

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Background and Context

Language is not merely a medium of communication rather a potent tool that shapes perceptions, influences thought processes, and guides actions (Francis, 2023). Studying 'language in use' can provide a practical understanding of how language functions in real-life situations, revealing the contextual nuances that influence meaning.

Media language, particularly in news articles, editorials, and broadcasts, is an easily accessible source of 'language in use' (Bell, 1995). Furthermore, studies show that the language used in media can influence public opinion and cultural values, reinforcing or challenging existing stereotypes (Van Dijk, 1995; Fowler, 2013).

In the realm of media discourse, editorial content plays a pivotal role in informing and persuading the public. Whether the subject is a political debate, a social issue, or an economic forecast, editorialists must present information that is persuasive yet ethical, balancing the need for clarity with the responsibility to represent diverse viewpoints. It is in this context that hedging—linguistic devices used to soften statements and allow room for alternative interpretations—becomes a crucial tool for editorial writers.

This thesis aims to investigate the forms, strategies, and functions of hedging in editorial discourse, focusing on 300 editorials evenly distributed across Hindi, Indian English, and British English. By conducting this cross-linguistic analysis, the study explores how hedging functions in different cultural and linguistic settings, offering new insights into the role of hedging in persuasive media communication.

Media language has often caught the attention of linguists, particularly applied linguists and sociolinguists. Editorials are influential pieces that can shape public opinion and drive

societal change. They enable newspapers to express affiliations; endorse or criticise persons; represent their readership; communicate with readers; and address politicians, political parties, and other entities (Firmstone, 2019).

Their effectiveness lies in the careful crafting of language to resonate with readers, providing not only information but also an interpretative lens through which the audience views complex issues (Van Dijk, 1995). Moreover, editorials aim to influence politics by either indirectly shaping public opinion or directly addressing politicians with targeted viewpoints (Firmstone, 2007, 2009). This interpretative role accentuates the need for editors to employ linguistic strategies that balance assertiveness with caution.

Editorialists utilise specific strategies to successfully communicate their ideas and persuade readers to modify their attitudes towards the subject under consideration. A thorough evaluation of the editorial's style, structure, and use of lexico-grammatical components, including interactional metadiscourse indicators such as hedges, is essential for fulfilling the communicative objectives of this persuasive genre (Zarza, 2018). Hedging refers to the deliberate use of linguistic devices that allow writers to soften the impact of their statements, creating room for alternative interpretations or demonstrating respect for differing viewpoints. This rhetorical strategy is particularly important in editorial writing, where writers often navigate controversial or complex topics and aim to engage a diverse readership. By employing hedges, writers can present their arguments in a manner that appears more cautious, tentative, or balanced, avoiding an overly assertive tone that might alienate readers.

This strategy is crucial in maintaining credibility and fostering a sense of trust with the audience (Hyland, 1998). For example, below are a few examples of sentences with and without hedging to demonstrate its role in media discourse:

1.1. Without hedging:

"The government's new policy will lead to economic growth."

1.2. With hedging:

"The government's new policy is **expected to** lead to economic growth, though **some experts remain cautious** about its long-term impact."

2.1. Without hedging:

"The president's approval ratings have dropped significantly due to recent controversies."

2.2. With hedging:

"Recent polls suggest that the president's approval ratings may have dropped, though it is unclear how these numbers will evolve in the coming weeks."

In the above-mentioned examples, the hedged sentences introduce caution, uncertainty, evasion or qualification that acknowledges the complexity of political situations. For instance, the use of "expected to" and "some experts remain cautious" in 1.2 softens the assertion, reflecting the uncertainty inherent in predicting the future, particularly in political analysis.

In 2.2, the expression "Recent polls suggest" functions as a hedge by shifting the responsibility for the claim away from the writer and onto an external source (the polls). By attributing the statement to "recent polls," the writer reduces their own accountability for the claim, emphasising that it is based on external data rather than a personal assertion. This creates a sort of distance between the writer and the statement. At the same time, "suggest" conveys that the information is not definitive, allowing the writer to maintain intellectual humility and accommodate alternative interpretations or future changes.

In media discourse, hedging serves to present information in a balanced and responsible manner, preventing over-simplification of complex issues while also allowing space for diverse viewpoints and future developments. This is especially important in political reporting, where facts and predictions can be interpreted in various ways depending on new evidence or changes in the political landscape.

The function of hedging extends beyond simply moderating claims. It also plays a critical role in establishing the writer's credibility and expertise while maintaining a tone of humility. For instance, hedging allows writers to signal that they are aware of the limitations of their arguments or the potential variability in their claims, thus fostering a sense of intellectual honesty. Moreover, this strategy can serve as a tool for politeness, enabling writers to present opinions or criticisms without sounding confrontational or dismissive. By tempering their assertions, writers create a rhetorical space that invites readers to reflect, engage, and potentially align with the perspective being presented.

Hedging also contributes significantly to the overall persuasive power of editorial discourse. As Hyland (1998) points out, it is through carefully hedged statements that writers balance authority with approachability, demonstrating both knowledge of the subject and respect for the reader's autonomy. This balance is essential in maintaining the reader's trust and promoting the perceived fairness of the argument. Whether discussing uncertain data, offering speculative interpretations, or addressing sensitive sociopolitical issues, hedging enables writers to handle contentious or delicate topics with rhetorical finesse, making it an indispensable tool in effective editorial writing.

1.2. Motivation

During my PhD coursework, I was first formally introduced to the concept of "hedging" in a course titled "Academic Argumentation." The idea immediately intrigued my interest, as it offered a fascinating lens through which language could be analysed for its subtlety and nuance. I was particularly intrigued by the role of the metadiscourse marker in enabling writers and speakers to convey their thoughts in a measured, nuanced, and non-assertive manner, balancing precision with tact. This initial exposure sparked a natural curiosity to delve deeper into the concept and its applications across various contexts.

As I began exploring the existing body of literature, I observed a noticeable gap: research on hedging in Indian languages and IE was remarkably sparse. The few studies that did exist were largely confined to genres such as academic writing or business communication, leaving other forms of discourse, such as media language, largely unexplored. This realisation, yoked with the potential for uncovering novel insights in a relatively under-researched area, provided the impetus for my doctoral research. With valuable guidance and encouragement from my advisor, I chose to focus on hedging in editorial discourse, an area where precision, subtlety, and balance are crucial. This marked the beginning of my research journey, driven by a desire to bridge the gap in the existing scholarship and to contribute to a deeper understanding of hedging strategies in contexts of Indian languages, Indian English, and British English.

1.3. Research Gap

Hedging, as a linguistic phenomenon, holds significant importance in both Pragmatics and Language Teaching. In Pragmatics, it provides insight into how language conveys elements such as caution, tentativeness, uncertainty, and politeness. In the context of Language

Teaching, understanding hedging helps learners adjust their utterances to balance assertion with caution, enabling them to express themselves in a nuanced and polite manner.

Despite its importance, research on hedging strategies within media discourse, particularly in editorial writing, remains limited and predominantly confined to the English language. Most of the existing studies focus on Western varieties such as BrE and American English. Furthermore, there is a notable scarcity of studies exploring hedging in non-Western linguistic contexts, especially in Hindi or Indian English.

While some research has examined hedging in individual languages, there is a significant gap in comparative studies that analyse hedging strategies across different languages and varieties within the same cultural context. This gap highlights the need for comprehensive research to investigate the hedging strategies and functions in editorial discourse across diverse linguistic contexts.

This study aims to address this gap by examining the hedging strategies and their functions across three different datasets: Hindi, Indian English, and BrE editorials. By doing so, it seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of hedging as a pragmatic tool in varied linguistic and cultural settings.

1.4. Aim and Objectives

This study aims to explore various hedging strategies employed in editorial discourse, with a particular focus on classifying these strategies and identifying their pragmatic functions. The analysis will be conducted across three linguistic varieties: Hindi, IE, and BrE. By examining these corpora, the study seeks to understand how hedges are used in context and how their functions may differ or overlap in these distinct editorial contexts. The study has the following objectives:

1. To propose a structural classification framework for hedges in Hindi and English editorial discourse.
2. To adapt an existing functional classification framework to categorise the pragmatic functions of hedges in editorial discourse.
3. To identify and classify the hedging strategies employed in BrE, IE, and Hindi both formally and functionally in the editorial discourse, of self-compiled corpora.
4. To compare and contrast the hedging strategies across the three corpora, identifying both similarities and differences.
5. To identify and analyse the pragmatic functions of hedges within their context across the three corpora.

1.5. Research Questions

1. What are the types and frequencies of hedging strategies employed in BrE, IE, and Hindi newspaper editorials?
2. How are these strategies similar or different across the language varieties?
3. Does the existing functional classificatory framework require revision or modification to be applicable to this study?
4. What are the primary pragmatic functions of hedges in editorial discourse across these three linguistic varieties?

1.6. Significance of the Study

By examining the role of hedging in media discourse, the research provides valuable insights into the linguistic strategies employed by media practitioners, often either consciously or unconsciously, to convey caution, uncertainty, and politeness. Understanding these nuances can enrich our knowledge of language use in the media,

where hedging plays a pivotal role in shaping the tone and perceived credibility of the discourse.

Furthermore, the study proposes a structural framework for formally classifying hedges in media discourse, a tool that could be adapted for future research investigating hedging strategies, particularly in the context of other Indian languages. This framework has the potential to be relevant for a wide range of languages, offering a standardized approach to analysing hedging across diverse linguistic and cultural contexts.

In addition, we propose an adapted version of the functional classification framework originally developed by Prince et al. (1982) to categorise hedges in the media discourse in a more nuanced, fine-grained, and comprehensive manner. This adapted framework can provide a deeper understanding of the pragmatic functions of hedges, moving beyond the basic categorisation to account for the subtle variations in their use across different media settings.

One of the significant challenges in the study of pragmatics has been the scarcity of pragmatically annotated corpora for investigating phenomena like hedging (Johansen, 2020). While existing corpora are valuable, their size and scope are often insufficient for comprehensive analysis. Our study addresses this gap by creating pragmatically annotated, smaller-scale corpora of media discourse, specifically tagged for hedges in Hindi, Indian English, and British English. These corpora offer a rich resource for researchers interested in the linguistic intricacies of hedging, providing a foundation for more detailed cross-linguistic and cross-cultural studies.

Moreover, these annotated corpora hold potential for multiple practical applications. They could be utilized in training LLMs for the automatic detection of hedges, enhancing the accuracy and efficiency of computational linguistic tools in the analysis of media texts.

Numerous studies have established that using newspaper texts as a resource can effectively enhance the linguistic skills of learners in ESL classrooms (Tafida & Dalhatu, 2014; Luganskaya & Suslova, 2023;).

Additionally, the corpora can serve as valuable teaching materials in ESL education, particularly for teaching the effective use of hedging strategies. Since the skilful application of hedging is often considered an indicator of pragmatic competence, these resources can help learners develop a more nuanced understanding of how to modulate their language in various social and communicative contexts.

To sum up, the study not only contributes to theoretical advancements in Media Linguistics and Pragmatics but also offers practical tools and resources that can be used by researchers, educators, and practitioners to explore and teach the use of hedging in media discourse.

1.7. Overview of Methodology

We adopted a corpus-based approach to achieve the objectives of this study. With a dataset of randomly chosen 100 newspaper editorials from each of the three languages: Hindi, IE, and BrE. These editorials were contextually analysed for the presence of hedging strategies in their linguistic and contextual frameworks.

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative techniques. This included the identification and categorisation of hedging instances, frequency analysis, and pragmatic function analysis. To ensure the reliability and robustness of the findings, the analysis was carried out using a combination of manual methods and computational tools. This blend of approaches enabled a comprehensive exploration of hedging strategies, offering valuable insights into their usage in editorial discourse.

1.8. Definitions and Key Terms

This section provides the definitions of key terms and concepts used throughout this study to ensure clarity and consistency in the analysis. The terms presented here are integral to understanding the linguistic phenomena under investigation in the context of editorial discourse in Hindi, Indian English, and British English.

- **Hedging:** The linguistic strategy of using vague or non-committal language to soften the impact of statements, indicating uncertainty or politeness. For instance, using phrases like "it seems that" or "perhaps" serves to mitigate the certainty of the message.
- **Compound Hedge:** The term was first proposed by Salager-Meyer (1994). When more than one hedges are used to diminish the strength of an utterance, they are called Compound hedges. Depending upon the number of hedges, there can be double, triple, and quadruple hedges. For example, 'may possibly,' 'might perhaps,' etc.
- **Editorial Discourse:** It refers to opinionated writing found in editorial articles, which typically aim to persuade, inform, or provide commentary on a current issue. Hedging in editorials allows writers to present arguments while remaining cautious or non-assertive.
- **Metadiscourse:** The concept of metadiscourse was first introduced by the American linguist Zellig Harris in 1959. It is defined as the commentary on a text made by its articulator while speaking or writing and it is a widely used term in current discourse analysis and language teaching (Hyland, 2017).

- **Newspaper Editorial:** A newspaper editorial is a written piece that represents the stance of a newspaper. It is usually written by the editorial staff or guest writers, and represents the official stance of a newspaper (Marques & Mont'Alverne, 2021).
- **Contrastive Pragmatics:** Contrastive pragmatics is the study of differences in pragmatic usage across languages (Baumgarten, 2022). This sub-discipline of Pragmatics helps understand how pragmatic meanings compare or align between languages.
- **Media Linguistics:** Media linguistics examines the role of language in mass communication and the relationship between language and the public. It also studies the functioning of language in the media sphere, which includes print, audiovisual, digital, and networked media.
- **Hindi:** Hindi is an Indo-Aryan language belonging to the Indo-European language family, primarily spoken in northern India and serving as the official language of the Indian government; it is written using the Devanagari script.
- **Indian English (IE):** IE is a group of English dialects spoken in the Republic of India and among the Indian diaspora characterised by unique vocabulary, grammar patterns, and pronunciation influenced by Indian languages and culture.
- **British English (BrE):** It refers to the varieties of the English language spoken and written in Great Britain (or, more narrowly defined, in England).
- **Politeness:** In linguistics, "politeness" refers to the use of language to show respect for others' feelings and social positions, aiming to reduce conflict and foster positive interactions during conversations (Brown and Levinson, 1978, 1987). This is typically done through particular language choices based on the social context and

power dynamics between speakers. Politeness is an important element of Pragmatics.

- **Face:** The concept of "face" is largely attributed to sociologist Erving Goffman, who first explored the idea of how individuals present themselves in social situations to maintain a positive self-image. In politeness theory, "face" refers to a person's public self-image or desired social standing. Politeness theory distinguishes between two types of face:
 - **Positive face:** The desire to be liked, appreciated, and included by others.
 - **Negative face:** The desire to be free from imposition and to have control over one's own actions.
- **Vagueness:** In linguistics, a vague predicate is one which gives rise to borderline cases. For example, the English adjective "short" is vague since it is not clearly true or false for someone of average height. By contrast, the word "even" is not vague since every number is definitively either even or not.
- **Mitigation:** Linguistic mitigation is the strategy of trying to repair linguistically the damage done to someone's face by what you say or do. It can be linguistically realised by reducing the threat to someone's negative or positive face.
- **Evasion:** According to Bavelas et al. (1998), evasion is defined as the "weak" statement to avoid clarification. Evasion is a mode of speech adopted when the speaker wishes to avoid a direct answer to a question but is unwilling to resort to telling a lie. If you accuse someone of evasion when they have been asked a question, you mean that they are deliberately avoiding giving a clear and direct answer.

- **Prototype Theory:** In cognitive linguistics, "prototype theory," primarily developed by Rosch (1973) proposes that concepts are structured around a central, most representative example (the "prototype"), and an item's membership in a category is based on how closely it resembles this prototype. This means that some members of a category are viewed as "better" examples than others, with varying degrees of belonging to the category
- **Cross-linguistic study:** This approach in Linguistics involves examining a linguistic phenomenon across different languages to identify similarities and differences. In this study, the focus is on comparing hedging strategies used in Hindi, Indian English, and BrE editorial texts.
- **Corpus-based Analysis:** A research method in Linguistics that involves analysing large collections of written texts (a corpus) to identify patterns of language use. This study uses corpus-based analysis to explore how hedging strategies are employed in editorial texts in the three languages.

1.9. Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is structured as follows:

Chapter 1: Introduction – This chapter lays the foundation for the study by presenting its background and motivation. It outlines the objectives (see section 1.4), research questions (see section 1.5), and significance of the research while providing an overview of the methodology employed. Additionally, it defines key terms frequently used throughout the study to ensure clarity. The chapter concludes with a detailed outline of the thesis structure, guiding the reader through its organisation.

Chapter 2: Hedging in Editorials: Patterns, Trends, and Knowledge Gaps – The chapter begins by defining the concept of hedges/hedging, tracing its origins, and documenting its entry into Linguistics. It then provides an overview of the evolution of the concept and its associated discourse effects, such as evasion and politeness. The chapter then reviews key scholarly works on hedging in Linguistics, with a specific focus on media discourse, particularly newspaper editorials, to identify research gaps. Finally, it highlights these gaps and justifies how this study seeks to address them, and where it is situated.

Chapter 3: Methodology and Functional Framework for analysing Hedges – This chapter outlines the systematic steps undertaken to achieve the objectives of the study and address the research questions. It covers key stages, including corpus selection, data collection, contextual analysis, hedge classification, and an overview of the statistical test used to evaluate the hypotheses.

Chapter 4: Hedging in Editorials: Qualitative and Quantitative Insights – This chapter has provided a thorough structural and functional examination of the various types of hedging strategies employed in editorial discourse. Afterwards, it presents the report of the statistical test carried out to examine the research hypotheses. Furthermore, the chapter discusses the various types of hedging strategies found across the corpora with apt illustrations.

Chapter 5: Unveiling Pragmatic Functions of Hedges in Editorial Texts – The chapter has systematically explored the key pragmatic functions of hedges in editorial discourse, based on an extensive analysis of 100 editorials from each of the languages: British English, Indian English, and Hindi. Each instance of hedging has been closely examined and categorised according to the specific pragmatic function it served. Through this meticulous process, similar functions were grouped together to identify overarching generic functions.

Chapter 6: Conclusion – This chapter synthesizes the key findings of the study, providing a clear and concise summary of the results in relation to the research questions. It reflects on the implications of the findings, discusses how they contribute to the understanding of hedging strategies in editorial discourse, and highlights their significance within the broader linguistic framework. Additionally, the chapter outlines potential directions for future research, suggesting ways to extend the study to other genres, languages, or methodologies, thereby paving the way for further exploration in the field.

1.10. Summary

This introductory chapter emphasizes the importance of hedging in communication, particularly within newspaper editorials, where it plays a vital role in managing uncertainty, politeness, persuasion, and authority. The chapter outlines the motivations behind the study, presents the research objectives, and defines key terms used throughout the thesis. The study aims to identify hedging strategies in editorials across Hindi, Indian English, and British English, comparing their frequency and distribution while examining their functions in shaping public discourse. The research questions focus on how hedging varies across these linguistic contexts and the roles it plays in editorial writing.

The ensuing chapter will introduce the concept of hedging, its historical development, and a review of the existing classification frameworks. It will also review studies on hedging across different genres, with a focus on editorial discourse, highlighting research gaps and setting the foundation for the empirical analysis.