

Extended Abstract

Hedging is a metalinguistic strategy that plays a critical role in a discourse. It allows speakers or writers to express tentativeness, politeness, and a lack of commitment to their propositions. For example, phrases like "I may visit the doctor today." or "As far as I think, the Indian team is playing well." illustrate how hedging allows nuanced communication while leaving room for flexibility and interpretation. In newspaper editorials, hedging serves as a crucial tool for managing the articulation of opinions, downtoning arguments, and enhancing persuasion, thereby playing a significant role in shaping and influencing public perception. While numerous studies have focused on hedging in genres such as academic writing, students' writing, and informal conversations—predominantly in English—there remains a notable gap in comprehensive research on the hedging strategies used in editorial discourse, particularly in Indian languages. This cross-linguistic study seeks to address these gaps by investigating the hedging strategies employed in Hindi and English (BrE and IE) editorials. Additionally, we explore the primary pragmatic functions of hedges, highlighting their broader communicative roles within the editorial discourse through a contextual and thematic analysis of a substantial body of editorial texts.

The study adopts a corpus-based, mixed-method approach, integrating qualitative and quantitative techniques to analyse hedging strategies in editorial discourse comprehensively. This combination of methods allows for an in-depth exploration of hedging, yielding valuable insights into its linguistic and functional characteristics.

The research methodology follows a systematic, multi-stage process:

- **Data Collection:** The study begins with the selection of three datasets, each comprising 100 editorials to represent British English (BrE), Indian English (IE), and Hindi. These editorials were randomly selected from newspapers published within a one-year timeframe (2023) to ensure recency, consistency, and comparability.
- **Data Cleansing:** Non-textual elements such as graphics, metadata, and irrelevant content were removed to focus exclusively on the editorial text.
- **Contextual Analysis:** Each editorial was meticulously read and analysed in its context to identify instances of hedging. This step ensured that the interpretation of hedges was grounded in the specific communicative intent and context of each editorial.

- **Coding and Classification:** Identified hedges were systematically coded and classified according to their formal and functional types. This dual classification enabled a detailed and nuanced analysis of the hedging strategies employed in the editorials.

The log-likelihood test was used to test the research hypotheses and assess whether the frequency variations of hedging strategies among the corpora were statistically significant. Type to Token Ratio (TTR) was utilised to measure the lexical diversity of hedges across the three corpora.

The analysis revealed that plausibility shields (e.g., “it seems,” “maybe,” “possibly,” etc.) were the most frequently employed hedging strategy across the three corpora. These hedges aid writers soften the certainty of statements, providing a layer of tentativeness and neutrality, which is considered crucial in editorial writing. The frequent use of plausibility shields can be ascribed to their several critical pragmatic functions, like enhancing the writer's credibility by signalling intellectual humility and openness and mitigating face-threatening acts. These functions can be conducive to editorial writing and may enable editorial writers to present their viewpoints tactfully, fostering a dialogic and inclusive tone.

Adaptors (e.g., “a bit of,” “sort of,” and “some”) were found to be the second most frequent type of hedging strategy in Hindi, unlike BrE, where rounders are the second most frequent type. The prominence of rounders in the BrE corpus can be explained by cognitive theories suggesting that rounded numbers simplify complex numerical information, thereby reducing cognitive load. In contrast, the higher frequency of Adaptors in the IE and Hindi corpora may reflect cultural and linguistic preferences for alternative hedging strategies that emphasise modification or adjustment of meaning. Adaptors allow writers to subtly qualify their statements, aligning with possible rhetorical norms in Indian and Hindi editorial discourse.

Attribution shields (e.g., “according to experts,” “some believe”), employed to evade the responsibility and to keep a distance from the credibility of the utterance, were the least utilised hedging strategy across the three corpora. The sparse use of attribution shields reflects the genre's underlying ethos of trustworthiness and authority. Editorials are expected to present well-supported and substantiated claims, ensuring their arguments sound credible and authoritative to their readers. By limiting their reliance on external attributions, editorial writers reinforce their accountability for the claims made, strengthening their rhetorical and ethical stance. This suggests that authors in editorials often prefer to take a more direct or authoritative stance rather than attributing opinions to external sources.

The statistical test (LLR) revealed that BrE editorials employ hedging more frequently than IE and Hindi editorials, with IE demonstrating higher hedging usage than Hindi. Furthermore, type-to-token ratio (TTR) calculations indicated that Hindi and BrE editorials exhibit nearly identical levels of lexical diversity in hedging, whereas IE editorials displayed the lowest lexical diversity. The higher frequency of hedging in BrE editorial discourse may be ascribed to Hall's (1997) theory on language and identity, which posits that language use is deeply intertwined with cultural identity. However, future research could explore the relationship between hedging and cultural values such as politeness, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, and collectivism to provide deeper insights into the observed patterns.

Through an in-depth contextual and thematic analysis of 300 editorials, eight primary pragmatic functions of hedging were extracted: maintaining politeness, expressing varying degrees of commitment to a proposition, acknowledging limitations or the irrelevance of precision, mitigating the certainty or strength of a claim, expressing uncertainty or doubt, making conditional assertions, fostering inclusivity to enhance persuasion, and evading responsibility. These functions offer valuable insights into the nuanced ways hedging is employed to navigate the complex rhetorical demands of editorial writing.

These functions demonstrated how hedging enabled editorial writers to balance the intricate interplay between precision, objectivity, and reader engagement. Notably, the editorial genre, emphasising neutrality and the presentation of balanced perspectives, frequently used hedging to distance writers from absolute assertions or contentious viewpoints.

This research has several implications for pragmatics, media literacy, and language teaching:

- **Pragmatics:** The study contributes to the growing field of contrastive pragmatics by comparing hedging strategies across languages and cultures.
- **Media Linguistics:** The study significantly contributes to the field of Media Linguistics by offering a detailed examination of hedging as a linguistic strategy in editorial discourse across Hindi, IE, and BrE. It enriches our comprehension of the functions of hedging to impact persuasive and ethical communication in editorial material.
- **Media Literacy:** The study offers a framework for understanding how hedging works in editorial discourse, enabling readers to critically assess editorial content and identify underlying biases or intentions.
- **Language Teaching:** The findings have implications for pragmatics instruction in second language (L2) education, particularly for learners of English and Hindi.

Understanding hedging strategies is critical for enhancing learners' pragmatic competence and ability to navigate discourse in formal contexts like editorials.

In essence, the study sheds light on the pivotal role of hedging in editorial discourse across Hindi, IE, and BrE, emphasising its importance as a strategy for managing uncertainty, upholding neutrality, and ensuring politeness in media communication. Addressing a critical gap in the literature offers practical insights for media practitioners, language educators, and learners, highlighting the impact of hedging in shaping public opinion and fostering effective communication. The comparative analysis across these linguistic contexts contributes significantly to contrastive pragmatics and media linguistics. Furthermore, the study introduces a structural framework for classifying hedges in editorial discourse and refines the functional framework proposed by Prince et al. (1982), enhancing its robustness and applicability. Future research could build on these findings by examining hedging in other media genres, such as news reporting or media interviews, and in high-stakes domains like courtroom and parliamentary discourse. Additionally, exploring its role in emerging digital media forms could provide fresh perspectives on how hedging adapts to contemporary modes of communication.