

Sustaining Deception through Hedging: A Socio-Pragmatic Study of Mike Ross's Dialogues in Suits

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Abstract

Deception is a common tactic in both real life and fiction, but little is known about how people use language to sustain deception through lies over time. This study investigates how Mike Ross, one of the main characters in The Suits TV series, maintains his deception by using hedging. Adopting a socio-pragmatic approach called the Deceptive Hedging Model (DHM), the study combines three perspectives: types of hedging (Prince et al., 1982), purposes of deception (Buller and Burgoon, 1996), and how people manage face in conversation (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Over twenty Harvard-related dialogues from scripts and subtitles across all seasons were analyzed. The study shows that hedging helps Mike soften statements, influence others' perceptions, and protect social face, allowing him to sustain his lies. It highlights how language, strategy, and social awareness work together in fictional discourse for a specific purpose

Keywords: Hedging, Socio-pragmatics, Deception, Suits

المستخلص

يُعدُّ الخداع أسلوبًا شائعًا في كلِّ من الواقع والخيال، إلا أنَّ المعرفة حول الكيفية التي يستخدم بها الناس اللغة للحفاظ على الخداع عبر الزمن من خلال الأكاذيب ما تزال محدودة. تبحث هذه الدراسة في الكيفية التي يحافظ بها مايك روس، أحد الشخصيات الرئيسية في المسلسل التلفزيوني "سوتس"، على خداعه باستخدام أسلوب التلطيف اللغوي. باعتماد منهج اجتماعي تداولي يُدعى نموذج التلطيف الخادع، تجمع الدراسة بين ثلاث وجهات نظر: أنواع التلطيف (Prince et al., 1982)، وأغراض الخداع (Buller and Burgoon, 1996)، وكيف يدير الناس "الوجه" في المحادثة (Brown and Levinson, 1987). تم تحليل أكثر من عشرين حوارًا مرتبطًا بخدعة جامعة هارفارد مأخوذة من نصوص المسلسل عبر جميع المواسم. تبين الدراسة أن التلطيف اللغوي يساعد مايك على تلطيف التصريحات، والتأثير على تصورات الآخرين، وحماية الوجه الاجتماعي، مما يسمح له بالحفاظ على أكاذيبه. كما تُبرز الدراسة كيف تتفاعل اللغة والاستراتيجية والوعي الاجتماعي معًا في الخطاب الخيالي لتحقيق غرض محدد. الكلمات المفتاحية: التلطيف اللغوي، التداوليات الاجتماعية، الخداع، مسلسل سوتس.

research has examined deception in interpersonal and mediated contexts, highlighting how strategic language use can influence perceptions and sustain falsehoods (Buller and Burgoon, 1996: 25). However, most studies focus on short, isolated interactions, leaving a gap in understanding how deception is maintained over extended discourse, especially in fictional narratives such as television series; language and language use should be studied from different perspectives and in different forms, as Najim (2012:2) also asserts.

The current study addresses this gap by investigating how Mike Ross, a central character in the television series *Suits*, sustains his deception about attending Harvard Law School. While deception has been extensively studied in real-life and experimental contexts, less attention has been given to the socio-pragmatic strategies

Based on this framework, the study tests the following hypotheses:

Mike Ross uses hedging consistently to sustain his deception about Harvard.

Different types of hedges correspond to distinct strategic functions of deception, such as delaying disclosure, misdirecting attention, or softening potential conflicts.

1. Hedging is influenced by face-management considerations, with strategies varying depending on the interlocutor and social context.

By addressing these hypotheses, the study provides a comprehensive socio-pragmatic account of how hedging functions as a tool for sustaining deception in long-term fictional discourse, bridging

that enable a character in a TV series to maintain prolonged lies across multiple interactions. The study aims to identify the hedging techniques Mike Ross employs, examine their strategic functions in sustaining deception, and explore how these strategies interact with social and face-management considerations. In doing so, the study contributes to understanding both the linguistic mechanisms of deception and their pragmatic implications in fictional discourse.

To achieve these objectives, the study adopts a socio-pragmatic approach using the **Deceptive Hedging Model (DHM)**. The model integrates three analytical layers: (1) pragmatic forms of hedging (Prince et al., 1982), which categorize the linguistic devices used to soften statements; (2) strategic deception functions from Buller and Burgoon's *Interpersonal Deception Theory* (1996), which capture the communicative purposes of hedges; and (3) face-management motives from Brown and Levinson's *Politeness Theory* (1987), which contextualize hedging within social and relational dynamics. Data consists of over twenty Harvard-related dialogues extracted from scripts and subtitles across all

Introduction

In addition to conveying information, Language plays a central role in shaping human interaction, managing social relationships and building strategic goals (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 61). In particular, hedging, linguistic strategies that soften, qualify, or make statements less direct, has been widely studied in pragmatics for its role in mitigating face threats and expressing uncertainty (Prince et al. 1982: 125). A previous

room for reinterpretation or correction. In contexts involving deception, hedging becomes a strategic tool: it softens potentially risky statements, making them appear plausible while allowing the speaker to maintain control over the narrative (Buller and Burgoon, 1996: 30). Thus, hedging sits at the intersection of linguistic form and pragmatic function, illustrating how subtle choices in language can influence interpretation, social dynamics, and perceived credibility.

3. Hedge Typology

Prince et al. (1982: 126–130) provide a systematic classification of hedges, identifying the different linguistic forms speakers use to soften or qualify statements. Hedging is a central concept in pragmatics, reflecting how language can convey uncertainty, approximation, or provisionality while shaping social interaction (Lakoff, 1973: 456).

According to Prince et al., hedges can be categorized as follows:

1. **Epistemic Hedges:** Indicate the speaker's degree of certainty, including expressions like "I think," "I believe," "it seems," and modal verbs such as "may" or "might" (Prince et al., 1982: 127).
2. **Approximation Hedges:** Express vagueness in quantity, degree, or frequency, such as "around," "approximately," "more or less," and "sort of" (ibid: 128).

gaps between linguistic form, communicative strategy, and social awareness.

2. Pragmatic Hedging

Hedging is defined as the use of linguistic strategies that reduce and soften the force or certainty of an utterance. Prince seasons of *Suits*. Analysis involves identifying hedging forms, mapping them to strategic deception functions, and examining their alignment with face-management motives. et al. (1982: 125) describe hedges as expressions that "allow speakers to make statements without fully committing to their truth," while Lakoff (1973: 456) defines them as "words or constructions that lessen the impact of what is said and make the speaker appear cautious or polite." Hyland (1998: 91) further emphasizes the discourse function of hedging, noting that hedges "signal the writer's or speaker's commitment to knowledge claims and manage interpersonal relations with the audience." In pragmatics, hedging is particularly important because it reflects how language is used not only to convey information but also to navigate social and interpersonal contexts (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 61). Pragmatic hedges serve multiple functions: they protect the speaker's face by softening claims, they manage the interlocutor's expectations, and they allow flexibility in communication by leaving

process in which the deceiver simultaneously manages:

1. **Message Strategy:** Crafting verbal and nonverbal content to support the lie while appearing truthful. Hedges can be used to soften statements or allow flexibility in case the falsehood is challenged.
2. **Behavioral Control:** Regulating verbal and nonverbal cues to avoid detection. Strategic use of hedges can reduce the risk of inconsistencies and maintain credibility.
3. **Cognitive Load Management:** Balancing the mental effort required to maintain a lie across multiple interactions, with hedges helping to create room for adjustment or reinterpretation if the discourse is challenged.
4. **Interactional Awareness:** Monitoring the interlocutor's responses and adjusting strategies accordingly, including the choice and placement of hedges to influence perception, minimize suspicion, and maintain rapport.

IDT emphasizes that deception is not a single act but an ongoing interactional process. In the context of this study, Mike Ross's use of hedging in *Suits* exemplifies how linguistic devices are strategically deployed to sustain prolonged deception,

3. **Classifying Hedges:** Limit statements to specific classes or categories, using qualifiers like "kind of," "type of," or "somewhat" (ibid: 129).

4. **Questioning or Provisional Hedges:** Present statements tentatively or invite agreement, including tag questions like "isn't it?" or "right?" and expressions such as "perhaps" or "maybe" (ibid: 130).

This typology provides a clear linguistic framework for identifying hedges in discourse. By focusing solely on **form**, it sets the stage for examining their strategic use in deception, which is addressed in the following section.

4. Strategic Deception (IDT)

Hedging is not only a linguistic phenomenon; it also plays a critical role in the strategic management of deception. While hedges can indicate uncertainty or politeness, they can also be employed deliberately to mislead, delay disclosure, or manipulate an interlocutor's perception (Buller and Burgoon, 1996: 25). In this sense, hedging acts as a bridge between linguistic form and deceptive intent.

Buller and Burgoon's (1996: 25–50) Interpersonal Deception Theory (IDT) provides a comprehensive framework for understanding how deception operates in interactive contexts. IDT proposes that deception is a dynamic, goal-driven

1. **Bald-on-record:** Direct communication with no mitigation, often risking face threats.
2. **Positive politeness:** Strategies that appeal to the interlocutor's need for approval and belonging, e.g., compliments or expressions of solidarity.
3. **Negative politeness:** Strategies that recognize the interlocutor's desire for autonomy, often involving hedging, indirectness, or formal language.
4. **Off-record (indirect):** Ambiguous or indirect language that allows multiple interpretations, leaving the speaker uncommitted.

This study employs Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory, which posits that hedges function as negative politeness and off-record strategies. This framework is applied to analyze deceptive dialogue, with the understanding that while hedges are not exclusively markers of deception, they provide a strategic tool for deceivers to minimize confrontation and maintain plausible deniability.

6. The Deceptive Hedging Model (DHM)

The **Deceptive Hedging Model (DHM)** is a socio-pragmatic framework designed to analyze how hedging functions as a tool for sustaining deception in discourse. Building on the foundations of

manage face, and control the narrative across complex social interactions.

5. Politeness Theory

While hedging and strategic deception highlight the linguistic and cognitive mechanisms of sustaining a lie, it is equally important to consider the social and interpersonal dimensions of language. Brown and Levinson's (1987: 61–85) Politeness Theory provides a framework for understanding how speakers manage **face**, defined as the public self-image individuals want to maintain during interactions. According to the theory, every participant has two aspects of face: **positive face**, the desire to be liked and approved of, and **negative face**, the desire to act freely without imposition (Fa'aaq and Hassan:2017:14-19).

Hedging plays a central role in managing both aspects of face. By softening statements, speakers can avoid threatening the interlocutor's positive face, for instance, by reducing the risk of disagreement, or protect their own negative face by creating room for flexibility in case of challenges (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 65). In the context of deception, this function becomes strategic: hedges allow the deceiver to maintain social harmony and interpersonal credibility while advancing a false narrative.

Brown and Levinson (ibid) categorize politeness strategies into **four main types:**

3. **Social-Interpersonal Layer (Face Management):** This layer situates hedging within the social and relational context. Drawing on Politeness Theory, it accounts for the ways hedges protect both the speaker's and the interlocutor's face, minimize potential conflicts, and maintain social harmony during deceptive interactions.

The DHM conceptualizes deception as a **dynamic interplay** between these three layers. Hedges are not analyzed in isolation; rather, their occurrence, placement, and type are interpreted simultaneously in terms of linguistic form, strategic intent, and face considerations. This integrated perspective allows researchers to uncover **how language operates as a tool for both concealment and social management**, providing a comprehensive understanding of sustained deception in discourse.

By applying the DHM to the dialogues of Mike Ross in *Suits*, this study illustrates how hedging serves multiple, interconnected functions. The model thus offers a framework for socio-pragmatic analysis, bridging micro-level linguistic choices and macro-level interactional goals.

7. Data Collection and Methodology

This study utilizes a corpus derived from the famous television series *Suits*.

hedge typology (Prince et al., 1982), strategic deception (Buller and Burgoon, 1996), and face-management motives (Brown and Levinson, 1987), the DHM conceptualizes hedging as a **multi-layered process** in which linguistic form, cognitive strategy, and social awareness interact.

The model consists of three integrated layers:

1. Linguistic Layer (Hedge Typology):

This layer identifies and classifies hedges according to established forms, such as epistemic, approximation, classifying, and provisional hedges. By systematically coding these forms, the model provides a precise linguistic map of how statements are softened, qualified, or made ambiguous.

2. Cognitive-Strategic Layer (Strategic Deception):

Building on Interpersonal Deception Theory (IDT), this layer examines how hedges support the deceiver's cognitive and strategic goals. It considers message crafting, behavioral control, cognitive load management, and interactional monitoring. In this layer, hedges are interpreted as tools that allow the deceiver to maintain consistency, adapt to interlocutor responses, and sustain deception over time.

strategic deception function per IDT; and (3) examining its alignment with face-management motives as per Politeness Theory. This layered analysis enables a comprehensive understanding of how hedging operates not merely as a linguistic softener, but as a sustained socio-pragmatic tool for managing deceptive discourse.

9. Data Analysis

9.1 Coding Dialogues: A Three-Layer Analysis

The following presents the socio-pragmatic analysis of 23 key utterances by Mike Ross, coded according to the three layers of the Deceptive Hedging Model.

⁽¹⁾ “I studied under Professor Gerard.” / “I aced the LSATs.

Mike introduces their fabricated credentials with the above two statements. The speeches serve as the founding lie to Harvey, establishing a false Harvard background. The deception employs a **classifier hedge** (“studied under”) to sound prestigious and an **epistemic claim** (“aced”) to assert undeniable competence, constituting a **message strategy** to construct a credible false identity. In terms of face, this uses **positive politeness** by building common ground through the shared, prestigious context of Harvard and influential mentors.

Suits offers a unique laboratory for examining socio-pragmatic deception, as its core plot revolves around a character who must constantly employ hedging and face-management strategies to conceal his lack of legitimate credentials from his colleagues and adversaries. The data comprises **over twenty Harvard-related dialogues** in which Mike Ross engages in identity concealment or fabrication. These dialogues were systematically extracted from the show's subtitles and scripts, covering all seasons. The selection ensures a consistent thematic and linguistic focus on the core deception, his false claim of attending Harvard Law School via hedges.

To investigate how Mike Ross sustains deception through hedging in this television series, the study adopts a **three-layer socio-pragmatic approach**. To operationalize this approach, a **refined Deceptive Hedging Model (DHM)** is employed, synthesizing insights from three complementary theoretical frameworks:

1. **Pragmatic Forms of Hedging** (Prince et al., 1982)
2. **Strategic Deception Functions** from Buller and Burgoon's (1996) Interpersonal Deception Theory (IDT)
3. **Face-Management Motives**

The analysis proceeds in three stages: (1) identifying and coding hedging forms according to Prince et al.'s taxonomy; (2) mapping each instance to its corresponding

(4) "It was a rigorous program." / "You know how competitive it is."

In vague small talk about Harvard, Mike avoids specifics by using assumptive language. The **classifier hedge** ("rigorous program") is vague, and the **provisional hedge** ("you know") assumes shared understanding. This **message strategy** relies on universal truths to avoid personal detail. It functions as **positive politeness**, creating in-group solidarity with anyone who understands elite academic institutions.

(5) "You went to Yale? That's almost as good as Harvard." / "Why would you think I didn't go to Harvard?"

To disarm a Yale graduate, Mike uses flattery and reverse psychology. The **approximator hedge** ("almost as good") delivers a backhanded compliment, while the confrontational question challenges the accuser. This shows **interactional awareness** of institutional rivalry and uses **behavioral control** by feigning offense. It mixes **positive politeness** (camaraderie) with a **negative politeness** challenge to the accuser's right to ask.

(6) "I trained under some of the best legal minds." / "Does it matter where I went to school?"

When challenged on credentials, Mike

(2) "I've read every case file in this office." / "Ask Harvey where he found me."

When questioned by Louis, Mike deflects by stating the above two explanations. The explanations reveal a tactic to redirect scrutiny onto Harvey's authority. The **approximator hedge** ("every") exaggerates diligence, while the primary move is a **deflection**. This shows **interactional awareness** by avoiding a direct challenge to Louis while subtly invoking a higher power. For **face management**, it is a form of **negative politeness**, deferring to the established power hierarchy and avoiding imposition on Louis by making Harvey the source of answers.

(3) "I clerked for Judge Winter." / "Harvey, tell them I know what I'm doing."

Mike bolsters their backstory by the above two claims. This adds a layer of fake experience while demanding validation. The **epistemic claim** ("clerked") is a core part of the **message strategy** to add believable detail. The plea demonstrates **interactional awareness** by forcing Harvey to publicly commit to the lie. This is a **negative politeness** strategy, acknowledging Harvey's authority and face needs by making him the ultimate validator.

persona. This involves negative politeness towards self-face, as admitting forgetfulness is a humble, self-face-threatening act that makes the excuse seem more believable.

(9) **Speech:** "You've seen my work. Does it look like I skipped school?" / "They taught me to think like this."

Here, Mike uses their proven competence as a defense. The **provisional** rhetorical question and vague **epistemic** claim ("They taught me") form a **message strategy** that forces the interlocutor to concede based on observed results. This is a **bald-on-record** politeness strategy, directly challenging the accuser but relying on the strength of the character's proven work to justify the face-threatening act.

(10) "The dorm walls were so thin... what was it called again?" / "Ask Harvey if I know the law."

To build fake mutual trust and friendly relationship, Mike starts telling a fake a story. The **epistemic feigned uncertainty** ("what was it called") adds authentic detail with a built-in safety net. This **message strategy** builds authenticity before a strategic deflection that shows **negative politeness** by deferring to Harvey's authority, while the story itself is a **positive politeness** attempt at solidarity.

redirects minds by pivoting from a weakness (school) to a strength (results). The **classifier hedge** ("some of the best") is a technical truth, while the **provisional** rhetorical question is a pre-packaged deflection to manage **cognitive load**. This is an **off-record** politeness strategy, implying the question itself is irrelevant without directly saying so.

(7) "I just got lucky on a few cases." / "Harvard? Let's just say I'm overqualified."

Mike employs false modesty and humor. The **approximator** ("a few") downplays success, and the **provisional phrase** ("Let's just say") introduces a boast as a joke. This is a **behavioral control** tactic, mimicking a confident, stylish persona. The use of humor is a clear **positive politeness** strategy to build rapport and make the deception more charming.

(8) : "I don't remember that professor's name." / "The library was my second home."

To explain a lack of specific knowledge, Mike feigns forgetfulness. The epistemic claim of uncertainty ("I don't remember") is a low-effort excuse to manage cognitive load, while the pivot is a message strategy to reinforce a diligent

gamble. This appeals to **positive politeness** by referencing a shared hardship among lawyers.

(14) "I'm impressed you remember your professors' names!" / "It's not about the degree; it's about the results."

Mike deflects an accusation with flattery and philosophy. The **provisional exclamation** disarms the accuser, showing **interactional awareness**. The philosophical statement is a core **message strategy**. This is **positive politeness**, as the flattery directly addresses the accuser's desire to be seen as intelligent and detail-oriented.

(15) "The LexisNexis vs. Westlaw debate... was intense." / "Are you questioning my credentials?"

When challenged, Mike overwhelms with jargon and aggression. The **classifier hedge** ("intense") is secondary to the **behavioral control** tactics of jargon overload and an aggressive tonal shift. This is a **bald-on-record** face-threatening challenge, directly attacking the accuser's right to question and asserting dominance.

(16) "I've met Dean Carter." / "Harvey can vouch for my... unconventional education."

Mike carefully words a defense by the above statements. The **epistemic** statement ("I've met") is a technical truth, while

(11) "I'm more of a 'learn by doing' guy." / "Cambridge in the fall..."

When demonstrating deceptive tactics, Mike uses vague language. The **classifier hedge** ("learn by doing") is a cliché that avoids specifics. This is a pure **message strategy** of implication. The politeness is entirely **off-record**, as the meaning is ambiguous and relies on the listener to draw the desired conclusion without the speaker making a direct false claim.

(12) "That's how we were trained." / "You know how Harvard is—always changing the curriculum."

To explain knowledge gaps, Mike uses collective identity. The **provisional collective** ("we") and **epistemic** appeal ("you know") show **interactional awareness** by aligning with the group and using a flexible, all-purpose excuse as part of the **message strategy**. This is a strong **positive politeness** move, creating powerful in-group solidarity with the listener.

(13) "I've been in courtrooms since I was 19." / "The bar exam was tough."

Mike uses a half-truth to imply experience. These **epistemic claims** reframe the negative truth of being a defendant into a positive suggestion of experience, a high-stakes **message strategy**. Mentioning the bar exam is a

Mike uses a generic memory in his speech. The **classifier** (“intense”) and **approximator** (“most lawyers”) are part of a **message strategy** that uses a safe detail followed by a conversation-ending boast. This is a **bald-on-record** strategy to assert dominance and protect self-face by shutting down further inquiry.

(20) “I’ve read every Harvard Law Review since 1982.”

Mike states, “I’ve read every Harvard Law Review since 1982,” using a truth (his knowledge) to support the false premise (his attendance). The **approximator hedge** (“every”) adds to the grandeur of the claim. This is a sophisticated **message strategy** that uses an incontrovertible fact to create a powerful implication. It is a bid for extreme respect, functioning as **positive politeness**.

(21) “I’ve seen worse in moot court.”

To sound experienced, Mike claims, “I’ve seen worse in moot court,” directly implying Harvard experience. This **epistemic claim** is a throwaway lie embedded in conversation as part of a **message strategy** to normalize the false backstory. It uses **positive politeness** to position the character as a seasoned veteran, building common ground with other experienced lawyers.

the **classifier** (“unconventional”) is a weasel word, together forming a clever **message strategy**. This shows **negative politeness** by deferring to Harvey's authority and carefully avoiding a direct, provable lie.

(17) “Ah, the Harvard-Yale rivalry...” / “I argued in front of the Ethics Committee.”

Mike makes a safe, generic comment. The **provisional filler** (“Ah...”) is a stalling tactic. The lie relies on the listener's misinterpretation, a risky **message strategy**. The first part uses **positive politeness** for in-group bonding, while the second is a bid for respect.

(18) “I don’t play the odds; I play the man.” / “You’re gonna want to hear this.”

To establish credibility, Mike quotes Harvey: “I don’t play the odds; I play the man,” and uses a diversion: “You’re gonna want to hear this.” Using a direct quote is a **behavioral control** tactic to project Harvey's confidence onto themselves. The diversion manages the interaction. This is **positive politeness**, signaling allegiance to Harvey and appealing to the listener's self-interest.

(19) “My study group was intense.” / “I’ve forgotten more law than most lawyers know.”

Season	Epistemic	Approximator	Classifier	Provisional
Season 1	4	2	3	1
Season 2	3	2	3	4
Seasons 3-7	3	1	2	1

The data shows a marked **increase in the use of Provisional hedges in Season 2**. This aligns with the narrative: Season 1 is about building a new identity (using definitive-sounding **Epistemic** claims and **Classifiers**). Season 2 introduces intense scrutiny from new antagonists (Daniel Hardman), forcing Mike to adopt more tentative, flexible language (“Perhaps,” “You know how it is,” rhetorical questions) to avoid being pinned down. This supports the hypothesis that as suspicion grows, his hedging becomes more defensive and interactionally aware.

9.3 Evolution of Primary Deceptive Function

The following chart analyzes the primary strategic goal (per IDT) of each deceptive act per season.

(22) “I’ve had this debate with professors before.”

Mike asserts authority with the above statement. This **epistemic claim** is an unverifiable **message strategy** designed to claim expertise through association. It is a **positive politeness** strategy that raises the character's status by linking them indirectly to authoritative figures.

(23) “I never went to Harvard.”

Under oath, the character confesses, “I never went to Harvard.” This is the ultimate collapse of the deception. As a bald truth, it requires no hedging. The **message strategy** shifts entirely to one of redemption and surrender of **behavioral control**. This is a **bald-on-record** act that is highly self-face-threatening but is performed for moral redemption.

9.2 Evolution of Hedge Type Frequency

The coded data reveals clear patterns in Mike Ross's use of deceptive hedging, showing a distinct evolution as the stakes of his deception change. This chart tracks the primary linguistic hedge type used per season, showing a strategic shift in Mike's verbal tactics.

Table (1): Hedge Type by Season

seasons, Mike finds himself obliged to continuously manage interactions to sustain the deception long-term. This strongly supports the hypothesis of a shift from **Image Management** (a subset of Message Strategy) to **Behavioral Control**.

9.4 Illustrative Case Studies

The following four case studies were selected from the dataset as they best exemplify the evolution and mechanics of Mike’s deceptive hedging. The evolution is best mapped as the following:

1. The Foundation: Constructing the Lie (Season one)

- **Sample:** ⁽¹⁾“I studied under Professor Gerard.” / “I aced the LSATs.”

This is the genesis of the deception. There is no subtlety here. The hedges are **Classifiers** and **Epistemic** claims used for **Message Strategy**; their sole purpose is to build the foundational blocks of a false identity with specific, impressive-sounding details. The facework is purely **Positive Politeness**, designed to appeal to Harvey's values and build immediate rapport. This sample shows the deception in its pure, constructive form before it requires defense.

2. The Pivot: Redirecting to Competence (Season two)

Table (2): Primary Strategic Deception Function by Season

Season	Message Strategy	Behavioral Control	Interactional Awareness
Season 1	7	1	2
Season 2	4	4	4
Seasons 3-7	2	2	3

Mike's strategy evolves from constructing a lie to controlling its perception and finally to managing the interaction around it. **Season one** is dominated by **Message Strategy**, crafting the core false narrative, adding layers (e.g., “I clerked for a judge”), and building his credible image. **Season two** shows a dramatic shift. The need for **Behavioral Control** (regulating cues, e.g., feigned offense) and **Interactional Awareness** (deflecting to Harvey, reading the accuser) increases sharply. The goal is less about building the lie and more about actively protecting it from discovery. **Later Seasons, where less reference to the lie is made**, show a balance. The balance reflects Mike’s established but perpetually precarious position. In later

know this”) and thus end the line of questioning.

4. The Confession: The Absence of Hedge (Season Five)

- **Sample** ⁽¹³⁾: ”I never went to Harvard.” (Sample #23)

This is the most powerful data point. After years of hedging, the ultimate truth is delivered **Bald-On-Record**, without a single hedge. This final act is the ultimate **Message Strategy**, but now in the service of truth and redemption. The complete lack of mitigation signifies the end of the cognitive and behavioral effort (**Behavioral Control**) required to maintain the lie. The **Face Management** is a calculated self-face-threatening act to achieve a higher goal. It provides the critical counterpoint that defines all his previous communication: to see the hedges is to see the deception.

10. Discussion

The analysis of Mike Ross’s dialogues reveals that hedging is not merely a linguistic feature but the central pragmatic mechanism enabling his prolonged deception. His use of hedges evolves strategically, manages complex face dynamics, and constitutes a systematic violation of conversational norms that ultimately contains the seeds of its own collapse. However, below three essential

- **Sample**: ⁽⁶⁾ ”Does it matter where I went to school?”

This is Mike's first and most powerful strategic evolution. When direct lies are risky, he pivots. The **Provisional** rhetorical question is a masterclass in **Interactional Awareness and Cognitive Load** management. It’s an **Off-Record** strategy that implicitly challenges the premise of the question itself, shifting the conversation from his weakness (credentials) to his strength (results). This tactic becomes the cornerstone of his long-term deception.

3. The Boiling Point: Defensive Maneuvering (Season Two)

- **Sample** ⁽¹²⁾: “You know how Harvard is, always changing the curriculum.”

Under the heightened scrutiny of Season two, Mike's hedging becomes more sophisticated and defensive. This line uses a **Provisional** hedge (“you know”) and a **Classifier** (“changing the curriculum”) for brilliant **Message Strategy**. It creates an all-purpose, unverifiable excuse for any potential mistake or knowledge gap. Its function is pure **Behavioral Control** and **Interactional Awareness**, designed to shut down nitpicking by appealing to **Positive Politeness** (“we all

lie by creating room for maneuver and plausible deniability.

Further, in the **Damage Control Phase (Crisis Seasons)**, the analysis suggests his hedging becomes more complex and high-risk. While our dataset peaks at the confession, samples like the high-stakes lie of omission in "I argued in front of the Ethics Committee" (Sample 17) illustrate this frantic stage. Here, hedging is pushed to its limits, employing compound and implied strategies to stave off collapse under intense scrutiny, directly supporting the hypothesis.

2. The Interplay of Facework and Power

Mike's hedging strategy is exquisitely tailored to his interlocutor's status and his relational power dynamics, as governed by Politeness Theory:

- **With Harvey (Mentor/Peer):** Mike's hedging is minimal and often leans on **positive politeness** strategies that reinforce their partnership. He uses insider humor ("Harvard? Let's just say I'm overqualified" - Sample 7) and shared references, protecting their mutual positive face and reinforcing their "legendary" team identity.
- **With Louis (Rival):** The analysis reveals a reliance on **negative politeness** and deflection. Statements like "Ask Harvey where he found me" (Sample 2) are strategic deferrals to a higher authority.

dimensions of hedging to be discussed thoroughly:

1. The Sustaining Power of Hedging

The findings demonstrate a clear evolution in the function of Mike's hedges, mirroring the narrative arc of his deception. In the **Construction Phase (Early Seasons)**, hedging is primarily proactive and used for *Image Management*. Epistemic claims like "I aced the LSATs" (Sample 1) and classifiers like "a rigorous program" (Sample 4) are deployed not to express doubt but to build a credible, specific, and impressive false identity. These hedges are confident, designed to add layers of authenticity to his Harvard persona rather than to avoid detection.

As the stakes heighten, Mike enters the **Maintenance Phase (Middle Seasons)**, where the function of hedging sharply pivots to *Behavioral Control* and *Interactional Awareness*. The data shows a marked increase in provisional hedges and deflections (Samples 6, 12, 14). Phrases like "Does it matter where I went to school?" or "You know how Harvard is" are reactive, defensive tools. Their purpose is no longer to build but to protect. That is, the function is to evade direct questions, redirect conversations towards his competence, and manage the increased cognitive load of the

demands literal, cooperative communication, the entire fabricated identity collapses. The house of cards, built and sustained by pragmatic implicature, cannot withstand the weight of a direct, cooperative statement. Thus, the mechanism that sustained the deception for years also defined the precise conditions for its inevitable failure.

11. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Mike Ross's prolonged deception in Suits was pragmatically sustained through an evolving portfolio of hedging strategies. His linguistic tactics shifted demonstrably from building a false identity with confident epistemic claims to defensively maintaining it with provisional language and deflections as scrutiny intensified. This evolution underscores that deception is not a static act but a dynamic process of verbal adaptation.

Critically, the analysis confirms that these hedging strategies were inextricably linked to social face-work. The specific type of hedge employed was consistently calibrated to the power dynamics and face needs of his interlocutors, revealing that successful long-term deception depends as much on adept social navigation as on narrative consistency.

The ultimate collapse of the lie provides the most compelling evidence for

This acknowledges the power hierarchy and imposes on Louis's negative face wants (his desire to not challenge Harvey), effectively using Harvey's authority as a shield.

- **With Clients/Opponents:** Mike's hedging shifts to projecting an image of unassailable expertise, a form of **positive facework**. Boasts like "I've read every case file in this office" (Sample 2) or jargon-heavy overload ("The LexisNexis vs. Westlaw debate... was intense" - Sample 15) are designed to earn respect, assert dominance, and construct a persona of such competence that his credentials become a moot point.

3. The Limits of Hedging: Why the Lie Eventually Collapsed

The ultimate proof of hedging's central role is found in its absence. Mike's confession, "I never went to Harvard" (Sample 23), is the most significant pragmatic act in the entire series. It is delivered **Bald-On-Record**, utterly devoid of any mitigating hedge.

This final, non-hedged statement instantly shatters the deception. It demonstrates conclusively that the lie was structurally dependent on ambiguity, implication, and pragmatic nuance. The moment the protective layer of hedging is stripped away, when he is forced into a context (a courtroom under oath) that

this model. The stark, unhedged confession, "I never went to Harvard," instantly dismantled the deception. This final act proves that the hedging was not merely decorative but constituted the essential pragmatic scaffolding of the falsehood. Its removal caused the entire construct to collapse, highlighting that in extended discourse, hedging functions as both the primary mechanism for sustaining deception and the clearest indicator of its presence.

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