

HEDGING – ARIADNE’S THREAD? : OBJECTIVITY THROUGH SUBJECTIVITY IN ACADEMIC DISCOURSE

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This research highlights the role of intersubjective hedging in academic discourse and focuses the pragmatic mechanisms of co-existence of subjective scholars' hedging and scientific objectivity in presenting information hedging is meant to pursue. Patterns of interrelation between the extent of "hedging code" use and the degree of objectivity of scientific text perception are deduced. The subjective nature of hedging as a linguistic concept is analyzed on the grounds of the non-positivist approach. The priority of objectivity reaching as an ultimate aim of academic discourse is questioned.

Key words: hedging, academic discourse, intersubjectivity, subjectivity, scientific objectivity, "hedging code", the language of science, scientific impartiality, non-positivist approach

Легейда А.В. Хеджинг – нить Ариадни? Від суб'єктивності до об'єктивності в академічному дискурсі. Представлене дослідження фокусує роль інтерсуб'єктивного хеджинга у академічному дискурсі та прагматичні механізми співіснування суб'єктивного авторського хеджування науковців та наукової об'єктивності у презентації інформації, яку хеджинг покликаний забезпечити. Встановлюються патерни взаємодії між ступенем використання кодового хеджинга та ступенем об'єктивності, із якою сприймаються наукові тексти. Суб'єктивна природа хеджинга як лінгвістичного поняття підлягає аналізу з точки зору не-позитивістського підходу. Приоритетність досягнення об'єктивності як первинної мети академічного дискурсу підлягає критичному аналізу.

Ключові слова: хеджинг, академічний дискурс, інтерсуб'єктивність, суб'єктивність, наукова об'єктивність, кодовий хеджинг, мова науки, наукова неупередженість, не-позитивістський підхід

Легейда А.В. Хеджинг – нить Ариадны? От субъективности к объективности в академическом дискурсе. Данная работа фокусирует роль интерсубъективного хеджинга в академическом дискурсе и прагматические механизмы сосуществования субъективного авторского хеджинга ученых и научной объективности в презентации информации, которую хеджинг призван обеспечить. Устанавливаются паттерны взаимодействия между степенью использования кодового хеджинга и степенью объективности, с которой воспринимаются научные тексты. Субъективная природа хеджинга как лингвистического понятия подвергается анализу с точки зрения не-позитивистского подхода. Приоритетность достижения объективности в качестве основной задачи академического дискурса подвергается критическому анализу.

Ключевые слова: хеджинг, академический дискурс, интерсубъективность, субъективность, научная объективность, "кодовый хеджинг", язык науки, научная беспристрастность, не-позитивистский подход

"Contrariwise," continued Tweedledee, 'if it was so,
it might be; and if it were so, it would be;
but as it isn't, it ain't. That's logic."

(Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking-Glass
And What Alice Found There*)

Nowadays one cannot underestimate the role of hedging in the relationship between the language and the situations it relates to. The necessity of hedging and communicative models incorporating it for discourse (academic discourse in this case), as well as for

behavioural phenomena in general [33, c. 15], has been argued for by many scholars: "...the language is full of figures today: most of the figures are given implicitly or explicitly, with a qualification as to the degree of certainty. The population of a town, an industrial output,

a distance, a temperature, a duration, a speed, a percentage, etc. How are we to find our way about? An approximate value, as common sense says, is that which is not exact. Is it a lie then? ... No! Talking and thinking by means of “about”, “nearly” is a necessity” [15, c. 126]. As scholars put it, hedging is not absent even from contexts where one would expect exactitude: science, economics, medicine, etc. The “direction of fit” [10] of the language and the world is predominantly the case where language is required to fit the world. Communicative hedging (see [5] for the interpretation of terminological and conceptual differences between hedging and similar linguistic concepts of vagueness, approximation, etc.), firstly manifests itself in the ability of language to incorporate flexibility to adapt to the constantly changing world; secondly, in the ability to reflect many things in the world which are themselves vague, or “perceived as vague, subject as our perception is to physiological and neurological constraints” [10, c. 5]. Thus, as a result of the accepted direction of the above-mentioned “fit”, discourse as such and academic discourse as its genre, do incorporate hedging.

The recent proliferation of international research on the topic of hedging in academic discourse testifies to the obvious interest of linguists to this feature of communication, hence, to its crucial importance for the general studies of the essence of language as such [1; 5; 11; 12; 14; 17; 19; 21; 23; 25; 28; 30; 31, etc]. According to David Banks [8, c. 3], hedging has become “one of the central questions of ESP”. The cause of such particular linguistic attention to hedging may be accounted for by its social function manifesting itself in making statements subjective and complying with the standards our community compels us to accept. There is no denying the fact that our language – be it academic discourse or interpersonal one – is totally abundant with hedging, which enables one to modulate and mitigate according to the existing linguistic stereotypes using the respective linguistic repertoire of the given culture. Alongside, it is a universally acknowledged fact that science, scientific discourse likewise, aspires to objectivity in research.

The aim of this paper is to trace the theoretical patterns of co-existence of the *intersubjective*

message of hedging (*intersubjectivity* is a term used in philosophy, psychology, sociology and anthropology to describe a condition somewhere between subjectivity and objectivity, one in which a phenomenon is personally experienced subjectively but by more than one subject) as a pragmalinguistic feature in academic discourse and the objectivity in science that the above-mentioned type of discourse is meant to pursue. This task has so far been left off the well-trodden path of the considerable amount of the mentioned research [see above] in this area and proves the expediency of our approach. Thus, the object of this research is represented by hedging within the framework of international academic discourse, while the subject is interpreted as pragmatic mechanisms owing to which we reach objectivity through subjectivity in science. The empirical corpus of this research was constituted by various genres of academic discourse analyzed from the perspective of socially-constructed hedging.

The use of hedging in the research by members of academic professional community has been effectively described by T. Varttala, stating that “...members of academia should rather *assume* or *suggest* when they address other scholars. Similarly, in the place of saying how things are, one should sometimes preferably say how things *might* be, or how things *perhaps* are” [30, c. 178] (this refers one once again to the epigraph of this paper). F. Salager-Meyer [29] also identifies quasi-obligatory softening or mitigation of criticisms as a typical feature of the late 20th century Anglo-Saxon academic discourse and postulates that the “directness” of critical speech acts depends on text-types and discipline.

While the academic community imposes a certain “hedging code” upon its members for their works to be socially acceptable, hedging may also be viewed, and here we once again tend to agree with F. Salager-Meyer [28; 29, c. 144], as a complex “multiform relation that exists between thought, language and society”, as a “product of a mental attitude... , a typically mental phenomenon that we express linguistically by resorting to certain forms/expressions containing elements of tentativeness and possibility. It cannot be said, however, that there exists a necessary relation between the use

of such expressions and the presence of hedges”. In clarifying the phenomenon of hedging in academic discourse and supporting the opinion of F. Salager-Meyer, we disagree with the positivist approach suggested by P. Crompton [12, c. 271] claiming that “unless or until a definition and a clear description [of hedgings] can be achieved, there seems little hope of studying or teaching the phenomenon consistently”. To dismiss such a radical approach, one may refer to the works by I. Kant, who stated that “mathematization” of knowledge is impossible except in the realm of mathematics, where “the exactness of mathematics depends on definitions, axioms and demonstrations” [18, c. 211] and that more often than not “clear and precise definitions can (but not always) be stated upon the completion of the research, not at the outset”.

Questioning ourselves about how it is possible to combine communicative vagueness and tentativeness with preserving the factual accuracy in presenting the information in academic discourse, as well as tracing the borderline between the subjectivity of hedging as a communicative feature and the pursued objectivity of the language of science presented, we have adopted the following view: though science is in constant search of clarifying and defining the basic concepts, supporting its theories, hypotheses and discussions, it does not imply in any case that exclusively precise descriptions of scientific findings or minimalistic interpretations of the results achieved constitute a prerequisite of the scientific language style. Quite paradoxically, greater success (judging by the extent of hedging used in academic discourse of the scientific corpora analyzed) can be granted by resorting to the language of modulation and camouflage where the degree of hedging seems to be directly proportional to the degree of objectivity with which the scientific claim is perceived by the audience. This view is shared by F. Salager-Meyer [28, c. 133] who asserts: “...the view is often defended that science should be built on clear and sharply defined basal concepts, but in actual fact, no science, not even the most exact, begins with such definitions”. It may be, thus, concluded, that our interpretation of hedging feature in academic discourse in terms of Ariadne’s thread to objectivity is well-justified.

Having decided upon the nature of co-existence of subjective hedging and scientific objectivity, we stumbled upon the problem of the degree of subjectivity/objectivity in the definition of hedging itself. Most linguists dealing with the phenomenon of hedging [23; 28; 29; 32 among them] rely on the pure subjective perception of hedges and on their own consciousness to identify them. They tend to remark that “we realize that straightforward plus/minus values are alien to hedges. Hedges are a matter of degree, and it is not always easy to mark off hedges from non-hedges... The development of objective criteria for ways of speech that are characterized by hedges... is difficult. The interpretation of a specific formulation as a hedge or non-hedge rests significantly on the subjective assessment capacity of the reader” [32, c. 141, 144]. R. Markkanen and H. Schroeder in their analysis of hedging in academic texts go even further, claiming that “the concept of hedges has lost its clarity and sometimes seems to have reached a state of definitional chaos, as it overlaps with several other concepts. This problem concerns many other linguistic concepts and their definitions, beginning with the concept of “language” itself” [23, c. 15]. The above claimed echoes with the general finding, that it is apparently impossible to describe meanings (meanings of hedges among them) without the profound consideration of the context. This conclusion calls into question the necessity to avoid cases of decontextualized meaning, supporting the opinion of J. Lyons [22, c. 140]: “...the notion of sentence meaning is arguably dependent, both logically and methodologically, upon the notion of utterance meaning, so that one cannot give a full account of sentence-meaning without relating sentences”.

It is postulated by this research that hedging in academic discourse is highly subjective as it is grounded on the intentionality of the author of the text, which itself is purely subjective. However, the general orientation of hedging in academic discourse is towards promoting objectivity in science. The above symbiosis pushes forward a question: is scientific writing purely objective reporting of facts, methods, discussions and findings? It is an accepted stereotype that objectivity must be seen as a priority in scientific research.

However, more and more scholars [13; 28; 29] tend to postulate the view that objectivity only manifests itself in the intention of the researchers to reach it, while the realization of this pursuit is largely unattainable. Nowadays linguists [14; 16; 31] even venture as far as to suggest that the idea of scientific objectivity is nothing more than subjectivity hidden behind the approach of scientific impartiality supported by positivists. One may refer here to W. Grabbe and R. Kaplan, who claim that "...the notion of scientific writing as pure objective reporting is a myth promulgated by the science community itself. Objective fact is only what the dominating group says it is; and the reporting of objective knowledge becomes the means by which the myth is maintained" [14, c. 205], to E. Ventola, stating that "academic texts are not more objective than other texts; they are simply more effective at hiding subjectivity linguistically" [31, c. 170] and, finally, to M. Horkheimer criticizing the issue of scientific subjectivity and arguing that "science is positivist and fetishist as it falsely presents itself as purely objective and ignores the social genesis of problems, the situations in which science is used and the purposes to which the results of scientific investigation are applied" [16, c. 84].

Thus, our research focuses:

- the importance of non-positivist approach to the language of science;
- a whole lot of mental life behind and beyond the formal visible signs of the language;
- the interpretation of the above-mentioned mental life in terms of intersubjectivity;
- and, finally and primarily, the role of hedging as a key linguistic element of promotion of intersubjectivity in academic discourse, as well as in language as such, understood by us as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon.

A perfect inference was drawn by F. Salager-Meyer, summarizing the postulate of our research "objectivity through subjectivity" and setting the appropriate theoretical framework for its continuation: "...too frequently, language expresses more or less of what we have in mind. This is the true essence of hedges; not accepting this leads to the denial of their

very existence. A science of language that does not take into account the singular essence of its object is not linguistics; it is not grammar either; it could not even pretend to be graphology" [29, c. 173].

The prospects of the above research may lie within the framework of conducting a conceptual analysis of hedging as intersubjectivity signal in the academic discourse.

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