

A CORPUS-BASED ANALYSIS OF HEDGING IN BRITISH AND AMERICAN AMBASSADORIAL SPEECHES

PHÂN TÍCH LỜI RÀO ĐÓN DỰA TRÊN KHỐI LIỆU PHÁT BIỂU CỦA ĐẠI SỨ ANH – MỸ

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Abstract - This paper aims at investigating the communicative purpose of different forms of hedges in English discourse under the umbrella of corpus-based analysis. The two corpora of British and American ambassadorial speeches are compiled to provide the data source for a comparative analysis. Hedges are expressions showing the speaker's tentativeness, indirectness and modality in speech communication. The results of this research shows that most hedges occurring in ambassadorial speeches are in patterns with modal lexical verbs, modal adjectives and modal adverbs as intensifiers and downtoners. Hedges in patterns with modal lexical verbs and modal adjectives occur with higher frequencies in the American ambassador corpus while more hedges with modal adverbs as intensifiers and downtoners are found in the British ambassador corpus. As such, it can be seen that American ambassadors appear to be more personal and subjective, whereas the British ambassadors seem to be more tentative and objective in speech delivery.

Key words - hedges; modality; corpus; intensifiers; downtoners

Tóm tắt - Bài viết tìm hiểu mục đích giao tiếp của các dạng lời rào đón khác nhau trong ngôn bản tiếng Anh qua phân tích khối liệu. Hai khối liệu phát biểu đại sứ Anh và Mỹ được xây dựng nhằm cung cấp dữ liệu cho việc phân tích. Lời rào đón thể hiện sự dè dặt, gián tiếp và tính thái của người nói trong giao tiếp. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy hầu hết lời rào đón trong các phát biểu đại sứ là những mô hình có động từ tính thái, tính từ tính thái và trạng từ tính thái mang nghĩa nhấn mạnh và giảm nhẹ. Mô hình với động từ tính thái và tính từ tính thái có tần suất cao ở khối liệu phát biểu của Đại sứ Mỹ, trong khi mô hình với trạng từ tính thái xuất hiện nhiều hơn ở khối liệu phát biểu của Đại sứ Anh. Như vậy, có thể thấy rằng Đại sứ Mỹ tỏ ra cá nhân và chủ quan hơn, ngược lại Đại sứ Anh dè dặt và khách quan hơn trong phát biểu.

Từ khóa - lời rào đón; tính thái; khối liệu; cụm từ nhấn mạnh; cụm từ giảm nhẹ

1. Introduction

Hedges are linguistic devices, i.e., understatements, used to convey purposive tentativeness and vagueness in communication. These are tools that the speaker/writer adds to the proposition to make the sentence more acceptable to the hearer/reader. Actually, hedges create no information for the sentence but they increase the capability of acceptance and reduce the risk of negation. As such, hedges are important devices to the discourse by their overall effect on the implication or the message of the text oral/written.

This domain has been concerned in ongoing research by a large number of linguists, pragmatists and discourse analysts. The term hedging was commenced into the field of linguistics by Lakoff (1972) in which hedges are associated with unclarity or fuzziness, as Lakoff (1972) claims “for me some of the most interesting questions are raised by the study of words or phrases whose job is to make things more or less fuzzy”. According to Myers (1988) scientists do not always want precision in all situations. “We sometimes want to be vague” and thus, hedges are among the safe ways to show our vagueness and tentativeness. However, as observed in linguistic research, the term hedging has now been widened to cover a number of interrelated concepts, not only vagueness and tentativeness but also indetermination, indirectness, approximation, etc. as politeness (see Brown & Levinson, 1987; Hyland, 1996; Vazquez & Giner, 2008).

Therefore, hedges can be seen as important tools used for “projecting honesty, modesty and proper caution in self-reports and for diplomatically creating space in areas

heavily populated by other researchers” (Swales, 1990). They are linguistic devices used to indicate a lack of complete commitment to the truth of the proposition, a desire not to express the commitment categorically (see Hyland, 1996) and to allow the speaker the greatest liberate in performing actions and making decisions. It is possible to purport that hedges are expressions of indetermination, indirectness, vagueness and modality in communication. One of the best ways to approach such expressions is under the umbrella of corpus-based research.

2. Objectives and methodology

2.1. Principal tasks in corpus design

A corpus is obviously the key component in any corpus-based research. The initial issue in any corpus-based study is corpus design which determines the effect of research. Although there are a range of corpora in different levels of text types, size and style, it would be misleading to treat corpora as the overall storage of any potentiality for linguistic research and then just use the appropriate software and sort out questions of study from corpora. Basic principles have to be considered, careful collections and planning for the organisation of a corpus have to be undertaken before it is designed. Aston and Burnard (1998: 21) indicate two groups of criteria to be considered: “on the one hand the size of a corpus and of its component parts and on the other the material actually selected for inclusion”. Hunston (2002: 25-31) also proposes four principal issues in corpus design as *size*, *content*, *balance* and *representativeness*, and *permanence*.

Basic tasks in conducting corpus-based research are three stages in priority: basic corpus development, corpus

tool development, and development of corpus annotations (see Leech 1991). Kennedy (1998) also suggest that the key points in any corpus design are in the researcher's determinations of what texts to be included in the corpus to achieve data for analysis; what comparison is intended to make between corpora for what purposes to be obtained. There must be careful planning decisions in selecting texts which promise the potentiality of the research efficiency to ensure its appropriateness in terms of variables, e.g., genre, style, authorship, topic, etc.

2.2. Building the research corpora and process of data collection for analysis

Typical in building the research corpora and process of data collection for corpus-based analysis are in Biber et al. (1998, 1999, 2002); Keck and Biber (2004); Baker (2006). On the basis of prior studies on data collection, the steps of collecting British and American ambassadorial speeches and building the research corpora are undertaken as follows.

Firstly, British and American ambassadors' speeches are selected because they are expected to contain expressions of the speaker's tentativeness. Then, patterns of hedges are coded and selected speeches are compiled into two research corpora. One is built from speeches made by British ambassadors to Vietnam (BAC) and the other is from speeches delivered by American ambassadors to Vietnam (AAC). These two research corpora provide data of hedges for quantitative analysis while qualitative analysis is used on selected utterances as illustration.

Table 1. Data on the corpus of American ambassadorial speeches (The AAC)

Ambassadors	Date range	No. of Speeches	% of corpus	No. of words	% of words
A01	2000-2003	13	19.25%	19,763	18.91%
A02	2003-2005	17	23.61%	26,910	25.76%
A03	2005-2008	25	35.22%	33,267	31.84%
A04	2008-2011	15	21.32%	24,544	23.49%
Total		70	100%	104,484	100%

Table 2. Data on the corpus of British ambassadorial speeches (The BAC)

Ambassadors	Date range	No. of speeches	% of Corpus	No. of words	% of Words
B01	2002-2004	20	28.52%	29,599	28.19%
B02	2004-2006	17	23.38%	23,638	22.51%

B03	2006-2008	17	23.38%	24,920	23.73%
B04	2008-2010	18	24.72%	26,845	25.57%
Total		72	100%	105,002	100%

In Table 1, the AAC consists of 70 speeches delivered by four American ambassadors to Vietnam in the period from 2000 to 2011, in the size of 104,484 words. The highest proportion of speeches contributing to the compilation of this corpus is from those made by ambassador A03, accounting for 25 speeches, at 35.22% of corpus and 31.84% of total words. The amount of speeches delivered by ambassador A01 is the fewest in this corpus, with 13 speeches, at 19.25% of corpus and 18.91% of total words. The amounts of speeches made by ambassadors A02 and A04 collected for this corpus are 17 and 15 respectively, at 23.61% and 21.32% of the corpus, 26.76% and 23.49% of total words.

Table 2 shows details of the BAC compiled from 72 speeches delivered by 4 British ambassadors to Vietnam in the period from 2002 to 2010, in the size of 105,002 words. Ambassador B01 contributes the highest proportion of the BAC, accounting for 20 speeches, at 28.52% of the corpus and 28.19% of total words. The number of speeches made by ambassadors B04 follows, accounting for 18, at 24.72% of the corpus and 25.57% of words. The speeches made by ambassadors B02 and B03 are equal, each with 17 speeches, at 22.51% and 23.38% of total words, respectively. In general, the size and synchronic range of these transcribed speeches are approximately equal. Therefore, they are expected to be relevant for collecting data and analysing the hedging expressions that the British and American ambassadors perform in their speech delivery.

Actually, the population of ambassadorial speeches selected for the compilation of each research corpus is not very large (70 speeches in the AAC and 72 in the BAC) and the size of the research corpora is also small (over 100,000 words each). However, the two research corpora can be seen representative since they contain similar text types of general speeches delivered by British and American ambassadors to general audience of Vietnamese users of English at similar time and are thus expected to provide spontaneous data for the comparative analysis and interpretation of hedging expressions.

It is honestly recognised that the research corpora are not all-sided for the genre of ambassadorial speeches in terms of varieties. Actually, samples of ambassadorial speeches for this genre could be collected from more varieties of English other than only those made by British and American ambassadors. However, speeches delivered by non-native English speakers would make this genre of speeches more complicated and thus cause the research corpora to be less representative.

Ambassadorial speeches collected are examined carefully so that patterns of hedges are coded manually.

Then, the software package of Wordsmith version 5.0 is used to provide statistical data of hedges in patterns as coded for analysis. Quantitative analysis shows the difference in frequency use of hedges between the corpora of British and American ambassadorial speeches. Qualitative investigation into selected utterances provides illustrations of hedges as well as indicates the major differences between British and American ambassadors in using patterns of hedges in their speech delivery.

3. Results and discussions

3.1. Hedges with modal lexical verbs

Modal lexical verbs normally occur in the comment clause of an utterance to indicate the speaker's commitment to the occurrence of the event presented in the complement clause of the utterance. These are in patterns with "parenthetical verbs" co-occurring with 1st person subjects to form comment clauses expressing the speaker's "mental state or attitude" towards the proposition (see Perkins, 1983: 97). As such, different modal lexical verbs in patterns of comment clauses as MMs indicate different levels of the speaker's commitment to the event presented in the proposition uttered as in the following excerpts:

[1] Madame Minister, I personally renew our commitment to you here today, to stand with you as your partners and to fight side by side with you as your friends against this dreaded disease. Together, ***I believe*** we can keep making progress and give hope to those in need. [A03U]

[2] ***I think*** today's report highlights the need for sound science, for monitoring and assessment, so we can understand the environmental trends much better, and, crucially, to understand the impact of those trends on the very poorest. [B03M]

In the excerpts above, patterns like *I believe...*, *I think...* are expressions of embedded modality. Such patterns play the function as hedges marking the speaker's engagement to the content of the utterance. The epistemic meaning expressed by the pattern ***I believe*** as in [1] indicates the speaker's strong belief that the two sides *can keep making progress and give hope to those in need*. Thus, this pattern is used to convey the strong epistemic sense of commitment. In [2], the pattern ***I think*** implies that the speaker neither completely commits himself to nor is fully responsible for the achievement of *today's report* and he just shows his opinions. As such, it can be claimed that '*believe*' is typically used in hedges showing the speaker's strong commitment while '*think*' is used to express the speaker's weak commitment to the occurrence of the event presented.

Other modal lexical verbs combined with the *I* pronoun expressing the sense of strong commitment as *believe* are *know*, *see*, *understand*, *assure*. Modal lexical verbs in the sense of weak commitment as *think* are *hope*, *expect*, *wish*, *suggest*. These convey the speaker's implication in lacking of confidence in the proposition presented. Observations of these patterns in the research corpora show that American ambassadors (AAs) employ more patterns of hedges with modal lexical verbs than British ambassadors (BAs) do,

accounting for 484 instances (4.6 per 1,000 words) in the AAC compared with 378 instances (3.6 per 1,000 words) in the BAC.

3.2. Hedges with modal adjectives

Modal adjectives are used in the comment clause as hedging expressions showing the speaker's confidence in the occurrence of the event presented in the utterance. Observations of hedges with modal adjectives collected in the research corpora show that the sense of the speaker's strong or weak confidence is not in the modal adjective itself but through patterns of embedded modality expressing subjective or objective meanings as in the following excerpts:

[3] ***It is clear that*** beneath this financial crisis lies a human crisis, and we need a coordinated global response to this crisis to ensure that the coming years do not become the 'lost years' in the global fight against poverty. [B04P]

[4] ***I am confident that*** Vietnam will continue to make domestic changes to ensure the future prosperity and happiness of its people. ***I am hopeful that*** Vietnam will strengthen its cooperation on challenges to global and regional stability that threaten us all. ***I am certain that*** our two peoples will continue to grow closer together... [A03P]

In [3], the pattern of modal adjective combined with impersonal subject '*it*' indicates the sense of objective epistemic modality. Hedges like '*It is clear that...*', '*It is likely that...*' convey the speaker's implication that it is not his judgement but it can be inferred from the situation that it is the case. The speaker transmits a message to hearers that although he does not commit himself to the event presented, he would like hearers to believe it. Patterns of hedges with modal adjectives as [It is + Adj_{Mod} + that/to] occur with higher frequencies in the BAC than in the AAC, accounting for 25 instances of *clear* found in the BAC, at 29.76% compared with 15 instances in the AAC, at 12.82%; and 23 instances of *likely* in the BAC, at 27.38% compared with only 6 in the AAC, at 5.13%.

In [4], the pattern of a modal adjective combined with the *I* pronoun conveys the sense of subjective epistemic modality. Hedges like '*I am confident that...*', '*I am hopeful that...*', '*I am certain that...*' indicating the speaker's strong belief or subjective commitment occur frequently in the research corpora. Interestingly, patterns of hedges as [I am + Adj_{Mod} + that/to...] are found with a higher frequency in the AAC than in the BAC, accounting for 96 and 36 instances, respectively. As such, it can be argued that AAs are more subjective and thus, more personal and direct than BAs in making commitment to the proposition presented in the utterance.

3.3. Intensifiers as hedges

Intensifiers are MMs used to modify the level of certainty that the speaker would like to claim for the propositional content of the utterance. Most hedges found in ambassadorial speeches as intensifiers are modal adverbs such as *obviously*, *certainly*, *definitely*, *of course*, *indeed*, *clearly*, *etc*. Hedges of this type are used to reinforce the impact of the utterance and help the speaker

avoid direct imposition on hearers as in the following examples:

[5] *Obviously there is a need* to make the information that's contained in the Vietnamese media available in English, otherwise your leadership is going to be very limited. [A03Y]

[6] *Clearly* the challenge is huge and *we need* to do more. This Government has committed to spend 0.7% of our national income on aid by 2013 – and we are the first UK government to put a date to the UN target. [B03C]

In [5] and [6], the modal adverbs *obviously* and *clearly* are used to enhance the speaker's opinion that the impact on the sense of obligation represented in *there is a need to...* or in *we need to...* is certain. That is to say although the impact of the utterance is intended to impose on hearers, with these intensifiers the sense of obligation becomes objectively obvious. As such, intensifiers can be seen as hedges conveying the sense of objective certainty about the occurrence of the event presented other than the speaker's subjective opinion. Hedges as intensifiers occur with a higher frequency in the BAC than in the AAC, accounting for 206 and 175 instances, respectively.

3.4. Downtoners as hedges

Downtoners are hedges used to serve the speakers' politeness in attenuating the strong impact of the utterance on hearers. Downtoners as hedges found in ambassadorial speeches are modal adverbs. They are used as sentence modifiers and can be pragmatically seen as the opposite to intensifiers. Downtoners as hedges indicate the speaker's avoidance of certain assertion or candid comment on the issue presented. As such, they are used to express the speaker's intention in avoiding the strong impact of the utterance on hearers. In ambassadorial speeches downtoners such as *perhaps*, *probably*, *maybe*, *possibly*, *etc.* are frequently used as hedges as in the following excerpts:

[7] *Perhaps* the first thing to bear in mind is the need for informed public debate. [B03N]

[8] In a business sense, you *probably* really should plan to be patient. It takes time, it takes longer than you may think sometimes. [A02C]

Downtoners like *perhaps* and *probably* are hedges used to attenuate the strong impact on hearers. As in [7], *perhaps* makes it easier for hearers to accept the imposition of obligation paraphrased as *the first thing you must bear in mind is....* In [8] the deontic *should* of obligation is weakened when the modal adverb *probably* is used as a hedging expression.

Downtoners as hedges occur with a higher frequency in the BAC than in the AAC, accounting for 96 compared with 50 instances, respectively. Moreover, the frequencies of individual downtoners are found with higher frequencies

in the BAC than in the AAC.

4. Conclusion

It has been observed from the research corpora that hedges are in patterns with modal adjectives, modal lexical verbs, modal adverbs as intensifiers and downtoners. It can be argued that the AAs and BAs are strikingly different in using patterns of hedges in their speech delivery. More instances of hedges with modal adjectives and modal lexical verbs are found in the AAC than in the BAC. On the contrary, higher frequencies of intensifiers and downtoners are found in the BAC than in the AAC. Such differences in patterns of hedges indicate that AAs are more personal and subjective, whereas BAs are more tentative and objective in using hedges in their speech delivery.

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