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A Corpus-based Study of Shields in Conversations of Chinese EFL Learners

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Abstract—As an important part of the fuzzy language, hedges have become a common linguistic phenomenon and frequently applied in daily spoken language. In this study, the authors investigated the shields-using frequency of Chinese EFL learners from the Multi-modal Spoken English Corpus of Chinese Learners-Science & Engineering Majors (MSECCL-SEM). In this study, the classification of Prince et al. (1982) will be adopted. Six shields that are frequently used in spoken English have been searched, namely, “I think”, “in my opinion”, “maybe”, “according to”, “as we (all) know”, “it is said that”. Data are analyzed by the application of Wordsmith 6.0 and SPSS 25.0. Through this study, we attempt to explore the characteristics of shields in spoken English of EFL learners, especially the differences in terms of gender, various language proficiency and two different kinds of shields. Through this research, the authors hope to guide second language teaching and learning by finding out the use of shields in EFL students' daily spoken language and analyzing its potential causes.

Index Terms—hedge, shield, fuzziness, EFL learners

I. INTRODUCTION

In our daily communication and writing, it is assumed that the utterances we make or the output of writing should be very clear and precise, but in fact, vagueness and indirectness occur frequently among various languages. Many scholars have studied the phenomenon of hedging, noting that hedging is also a positive feature of human language (Williamson, 1994; Channell, 1994; Cutting, 2015). The correct use of hedges is not only a crucial manifestation of the speaker's pragmatic ability but also an important means for the speaker to express his or her views accurately and successfully. The appropriate use of hedges can help create a comfortable communicating atmosphere, establish a personal rapport, and mitigate face threats (Cutting, 2015). However, how to choose and use hedges for oral communication is one of the most difficult problems that non-native English speakers would confront.

Literature Review

Originated from the study of the vagueness and indirectness phenomenon happened in the language use (Ullmann, 1962), “hedge” was first put forward by G. Lakoff in 1972 as a concept referring to words that make things fuzzier or less fuzzy (Lakoff, 1972), such as “kind of”, “almost”, “perhaps”, “I think” and so on. Pragmatics expert He Ziran (1988) believes that hedges are words that describe the general situation of a topic and make it impossible for the listener to get exact information, such as “kind of”, “sort of”. Scholars at home and abroad have made great achievements in the study of hedges. To sum up, the research mainly involves two fields, including daily verbal conversation and written language (including academic written language). The research perspectives include the classification of hedges and discourse analysis in various fields.

The classification of hedges went through continuous development. Prince et al. (1982) studied doctors' and patients' conversations in the children's intensive care during the morning doctor's visit, classifying hedges into two categories according to whether it changes the true value of the sentence: approximators and shields. Chinese expert He Ziran (1988) adopted the view of Prince et al. and further divided approximators into adaptors and rounders, shields into plausibility shields and attribution shields. In the study of medical written texts, Salager-Meyer (1994) divided hedges into five parts based on its function, namely shields, approximators, author's insufficiency and doubt, emotionally charged expressions and compounds hedges. Also concentrating on the functions, Hyland (1996) classified hedges according to its two major functions: content motivation and reader motivation. Gao Xiaofang and Zhang Qin (2002) classified hedges into semantic hedges and pragmatic hedges according to their degree of contextual attachment. In this study, the classification of Prince et al. (1982) will be adopted to specifically focus on the use of shields (The classification is shown in Fig. 1).

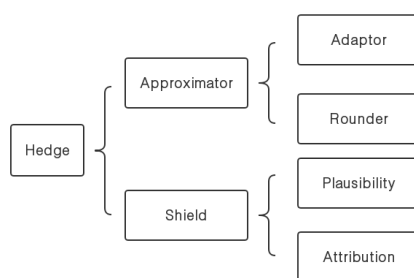


Figure 1 The classification of Prince et al. And He

Hedges are widely studied in literary, political, legal, scientific and technological texts, as well as business letters and news. The analysis of academic papers has aroused much attention. Hyland(1998) studied the written language of science and technology from the perspective of pragmatics and pointed out that the hedges are not only a rhetorical device for the writing of science and technology texts but also a key feature of science and technology texts, which help reduce the declarative power, including modality, expression of obedience, uncertainty and other functions. The study of hedges is also widely applied in the law, medical and political fields. In the law field, scholars find that the interpersonal meaning of hedges is mainly reflected in the author's rigorous and objective attitude, his politeness and respect for readers, his protection for himself, and his negotiation and dialogue with readers (Pang Jianrong, 2003). Shi Feitong (2014), and Qiu Guizhen (2015) compared the introductions and results of the English abstracts of Chinese and American or Chinese-English medical papers and discussed the use of hedges to explore the differences and Pragmatic function. In the meanwhile, Xiao Jianping (2018) discusses gender differences in the use of hedges in political discourse from the perspectives of hedges, political speeches of national leaders and gender differences. Pan Feng (2014) studied the application of hedges in Chinese-English interpretation of press conferences by applying corpus method and found that hedges were significantly less used in interpreting English than in original oral English. Although the study of hedges in these fields is prosperous, it is easy to find that most of the studies focus on the written language rather than the interlanguage given by L2 speakers. Few studies have been made for oral English in the past years, mainly focusing on the academic spoken English and teachers' utterances in the class. Deng Zhaohong (2009) investigated the distribution and functions of various adverbs by using the University of Michigan English academic spoken language corpus. Based on the corpus of MICASE, Wang Jiangang et al. (2018) discusses the characteristics of the use of English mild hedges in oral academic communication, focusing on the influence of the speaker's gender, discourse mode, and different disciplinary fields on the use of moderate hedges..

Shortly, some scholars at home and abroad have discussed the application of hedges in oral English, they focus on the academic, political and medical field, revealing the pragmatic function and politeness function of hedges to some extent, but not enough attention has been made to the study on the use of hedges in daily spoken English of L2 students. Therefore, this study tries to analyze the use of shields among the daily spoken English uttered by L2 students based on corpus MSECCL-SEM. This study aims to find out the use of shields in SLA students' daily spoken language and analyze its potential causes, thus guiding second language teaching and learning.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

A. Research Questions

In this study, six shields that are frequently used in spoken English are searched in the corpus, namely "I think", "in my opinion", "maybe", "according to", "as we (all) know", "it is said that". Data are analyzed by using Wordsmith 6.0 and SPSS 25.0. All these six kinds of hedges are essential means to express the speaker's uncertainty when he says a proposition. The first three plausibility shields are used to express the speaker's lack of confidence in the authenticity of the utterance or lack of assurance, and to soften the positive tone of the utterance. The last three are attribution shields, in which the speaker indirectly expresses his or her attitude by quoting the opinions of a third party. By answering the following questions, we try to explore the characteristics of shields in spoken English of second language learners, especially the differences in terms of gender, various language proficiency and two different kinds of shields:

What are the differences in the use of shields by L2 speakers of different gender?

What are the differences in the use of shields by L2 speakers according to their language proficiency?

What are the differences in the use of plausibility shields and attribution shields by L2 speakers?

B. The Corpus Used in This Study

The corpus employed in this research is MSECCL-SEM (Liu Qin, 2013), short for Multi-modal Spoken English Corpus of Chinese Learners-Science & Engineering Majors, including transcribed video of 150 oral group discussions in five universities of science and engineering in China (including key universities and local universities), with a total of 85,540 words. The corpus contains dialogues of groups with two to four people each. Teachers provide alternative topics (involving college students' employment, urban environmental pollution and other social phenomena), and students choose the topic and have a 6-minute-long discussion. Students are divided into groups according to whether

they have passed the written test of CET-4 and CET-6. Those who have passed CET-6 are classified into the high-proficiency group, those who have passed CET-4 but failed CET-6 into the middle-proficiency group and those who have failed CET-4 are classified into the low-proficiency group. All spoken transcribed corpus texts are marked with the speaker's status, gender, major and various non-verbal information.

III. RESULTS

A. Gender Differences in the Use of Shields

Table 1 shows the using frequency of male and female speakers of the chosen shields in MSECCL-SEM corpus. The Numbers in brackets show the standardized frequency of each shield, which is the frequency per 10,000 words. P-value represents the statistical test results of gender difference in the using frequency.

TABLE 1
STATISTICAL RESULTS OF GENDER DIFFERENCES IN SHIELDS IN CORPUS MSECCL-SEM

Shield Type	Shields	Male	Female	p-Value
Plausibility Shield	I think	343(109.10)	100(37.67)	0.00**
	in my opinion	19(6.04)	9(3.39)	0.00**
	maybe	69(21.94)	85(32.02)	0.00**
Attribution Shield	according to	1(0.32)	3(1.13)	0.89
	as we (all) know	13(4.13)	5(1.88)	0.01
	it is said that	1(0.32)	1(0.38)	0.00**
	Total	438(139.26)	203(76.47)	0.00**

According to the data in table 1, the standardized frequency of shields used by females is 76.47 per 10,000 words, while that of males is 139.26 per 10,000 words. The chi-square test results show that there is a significant difference between the two at the 1% confidence level, which indicates that male students are more likely to use shields in daily conversation. The results differ from Wang's finding in 2018 that women are more likely than men to use shields in oral academic communication. The reason is that in the context of academic communication and from the historical view, most of the people engaged in scientific research are male researchers, with fewer women, and their overall academic status is lower than that of men. In academic communication, the use of mild hedges can make the expression more cautious and polite. However, in daily communication of the L2 students, the different outcomes can be seen in the table.

The reason lies in the different shields that are studied by different researchers. The shields chosen in Wang's research are mainly used to indicate uncertainty of the speaker such as "possibly", "probably", and "likely". The same result is found in this paper when examining the similar word "maybe", which indicates that female speakers are more likely to use this kind of shield to be more cautious and polite. The other two plausibility shields "I think" and "in my opinion" are used to emphasize their views and highlight the subjectivity. For example:

(1) But I think now, the most important thing I should do now is going home. (Male)

(2) -What's your opinion? -Partly I think. But more and more private cars may make a serious problem in our environment of society. (Female)

It can be seen from the example that shields like "I think" used in the conversation express two kinds of interpersonal meaning. In example (1), the student's father caught a cold and they started to talk about how to make their parents happy. At last, the student indicated his strong will to go home visiting his father using "I think". And in example (2), "I think" occurs in the middle of a conversation and is used to answer questions or refute the other speaker. The other student thought that private cars would bring many advantages and solve a lot of problems and she asked the speaker's opinion. But the speaker in example 2 held the view that there were also demerits brought by private cars so she used the shield to express her different opinion.

Grice (1975) defines five features of conversational implicature as cancelability, non-detachability, calculability, non-conventionability and indeterminacy. One of the most important features is cancelability referring to the possibility to attach some premises to the original discourse and then the pragmatic meaning of the original discourse will be changed to some extent. The use of "I think" or "maybe" indicates the uncertainty of the speaker and the possibility of canceling the utterance he made and changing his words.

B. The Difference among Various Language Proficiency

The participants in the corpus are divided into three different groups according to their language proficiency, namely high-proficiency (passing CET-6), mid-proficiency (passing CET-4) and low-proficiency (failing CET-4). The six shields are searched in the different groups to find out the frequency difference among L2 speakers of various language proficiency. (shown in Table 2). The Numbers in brackets show the standardized frequency of each shield, which is the frequency per 10,000 words.

TABLE 2
STATISTICAL RESULTS OF DIFFERENCES IN SHIELDS OF DIFFERENT LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

Shield Type	Shields	Low-P	Mid-P	High-P
Plausibility Shield	I think	100(38.25)	82(36.37)	100(30.27)
	in my opinion	19(7.27)	16(7.10)	12(3.63)
	maybe	67(25.63)	50(22.18)	45(13.62)
Attribution Shield	according to	2(0.77)	3(1.33)	4(1.21)
	as we (all) know	11(4.21)	7(3.10)	10(3.03)
	it is said that	1(0.38)	2(0.89)	0(0)
	Total	200(76.50)	160(70.97)	171(51.76)

From the table, it can be seen that there is no significant difference in using attribution shields among different proficiency groups. In terms of Plausibility, a declining trend can be observed from the low proficiency group to high proficiency group. The total frequency of the high proficiency group is 19.21 lower than the mid-proficiency group and 24.74 lower than the low proficiency group. A previous study has found that the use of hedges enables students to output language accurately and appropriately, and avoid expressing impoliteness, rudeness or arbitrariness (Wei Yufen, 2010). Moreover, the politeness principle proposed by Leech (1983) explains that speakers intentionally violate the cooperative Principle to implicitly express their true meaning. Brown Levinson (1978) put forward the theory of Face preservation. The so-called "Face" is the personal image in the public that every social member wants to earn for himself, which is divided into Positive Face and Negative Face. A positive face is the desire to be approved and liked. Negative face means that you do not want others to impose on you and your behavior is not subject to interference or hindrance from others. Politeness is about mitigating the threat to face posed by certain communicative behaviors. Using shields means respecting each others' positive window and negative face in social interaction to earn some face for yourself at the same time. The real purpose of using shields is also to better achieve the communicative purpose and to meet people's face needs. From those studies and theories, we tend to predict that the high-proficiency group should use more shields than the other two groups. After further investigation into the conversation of the L2 speakers, it is found that low proficiency students can't express themselves fluently in English, so they use a large number of shields repeatedly to keep their fluency. For example:

(1) I think, I think er...we should, we should buy a car..... I think the traffic will stop. So I think not buy a car is like a dream. (uttered by a student of low English proficiency)

(2) I think it's too expensive. And I suppose you can en...you can take a bus or ride bike. (uttered by a student of high English proficiency)

In this one speech turn in example (1), the student said "I think" four times. At the beginning of the turn, the student did not have a clear and specific idea of what he was going to say, so he said it twice to give himself time to think. Besides, most of what the student said were short sentences. In the last two sentences, she used two consecutive sentences of "I think" to lengthen her sentence and make the short sentence sound less abrupt. In example (2), it can be seen that the student of high English proficiency first used "I think" to express his own opinion and then use the phrase "I suppose" in the next sentence to substitute "I think", thus avoiding repetition and adding varieties in his speaking. Further looking into the corpus, we find that students of high English proficiency use a large variety of phrases to express their opinion such as "I assume", "I suppose", "as far as I am concerned" and so on.

C. Using frequency of Plausibility Shields and Attribute Shields

As can be seen in Table 1 and Table 2, the using frequency of attribute shields is far less than plausibility shields. In table 2, the standardized frequency of using plausibility shields is 491 per 10000 words and that of attribute shields is 40 per 10000 words. The data shows Chinese L2 students have a better command of plausibility shields and use them more frequently to be cautious of what they say. Students are aware that in verbal communication, the appropriate use of plausibility can make the discourse more subtle and polite.

The reason why Chinese L2 speakers use fewer attribute shields may lie in their communication strategy. Attribute shields often express the speaker's opinion or attitude about something indirectly, using attribute shields accordingly will introduce a third party and will exclude themselves and save face to the maximum extent. According to the data collected from the corpus, Chinese L2 students rarely quote other people's saying or real data to support their view. Citing other people's opinions and real data can make the language more vivid, make the content of the explanation more specific, the demonstration of their views more effective, the arguments more substantial, and enhance the persuasive power.

IV. CONCLUSION

In this study, three results are found: 1) Male L2 students are more likely to use plausibility shields to express their strong opinion; 2) L2 students of low proficiency tend to use more plausibility shields because they fail to output fluent English and use too many repeated shields; 3) Chinese L2 students use fewer attribute shields than plausibility shields unaware of the significance of citing other people's opinion and data to support themselves.

To be short, the application of hedges in daily conversations plays a crucial role that cannot be ignored. Therefore, it is necessary for us to strengthen the analysis of hedges, correctly understand the value and use of hedges, optimize the

effect of linguistic expression, and improve the ability of linguistic expression. It is hoped that this study could shed some light on oral English teaching and learning. Teachers should cultivate the appropriateness of oral expression and the pragmatic ability of students. Students should pay more attention to the knowledge of language culture and pragmatics and use hedges reasonably to speak more native-likely.

This research is conducted in a synchronic view, while more features can be found during the learning process of the L2 students. Based upon these findings, research is underway into diachronic research of the L2 students using shields in different periods.

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