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The Use of Hedging Devices in English and Persian Abstracts of Persian Literature and Civil Engineering MA/MS Theses of Iranian Writers

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Abstract

The present study compared and contrasted the frequency of incidence of hedges in 40 MA/MS abstracts of Persian Literature and Civil Engineering theses written both in Persian and English against the taxonomy of hedges proposed by Salager-Meyer (1994). Running Chi-square analyses, it was found that, firstly, there were no significant differences in the frequency of incidence of hedges used in the abstracts written both in English and Persian in both disciplines and secondly, discipline had no effect on the frequency of incidence of hedges. Thirdly, Iranian graduate students made relatively lower use of hedges compared with their English speaking counterparts.

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1. Introduction

It is now widely accepted that any written text involves an interaction between the writer and the reader. Research in a variety of disciplines has shown that academic genre like other genres is socially based to accomplish rhetorical objectives. Thus, writers should use certain linguistic devices to define their relationship to the research community and make their statement closer to the consensus of the discourse community. The concept of hedging seems to have been first introduced by Lakoff (1972) by which he meant "words whose job is to make things more

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or less fuzzy"(1972, p.194). Holmes (1982) defines hedging as a rhetorical device for demonstrating politeness and consideration for others, and a way of giving readers a chance to disagree.

Hedging is the expression of tentativeness and possibility and is a must in academic writing where it is necessary to present unproven propositions with caution and precision (Hyland, 1996b). As Hyland (1996a) argues, a hedge is a linguistic device used to show two main purposes; a) a lack of complete commitment to the truth of a proposition and b) a desire not to express that commitment categorically. In another seminal paper, Hyland (1994) clarified two reasons for the use of hedging devices. Firstly, hedges allow claims to be made with due caution, modesty, and humility. Secondly, the status of such claims is diplomatically negotiated when referring to the work of colleagues and competitors.

Hyland and Tse (2004, p. 157) believe that metadiscourse is "self-reflective linguistic material referring to the evolving text and to the writer and imagined reader of that text". They also contend that metadiscourse views writing as social engagement and in academic contexts it shows the ways writers project themselves into their discourse to signal their attitude towards both the propositional content and the audience of the text. Hyland (2000, p.111) categorized hedges as interpersonal metadiscourse which refer to words that "modify the writer's commitment to the proposition". Thus, lexical devices used to signal the author's lack of confidence are described as hedges.

In addition, many taxonomies have been proposed for hedges including that of Myers (1985), Hyland (1996a, 1996b) and Salager-Meyer (1994). Because the classification of Salager-Meyer (1994) served as the basis of the present study, it is elaborated here.

Salagar-Meyer (1994) classified hedges as; *shields* (expressions like could, may, might, would, to appear, to seem, probably, to suggest), *approximators* of degree, quantity, frequency and time (e.g., approximately, roughly, about, often, occasionally, etc), *authors' personal doubt and direct involvement* (expressions such as I believe, to our knowledge, it is our view that, etc), *emotionally-charged intensifiers* (such as extremely difficult/interesting, of particular importance, unexpectedly, surprisingly, etc) and *compound hedges* (e.g., could be suggested, would seem likely, would seem, somewhat, etc).

Recently, hedges have been well studied and a great deal is known about them. Nasiri (2012) compared utilization of hedging devices by American and Iranian researchers in the field of Civil Engineering. The results of his study showed that in general, the number of hedging devices used by American writers was more than those of Iranian writers. He also found no significant difference between the American and Iranian writers in terms of utilizing hedging devices in the discussion sections of their research articles.

However, to the best of our knowledge, no study seems to have been conducted to compare the frequency of occurrence of hedging devices among Iranian writers in academic writings in their native Persian and non-native English language. Thus, this paper aimed at investigating the use of hedging devices in the Abstract section of MA/MS theses of the two fields of Persian Literature and Civil Engineering and comparing the frequency of occurrence of these devices among the two majors. Attempts were thus made to answer the following research questions:

- 1- Is there any significant difference in the use of hedging devices in the English abstracts of Persian Literature and Civil Engineering MA/MS theses of Iranian university students?
- 2- Is there any significant difference in the use of hedging devices in the Persian abstracts of Persian Literature and Civil Engineering MA/MS theses of Iranian university students?

2. Methodology

2.1. Corpus/ Participants

The data in this study were obtained from forty MA/MS theses written by students of Bu-Ali Sina

University, Hamedan, Iran, in the two fields of Persian Literature and Civil Engineering submitted to the university during the academic years of 2000 and 2012. The English abstracts of twenty of these theses were then analyzed. Also, the Persian abstracts of the other twenty theses in both fields were analyzed. The results of the analysis were compared and contrasted. The number of abstracts in both fields is tabulated in Table 1.

Table1. The number of Persian and English abstracts in the two field.

Field	Number of Persian abstracts	Number of English abstracts	Total
Persian Literature	10	10	20
Civil Engineering	10	10	20
Total	20	20	40

2.2. Instruments

Forty MA/MS theses were chosen in the fields of Persian Literature and Civil Engineering which were all written after 2000 so that time factor would not affect the results. In order to analyze the abstracts, the researchers, using Salagar-Meyer's (1994) taxonomy of hedges, scrutinized them. Salagar-Meyer (1994) classified hedges as; *shields* (expressions like could, may, might, would, to appear, to seem, probably, to suggest), *approximators* of degree, quantity, frequency and time (e.g., approximately, roughly, about, often, occasionally, etc), *authors' personal doubt and direct involvement* (expressions such as I believe, to our knowledge, it is our view that, etc), *emotionally-charged intensifiers* (such as extremely difficult/interesting, of particular importance, unexpectedly, surprisingly, etc) and *compound hedges* (e.g., could be suggested, would seem likely, would seem, somewhat, etc).

2.3. Procedure

Based on the Salagar-Meyer's (1994) taxonomy, the researchers scrutinized the Persian and English abstracts of the theses and calculated the frequency of occurrence of different categories of hedges in them. The Salagar-Meyers's taxonomy was translated into Persian by two experts in Persian Literature. The back-translation method was also employed to enhance the validity of the translation.

2.4. Data analysis

Using SPSS, the frequency of occurrence of hedges was calculated. Also, to find any meaningful difference between the frequency of occurrence of hedges of Persian and English abstracts of the two groups, a Chi-square analysis was run.

3. Results and discussion

The frequency and percentage of hedges used in Persian and English abstracts of Persian Literature and Civil Engineering MA/MS theses are summarized in Table 2 below.

Table2. The descriptive statistics of hedges in Abstract sections of Persian Literature and Civil Engineering MA/MS theses

Hedging Type / Field and language	Shields	Approximators	Authors' personal doubt and direct involvement	Emotionally-charged intensifiers	Compound hedges	Total
English abstracts of Persian Literature	8 28.5%	6 21.42%	0 0%	13 46.42%	1 3.57%	28 100%
English abstracts of Civil Engineering	15 46.8%	7 21.87%	0 0%	7 21.87%	3 9.37%	32 100%
Persian abstracts of Persian Literature	4 11.4%	17 48.57%	0 0%	12 34.28%	2 5.71%	35 100%
Persian abstracts of Civil Engineering	7 17.0%	19 46.34%	0 0%	15 36.58%	0 0%	41 100%
Total	34	49	0	47	6	136

As it can be seen in Table 2, while Persian Literature abstracts had 8 shields in their Persian abstracts, Civil Engineering abstracts had 13 of them. Furthermore, Civil Engineering students used 15 shields in their abstracts while their Persian Literature counterparts used only 8 of this. The total number of shields used by the two majors in both languages equals 34. This finding suggests that shields are one of the most frequently used kinds of hedges, a finding confirmed by the results of Mojica (2005, cited in Nivales, 2011) who found that modals are the favored form of hedging. Salager-Meyer (1992) also found that modal verbs accounted for 38 percent of the verbs in the 84 medical abstracts she analyzed. Similarly, Hyland (1994) found that 27 percent of lexical hedging devices in his corpus of 26 molecular biology articles constituted modals. He also cited Butler (1990, p. 166) who maintained that "modals are the most important means of allowing authors to make claims about what it is legitimate to conclude from the results, what may or must be the case, what phenomena are sometimes or generally observable and so on". Table 3 below shows the results of the chi-square analysis for the use of shields in the two disciplines.

Table.3 Chi-square analysis for the use of shields in the two disciplines in both languages

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig (2sided)
Pearson Chi Square	4.000 a	3	.261
Continuity Correction			
Likelihood Ratio	5.545	3	.136
Linear-by-Linear			
Association	1.154	1	.283
N of Valid Cases	4		

As it can be inferred from Table 3, there was no significant difference in using shields between the two disciplines in both English and Persian languages. In another study, Nasiri (2012) used the Salagar-Meyer taxonomy of hedges and ran a chi-square analysis. He also found that there was no significant difference in using shields by American and Iranian writers.

The next type of hedges (Approximators) were most frequently used in the Persian abstracts of Civil Engineering students (N=19). However, Persian Literature students also used several Approximators in their mother tongue (N=17). In addition, Approximators were less frequently used than shields in English abstracts of both disciplines. Hyland (1994) argues that adverbials, nouns and adjectives are less frequently used than lexical and modal verbs and they are used quite extensively to express modality in written texts. Abdollahzadeh (2011, p.293) also reported that "writer groups make recourse to modal auxiliaries and adverbials more frequently than adjectival or verbal boosters to establish the significance of their work and fend off against or restrict possible alternative interpretations". He maintains that the modal *can* is able to make predictions and recommendations for further study and is widely used in abstract sections. Table 4 below shows the results of Chi-square analysis for the use of approximators in the two disciplines.

Table.4 Chi-square analysis for the use of approximators in the two disciplines in both languages

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig (2sided)
Pearson Chi Square	4.000 a	3	.261
Continuity Correction			
Likelihood Ratio	5.545	3	.136
Linear-by-Linear			
Association	.050	1	.823
N of Valid Cases	4		

Table 4 shows that there was no significant difference between the two disciplines in using approximators in both English and Persian languages.

Furthermore, it can be understood from Table 2 that neither majors had the propensity to use the third type of hedges (Authors' personal doubt and direct involvement) in both their native and non-native languages. This may be due to the fact that it is not common to express personal ideas in abstracts of MA/MS theses. It might be also due to the fact that, expressing individual ideas in these two majors is not possible and the authors rely more on their findings rather than their personal interpretations.

Myers (1989, p.8) maintains that emotionally charged intensifiers show "solidarity with the (discourse) community by exhibiting responses that assume shared knowledge and desires showing identification with a common goal, rather than the response or desires of an individual". The findings indicate that these types of hedges

constitute a noticeable number of total hedges (N=47) and in the present study they were most frequently used in Persian abstracts of Civil Engineering theses. Instances of the Persian Literature abstracts are: *it had a tremendous influence* and *it is of crucial importance*. Moreover, samples from Civil Engineering abstracts are: *is of little concern*, and *has the great advantage of*. However, the authors of Persian Literature abstracts used about twice as many intensifiers of this kind. This may be due to the nature of this major. While Civil Engineering is an exact science and needs to be exact in every aspect of it, Persian Literature is a soft science and is expected to use even more hedges in general.

Thereafter, a Chi-square analysis was run to compare the two disciplines in using emotionally charged intensifiers.

Table.5 Chi-square analysis for the use of emotionally charged intensifiers in the two disciplines in both languages

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig (2sided)
Pearson Chi Square	4.000 a	3	.261
Continuity Correction			
Likelihood Ratio	5.545	3	.136
Linear-by-Linear			
Association	.194	1	.659
N of Valid Cases	4		

Table 5 shows there was no statistically significant difference between the two disciplines in using emotionally charged intensifiers.

As for the last type of hedges, they were found to be rare in both languages and disciplines. However, Civil Engineering English abstracts outnumbered Persian Literature English abstracts in the use of this kind of hedges. The authors' personal interpretation is that they may be rare due to the premise that authors of the two majors seem not to be familiar with hedges and the importance of them in academic writing so that they cannot combine different hedging devices.

Another Chi-square analysis was run to find whether there was any significant difference in using compound hedging devices by the two disciplines.

Table.6 Chi-square analysis for the use of compound hedges in the two disciplines in both languages

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig (2sided)
Pearson Chi Square	4.000 a	3	.261
Continuity Correction			
Likelihood Ratio	5.545	3	.136
Linear-by-Linear			
Association	.194	1	.659
N of Valid Cases	4		

As the results in Table 6 indicate, there was no significant difference in the use of compound hedges between the two disciplines in both English and Persian languages.

Finally, a Chi-square analysis was run to find any significant difference in the total number of hedges used in the two disciplines in both Persian and English abstracts. Table 7 shows there was no such a significant difference

in the total number of hedges used in both languages.

Table.7 Chi square analysis for all kinds of hedges in the two disciplines in both languages

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig (2sided)	Exact Sig. (2sided)	Exact Sig. (1- sided)	Point Probability
Pearson Chi Square	4.000 a	3	.261	1.000		
Continuity Correction						
Likelihood Ratio	5.545	3	.136	1.000		
Linear-by-Linear	3.615					
Association	.833 b	1	.361	.667	.337	.167
N of Valid Cases	4					

As it can be inferred from the results of this study, writers of both majors use hedges rather equally in their non-native language and the writers of none of the majors seem to be proficient enough in using various kinds of hedging devices. The results of the study conducted by Nasiri (2012) also confirm the findings of the present study. He found that Iranian Civil Engineering students used much fewer hedging devices in their academic writings in comparison to American students. In addition, Mirazapour and RasekhMahand (2012) studying the frequency of hedges used by native and non-native writers of Library and Information and Computer Sciences research articles found that there were significant differences between native and non-native writers in the use of hedges. The findings of their study are in line with those of the present study showing that non-native speakers use much fewer hedging devices in their academic writing. Regarding the use of hedging devices by Iranian writers in their native language (Persian), it seems there is less emphasis on using them in academic Persian writing by students.

5. Conclusion and implications

Hedging is an important discourse feature that students must learn if they want their ideas to be taken seriously in the academic community and also if they want their theses and papers to be accepted in journals published in English language. However, the results of this study indicate that Iranian MA/MS students are not seemingly aware of the great importance of hedging in academic writing. Thus, it might be helpful to raise their awareness of the usefulness of various hedging devices and encourage them to use these devices in their academic writings, a point highlighted by Hyland (1994, p.246) who maintains there is "a need for greater and more systematic attention to be given to this important interpersonal strategy." Thus, the results of the present study might help the textbook writers to be more aware of the importance of hedging devices for MA/MS students so that they can include them in the textbooks. Moreover, teachers can instruct their MA/MS students in using different hedging devices to improve their students' writing ability.

In conclusion, it should be noted that this study investigated the frequency of hedging devices in only two majors. Thus, the results should be treated with caution and should not be overgeneralized.

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