

A Stylistic Study of Hedging in Agatha Christie's The Murder of Roger Ackroyd

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Abstract

The study of literary discourse with respect to its linguistic assimilation can help in the understanding of literature. While pursuing literary analysis, the workings of the language are often ignored due to which certain significant points go amiss. Thus, it is imperative to conduct a linguistic analysis to gain complete comprehension of the literature being studied. Resonating with this thought, the present study aims at analysing Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, essentially in the context of hedging. This paper includes a qualitative analysis of hedging which is conducted with the help of the tool called Wordsmith Version7. It investigates the usage of hedges in the novel and further illustrates how hedges can be used in the text, not just for politeness and respect, but to show caution and also to intentionally create an enigma of vagueness that obscures the facts and leads to misinterpretation of the text.

المستخلص:

إن دراسة النص الأدبي مع الأخذ بنظر الاعتبار استيعابه لغوياً تساعد كثيراً في فهم الأدب، فغالباً ما تُهمل وظائف اللغة عند إجراء تحليل أدبي، الأمر الذي يؤدي إلى إغفال لنقاط هامة. ولهذا أصبح من الضروري أن يكون هنالك تحليل لغوي للوصول إلى فهم كلي للنص. وانطلاقاً من هذه الفكرة تهدف الدراسة الحالية لتحليل رواية أجاثا كريستي ((مقتل روجر أكرويد)) ضمن سياق عبارات الإبهام. وتشتمل الدراسة على تحليل نوعي لهذه العبارات والتي سيتم إحصائها باستخدام برنامج ورد سميث، النسخة ٧. وتقوم هذه الدراسة بتقصي استخدام هذه العبارات في الرواية وبيان كيف إن هذه العبارات تستخدم ليس فقط للتعبير عن التأدب والاحترام ولكن أيضاً لبيان الحيلة وخلق الغموض الذي يخفي الحقائق ويقود لتفسير خاطئ للأحداث.



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Keywords: Stylistic analysis, hedging, Agatha Christie, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, Wordsmith.

Introduction

The term "hedges" came into existence in the late twentieth century. G. Lakoff's article, *Hedges: A Study in Meaning Criteria and Logic of Fuzzy Concepts* (1970) birthed the linguistic term. In the initial stage, the communicative value of hedges was not given any specific concern as the focus was on the logical property of phrases and words and its capacity to blur sentences and dialogues. Brown and Levinson (1987:145) defined hedges as a phrase, particle or word which inherently alters the degree of membership that is more accurate and complete than a membership that is perhaps expected.

VandeKopple (1985) describes hedges as interactive elements that modify the truth-value of a proposition and act as a bridge between the factual interpretation of the writer and the descriptive knowledge. Hedges are critical elements in the academic discourse as they aid in the understanding of the knowledge claims. Skleton (2011) suggests that hedges are components to the phenomenon commentative potentials of all languages. By the 1990s, the research on hedging expanded to consider the uses, meanings as well as the functions of politeness and vagueness in academic writing and other forms of discourse. Taking formal academic writing into consideration, it can be incurred that hedging takes several forms comprised of the common devices such as lexical hedges, epistemic hedges, possibility hedges, vague, indefinite pronouns, and emphatic and so on. Researchers have identified the role of hedges in discourse as elevating or lowering the effect of a sentence or even the entire propositions. The terms 'hedge' and 'hedging' are a significant part of the linguistic vocabulary, for the past thirty years. Though they have been an integral part of the linguistic vocabulary, there has been no specific definition or concept regarding hedge and hedging in the literature (Yagiz&Demir, 2014:261).

The practice of hedging is the intentional or purposeful use of an ambiguous and equivocal statement, the deliberate use of vague language and it avoids completely accomplishing or answering a question. The verbal as well as the adverbial phrases such as perhaps, can, may and suggest that deals with the variant degrees of probability. In literature, writers make use of indefinite or uncertain language such as likely, arguably, etc. And this concept is called cautious language. The concept of using cautious language is called hedging, often deemed as vague language. The aspect of hedging is a critical element in academic discourse and reduces the risk of



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opposition in the case of writers. In literature, writers are often reluctant to deliver the final word on a subject, expressing a lack of certainty (Fraser, 2010:16). The expression of lack of certainty does not mean that the authors are faced with any vagueness of confusion but often presents the accurate state of the writer's understanding. Writers make use of hedging or hedges as positive or negative strategies in politeness, which presents the writer to be humble and not arrogant and boundless. This assists in backing the writer's stand and in building a relationship with the reader, and guaranteeing a valid level of reputation within the society. Being conventionalized, hedging has now enhanced into an established writing style in the English language (Hinkel, 2005:29).

Hedging or hedges are classified into further different elements¹, such as;

- Modal Auxiliary Verbs
 - Modal Lexical Verbs
 - Probability Adjectives, Adverbs, and nouns.
 - Approximators
 - Introductory Phrases
 - "If Clauses"
 - Compound Hedges
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- Modal Auxiliary Verbs: In English academic writing, modal auxiliary verbs are used widely to express modality, such as may, might, can, could, would, should.
 - Modal Lexical Verbs: Also called as speech act verbs, these are used in English academic writing to perform and describe acts such as doubting and describing an element or an action rather than plainly describing it. They describe the actions of illocutionary force in its varying degrees. Though a wide range of verbs can be used in this manner, the most commonly used ones are; to believe, to seem, to suggest, to appear, to tend, to estimate, to think, to indicate, to propose, to argue, to speculate, etc. (Boncea, 2013:11).
 - Probability Adjectives, Adverbs, and nouns: This includes the adverbial, adjectival and nominal modal phrases such as possible, unlikely, likely, probable (adjectives); estimation, assumption, claim (nouns); perhaps, probably, likely, virtually, apparently (adverbs, can be considered as non-

¹<http://www.bbk.ac.uk/mybirkbeck/services/facilities/support/essay-writing/Hedging-in-AcademicWriting.doc>



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verbal nouns).

- Approximators: Approximators enables the understanding of quantity, frequency, time, degree, etc. through terms like about, roughly, usually, generally, somewhat, a lot of, occasionally, usually, somehow.
- Introductory Phrases: These are dependent phrases that provide background information of the central part of the sentence. Examples are: to our knowledge, I believe, we feel that, it is our view that.
- If Clauses: Under if clauses, the sentences are not based on any significant facts. These are understood through the phrases such as, if anything, if true, etc.
- Compound Hedges: The compound hedges are a combination or an amalgamation of various hedges. The most common type of compound hedges are; a combination of a lexical verb with modal auxiliary with a hedging content, a lexical verb followed by a hedging adverb. Compound hedges of these natures are also called as double hedges (it would indicate that, this probably indicates, it may suggest, it seems likely that), treble hedges (it seems reasonable to assume that), quadruple hedges (it may appear somewhat speculative that, it would seem unlikely that) (Meyer, 1997:109-110).

In the current study, the researcher aims to bring out the effect of hedges in creating an enigma of vagueness that obscures the facts and leads to the misinterpretation of the text. As per the statement of Meyer (2001), hedging often leads to creating vagueness and tentativeness in the corpus which is traced in the works of G.Lakoff. By assimilating the statements, it can be asserted that hedges can be denoted as the elements to portray the truth value placing it on a continuum between the extents of absolute falsehood and absolute falsehood. Hedges act in increasing and decreasing the fuzziness in a corpus, therefore often blurring the meaning. By carrying out the statistical analysis of the hedge words in the novel, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* by Agatha Christie, the current study aims to prove the role of hedge words in serving cautions, creating suspense or elevating the essence of mystery.

Introduction to the Writer and Text

To initiate the analysis of hedge words in the novels of Agatha Christie to ascertain their role in creating suspense or increasing the sense of mystery, it would be applicable first to discuss and clarify the writing style of the author, Agatha



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Agatha Christie stands out when compared to her contemporaries and writers of other times. Encompassed of simple language and fresh thoughts, the writing style of Agatha Christie adopted fresh approaches. Awarded the bestselling novelist of all time by Guinness Book of World Records, Christie has sold more than four billion copies. The books of Agatha Christie were internationally enjoyed and had been translated into more than hundred languages. The mystery and crime novels of Agatha Christie were the prime of her writings. The author produced the best of the mystery novels, till date. Even years after the death of the writer, the novels have a strong base in the literature world. Regarded as the 'Queen of Crime,' Agatha Christie gave birth to the modern day murder mystery. Though the genre was initially developed by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Agatha Christie followed the path in her own ways by modifying and changing the styles as to her liking. The mysteries of Christie have been adapted into movies, dramas, radio, etc. With crime and mystery being the central aspect of Christie's novels, the writer's novels structured the classical mystery novel. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was awarded as the best mystery novel last year by the Crime Writers' Association, even years after the author's death. The writer had birthed 19 plays, 78 novels and short stories over 100 in numbers. Though Agatha Christie's forte was crime, mystery, and thriller, the author has also penned six romance novels under the name Mary Westmacott (Prihatiningsih, 2015; Acocella, 2010; AESU, 2010).

It is more fitting to regard the writing style of Agatha Christie with her novels of the mystery genre, as it was the one style that the writer had followed predominantly. The novels of Christie are an amalgamation of psychology, the creative structure of plot and delicate development of the story. Christie was able to bring in the sense of mystery and raise suspense through the slow but effective development of the plot as well as the characters (Woodward, 2014). The unique writing style of Agatha Christie, where she began the stories from the murder instantly develops a sense of mystery, heightening the caution and curiosity of the readers. The novels were laid out from the murder, then the mode of the murder, the killer and the motive behind the murder; bringing the readers close to the characters and then the novel moves from the intents of the suspects or the characters. One of the most regarded styles of Agatha Christie is the way the writer incorporates the diversionary tactic so as to pull the readers in different directions. But, Christie was cautious enough to not add an excessive of misleading clues as it would muzzle with the plot of the novel (Bernthal, 2014).



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The Murder of Roger Ackroyd by Agatha Christie is a detective fiction, published in 1926 (June). Well received in its time, the novel was critically appreciated and won the award for the best crime novel of all times; eighty-seven years after its release by the British Crime Writers' Association. The novel features, Hercules Poirot; the most prominent and continuing character of Christie as the lead detective who solves the mystery behind the death of Mr. Roger Ackroyd. The other prominent characters of the novel are, Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd, Captain Ralph Paton, Major Hector Blunt, Dr. James Sheppard, Mrs. Ferrars, the ship steward and Mr. Hammond. Truthful to her writing style, Christie does not reveal the murderer of Mr. Ackroyd nor give the audience a chance to solve the crime (Collins, 2011). The readers are left guessing the killer as Agatha Christie develops almost spurious situations and suspects, leaving the readers surprised and taken aback. The mystery of the novel is unveiled through the eyes of Poirot, who investigates the death of Mr. Ackroyd. Step by step, the suspects are cleared out again leaving the readers in a state of surprise and confusion. As the novel nears its end, Poirot reveals that he has figured out the killer; warning him or her. As the novel comes to an end, the writer reveals the killer to the world through the detective, Poirot. Dr. Sheppard is revealed as the murderer of Mr. Ackroyd. Agatha Christie ends the novel with Dr. Sheppard, the murdering committing suicide on being caught. From the initiation of the story, the novel keeps the readers close with its suspense and mysterious elements (AQA, 2016).

Analysis of Hedges in TMRA

In order to assess the role of hedges in serving as elements of caution, raising suspense and in increasing the mystery, the researcher has made use of the Wordsmith tool Version 7. The hedge words in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* have been derived and grammatically classified into modal auxiliaries, modal lexical verbs, probability adjectives, approximators, adverbs, introductory phrases, and nouns.

Table 1: occurrences of hedge words in TMRA

No.	Hedges		Frequencies in the Novel	Total
1.	Modal Auxiliary Verbs	May	66	601
		Might	87	
		Can	103	
		Could	96	
		Would	159	
		Should	90	
2.	Modal Lexical Verbs	to seem	1	26
		to appear	1	
		to believe	10	
		to think	12	
		to argue	2	
3.	Probability Adjectives	possible	27	48
		probable	3	
		unlikely	2	
		Likely	16	

No.	Hedges		Frequencies in the Novel	Total
		Often	6	41
		Usually	10	





		somewhat	10	
		somehow	3	
		a lot of	12	
5.	Adverbs	perhaps	1	31
		possibly	1	
		probably	10	
		practically	12	
		Likely	2	
		presumably	2	
		apparently	3	
6.	Introductory Phrases	believe	59	59
7.	Nouns	assumption	1	11
		Claim	1	
		Possibility	6	
		Suggestion	3	

The analysis statistically shows that Christie's novel is rich with words denoting cautious or uncertain language. It is first found that modal auxiliaries, among other categories, are the worst dominant hedge words in the novel, with a total of 601.

•Modal Auxiliary Verbs:analyzing the modal auxiliary verbs and their occurrences in the novel that their frequencies are as follows. *May* has an occurrence of 66, *might* 87, *can* 103, *could* 96, *would* 159, and *should* 90. The auxiliary verbs have the tendency to create a sense of suspense to the readers. For example;

"The window may have been left open after... ..entrance to the murderer" (TMRA, 38).



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"And however gushing her words may be, those eyes others always remain coldly speculative" (TMRA, 15).

"Under certain circumstances ... he might be" (TMRA, 92).

"Something she said made me think that the person in question might be actually among my household - but that can't be so" (TMRA, 18).

"As far as I can remember, the exact words were these. Mr. Ackroyd was speaking. "The calls on my purse have been so frequent of late" - that is what he was saying" (TMRA, 25).

"You don't think he can have... ..murder, do you?" (TMRA, 94).

"I wondered if something could be done" (TMRA, 102).

"What an extraordinary thing. It seems almost impossible, and yet there could hardly be two daggers the same." (TMRA, 29).

The occurrence of the modals invests a sense of caution and suspense that the novel is encompassed of. In the above excerpts from the novel, it can be assimilated that the verbs create a sense of suspense or uncertainty amongst the readers. The vagueness that the novel develops can result in the misinterpretation of the text by the readers.

- **Modal Lexical Verbs:** In analyzing the modal lexical verbs, the occurrences of the hedge words are found to be as follows: *'to seem 1, to appear 1, to believe 10, to think 12 and to argue 2'*. The occurrence of the lexical verbs varies from that of the auxiliary verbs. These verbs develop a sense of doubt while describing an action or element. The lexical verbs, *to think* and *to believe* are more frequent when compared to the other lexical verbs. This type of hedging is found in the instances where the characters of the novels tend to confuse the other characters. In a detective or mystery novel, the act of deliberately creating confusion is normal (more likely is a critical part of the novel). In the current study of Agatha Christie's novel, the writer has incorporated the hedge words that creates confusion and misleads the readers to the extent of misconception. For example;

"That is where we disagree, you and I. Three motives - it is almost too much. I am inclined to believe that, after all, Ralph Paton is innocent" (TMRA, 68).

"It is, of course, possible that he banked the money under another name, but I am disposed to believe he spoke the truth to us." (TMRA, 87).

"But the inmates of the house had shoes soled with crepe rubber, and I declined to believe in the coincidence of someone from outside having the same kind of shoes as Ralph Paton wore" (TMRA, 120).



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"For a moment I was inclined to think that the scene I had just witnessed was a gigantic piece of bombast" (TMRA, 118).

"I began to think that Porrott couldn't be a hairdresser after all." (TMRA, 10).

"It pleases me very much to think of her stepping out of the housekeeper's room to rebuke a delinquent housemaid, and then returning to a comfortable perusal of *The Mystery of the Seventh Death*, or something of the kind." (TMRA, 07).

After analyzing the occurrences of the hedge words (lexical verbs) in the novel, it can be assessed that the terms contribute towards reflecting the sense of doubt that is created by the characters of Agatha Christie. It can be noticed in the dialogues that the hedge words are used to assert the sense of inquiry in the mind of the readers.

- Probability Adjectives: The analysis has also shown that the novel contains some probability adjectives. It has revealed that the frequency of these adjectives is as follows. 'Possible has a frequency of 27, probable 3, unlikely 2 and likely 16'. Out of the four probability adjectives, *possible* and *likely* are more frequent. Here the researcher aims to point out how these hedge words develop a sense of caution or suspense within the plotline of the novel. So, in order to assess the sense of mystery, examples on these adjectives are taken into consideration, as they denote a sense of uncertainty, assuming or presuming an action or thought.

"We've got evidence against him, but it's just possible that the evidence could be explained away" (TMRA, 61).

"I considered it possible that her agitation might arise from the fact that she had been tampering with the silver table, but I think now that we must look for another cause." (TMRA, 75).

"It is, of course, possible that he banked the money under another name, but I am disposed to believe he spoke the truth to us" (TMRA, 87).

"At any rate, he is more likely to have come upon it than a casual guest such as Blunt, for instance" (TMRA, 77).

"If there was the shadow of a motive, nothing's more likely than that he killed Mr. Ackroyd." (TMRA, 90).

"Admitted Ursula, 'but Ralph had often spoken of Dr. Sheppard, and I knew that he would be likely to consider him as his best friend in King's Abbot" (TMRA, 109).

Exploring the probability adjectives in the novel uncovers that the author has used the hedges successfully to plant a sense of ambiguity in the reader's mind. In the above examples, the uncertainty towards certain situations and incidents is clearly portrayed and understood. Here, hedge words act as the medium through which the



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ambiguity is declared. The hedge words do not show any certainty but are the assumptions or doubts of the characters. No assurance or certainty of incidents and thoughts are given to the readers through the probability adjectives.

- Approximators: The analysis shows that some approximators are used. The numbers of (a lot, often, usually, somewhat, and somehow) are (12,6,10,10,3) respectively.

"So is my sister,' I struck in. 'And she's usually right.' Nobody paid any attention to my interpolation" (TMRA, 42).

"One advantage of being a medical practitioner is that you can usually tell when people are lying to you" (TMRA, 58).

"But it did occur to me that the position of the prints was somewhat awkward." (TMRA, 63).

"After the slight unpleasantness always caused by my corrections of Caroline's somewhat faulty arithmetic, we started a new hand" (TMRA, 80).

By making use of the approximators, the writer has successfully created a sense of mystery that is critical to the setting of a detective or mystery murder novel. In the above sentences, the uncertainty that rises is the reflection of the incorporation of the hedge words. By using adverbs like usually, somewhat and about; the writer is able to create confusion within the readers by developing fluctuations in the plot. The uncertainty, especially in a detective, murder mystery novel is essential to the setting of the novel.

- Adverbs: After inspecting the adverbial occurrences as hedge words in the novel, the occurrences are *perhaps 1, possibly 1, probably 10, practically 12, likely 2, presumably 2, and apparently 3*. The adverb with the highest occurrence is practically, followed by probably and apparently. In the current novel, to assimilate the effect of the hedge words on creating a sense of confusion and mystery; the adverbs *probably, presumably and apparently* is more fitting as they reflect the sense of doubt and concern in the mind of the readers.

"I think probably not -, but one cannot be certain yet" (TMRA, 94).

"There probably are women like that - but Mrs. Ferrars wasn't one of them" (TMRA, 03).

"And then it gets round -and all the time there's probably nothing in it at all" (TMRA, 70).

"Now that she has gone where (presumably) Paris frocks can no longer be worn, Caroline is prepared to indulge in the softer emotions of pity and comprehension" (TMRA, 03).



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"Presumably the man has milk and vegetables and joints of meat and occasional whiting just like everybody else, but none of the people who make it their business to supply these things seem to have acquired any information." (TMRA, 08).

"His name, apparently, is Mr. Porrott ~ a name which conveys an odd feeling of unreality" (TMRA, 08).

"Her voice had lowered itself, and I saw Blunt turn and look at her, bringing his eyes back from (apparently) the coast of Africa to do so." (TMRA, 46).

After exploring the occurrence of the adverbs in the dialogues of the characters of Agatha Christie, it can be asserted that the adverbs also act as elements that cause confusion in the mind of the readers. The characters deliver the dialogues with the uncertainty that aids the writer in developing the same in the mind of the readers. By using adverbs like presumably, apparently and probably, the readers are given misconceptions on the plot line of the novel. But it can be seen that the misconceptions do not divert away from the central theme and setting of the novel but create a sense of confusion just enough to divert the readers' conceptions.

• **Introductory Phrases:** These phrases used in the novel are meant to create a sense of understanding of the central theme or the plot. On analyzing the current novel, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*; it has been ascertained that the phrase 'believe' alone occurs in the novel. The word "believe" has a frequency of 59 in the novel. The occurrences of the hedge word in the novel can be seen in the dialogues of the characters, as follows;

"I cannot seriously believe that Captain Paton can be concerned in this crime,' he said, 'however strong the circumstantial evidence against him may be" (TMRA, 50).

"You believe him to be innocent, though?' Poirot looked at me very gravely" (TMRA, 57).

"I believe that when we find the explanation of that telephone call, we shall find the explanation of the murder." (TMRA, 62).

"Mademoiselle, if you really believe in his innocence, persuade him to come forward before it is too late." (TMRA, 63).

"It is, of course, possible that he banked the money under another name, but I am disposed to believe he spoke the truth to us." (TMRA, 87).

It can be seen that the word 'believe' is used to reflect the assumptions of the characters about the incidents that develop within the novel. It is through the characters and their assumptions that the readers understand the eventuation of the incidents in the novel. On closely exploring the dialogues, the dilemmas and



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concerns in the unraveling of the plot of the novel can be ascertained. The characters are seen declaring their assumption, but with a hint of confusion in their minds which is produced through the use of the hedge words.

•Nouns: Four probability nouns are found in the novel, assumption, claim, possibility and suggestion. The most frequent noun among these four is "Possibility" which scored (6) occurrences.

"That leaves us as a possibility, Raymond, or well - Major Blunt" (TMRA, 87).

"I confess that I hardly see him as a blackmailer, but there is another possibility that you have not even considered" (TMRA, 87).

"There was the possibility that the footmarks might have been made by somebody else who happened to have the same kind of studs in his shoes" (TMRA, 120).

"My friend, everything points to the assumption that he is guilty" (TMRA, 57).

"He would throw out hints and suggestions, but beyond that, he would not go" (TMRA, 68).

After carrying out the analysis, it has been asserted that the probability nouns contribute towards developing a sense of ambiguity. The assumptions and the probability of the scenes and situations are expressed through the incorporation of the hedge words.

Conclusion

The present study has examined the occurrences of hedge words in Agatha Christie's The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, with the aim of explaining the role of hedge words in developing a sense of ambiguity and confusion amongst the readers. After carrying out the analysis, it can be ascertained that the hedge words are critical in developing a sense of mystery in the novel. It is found that the novel is full of hedge words which often imply uncertainty. The modal auxiliaries, it is concluded, are the most frequent hedge words in the novel. It is also revealed that the writing style of Agatha Christie develops a sense of concern and create an enigma of vagueness that obscures the facts and leads to misinterpretation of the text but not too much of distortion that may lead to the ruin of the plot of the novel.

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