

## In Other Words: Hedging and Politeness in Two TESOL Research Papers

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### 1. Introduction

The term *hedging* is used in this paper to indicate a range of rhetorical devices that authors use to weaken their commitment to a statement or proposition. For instance, academic writing of most kinds abounds with modal verbs (*may, could, might, etc.*), modal adjectives (*possibly, probably, arguably, etc.*), and adverbials of time (*often, sometimes, occasionally, etc.*) used in instances where the writer might have opted for a simple declarative clause in less formal discourse. My own use of *might have opted* in the last sentence is a typical example of a hedged statement, displaying a level of caution that would be uncommon when expressing the same idea in, say, an informal conversation with a friend or a hastily written email to a colleague. Hedges are perhaps the most common of the *interactional resources* (Hyland & Tse, 2004) that academic writers use to involve the reader in the argument, and serve three important functions:

1. Distinguishing fact from opinion.
2. Respecting the right of others (readers and writers alike) to hold different opinions.
3. Leaving the writer with the option to later reject his/ her own proposition without loss of face.

As the second of these indicates, hedging is also closely connected with the wider notion of politeness in academic writing. Academic writers tend to adopt a depersonalized tone (e.g. extensive use of passive structures, self-reference using the third person), and intensifiers such as *clearly and definitely* are often avoided in statements which present new claims or reject the claims of others.

However, while there is no shortage of literature on the subject of hedging and politeness, most discussions to date have approached the subject by contrasting writing from different fields. Myers (1989) and Hyland (1996) look at how hedges and politeness are typically employed in science research articles, while Myers (1992) compares science textbooks with science research articles. Economic forecasting is dealt with by Bloor and Pindi (1986), and medical written discourse by Salager-Meyer (1994), while Varttala (1999) contrasts popular scientific research articles on medicine with their specialist research article counterparts. While the areas researched vary, all these writers share the common approach of seeking to identify “re-occurring stereotypes” (Salager-Meyer, 1998, p. 297)

within corpora of written texts of a particular genre. While it would be possible to carry out a similar analysis on a corpus of published writing in the field of TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages), one of the dangers inherent in this approach is the risk of obscuring the very real differences in rhetorical style that can exist between two authors in the same field. While there may be rhetorical features that are typical of the TESOL genre, this is not to say that all TESOL writers share an equal concern for presenting themselves, as scientific writers generally do, as “humble servants of the discipline” (Myers, 1989, p. 4). In this paper I contrast the writing of two TESOL authors as displayed in two papers in a collection targeted at EFL/ESL teachers and teacher-trainers. While it may be true that TESOL writers in general follow the unwritten rules governing hedging and politeness in writing, it will be seen that there are also cases in which a writer makes a conscious decision not to follow these rules.

## 2. Outline of Papers

The discussion is based on the following two papers:

Lewis, M. (1996). Implications of a lexical view of language.

Skehan, P. (1996). Second language acquisition research and task-based instruction.

Both papers appear in *Challenge and Change in Language Teaching* (Willis & Willis, 1996), a collection targeted at practising teachers and teacher-trainers. The book has as its underlying themes the rejection of the PPP (*Present, Practice, Produce*) paradigm of foreign language teaching, and the development of a methodological framework that integrates both formal teaching and communicative activities. At the outset, it is important to recognise that the core arguments presented by Lewis and Skehan are distinctly similar. Lewis rejects the PPP paradigm outright, claiming it to be “fundamentally flawed.” He calls for a lexical view of language, which should acknowledge that language learning requires memorisation of “chunks” of language rather than of grammar rules. He proposes a three-part learning cycle – *observe, hypothesise, experiment* – in which learners should continually form their own hypotheses about the language system as they observe the language to which they are exposed, and experiment by comparing their own output with authoritative input.

Skehan picks up on many of the same themes. He also rejects the PPP paradigm and, like Lewis, notes the predominance of prefabricated chunks of language in native conversation. He argues for a task-based approach to language learning, in which learners engage in tasks that focus on language as meaning, but also suggests that there must be some focus on form in the language classroom. He claims that grammatical awareness will only be of use if it can be incorporated into a real-time operating system based on the lexical mode.

## 3. Contrasting Styles

While there is clearly much common ground between the two writers, even the passive reader will immediately notice significant differences in the way in which arguments are presented. The following

sentence is typical of Skehan's style:

- (1) The belief that a precise focus on a particular form leads to learning and automisation (that learners will learn what is taught in the order in which it is taught) no longer carries much credibility in linguistics or psychology (Brumfit and Johnson 1979; Ellis 1985). (p. 18)

The three underlined parts are typical examples of the ways in which Skehan conforms to the patterns of politeness that we are accustomed to seeing in the writing of TESOL authors. *No longer* serves to acknowledge that in the past competent researchers may have accepted the argument, while the inclusion of *much* can be seen as acknowledging that there are some who continue to believe in PPP. Furthermore, the inclusion of two references, while on the one hand strengthening the argument by noting that it is shared by others, can also be seen as a politeness strategy, playing down the significance of Skehan's own contribution. Contrast this with Lewis on the same subject:

- (2) It is not sufficient to suggest that such a paradigm represents one of a number of ways in which language is learned; the fact is the PPP paradigm is, and always was, nonsense. (p. 11)

This is typical of the propositions presented throughout his paper. The PPP paradigm is not just unsatisfactory or flawed, it is *nonsense*. Moreover, this is given as a *fact*; Lewis appears to deny the reader the right to disagree, even going as far as to anticipate a possible counter-argument and duly dismiss it as *not sufficient*. The use of *always was*, meanwhile, serves to deny that there may even have been a time when researchers saw good reason to accept the PPP paradigm. This is a recurring pattern in Lewis's writing; he pays seemingly little attention to the negative face requirements of readers, and other writers, and makes little attempt to situate his work within the wider body of TESOL research literature. The remainder of this paper will examine these and other rhetorical differences, offering speculation on the motives of the authors, the audience they wish to target, and the reactions they seek to provoke.

#### 4. Hedging in the Writing of Lewis and Skehan

In discussions of hedging most writers seem to take as their point of departure Lakoff's (1972, p. 95) rather vague description of hedges as "words whose job it is to make things fuzzy or less fuzzy." Writers still disagree over exactly how hedges should be defined (e.g. Crompton, 1997, 1998; Salager-Meyer, 1998, 2000). However, most writers acknowledge the significance of the contribution made by Myers (1985, 1989), who argued that hedges are in essence a written form of the negative politeness strategies that Brown and Levinson (1987) identified in conversation. In other words, the use of hedging is seen as a rhetorical technique that enables writers to make new claims while at the same time showing proper respect for earlier claims. This in turn implies allowing the reader the option of rejecting the new claim. As such, this politeness is directed as much at readers as it is at the writers whose claims are challenged, as noted by Hyland (1994, p. 251): "Addressing the negative face requirements of readers assures them that the writer does not intend to infringe on their freedom to

hold alternative opinions.”

Let us now consider some of the forms of hedging that appear in the two articles under consideration.

### **a) Modal auxiliaries**

Both Skehan and Lewis make extensive use of modal auxiliaries such as *may*, *might* and *could*. However, it is important to note that the presence of such words need not necessarily signal that the author is qualifying his commitment to a proposition, but may simply refer to a situation in which more than one option is available. For example:

(3) The grammar may mean the partnership words are widely separated... (Lewis, p. 14)

(4) This may involve an explicit focus on specific language forms believed to be useful in the coming task. It may be more indirect. (Skehan, p. 25)

Examples of modal auxiliaries that weaken the author's commitment to a proposition are not especially common in either paper. The only example in Lewis comes in the final sentence:

(5) It may be, however, that schools and teachers who understand, fund, and implement approaches which reflect the real nature of language and learning may achieve the best possible advertising, namely successful learners. (p. 16)

There are a few more examples in Skehan, but not enough to make this an especially productive area for analysis.

### **b) Adjectival and adverbial expressions**

This is a more productive area for analysis. Both writers use expressions such as *possible*, *perhaps*, and *probability* to weaken their commitment to propositions. Examples include the following:

(6) Even more confusingly, perhaps the two processes are in some way parallel and overlapping? (Lewis, p. 11)

(The use of the interrogative form in the above example can also be seen as a form of hedging, together with the vague *in some way*, and the comment word *confusingly*, which Salager-Meyer (1994) classifies as an “emotionally-charged intensifier.”)

(7) In fact, the direct opposite is probably the truth. (Lewis, p. 16)

(8) There is then a greater possibility of learners using strategies... (Skehan, p. 25)

(9) This will probably have an effect on issues such as accuracy and complexity. (Skehan, p. 26)

However, one of the most striking differences between the two papers is the frequent use by Lewis of *boosters* (Hyland & Tse, 2004, p. 169) such as *inevitable*, *essential*, and *incontrovertible*. Consider

the following examples:

(10) This is patently absurd, and self-evidently it is not the case that every item which is learned needs to be formally taught. (p. 11)

(11) Any attempt to isolate one structure for the purpose of study inevitably distorts the language. (p. 11)

(12) Any learning paradigm must contain an element which reflects this incontrovertible aspect of the nature of language. (p. 12)

(13) This paradigm is a methodological possibility for short-term teaching sequences such as individual lessons; it is essential to any long-term teaching strategy. (p. 12)

These are not isolated examples, but part of a recurring pattern. The following list of some lexical items in Lewis's paper should help to give a flavour of his style: *clear*, *clearly* (2 times), *inevitable*, *inevitably* (2 times), *essential* (2 times), *incontrovertible*, *embarrassing*, *remotely*, *wholly unsatisfactory*.

If the use of modal auxiliaries such as *may*, *might* and *could* is seen as reflecting Brown and Levinson's concept of negative politeness, the features of Lewis's writing discussed in this section seem to match equally well with the concept of positive politeness, which in the case of academic writing is essentially a matter of showing solidarity with the reader. Comments such as *inevitably* and *patently absurd* can arguably be seen as manifestations of positive politeness. As Myers (1989, p. 9) observes, "by treating assumptions as obvious, the writer includes all his readers as potentially capable of making a claim, thus minimising his/her own originality."

While some might regard such a style as infringing on the reader's right to hold alternative opinions, perhaps many readers will welcome a style that does not leave the writer's opinions and propositions obscured behind a shroud of politeness and reservations. Again, though, our purpose here is not to pass judgement on such rhetorical techniques, but merely to illustrate how they may reflect conscious decisions on the part of the author. Indeed, it is extremely unlikely that Lewis is unaware that his style differs considerably from that of Skehan, so it seems entirely appropriate to consider his possible motives in choosing such a style.

### **c) Avoidance of hedging: "bald on record" claims**

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Lewis's writing is the large number of occasions on which, to borrow Brown and Levinson's (1987) terminology, he goes "bald on record" by assigning to claims the status of indisputable facts. Furthermore, claims are often accompanied by emotive terms such as *nonsense* and *travesty*. Examples abound, and in many cases we can identify a corresponding weaker claim in Skehan's writing.

Lewis on PPP:

(14) ...the fact is the PPP paradigm is, and always was, nonsense. (p. 11)

(15) ...any paradigm based on, or remotely resembling, Present – Practice – Produce (PPP) is

wholly unsatisfactory. (p. 11)

(16) ...the PPP paradigm was a travesty, for philosophical, psychological, ideological and methodological reasons. (p. 16)

Skehan on PPP:

(17) With the passage of time, however, these arguments have become less and less powerful. (p. 18)

(18) ...the evidence in support of such an approach is unimpressive. (p. 18)

(19) The underlying theory for a PPP approach has now been discredited. (p. 18)

What makes the above examples from Lewis stand out is not so much the absence of hedging as the presence of highly-charged terms. To say that something is *nonsense* or *a travesty* is to go much further than to say merely that the evidence to support it is *unimpressive*. Likewise, while Skehan makes a point of explaining *why* PPP commanded such a following in the past (the first page of his paper deals almost exclusively with this question), Lewis seems equally determined to leave no room for the reader to reject his claims without losing face. Consider two more examples:

(20) All forms of procedural or skill-based learning are, in fact, not subject to the kind of linear sequencing intrinsic to any assertion that we know exactly what is being learned at any given moment. (Lewis, p. 13)

(21) ...the evidence on second language acquisition is not encouraging to the proposition that one can target and teach individual structures in whatever order a pedagogic syllabus plan may decree. (Skehan, p. 28)

Here again, Lewis presents his claim as a bare fact (note the use of *in fact*), while Skehan goes no further than to note that “the evidence...is not encouraging.” Let us now consider possible explanations for the differences.

## 5. Content-oriented Hedges vs. Reader-oriented Hedges

It would be naive to conclude from such evidence that Lewis is more committed to his propositions than is Skehan. Indeed, it is unlikely that any writer would prepare his arguments for publication unless he/she felt confident that they could be defended if challenged. A more plausible explanation can be found by considering Hyland's (1996) distinction between *content-oriented* hedges and *reader-oriented* hedges. Hyland defines the former as being concerned with the *accuracy* of statements, the latter with their *acceptability*. In other words, while some hedges may simply reflect the degree of confidence that a writer has in his propositions, others may reflect the degree of confidence that a writer *feels it is appropriate to display*. As Hyland (1996, p. 446) explains, “This professional personality is crucial to achieving rhetorical goals as it also conveys an attitude about the reader and his/ her role in the negotiation of knowledge claims.”

Such an approach goes a long way toward explaining the preponderance of hedging and lack of emotive terms in Skehan's writing. We can argue that this is simply his way of soliciting collusion on the

part of the reader; giving readers the option to reject claims is ultimately a means of increasing the probability that they will in fact accept them. However, while this analysis may explain some features of Skehan's writing, it also implies that we should look elsewhere in seeking to explain the rhetorical choices made by Lewis if we are to avoid the highly improbable conclusion that Lewis seeks to provoke the rejection of the very claims that he proposes! One possible explanation that immediately springs to mind is that Lewis may be concerned primarily with addressing the general reader (i.e. practising teachers who are not themselves active researchers/ writers), while Skehan may feel a greater need to address the negative face requirements of his fellow academics, and to present his work as one small part of a wider body of research. Indeed, it may be significant that Lewis is one of the few contributors to *Challenge and Change* who is not affiliated to an academic institution. Support is lent to this idea by examining differences in the use of citation, and by contrasting the highly personalised style employed by Lewis with the very depersonalised style that Skehan adopts.

## 6. Citation and Personalisation

Academic writing typically abounds with citations of the work of other writers, be they in the form of a direct quotation, an acknowledgement referring to a particular text, or a name without a specific reference. A comparison of Lewis and Skehan reveals a very significant difference in style. In the course of 14 pages (approximately 7,000 words) Skehan cites a total of 47 separate publications, for a total of 63 citations. Lewis, whose paper is roughly half the length of Skehan's, includes a mere four titles in the references section at the end of his paper, and only one of these (his own book!) is actually cited in the body of the text. The figure for Skehan is roughly in line with the density of citation that Hyland (2000, p. 24) found in a small corpus of applied linguistics articles. The reasons for such a preponderance of citation seem fairly clear. Citation can be seen as a politeness strategy to the extent that it offers a way for a writer to express solidarity with fellow academics, while at the same time it distinguishes one's own original propositions from ideas already presented elsewhere. From the point of view of encouraging the acceptance of new ideas, it would seem that writers have a strong incentive to situate their work within an established framework embracing the work of other authors. It may even be a necessary condition for the acceptance of an idea that it does not veer too far from hitherto accepted arguments. As Hyland (2000, p. 31) observes, "Because new ideas must be situated in relation to assimilated disciplinary knowledge, the most influential ideas are often those that most closely resemble the old ones." If this is the case, then writers have a clear incentive to present their work as the logical follow-on from the work of others.

On reading Skehan, one will also notice the depersonalised way in which he cites his own findings, as in the following examples:

(22) Only the gifted learners achieve impressive levels of proficiency (Skehan 1989). (p. 18)

(23) Skehan (1992, 1994) proposes that the difficulty of tasks can be analysed... (p. 23)

(24) ...it has been argued that learners, too, can be regarded as oriented towards analysis or synthesis (Skehan 1986, 1989). (p. 29)

The casual reader who selected these pages at random would have no way of recognising that the Skehan referred to here is in fact the author. This pattern continues throughout the paper. Skehan cites seven of his own publications, each time with a bracketed reference, and without once using the personal pronoun *I*. While certainly not a rule of academic writing, this is nevertheless a popular rhetorical choice for many authors. It can be viewed as a way of stressing solidarity with fellow academics, of projecting the author's findings as no more nor less important than those of other authors. Of course, this is ultimately another way of increasing the probability of the author's arguments being accepted by readers; the author strengthens the credibility of his own earlier findings by presenting them as part of the wider body of accepted TESOL literature. Granted, there are subtle differences between the three examples above; example (22) is presented as a fact supported by evidence, while examples (23) and (24) are hedged through the use of *proposes* and *it has been argued*, respectively. In addition, there may be specific reasons for a writer's choosing to give prominence to the author (23) rather than to the argument (22). However, in the case of Skehan's paper there is little to suggest that this reflects anything more a desire to give life to the paper by avoiding over-reliance on one pattern.

The very first sentence of Lewis heralds a very different rhetorical style:

(25) In *The Lexical Approach* (1993), I argued that language consisted not of vocabulary and structures... (p. 10)

We immediately sense the strong personal presence of the author, and anticipate that the paper will be framed largely in the narrow context on Lewis's own earlier work. Indeed, later in the paper Lewis uses capitalisation to give even greater prominence to his own ideas:

(26) The Lexical Approach has less to say about innovative methods... (p. 13)

It is very noticeable that throughout his paper Lewis avoids any direct reference to the published work of other authors (although his bibliography lists three other publications that are not referred to in the text). Indeed, on several occasions indirect reference to other work leads us to anticipate specific references, but none are forthcoming:

(27) This view, long held intuitively, is clearly endorsed by recent work on spoken corpora. It suggests that...(p. 10)

(28) Studies of real language suggest rather differently – much 'agreeing' is done by one speaker using a close synonym of a lexical item used by the other, rather than the more obvious *I agree completely/I don't (really) agree* more likely to be found in the coursebook unit on agreeing and disagreeing politely. (p. 11)

(29) Recent commentators have suggested alternative paradigms, including my own Observe – Hypothesize – Experiment. This paradigm is... (p. 12)

In addition, Lewis on several occasions refers to himself using the personal pronoun *I* or the possessive pronoun *my*:

(30) It is an unusual expression, and not one which I can recall having seen before. (p. 12)

(31) My claim is that learning involves a constant cycle of O-H-E elements... (p. 13)

(32) I explicitly reject the idea that... (p. 13)

These examples are relatively few in number, but it appears significant that while Skehan never once refers to himself in the first person, Lewis never once refers to himself in the third person. If this were the writing of students, it would be easy to interpret lack of citation as lack of background knowledge, and personalisation as either confusion regarding academic conventions (Johns, 1997. p. 68) or a rebellious attempt to seek “‘emancipation’ through the flouting of conventions” (Fairclough, 1995, p. 228). However, this sheds no light on why a respected authority in this field would choose such a style, so it is perhaps more productive to speculate on the readership Lewis hopes to address.

We can assume that both papers will be of interest to a varied readership consisting of academics, teacher trainers, practising teachers, graduate students, and so on. Lewis’s apparent deviation from the norms of the genre might irritate some of his fellow writers, but at the same time may make his arguments more accessible to students and practising teachers lower down the academic ladder. Ivanic and Simpson (1992) argue that in academic writing in general, the average student reader may be alienated by the use of impersonal language, the use of long, “nouny” sentences, and the general avoidance of pronouns other than *it* and *this*. In a text such as *Challenge and Change* a writer’s choice to show solidarity with, and deference to, the academic community, may in fact have the undesirable consequence of making the text less penetrable for practising teachers who lack a strong academic background. Indeed, Simpson (himself a student) makes the following comment (p. 149), one with which many current or former students will readily identify: “As a student reader I go to a textbook as a means of expansion and authority. However, I usually find that I have to battle through a book to gain a small amount of either.”

While other explanations are certainly possible, perhaps we can interpret Skehan’s indirect, impersonal style as showing solidarity with the academic community by positioning his work first and foremost as part of an ongoing trend in TESOL research. In contrast, the more direct presence of Lewis in his own writing could be interpreted as showing solidarity with a readership comprised largely of practising teachers. This is no more than speculation, but it is perhaps what we would expect when given the knowledge that Skehan is a full-time academic at a respected university, while Lewis is perhaps best known for establishing a publishing company to promote titles that reflect his ideas. Such an interpretation is appealing, as it makes it easy to draw parallels with the motivations suggested by the use/avoidance of hedging. We can easily envisage a reader who would object to Lewis’s failure to link his own work to that of other writers, and who would object to being spoon-fed claims without being given room to challenge them. Such a reader might react much more positively on reading Skehan. Conversely, though, one can equally well envisage a reader such as the aforementioned Simpson who would welcome Lewis’s more direct style, and who might find that Skehan’s deference to the academic community simply makes his writing less penetrable.

## 7. Conclusion

Whatever the differences in rhetorical style, presumably the ultimate motivation of both writers (and indeed of any writer) is to say something that has not been said before, to “create a research space” (Swales, 1990). In the TESOL community, as in other academic communities, a fundamental criterion for a writer to be published is that s/he has something original to say. However, writers seek not only to present novel arguments, but also to do so in a way that will maximise the chance of their propositions being accepted into the existing body of academic knowledge. “Politeness” in academic writing, it seems, does not reflect some altruistic concern for the emotional well being of others; rather, it reflects the fact that a positive reaction from readers is crucial to the acceptance of arguments. As Hyland (2000, p. 20) notes, “Writers must consider the reactions of their expected audience, for it is ultimately one’s peers who provide the social justification which transforms beliefs into knowledge.”

The discussion of politeness and hedging in academic writing is an already substantial area that seems set to grow even larger. Debate will continue over issues such as what exactly hedges are and how they should be classified. However, it is hoped that this paper has shown how the selective application of analytical approaches hitherto identified can offer helpful insights into the motives that drive individual academic writers and determine their rhetorical choices. Moreover, it is hoped that the reader is left with the realisation that the decision to follow the unwritten rules of academic discourse is ultimately no more than a manifestation of the desire for one’s claims to be accepted. As such, writers may have valid reasons for choosing to break these rules, with much depending on the nature of the readers whom writers seek to address. Whatever their differences, all academic writers are ultimately driven by the same aims; to say something new, and to say it in a way that will persuade readers to accept it.

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