

# Hedges in Male and Female Language

تعابير المراوغة  
في لغة الرجال و النساء

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## ABSTRACT

Hedging is a linguistic phenomenon used to convey interpersonal messages in spoken interaction. It is a communicative strategy which enables speakers to soften the force of utterances or moderate the assertive force of utterances. It is resulted from different features such as uncertainty, doubt, tentativeness, ambiguity, neutrality, mitigation, and subjectivity. Hedging is used widely in TV debates to make utterances more acceptable to the interlocutors. Hedges are expressions used to communicate the speaker's weak commitment to information conveyed. The utterances in debates are often hedged because in an unhedged form might sound threatening to the addressees, and, therefore, be likely to be rejected.

Hedges play a significant pragmatic function which is affected by social variables such as gender. Thus, the main purpose of the present study is to compare and contrast the frequency types and functions of hedges in male and female language. The problem is that, in Iraq, there is no study which associates the use of hedges with gender as a social variable. This study is an attempt to fill this gap.

The study aims to identify the types of hedges used and figure out which types are most dominant in TV debates. It shows the specific functions of hedging in those four debates. It also introduces a pragmatic analysis of the use of hedges in language especially male's and female's social roles in order to identify their distinctive functions.

The study presents two conclusions. First, hedges keep the TV debates smooth and avoids conflict. The use of hedges is motivated by many language features such as indetermination, subjectivization, vagueness and politeness. Secondly, the study also shows the significant role that context plays in the interpretation of hedging. It also confirms that males tend to use hedges more than females do owing to their awareness of the undesirable effects of certain topics

## **Section one**

### **Theoretical part**

#### Introduction

Gendered communication is worthy of exploration because it brings into sharper focus real-world imbalances and inequalities, (Lackoff, 1973: 73). During the 1960's and 1970's, sociolinguistics provided mechanisms for scientific investigation of language variation on the basis of both sociological factors such as gender.

In 1975, Lakoff examines the everyday conversation of American women. She refers to the fact that women soften their opinions through using hedges. She also argues that American women are socialized into a quite different way of speaking than men. She argues that women are expected from an early age to "speak like a lady", i.e., to be more conservative of expression, polite, indirect and refined than men, ( Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 2003: 158).

Joseph(2004:61) indicates that Lakoff's work in (1975) is soon followed up by Thorne and Henley (1975) and Spender (1980), and led both to the discourse analyses of women's language practised by Tannen (1994), and to the more politically oriented work of Cameron (1992 and 1995).

In 1980's, many studies confirm that women more often than men tend to use speech style that gives the impression of politeness. For example, Brown (1980: 126) examines politeness in Mayan community. She shows that females use more politeness strategies than males. Although both males and females use hedges, only females use them to express personal feelings

and doubt. Males use hedges to express their doubt too. Brown claims that males' communicative style lacks the attention of face. Thus, such style can be considered as polite . She states that "it seems reasonable to predict that women in general speak more formally and more politely, since women are culturally relegated to a secondary status relative to men and since a higher level of politeness is expected from inferior to superior".

Similarly, Coates (1988:123) refers to women as more polite than men. Politeness is referred to as a "women style" by Coates (ibid: 102).

In the 1990s, the linguistic research continues concentrating on the model of politeness in the analysis of male and female languages. For example, Coates (1993:3) assumes that males and females speak differently. She collects evidence for this claim trying to show the ways these two groups differ. Her research shows that there are differences between males and females use of language with regard to certain features such as hedges. Coates discusses five examples of hedges (**I think**, **I'm sure**, **you know**, **sort of**, and **perhaps**) in males and females chat-logs. She concludes that males use more hedges than females,(ibid: 116).

Holmes (1995: 2) goes on to show that women are better than men in terms of verbal skills. She also says that men and women use language differently,(ibid: 5). Drawing on her own research on gender association with speech acts, Holmes confirms that females are more polite than males. In order to emphasize her view, she mentions that, for example, females often use hedges more than males. Politeness is defined as "behaviour which actively expresses positive concern for others, as well as non-imposing distancing behaviour". Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003: 137 ) show that

Holmes is one of the prominent writers in the field, who associates the use of hedge in female and male languages with politeness theory.

Van Dijk (2008: 155 ) points out that most studies of the influence of situational differences on language use focus on gender as a sociolinguistic variable rather than social class, ethnicity, and age. For example , until 1990s most researchers deal with the gender differences as an important social variable in analyzing hedges, intensifiers, tag-questions, etc.

## 1. Gender and Sex

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003:10) argue that gender is not something people are born with, but something they acquire and perform, while sex is “a biological categorization based on reproductive potential”. They also point out that gender is the “social elaboration of biological sex”. Thus, gender is based on biological sex, it exaggerates biological difference. They show that gender “carries biological difference into domains in which it is completely irrelevant”.

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (ibid: 3 ) cite Anne Fausto-Sterling (2000) who sums up the situation as follows:

labeling someone a man or a woman is a social decision. We may use scientific knowledge to help us make the decision, but only our beliefs about gender,

not science can define our sex. Furthermore, our beliefs about gender affect what kinds of knowledge scientists produce about sex in the first place.

Baxter (2010 : 14) emphasizes that gender must be distinguished from sex. He defines sex as “a well recognized sociolinguistic and grammatical term that is used to refer to the categories denoted by biological characteristics, such as the ‘male sex’ or the ‘female sex’ ”. Gender, in contrast, tends to :

Imply a socio-cultural construct, gender usually refers to cultural constructions of what it means to be a sexed individual in the 21<sup>st</sup> century western world. When we discuss ‘femininity’ or ‘feminine’ styles of speech, we are therefore referring not to innate characteristics of being female, but the cultural associations with being a woman, which of course vary from one culture to another, one historical period to another(Baxter ,2010:14).

The study focuses on gender as a social construction unit, since gender reflects the sexual differences among males and female language. Thus, it treats hedges as pragmatic strategies and their relation to gender differences in TV debate, titled Doha Debate, aired on BBC channel .

## 2. Hedges and Gender

Some linguists believe that gender has an influence on the use of hedges. Females use hedges more than males. Lakoff (1975) lists hedges as one of the features typical of female's speech. Hedges are ways of “sounding

feminine” and reflecting their position in society. Similarly, Preisler's (1986:288) study of linguistic sex roles also states that “linguistic tentativeness signals are correlated of both sex and interactional role, which is either task-oriented or socio-emotional”. Preisler's data shows that although women language is characterized by the use of more linguistic assertiveness strategies, it also contains a lot of hedges.

However, there is no general agreement on the previous viewpoints. Other linguists such as Holmes (1990: 202 ), disagree with Lakoff's and Preisler's propositions. In her study of gender differences in the use of hedges, she finds that hedges are actually frequently used by women "as positive politeness devices signalling solidarity with the addressee, rather than as devices for expressing uncertainty". She also asserts that successful panelists use hedges to make their addressees feel more at ease. women use more hedges than men. Thus, women are successful panelists since their style is widely described as supportive and polite.

Holmes(1995: 74) points out that women tend to use speech styles that give the impression of politeness. She refers to hedges as strategies of politeness. Coates seems to agree with Holmes in this respect. She explains that hedges reduce the strength or force of an utterance. In this way, they signal a wish not to impose, (Coates, 1996: 264).

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (2003: 183) show that women are often accused of positioning themselves as less completely committed to the content of what they have said. Lakoff(1975), cited in Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (ibid), suggests that women speaking English tend to hedge their bets

with qualifiers such as (sort of or probably) and also discourse particles such as (**you know, of course, and like**).

### 3. Hedges and Metadiscourse

Metadiscourse refers to the study of the non-referential linguistic meaning. It does not add to the propositional content of an utterance but guides or directs addressee to how they should understand and evaluate that content. Crismore (1984: 280) believes that the aim of metadiscourse is to “direct rather than inform the readers” .

Metadiscourse has been defined as discourse about discourse, or communication about communication (Vande Kopple, 1989:2) Biber et al. (1999: 966), express that hedges show personal feelings, attitudes, value judgements or assessments. Thus, hedges can be considered as a category of metadiscourse.

There are two main categories for metadiscourse : textual and interpersonal. Hyland (1998:51) indicates that the former category helps writers to “incorporate ideational materials within a text in a way which makes sense in a particular situation for readers”. The later one assists writers to “represent their opinions and their evaluations of situation they are involved in and shows how they hope readers will react on the ideational material”. Metadiscourse can be classified through different subcategories, such as logical connectives, code glosses, emphatics, and hedges. Halliday deals with written language, but his viewpoints can be applied to spoken language as well.



The focus of this study is on hedges as subcategories of interpersonal metadiscourse. Studying hedges from an interpersonal perspective. Hedges are communicative strategies which enable addressers in softening the force of their utterances to make them more acceptable in interpersonal relationships.

#### 4. Hedges as Pragmatic Phenomena

It is incorrect to say that hedges are intrinsically social phenomena. It might give rise to social implications such as considerations of “face” in many social contexts but there are cases in which the same hedges do not give rise to such implications. So hedges are pragmatic phenomena. This is the right way to view hedging since pragmatics can accommodate such social factors such as the speaker's concern with politeness.

Moreover, hedges crosscut parts of speech, i.e., they do not refer to unique lexical forms or form a natural syntactic class. Therefore, Hedges can be considered as pragmatic phenomena since the propositional attitude of an addresser is not always linguistically encoded and may have to be pragmatically inferred,(Caffi, 2007:50).

##### 4.1 Hedges and Grice's Maxims

The field of pragmatics is very strongly influenced by the work of Grice, who outlines the cooperative principles in order to arrive at a full understanding of what an addresser meant by an utterance. According to Grice, persons involved in an interlocution are essentially rational beings who cooperate with each other in order to achieve the purpose of the conversation . Thus, in the context of Gricean cooperative principle, interlocutors are expected to make conversational

contribution(Grice,1975:45). Consequently, the Gricean cooperative principle is divided into four maxims:

1. Maxim of quantity :

1.1 Make your contribution as in formative as is required

1.2 Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

2. Maxim of quality :

2.1 Do not say what you believe to be false.

2.2 Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

3. Maxim of relation :

3.1 Be relevant

4. Maxim of manner :

4.1 Avoid obscurity of expression.

4.2 Avoid ambiguity.

4.3 Be brief.

4.4 Be orderly.

However, hedges indicate how Gricean maxims are observed which means that hedges are connected to expectation of maxims of quantity, quality, manner, and relevance. For instance:

(1) **All I know** is smoking damages your health

In this instance, the addresser limits the quantity of information. Therefore the maxim of quantity is hedged (Grundy, 2000: 78).

(2) **They say that** smoking damages your health.

In the previous instance, the addresser indicates that the statement is either true or false by using “**they say that**” and she/he is not sure that “Smoking damages the health”. Thus, the addresser hedges the maxim of quality.

(3) It was dead funny , **if you see what I mean.**

In the previous instance, the addresser realized that she/he had produced a pun therefore she or he added “**if you see what I mean**” to indicate her/his conscious of the maxim of manner. Thus, the maxim of manner is hedged.

(4) What’s your name **by the way.**

In the previous instance, the addresser use of “by the way” indicate that what has been said before it is not relevant to the conversation. Such type of hedge is used when the addresser wants to switch from one topic to another one. Therefore, the relevance maxims may be hedged.

## 4.2 Hedges and Brown and Levinson’ Politeness

Brown and Levinson (1987: 61) consider that "face" has two aspects:

1.Negative face: the right to freedom of action and freedom from imposition.

2.Positive face: the need to be appreciated by others, and to maintain a positive self-image.

Holmes (1988: 13) indicates that although politeness theory suggested by Brown and Levinson (1987) may not be as universal as they claim, it has proven a useful tool in investigating the meaning and function of pragmatic devices in English such as hedges. Brown and Levinson (1987: 145) show that hedges are “particles, words, or phrases that modify the degree of membership of a predicate or noun phrase in a set”. Thus, such expressions such as (sort of, rather, and technically) are considered as hedges. Brown and Levinson point out that some hedges cover the entire force of an utterance. Hedges mitigate or weaken the force of the utterance.

Hickey (2000:57) states that “face can be likened to a person's public self-esteem or self-image, which can be damaged, maintained or enhanced in interaction with others”. Brown and Levinson's theory is based both on Grice's maxim theory and on Goffman's concept of “face” as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact” (Goffman, 1967: 5 cited in Hickey, *ibid*).

Brown and Levinson's theory consists of two parts. The first part is their fundamental theory concerning the nature of “politeness” and how it functions in interaction. The second part is a list of ‘politeness’ strategies with examples from three languages: English, Tzeltal, and Tamil. In the theoretical part of their work, Brown and Levinson introduce the notion of “face” in order to illustrate politeness in the broad sense, (Eckert and McConnell-Ginet, 2003:134).

## Section Two

### Practical part

#### Introduction

This chapter is devoted to analyzing , pragmatically, the data collected from a TV debate on BBC which is titled, “ The Doha Debates ”. In other words, this chapter presents the empirical part of this study. The model adopted for this study consists of two levels: types of hedges (formal ) and functions( functional) of hedges. The researcher has sought to divide the debates into extracts according to the speaker’s gender. Only extracts of the native speakers’ speech will be analyzed, in other words the non-native speakers’ speech will be neglected. Hence, each extract carries the main idea under analysis. The extracts; however, are rather long. So, the sentences that carry the strategies (i.e. hedges) under study will be dealt with solely.

#### 1. The analysis

TIM SEBASTIAN (M) : **I’m thinking** of the American musician Kanye West.(T1: 5)

Formal level: illocutionary force hedge, introductory phrase (**I’m thinking**)

Functional level : politeness

The chairman Tim Sebastian utilizes the introductory phrase to lessen the force of his utterance. The use of the epistemic verb **think** in this phrase is to indicate his psychological status. He is presenting new topic about an album’s cover of an American musician. The hedge is used as face saving strategy since a new topic introducing may threaten the addressees’ face.

NAT MULLER( F): And he also lives in hiding under protection, so that's **apparently** not a very nice way to live your life ( T1: 8)

Formal level: illocutionary force hedge, an adverb (**apparently**)

Functional level: indetermination

The adverb **apparently** indicates a high degree of indetermination and, thus, softens the illocutionary force of the utterance to make it more acceptable. It is clear that males and females have different power relations. Hedges, such as **apparently**, are often used by females to express their personal opinion and avoid commitment. Uttering indeterminate viewpoint may be understood as invitation to others to communicate their own viewpoints. The speaker, Nat Muller, wants to express her personal opinion that living under protection is not a good way of life.

NAT MULLER: But they should have a fight on the content of their work, not a fight about fighting. **By the way**, their work being banned.(T1:10)

Formal level: propositional hedge (**by the way**)

Functional level: evasion

Nat Muller uses by the way to evade her utterance. **By the way** is an adverb used to introduce something one has in mind i.e something which is not a part of the expected utterance. Nat Muller wants to change the subject by uttering what she thinks of. Thus, she evades her utterance by presenting new claim and changing the subject.

(7) TIM SEBASTIAN (M): “Yes, this is for us,” or the public’s representatives in terms of government. There’s no right to be shown everywhere, **is there?**(T1:11)

Formal level: illocutionary force hedge (**tag question**)

Functional level: indetermination

The tag is widely used by Tim Sebastian as a hedge to invite others to be involved in the debate. It has an affective function which enables the speaker to get more confirmation to his viewpoint. In stead of direct request which may have an undesirable effect, the speaker uses hedge to smooth the communication. Tim Sebastian, as a chairman, often uses tags in their affective function as hedges.

PETER FLORENCE ( M ) : I **would** call it ‘barbarism’ and I **would** call the murder of artists ‘murder’ ( T1: 102)

Formal level : two illocutionary force hedges, modal verbs ( **would**)

Functional level: indetermination

The meanings of modal verbs are contextually determined. Modal verbs mark the addresser’s attitude toward the proposition made. Peter Florence uses two markers: personalization marker which is the personal pronoun I and indetermination marker which is the modal verb **would**. These two markers are used to mitigate the force of the utterance. Peter Florence calls censorship as barbarism and murder. Although he tries to express his exact point, but at the same time he limits the force of his utterance through

subjective and indeterminate utterance. Peter Florence weakens his claim by hedging in order to strengthen his argument in the debate.

(16) PETER FLORENCE (M): I don't **think** you reduce art to ridicule. If anything, as others have said, it's the other way round. ( T1:108)

Formal level: illocutionary force hedge ,epistemic verb (**think**)

Functional level : subjectivization

The speaker softens his utterance by mitigating its force. Subjectivization strategies such as the epistemic verb **think** is the suitable choice to mitigate the potential undesirable effect of the utterance. The use of the first personal pronoun **I** assures the subjective function of the verb. Peter Florence rejects Tim Sebastian's viewpoint which is previously stated. But before rejection ,he refers to his misunderstanding of Tim Sebastian's viewpoint. This misunderstanding is potential, not determinate, since it is personal.

Nat Muller (F) : But if they face censorship – and there's this danger of self-censorship – you are really, I **think**, curtailing creativity; you're not actually promoting it. So I **think** it's detrimental to the arts.( T1 : 137)

Formal level : two illocutionary hedges, epistemic verbs ( **think**)

Functional level : subjectivization

Although Nat Muller is one of the panelists who stood firmly against censorship, she tries to make her claims as tentative as possible. She gives a good model of female language since she foregrounds her point without any harmful expressions. She is proficient in the use of suitable hedging



strategies in the suitable situation. When she wants to express her viewpoint, she usually mitigates the illocutionary force of speech act by hedges. The use of the epistemic verbs is one of the features of Nat Muller's speech. The verb **think** expresses the speaker intention to subjectivize her viewpoint to hedge its force. The use of the epistemic verb **think** twice in the last sentences indicates that her utterance is softened.

PETER FLORENCE (M): I don't **think** there's ever been any time when there hasn't been some form of censorship ( T2: 139)

Formal level: illocutionary force hedge, epistemic verb (**think**)

Functional level : subjectivization

The male panelist Peter Florence uses the epistemic verb **think** to attenuate his answer to Nat Muller's speech. The use of the personal pronoun **I** intensifies the subjective force of the verb. As a male, Peter Florence uses less hedging strategies than the female panelist Nat Muller. He uses only one hedging strategy, while Nat Muller uses two epistemic verbs to mitigate her message in the previous extract. He indicates that his viewpoint is personal and may be untrue. Thus, he weakens the force of his utterance to strengthen the argument.

## Section Three

### Conclusions

In the light of the previous sections, the study of hedges in male and female language in TV debates has come up with following conclusions:

1. Hedging is a significant interpersonal process in TV debates, since it is used to maintain smooth and friendly discussion among panelists.

2. The analysis of the data has revealed that the employment of the indetermination, subjectivization, evasion, and politeness are mainly directed towards achieving the hedging function. Due to the high frequency of these pragmatic strategies in male's speech in TV debates, the male language seems to be more flexible than female's language.

3. Hedges function interpersonally. They occur whenever speakers want to reduce their commitment to the truth of a proposition being conveyed or when they want to mitigate possible negative illocutionary effects on the audience.

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## تعابير المراوغة في لغة الرجال والنساء

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و

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المراوغة ظاهرة لغوية تستخدم لنقل الرسائل بين الأفراد في التفاعل المنطوق ، فهي طريقة تواصلية تمكن المتكلمين من تقليل حدة الألفاظ أو تعديل مقدار الجزم فيها . وهي تنجم من ميزات مختلفة مثل عدم اليقين والشك و التراخ والغموض و الحياد و التخفيف و الذاتية . و تُستخدم المراوغة إستخداماً واسع النطاق في المناظرات التلفزيونية لجعل الألفاظ أكثر قبولاً عند المتلقي . و غالباً تستخدم أساليب المراوغة عبارات للتعبير عن ضعف التزام المتكلم للمعلومات المنقولة . و غالباً ما تحصل المراوغة في المناقشات لأن الشكل الخالي من المراوغة قد يبدو تهديداً للمتلقي، وبالتالي من المحتمل أن تُرفض.

و تتأثر أساليب المراوغة بالمتغيرات الاجتماعية مثل الجنس . وبالتالي كان الغرض الرئيس من هذه الدراسة مقارنة وتيرة المراوغة و أنواعها و وظائف أساليبها في لغتي الرجال والنساء . ان المشكلة هي عدم وجود دراسة تربط بين تعابير المراوغة والجنس في العراق . وتهدف الدراسة الى ملئ هذه الثغرة .

و تهدف الدراسة الى تحديد أنواع أساليب المراوغة المُستخدمة و معرفة أي الأنواع أكثر شيوعاً في المناظرات التلفزيونية . و بينت الوظائف الخاصة للمراوغة في المناظرات الأربعة . و قدمت تحليل دلالي لاستخدام أساليب المراوغة في اللغة، خصوصاً الأدوار الاجتماعية للرجال و النساء، لتحديد وظائفها المميزة . و تخلصت الدراسة إلى استنتاجين . الاول يؤكد ان أساليب المراوغة تُبقي المناظرات التلفزيونية سلسلةً و تساعد على تجنب الخلاف . إن استخدام أساليب المراوغة باعثه خصائص لغوية كعدم التحديد و إضفاء الصفة الشخصية و تبديد الشخصية و التحوير و التهريب و الغموض و التأدب . والثاني يبين الدور المهم الذي يؤديه السياق في تفسير المراوغة، و يؤكد كذلك بأن الرجال يميلون إلى استخدام أساليب المراوغة أكثر من النساء بسبب معرفتهم بالمؤثرات غير المرغوب فيها لبعض الموضوعات .