a communicative event with its own specific communicative purposes identified within the relevant professional community and is socially constructive (Bazerman & Paradis, 1991; Swales, 1990). As part of academic writing, the inaugural lecture is the peak of all the writings of an academic. It is the work that launches an academic into the fold of established scholars and gives the chair the opportunity to highlight all they have done and intends to in their career (Bristol, 2016).

### **3.1. Conflicts in Academic Writing**

In the course of presenting their views to the academic community through their writing, conflicts may arise, among academics in relation to their works from: the question of writers' originality, convention of writing and genre, logicity of approach, mechanics of writing, convolution of presentation of facts or opinions, criticism from other scholars, refutation of claims made in the work etc. These sources of criticism bring us to the issue of hedging in academic writing as a conflict management stratagem as writers are expected to consciously tone down their meaning, hide the writer's attitude, be polite, noncommittal, tentative, expository and argumentative, express other possibilities (for the sake of argument), give little space for the reader by adjusting specialised information for a less specialised discourse community, reduce the risk of criticism from their peers, mitigate face-threat etc. (Adolphs, Atkins & Harvey, 2007; Behnam, Naeimi & Darvishzade, 2012; Hyland, 1998; Markkanen. & Schröder, 1997; Martín, 2015; Salager-Meyer, 1994). One of the means these can be

achieved is through linguistic hedging. Examples of linguistic hedges in the inaugural lectures include:

1. It can however *indicate* abnormality if it persist in high percentage beyond the neonatal age.
2. At best, it is logical to *assume* that it was an omission.
3. Experts *estimate* that over 70 per cent of infected Nigerians are unaware of their status, and may still be engaging in high-risk behaviour.
4. The results of the study *suggest* twice yearly kidding if does are first bred in the early dry season and rebred again after kidding at the early wet season.

### 3.2. Hedging in Academic Writing

Every writing, academic writing is no exception, involves interaction between the writer and the readers. According to Hyland (1994), hedging is part of the interactive features of academic discourse as authors factor their audience taking into account background knowledge, processing problems, and reactions to the text (Widdowson, 1984, p. 220, cited in Hyland, 1994, p. 239). The audience on the other hand interrogates authors on their positions, and evaluate such works for their usefulness and importance to the readers' research (Bazerman, 1985, cited in Hyland, 1994, p. 239) and the discourse community based on the common ground exploitation on writers' intended meaning (Sperber & Wilson, 1986). From the perspective of Myers (1989), hedging helps scholars make tentative claims that can stand pending acceptance in the literature and by the community. To Brown & Levinson (1978) hedging is a politeness stratagem that weakens, strengthens and blurs the intent of utterances.

According to Markkanen & Schröder (1997), hedging in academic discourse is a type of communicative strategy writers employ to portray their claims and views. Linguistic hedging is therefore, a vague language option opened to writers of academic texts to evade, be tentative, show possibility mitigate face-threats to their works and readers, etc. (Martín, 2015; Salager-Meyer, 1994).

From another angle, linguistic hedging is viewed as a language in context device which expresses the notion of imprecision or

qualification through the author-reader interaction on the basis of the text and the communication situation (Crystal, 2008). Hyland (1998), takes it as an indicator of lack of total commitment to statements by writers. He also argues that writers hedge for either of two reasons: (a) a lack of complete commitment to the truth of a proposition or (b) a desire not to express that commitment categorically (Hyland 1996, p. 251). For Swales (1990, p. 175), it is a feature of academic writing convention as well as indicator of “honesty, modesty and proper caution in self-reports.” It is also a vague category reference in the class of general extenders, discourse markers, pragmatic markers, etc. as the linguistic elements make things nonspecific and less fuzzy (see Lakoff, 1972; Overstreet, 1999; Schiffrin, 1987).

Linguistic hedging devices are language universals found in both oral and written communication and in formal and non-formal interaction used by every gender, age as well as a convention of writing not restricted to any field (Ewata, 2014; Hyland, 1994) which forms part of the pragmatic niceties of academic discourse and language learning, without which such writings and users would be considered inappropriate. They have no grammatical class and are drawn from “every syntactic category” and could at best be said to “form an open functional class” (Fraser, 2010, p. 23). They are communication devices exhibited verbally or nonverbally. This study however, focuses on verbal human communication devices that may be exhibited by auxiliary verbs, epistemic adjectives, adverbs, lexical verbs and other linguistic elements.

### **3.3. Classification of Hedging**

Current classification of hedging in the Nigerian university inaugural lectures is framed by taxonomies of Prince, Frader & Bosk (1982) and Quirk & Greenbaum (1987). They shall come under three classifications:

- i. approximators: They are linguistic elements that are used to sum up, round up or give a general rather than a specific view, sum etc. They estimate: degree, quantity, frequency and time and are signalled by such words as: “a lot of, a little bit, kind of, about, some, approximately, roughly, often, occasionally, generally, usually,

somewhat, somehow etc. They are subdivided into: adaptors – sort of, kind of, somewhat, really, almost, quite, entirely, to some extent, more or less, to some extent etc., and rounders – about, something between...and, roughly etc.

5. This figure translates *roughly* to 1 Neurophysiotherapist to 2.5 million Nigerians.
6. We observed *a lot of* production practices that were detrimental to the life of oil wells and reservoirs.
7. In their review of *approximately* 200 studies that examined the relationship between fruit and vegetable intake
8. In *some* Northern states, for example, the government grants have covered wide range of local government services such as dispensaries

ii. shields: They indicate a level of uncertainty with respect to speaker's commitment (Fraser) thus, insulate speaker/writer status from criticism. In short, they may be viewed as the cautious linguistic elements used to show that the speaker/writers are open to criticism and that they are not categorical with their claims. The use of the elements thus creates a way out of a difficult situation. In this class are: all modal verbs expressing possibility, semi-auxiliaries, probability adverbs, and their derivative adjectives; epistemic verbs (that is, verbs which relate to the probability of a proposition or a hypothesis being true) (Salager-Meyer, 1994, p. 7). Like the approximators, they are classified into two types: plausibility and attribution shields. For example: to appear, to seem, probably, likely, to suggest, to speculate etc.

9. It *might* also interest this august audience to know that my humble self started the teaching of the subject.
10. Some observers *believe* that some of the defects in its report *might* have been avoided if the ...

iii. intensifiers: the non-committal adverbs (and some noun phrases and a few prepositional phrases); they are classified into: amplifiers, emphasizers (maximizers and boosters), downtoners (compromisers, diminishers/minimizers, approximators). They “indicate a point on the intensity scale which may be high or low”

(Quirk & Greenbaum, 1987, pp. 214-8). The elements can modify verbs and sub-modify adjectives and other adverbs and that they are an open class with new ones included regularly used in communication in persuading ... and generally influencing the ... reception of the message (Partington, 1993, p. 177-9). Examples include: partly, slightly, somewhat, in part, to some extent, a little, a bit, barely, hardly, little, scarcely, in the least, in the slightest, at all, kind of/sort of, quite/rather, more or less etc.

11. The three optical instruments are sensitive enough to detect the embryo in the yolk of hatchable egg *barely* 24 hours after incubation.
12. There is *hardly* any consensus of opinion on what constitutes the functions of government as it depends on the view of government held by an individual.
13. Even at *slightly* more advanced stages of my teaching and research career ...
14. The subject's knowledge of the conventional linguistic system is *more or less* intact ...

#### 4. Methodology

This study investigated the use of linguistic hedging devices in the Nigerian inaugural lectures across 10 faculties/schools, represented by four (04) programmes/courses. In all, forty inaugural lectures of 473359 words made up the corpus of the study covering the three types of universities (Federal, State and Private), in Nigeria. The inaugural lecture of the academic writing genre was chosen as the focus of this work as it constitutes the pinnacle of academic excellence for any academic and because of the homogeneous nature of the lectures. The study used *AntConc*, a freeware corpus analysis toolkit for concordancing and text analysis to search for the linguistic hedging devices in the corpus (Anthony, 2014). All the inaugural lectures were converted from the PDF and Word formats to the Plain Text format, with some editing to remove sections such as preamble, acknowledgements, references and numerical figures from converted tables thus allowing the corpus analysis tool to work on them.



## 5. Results/ Findings

**Table 1.** Hedging Elements in the Nigerian University Inaugural Lectures

Hedgin g	ADM	AGR	EDU	ENG	HSC	HUM	LAW	MED	SC	SSC	TOT	VAL
shields	507	407	493	346	423	454	638	247	339	314	4168	12.39
approx.	201	126	176	207	145	180	140	105	213	145	1638	31.52
intens	880	1022	896	706	751	898	637	425	716	488	7419	56.10
<b>Total</b>	<b>1588</b>	<b>1555</b>	<b>1565</b>	<b>1259</b>	<b>1319</b>	<b>1532</b>	<b>1415</b>	<b>777</b>	<b>1268</b>	<b>947</b>	<b>13225</b>	<b>100.00</b>
<b>% VAL</b>	<b>12.01</b>	<b>11.76</b>	<b>11.83</b>	<b>9.52</b>	<b>9.97</b>	<b>11.58</b>	<b>10.70</b>	<b>5.88</b>	<b>9.59</b>	<b>7.16</b>	<b>100.00</b>	

**Legend:** approx (approximators), intens (intensifiers), ADM (administration); AGR (agriculture); EDU (education); ENG (engineering); HSC (health sciences); HUM (humanities); LAW (law); MED (medicine); SC (sciences); SSC (social sciences); TOT (total), VAL (value in percentage)

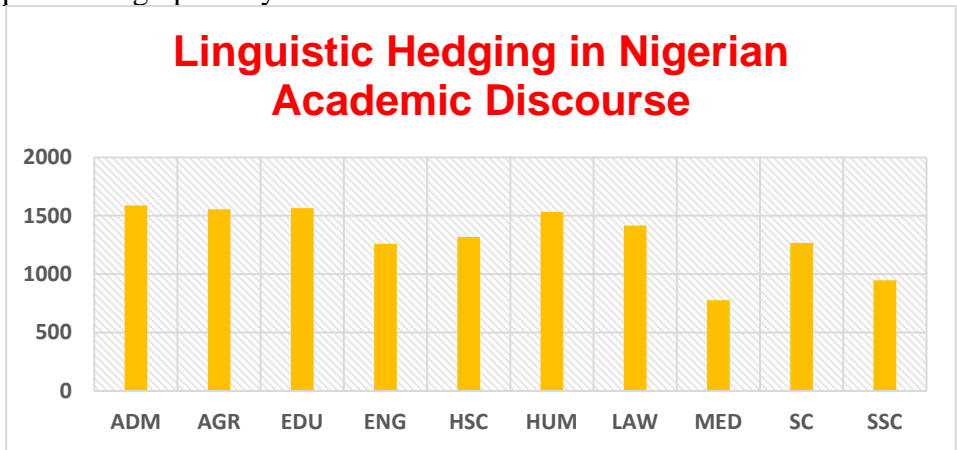
*Source:* Present study

Of the three classes of linguistic hedges examined in the Nigerian inaugural lectures, intensifiers subclass was the most used as it was used 7419 instances in the 40 inaugural lectures spanning the three types of universities in Nigeria. Shields were next used to the intensifiers with 4168 instances use while the approximators subclass was the least used with 1638 instances. The three elements were used 13225 times in the 40 sampled inaugural lectures.

## 6. Discussion

In the use of the linguistic hedging devices in the Nigerian inaugural lectures, the three classification of the linguistic hedging devices were used 13225 by the 10 schools/faculties studied. The usage of the elements have three patterns. First is those that used it between 5.88% – 7.16% who used the elements the least. Two schools, MED and SSC fell into the group as the used the elements 777 and 947 times respectively. The next is those that used it 9.52% – 10.70%. Four schools fell into this group: ENG used the items 1259 times (9.52%), HSC 1319 instances (9.97%), SC with 1268 tokens (9.59%) and LAW with 1415 instances of usage (10.70%). The third pattern is those with usage of 11.58% – 12.01%. This group includes: HUM that used the 1532 instance with 11.58%, AGR with 1555 times (11.76%) instances, EDU followed suit with 1564 (11.83%) of usage and ADM with the

highest instances of use with 1588 (12.01%). The uses and values are presented graphically below:



**Fig. 1.** Linguistic Hedging in Nigerian Academic Discourse.

ADM (administration); AGR (agriculture); EDU (education); ENG (engineering); HSC (health sciences); HUM (humanities); LAW (law); MED (medicine); SC (sciences); SSC (social sciences)

*Source:* Present study

The research questions drawn from the objectives of this work are discussed here:

- A. ***Are there hedging devices in the Nigerian inaugural lectures?***  
From the analysis of the 40 Nigerian university inaugural lectures across the three types of university in the country, there are linguistic hedging in the sampled inaugural lectures used in one form or the other by the 40 departments/programmes sampled in the 10 faculties/schools.
- B. ***What is the total number of the hedging devices in the Nigerian inaugural lectures?*** In the course of the work, using *AntConc Concordance Tool*, the study discovered 13225 instances of the linguistic hedging devices in the three classifications – approximators, shield and intensifiers – that it focused on. This is not taking into consideration those elements that did not occur to the set lowest minimum occurrence as it ignored linguistic hedging devices with less than 10 hits.

- C. *What are the types of the hedging devices in the Nigerian inaugural lectures?* Three classifications of the linguistic hedging devices were the focus of this study: approximators, shields and intensifiers. The three focused linguistic hedging devices were adequately represented in the sampled inaugural lectures.
- D. *Can the pragmatic functions of the identified linguistic hedging devices in the Nigerian inaugural lectures be determined?*

There are various reasons why academics hedge in their writings. To answer research question four, some of the reasons with specific examples from the corpus would be analysed as Hyland, (1996) affirms hedging to be “polypragmatic in that they convey a range of different functions simultaneously.”

i. *Academics hedge to be tentative in their claims*

15. A company *may* wind up and the pension then becomes unpaid.
16. In a State dominated by a single party, the minority Local Government *could* be sanctioned through such an instrument.

Tentativeness in academic writing suggests writers take into consideration situations or conditions that abound which could negate claims made thus there is caution in making generalized claims. In 15, the writer suggests the situations portrayed in the work could occur but knows also that a million and one other situations that won't make such to be also exists. Thus, the need for caution. In 16, like in 15, though dictatorial tendencies on the part of the majority to overwhelm minority parties exist, it is not usually the norm, thus, the need for caution.

- 17 In Sub-Saharan Africa, *probably* more than in any part of the world, the livestock sector is integral to the livelihood of the populations.
- 18 This *might* also have contributed immensely to the hardships faced by the poultry farmer in obtaining feed at reasonable prices.

In 17, the writer makes a claim that though might be very strong, there are still chances that it is not irrefutable. So the need to be on the side of caution through hedging. In 18, the writer means changes are that the situation could “have contributed immensely to the hardships faced by the poultry farmer...” but at the same time, other variables

might also be involved which is not covered by the study thus to have room to move, the writer opted for the hedging device.

ii. *Hedging helps lessen criticism from others*

With hedges, authors show a lack of full commitment to the propositional content of an utterance (Markkanen & Schröder, 1997). As part of the interactive devices in academic communication, readers know, based on shared background knowledge when writer make claims that cannot be defended but that can still hold pending when something else comes up.

19 It is predicted that sediment rates as high as 4.226 cm yr<sup>-1</sup> are *likely* by 2020 resulting in complete reclamation of shallow areas in the next 100 years.

20 The world over, there *appears to* be a decline in the application of this judicial self restraint.

In 19 and 20, changes are that the statements would generate reactions from others. In 19, for example, which makes a projection into the future, the writer is implying that chances are rather than been categorical of the purported claim. In 20 too, the writer is not definite but is relying on available evidence to make a claim or generalization. According to Hyland, hedges “allow writers to express conviction and to mark their involvement and solidarity with an audience” (2000, p. 179).

iii. *Used to give rough estimates or approximations of things*

21. So, whereas between 1954 and 57, *about* ½ of the LGs revenues came from grants...

22. The plates, concrete or reinforced concrete for the most, have large areas and rest on variously prepared foundations that can very *roughly* be approximated by the Winkler foundation.

23. In their review of *approximately* 200 studies that examined the relationship between fruit and vegetable intake and different types of cancer

24. Furthermore, while grants for the Western region between 1952 – 59 increased from £200,000 to *almost* £1,300,000 in 1959/60

The author of 21 does not need to say that the figure quoted cannot be verified empirically. The statement tells us we do not need to start

digging up facts looking for evidence as the author hedged. By hedging, we know the issue of specificity is not called for as we are told it is a rough estimate “about”. 22 tells us the same thing as the author estimated rather say for sure what was involved. It is the same for 23 and 24.

## 7. Implication of the Study

It is of note however, that *kind of/sort of* which Quirk & Greenbaum (1987, p. 219) attributed to as informal elements especially in AmE both featured prominently in the Nigerian University inaugural lectures as all the faculties used them. This shows that the fluidity in the classification of formality and informality in the second language situation *might* not really be observed here. However, in a study conducted on the use of general extenders in Nigerian newspaper editorials (Ewata, 2014), the elements did not occur in any of the 12 Nigerian newspapers sampled for the study. Ewata claims that the linguistic item might not have occurred in the study because of the formal nature of the editorials. The implication of this to this study is that the occurrence of the items in the current study (inaugural lectures) might be a pointer to the fact that the fluidity between formality and informality in the second language situation is thinning or has already thinned out.

Also, different variants of the same expression meaning the same thing was noticed in the lectures. For example:

- i. Permit me to digress a *bit*, to get us well informed about the word “gender”.
- ii. *A little* above 50 patients were recruited for the exercise.
- iii. There is, however, *very little* room for expansion in this area as recent data seem to suggest that operations are approaching their maximum sustainable yield.
- iv. In Nigeria there is *scarcely* any engineering component or system that is produced.

That there a different forms of the same expression could be explained as a sign of mastery or competence on the part of the second language users of the English language among other things.

At the same time, educational institutions in Nigeria and as a matter of fact, other second language situations where English is the medium of instruction, would need to pay close attention and ultimately re-evaluate their teaching curriculum, particularly at the tertiary level, to make room for vagueness in communication and linguistic hedging devices. This becomes necessary as has been shown in the study that vagueness helps in situating writings' positions, arguments and claims without necessarily incurring the face-threats of readers and others in the community.

It will also help teachers in second language situations to understand the position of vagueness as an essential aid to knowledge dissemination and portraying tentativeness of claims and arguments. This means attention should be focused on the interactive nature of writing as writing should not be taken solely as a passive activity.

Also, the fact that the inaugural lectures of Nigerian academics conform to the ones in other parts of the world, shows that the Nigerian educational system is not deficient in its duties of teaching, research and community service as insinuated in some quarters. The fact that the inaugural lectures of the Nigerian university system are organised and not illogical, presented in well-articulated format and not haphazard does represent the pinnacle of educational excellence of the academics involved and the system they represent.

Though Hyland (1996) reached the conclusion that foreign language learners have difficulty using hedging correctly, the Nigerian academics who are non-native users of English do not have this problem as they use linguistic hedging devices widely, in their inaugural lectures from different fields of the academia. Thus, their competence of the English language might not after all be in doubt as feared in some quarters.

## **8. Conclusion**

Corpus-based approach helps validate the claim of the study that Nigerian academics, like their counterparts elsewhere in the world, deliberately use hedging as a non-violent language conflict management stratagem. We could conclude from the study, based on the sampled inaugural lectures that there are no variations in the usage of the

elements in the second language situation in Nigeria. Also, we might conclude through the sampled inaugural lectures that the line between formal and inform usage of words and expressions are thinning out, in the second language situation. More so, that Nigerian academics use linguistic hedging shows that they are competent users of the English language and that they have also mastered the language and have metapragmatic and pragmatic awareness. Above all, the Nigerian academic discourse is also an interactive discourse as Nigerian academics take their audience into consideration and work towards satisfying the interactive conventions in the texts through authorial participation.

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