A Corpus-Based Pragmatic Analysis of Hedging in Linguistics Master Theses Abstracts Written by Saudi Students(*)

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Abstract

This pragmatic descriptive study is aimed at investigating the use of hedging by Arab speakers of English. It is geared towards answering the question of how frequently hedging is used in the abstracts of the Linguistics Master theses written by Saudi students enrolled in the English department at the College of Languages and Translation, Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. A corpus of 100 randomly selected Linguistics Master Theses abstracts (27,411 words), written between 2013 and 2016, were carefully examined quantitatively, and analyzed according to Hyland's (2000) classification of hedging words, using the online LEXICOOL text analyzer. The results indicate that Saudi students rarely use hedging words in writing the abstracts of their Linguistics Master theses. The limited number of hedging words used in the corpus reflects the students' lack of pragmatic competence and cross-cultural variation. The present study is limited to a single genre, i.e., Linguistics Master Theses Abstracts. Further studies combining both discourse analysis and qualitative interviews, focusing on the use of hedging by Arab speakers of English, with more diverse academic texts in different genres, would enhance the findings, and help explain whether pragmatic competence or cross-cultural variation affects the use of hedging by Arab speakers of English.

Keywords

Academic writing, Master theses abstracts, pragmatics, hedging

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الملخص

تناولت هذه الدراسة التداولية الوصفية ظاهرة استخدام التلاعب اللفظي البليغ (الحيل الكلامية) من قبل مستخدمي اللغة الإنجليزية الناطقين باللغة العربية من منظور النظرية التداولية، وذلك من خلال تحليل استخدام التلاعب اللفظي البليغ في أطروحات الماجستير في تخصص اللغويات من قبل طلاب قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بكلية اللغات والترجمة بجامعة الإمام محمد بن سعود الإسلامية بالمملكة العربية السعودية. وللإجابة علي السؤال المحوري الذى تدور حوله هذه الدراسة تم اختيار عشوائي لمائة مستلخص من أطروحات الماجستير في تخصص اللغويات، والتي قدمت للكلية في الفترة من ٢٠١٣-٢٠١٦. وقد ضمت العينة ٢٧,٤١١ كلمة، تم تحليلهم بشكل كمي وفقا لتصنيف (Hyland 2000) لأدوات التلاعب اللفظي البليغ باستخدام محلل النصوص الإلكتروني (LEXICOOL) المدرج على الشبكة العنكبوتية. وتشير نتائج الدراسة إلى أن الطلاب السعوديين نادرا ما يستخدمون أدوات التلاعب اللفظي في كتابة مستلخصات أطروحات الماجستير، وهو الأمر الذي يعكس عدم إدراكهم للأبعاد والوظائف الاجتماعية والثقافية للغة الانجليزية وعدم مقدرتهم على توظيف خصائصها التداولية. وحيث إن الدراسة الحالية قد اقتصرت على لون واحد ألا وهو مستلخصات الرسائل العلمية في تخصص اللغويات، فانها توصى بإجراء مزيد من الدراسات التى تتناول استخدام التلاعب اللفظي البليغ فى كتابة أنواع النصوص الأكاديمية المختلفة فى شتى العلوم من قبل مستخدمي اللغة الإنجليزية الناطقين باللغة العربية، من خلال توظيف تحليل الخطاب والتحليل الكيفي، وهو الأمر الذي من شأنه تدعيم نتائج الدراسة الحالية وتفسير ما إذا كانت المعرفة بالأبعاد والوظائف التداولية للغة الإنجليزية وإدراك الاختلاف بين الثقافات يؤثر على استخدام التلاعب اللفظي البليغ في الكتابات العلمية من قبل مستخدمي اللغة الإنجليزية الناطقين باللغة العربية.

الكلمات الدالة

الكتابات الأكاديمية، مستلخصات أطروحات الماجستير، النظرية التداولية، التلاعب اللفظي البليغ

1. Introduction

The past two decades have witnessed an increasing concern for genre-based language studies. Genre is "a complex and contested concept, but usually defined in terms of the purpose that users seek to achieve" (Parkinson, 2017, p. 3). Nunan (1993, p. 120) argued that genre is "a particular type of oral or written communication" He reported that different genres are typified by a particular structure and by grammatical forms that

reflect the communicative purpose of the genre in question. The term genre was widely used in rhetoric, literary theory, media theory, and more recently in Linguistics, to refer to "a distinctive type of text" (Allen, 2013, p. 44). Therefore, genres may be illustrated by specific kinds of texts such as abstracts, job applications, tourism brochures, business letters, cartoons, classified announcements, memos, personal letters, news reports, novels, owner's manuals, research reports, short biographies, university calendars, etc. Each genre has distinctive features. Such features can be linguistic, paralinguistic, contextual, and pragmatic.

One of the most important characteristics of the academic texts genre is the use of hedging. The study of hedging goes back to Lakoff (1975). He investigated how hedging words and phrases (e.g., *quite*, *greatly*, *rather*, *so*, *too*, *generally speaking*) can make things more or less vague. From that time on, hedging has been continued in Speech Acts Theory and oral discourse. Cabanes (2007) defined hedging as a lack of ultimate commitment to what the utterance propositionally conveys. Through hedging, writers attempt to show how their statements are accurate and, simultaneously, they care for saving their faces in case that their judgments undergo any possible falsification. Hyland (2005) stated that hedging words and phrases are modifiers of the writer's accountability for the truth value of what he/she expresses or as descriptors of the importance of the information presented and the attitude of the writer towards such information. The rationale beyond using hedging is to imply the meaning of uncertainty for the text and that the author is not sure about what he discusses in the text. This definition implies that hedging can be utilized as a way of securing the readers' acceptance and motivation. Jalilifar and Shooshtari (2011) maintained that hedging, with its function as a mitigator, is used as a strategy for maintaining status that seeks to make the inappropriate speech act a more appropriate one with the speaker's status in the situation. This means that hedging can be used to make for the unsuitability of the speech act that is used in writing or speaking. In addition, Hyland (1996) argued that hedging words "mitigate the relationship between propositional content and a representation of reality;

they hedge the correspondence between what the writer says about the world and what the world is thought to be like" (p. 439). Besides, hedging was regarded as "a way of qualifying categorical commitment and facilitating discussion" (Hyland, 1996, p. 433). It is a device by which the writer can convey his beliefs and subjective viewpoints.

Wishnoff (2002) argued that hedging could be used in various linguistic forms (e.g., the conditional statements, verb choice, modifiers, and personal viewpoint statements). Therefore, hedging is an activity that softens face-threatening as readers are given alternatives to make their own interpretations. This is a sort of politeness towards readers. Therefore, hedging was regarded as a politeness strategy. Myers (1989), in his investigation of the use of politeness in scientific writing, classified hedging as a negative politeness strategies when it marks a claim, or any other statement, as being provisional pending acceptance by the readers.

Hedging is frequently employed in academic writing (Hyland, 2005; Hyland and Tse, 2004). Hedging words and phrases are self-reflective linguistic expressions (e.g., might, suggest, probably) employed to express epistemic modality and modify the illocutionary force of speech acts (Holmes, 1988). They can be used to qualify the writer's commitment to a proposition (Kopple, 1985), to show uncertainty about the truth of an assertion (Crismore et al., 1993), to ''withhold commitment and open dialogue'' (Hyland, 2005, p. 49) by acknowledging alternative viewpoints or the subjectivity of one's own position, and/or ''to mitigate the force of an utterance for the sake of politeness'' (Holmes, 1990, p. 185). Thus, hedging is a writing technique that the writer can exploit to express uncertainty or certainty about an argument, conceal or reinforce commitment to a position, entertain or dismiss alternatives, open or close dialogue with the reader (Millan, 2008). The skillful manipulation of hedging in academic texts signals a writer's epistemic stance towards propositional content and intended readers, and marks him/herself as a competent member of the discourse community (Hyland, 2005).

Different reasons have been identified by different researchers for the use of hedging. Writers use hedging to tone down their utterances and minimize the risk of opposition. That is, they avoid scientific imprecision and personal accountability for what is presented (Varttala, 2001). In addition, writers need to inform readers that what they claim is clear-cut and the final word on the topic. Incomplete certainty does not inevitably mean that there is a vagueness or confusion. Hedging can be considered as techniques for reporting results more precisely. They reflect the real understanding of the writer and can call for a negotiation over the state of knowledge under investigation. The lack of a strong evidence and accredited data may make academic writers prone to use hedging as they may not be able to account for stronger claims (Skelton, 1988). Furthermore, hedging can be used as a positive or negative politeness strategy through which the writer tries to be modest rather than assuming he/she has the powerful knowledge. Consequently, it is capable of establishing a good relationship between readers and writers and secures a certain level of acceptability. Furthermore, the importance of hedging has been reported by a considerable number of studies. For example, Varttala (2001) claimed that hedging is utilized to report results, account for results, make inferences out of evidences, convince readers, and set up interpersonal ties between readers and writers.

Swales and Feak (2004) introduced three types of hedging: (1) content-oriented hedging, which mitigates the connection between the suppositional content and the manner of representing reality and hedges the correspondence between what the writer claims about the world and what the world is perceived to be like; (2) writer-oriented hedging, which protects the writer from the consequences of his personal commitment (e.g., the passive voice); and (3) reader-oriented hedging, which is concerned with the relationship between the reader and the writer. Writers pay attention to the interactional impacts of their statements and treat the reader as a colleague who is able take part in the discourse with an open mind (Kelly and Bazerman, 2003).

2. Review of literature

A growing body of research has investigated the use of hedging by members of different language, cultural, or disciplinary communities (Martín, 2008; Martín and Burgess, 2004; Salager-Meyer et al., 2003). Another stream of studies (e.g., Hyland, 2005; Millan, 2008; Vold, 2006) examined the use of hedging across disciplines and found clear disciplinary differences in the use of hedging. Through hedging, writers in academic contexts show whether they are certain or doubtful about their statements and to what extent they are confident of their claim (Vázquez and Giner, 2008). In addition, through hedging, readers are given some space to judge the truth value of the assertion.

In scientific writing, hedging was investigated by Hyland (2003). He examined around 27 articles on molecular biology published between 1990 and 1995. He concluded that modality is a significant way of expressing hedging. In addition, Hyland (2004) analyzed the metadiscourse features in seven biology articles. He concluded that scientists use hedging for addressing the intended reader and conveying their personal attitudes towards what they claim. Moreover, Cabanes (2007) compared hedging in English and Spanish architecture project descriptions. He concluded that hedging is used to serve three functions: (1) it expresses politeness towards the audience, (2) it protects the writer from claims that may be wrong, and (3) it implies the degree the precision that the writer considers in his text. Besides, Vázquez and Giner (2008) studied hedging in three types of research articles: marketing, biology, and mechanical engineering. They concluded that hedging is used differently in these three areas. In addition, Tabrizi (2011) compared hedging in biology and English language teaching texts. She presented the results of a review of 60 research articles, discussing the importance, frequency, and realization of hedging in both scientific and humanistic articles. She concluded that hedging is most frequently used in English language teaching texts than biology texts.

Further studies attempted to capture a wider view of how hedging is used in the genre of social texts. Hyland (2005) explored the use of

boosters and hedging in 240 published research articles from eight disciplines and insider informant interviews. He concluded that boosters are used more than hedging and that mass communication writers are more confident about their claims than biology writers. In addition, Martín (2008) compared the frequency of hedging in clinical and health psychology in English and Spanish research articles. He concluded that that English research articles involved more protection to the writer's face than the Spanish research articles. It is also worth noting here that Salager-Meyer (2011) argued that social texts are commonly associated with using hedged devices such as the passive voice and probabilities.

In academic writing, based on interviews with insider informants, and an analysis of two and a half million word corpus of published articles, textbooks, second language students essays, Hyland (2002) investigated the use of directives and hedging. He concluded that directives are used for different purposes across different branches of knowledge. Besides, in a study conducted by Hyland (2005), he concluded that EFL writers tend to use stronger modals as a way of showing commitment. In addition, Mojica (2005) investigated Filipino writers' ways of showing commitment in their English academic papers. He concluded that modals and probabilities are preferred forms of hedging. Moreover, Akbas (2012) investigated metadiscourse by manipulating WordSmith Tools (5.0) to quantitatively analysis twenty-five thousand one hundred and fifty-five word corpus of ninety randomly selected master's dissertation abstracts in the social sciences written by native speakers of Turkish, Turkish speakers of English and native speakers of English. His findings indicated that non-native speakers of English used a mixture of their cultural tendencies and adapt themselves to the target language conventions. Native speakers of English preferred the use of hedging more in their style of writing in their abstracts, whereas Turkish writers tend to use more boosters to show their claims with more confidence.

Based on the previous discussion, it is clear that the significance of hedging becomes more evident as far as academic writing is concerned. Hedging denotes interpretations and allows writers to express their

attitudes to the actuality of the statements they accompany, thereby giving unproven claims cautious and indecisive assertions. The use of hedging was studied in the context of scientific texts (e.g., biology, engineering, and architecture) and social texts (e.g., psychology and mass communication). Moreover, hedging was investigated through comparative studies such as scientific and humanistic texts and scientific and English language teaching texts.

3. Significance of the study

Regardless of the growing body of research on hedging, little research has focused on the genre of the English article abstract written by Arab speakers of English, especially Saudi students. A less-focused research effort was made on investigating hedging used by Saudi students. Therefore, this study is aimed at examining the types and frequency of hedging in the abstracts of the Linguistics Master theses written by Saudi students enrolled in the English Language and Literature department at the College of Languages and Translation, Al Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Specifically, it seeks to answer the question of what are the hedging words used in Linguistics Master Theses Abstracts written by Saudi students? In addition, it is geared towards investigating the frequency of hedging words in these theses. Accordingly, the study would contribute to the existing literature of hedging, provide further insights into the communication style and patterns of Saudi writers, and lay a foundation for further studies on Saudi writers' pragmatic competence and hedging production and development.

4. Methodology

4.1. Corpus

To address the study's research question, a corpus of 100 randomly selected Linguistics Master Theses Abstracts, written between 2012 and 2016, by Saudi students, was carefully examined quantitatively using the online LEXICOOL text analyzer, which can be found on https://www.lexicool.com/text_analyzer. The corpus comprised 27,411 words in total. This corpus will be made freely available for research

purposes. Despite presenting numerical trends, this study is predominantly qualitative in nature. A thorough descriptive analysis in addition to simple calculus processes were applied to the study corpus. In analyzing the study corpus, the following classification of hedge markers by Hyland (2000) was taken into account in the analysis of the corpus.

Table 1

Classification of hedging markers (Hyland, 2000, p. 17)

	Hedging Markers	Examples
1.	Introductory verbs	look like, seem, appear, indicate, suggest
2.	Certain lexical verbs	believe, assume, think, realize
3.	Certain modal verbs	may, will, should, could, shall
4.	Adverbs of frequency	often, usually, sometimes
5.	Modal adverbs	perhaps, probably, clearly, certainly
6.	Modal adjectives	certain, probable, possible, definite
7.	Modal nouns	assumption, possibility, probability
8.	That clauses	it can be suggested that ……, there is a hope that ……
9.	Adjective+ to-clause	it may be possible to … , it is significant to …..

4.2. Procedure

Following Hyland's (2000) classification, the online LEXICOOL text analyzer was used to identify and locate the hedging markers in the corpus. Verbs, for example, were located in their different grammatical forms (e.g., *appears*, *appeared*, *appearing*). The analysis proceeded as follows: the first category in the classification (i.e., introductory verbs) was analyzed and the frequency of using introductory verbs was calculated. The analysis then addressed the other eight categories respectively. The hedging words of the nine categories in the corpus were identified. Then, the overall usage of

each hedge in each category was identified. Tables (2) to (11) present descriptive statistics for the use of hedging words in the corpus.

5. Results and Discussion

The first hedging category in Hyland's (2000) classification, as shown in Table (1) is *introductory verbs*. This category includes verbs such as *seem*, *tend*, *appear*, *think*, *indicate,* and *suggest*. Such verbs show uncertainty about what has been mentioned. The analysis of the corpus, as listed in Table (2), indicates that the the most frequently used verb is *believe* (25.9%), followed by *seem* (21.20%), *think* (16%), *tend* (14.80%), *appear* (8.30%), *likely* (6.50%), *suggest* (4.60%) and *indicate* (2.70%). Table (2) also shows that *doubt* and *sure* were not used at all in the corpus. Examples of the using introductory verbs in the corpus include:

a) *The study **suggests** the usage of this strategy in the future.*

b) *The researcher **believes** that teachers should devote much attention to…… .*

c) *The new method **appeared** to be more effective in enhancing the students' writing skills.*

Table 2

The frequency of introductory verbs

Introductory Verbs	Frequency	%
Seem	23	21.20
Tend	16	14.80
Likely	7	6.50
Appear	9	8.30
Think	17	16.00
Believe	28	25.90
Doubt	0	0.00
Sure	0	0.00
Indicate	3	2.70
Suggest	5	4.60
Total	108	100

Table (1) indicates that the second hedging category in Hyland's (2000) classification is *lexical verbs*. It includes verbs such as *believe*, *assume*, *think,* and *realize*. Using such verbs allows writers to free themselves of any commitment to their claims. The findings of the study, as listed in Table (3), indicate that *assume* and *realize* were the only lexical verbs used in the corpus. *Assume* (78.50%) was more frequently used than *realize* (21.5%). Examples of using these lexical verbs in the the corpus include:

a) *The previous researches __assumed__ the relationship between vocabulary instruction and learning strategies.*

b) *Teachers __realize__ the importance of integrating technology in the class.*

Table 3

The frequency of certain lexical verbs

Certain Lexical Verbs	Frequency	%
Assume	22	78.50
Realize	6	21.50
Total	28	100

Certain modal verbs is the third hedging category in Hyland's (2000) classification. As Table (4) indicates, this category embodies seven modal verbs: *will*, *would*, *may*, *might*, *can*, *could* and *must*. These modals imply the two distinctive features of non-scientific discipline, namely, probability and uncertainty. As proposed by Salager-Meyer (1994), writers of academic articles, whether their writing is scientific or non-scientific, resort to hedging to protect themselves against readers' reactions and to reflect their modesty. The findings of the study reveal that *will* was used more frequently than the other modal verbs (27%), followed by *can* (25%), *must* (18.75%), *could* (15.2%), *would* (6.25%), *may* (4.50%), and finally *might* (2.6%). Examples of the use of modal verbs in the corpus include:

a) *The findings of this study __will__ contribute to EFL writing domain.*

b) *The study **can** be beneficial for those who have poor reading skills.*

c) *The differences in usage **must** be taken into account.*

d) *The differences **might** exist at the superficial level only.*

e) *These findings **could** help in improving the listening problems.*

f) *The new method **would** be only effective if it is implemented in light of the recent principles of teaching.*

Table 4

The frequency of certain modal verbs

Certain Model Verbs	Frequency	%
Will	31	27.7
Would	7	6.25
May	5	4.50
Might	3	2.6
Can	28	25
Could	17	15.2
Must	21	18.75
Total	112	100

The fourth hedging category in Hyland's (2000) classification is *modal adverbs*. As Table (5) indicates, this category involves seven adverbs. The analysis of the corpus demonstrate that *Clearly* was the most frequently used modal adverb in this category (34.6%), followed by *certainly* (19.4%), *possibly* (12.9%), *probably* (9.7%), *perhaps* (8%) and *definitely* (6.4%). The model adverb *conceivably* was not used at all in the corpus. Examples of the use of modal adverbs in the corpus include:

a) *This result **certainly** corresponds with the previous studies.*

b) *It is **clearly** required to have a focused approach towards technology in language classes.*

c) *The students have **certainly** achieved higher scores in the posttest.*

d) *The students **definitely** agreed on the importance of MALL.*

e) *The respondents have **possibly** affected by the impressionistic view of the old strategy.*

Table 5

The frequency of certain modal adverbs

Certain Model Adverbs	Frequency	%
Certainly	12	19.4
Definitely	4	6.4
Clearly	27	34.6
Probably	6	9.7
Possibly	8	12.9
Perhaps	5	8
Conceivably	0	0
Total	62	100

The fifth hedging category in Hyland's (2000) classification is *adverbs of frequency*. It embraces six adverbs. The findings, as listed in Table (6), demonstrate that   *often* was the most frequently used adverb (35.3%), followed by *sometimes* (23.6%), *usually* (21.5%), *always* (9.8%), *never* (5.9%), and *frequently* (3.9%). Examples of the use of such adverbs in the corpus include:

1. *The respondents were found to **often** use the computer in their classes.*

2. *The participants were reported to **usually** have access to the electronic dictionary.*

Table 6

The frequency of adverbs of frequency

Adverbs of frequency	Frequency	%
Often	18	35.3
Sometimes	12	23.6
Usually	11	21.5
Always	5	9.8
Never	3	5.9
Frequently	2	3.9
Total	51	100

The sixth category in Hyland's (2000) classification is *modal adjectives*. It includes six modal adjectives. As Table (7) presents, the analysis of the corpus evinces that the adjective *clear* was the most frequently used adjective (53.8%). It was followed by *probable* (15.5%), *certain* (11.5%), *possible* (11.6%). *Definite* was the least frequently used hedging device among all (7.6%). The adjective *conceivable* was never used in the corpus. Examples of the use of modal adjectives in the corpus include:

a) *The suggested method seemed to have a **possible** effect on the comprehension.*

b) *There were **clear** differences between the estimations of the both groups.*

c) *It is **certain** that the study will help the authorities to develop …….*

d) *The suggested technique had a **clear** effect on the motivation of the students in the three classes.*

e) *The participants said that MALL was **possible** to them in the class and that they liked to be taught through it.*

Table 7

The frequency of modal adjectives

Modal adjectives	Frequency	%
Certain	3	11.5
Definite	2	7.6
Clear	14	53.8
Probable	4	15.5
Possible	3	11.6
Conceivable	0	0
Total	26	100

The seventh category in Hyland's (2000) classification is *modal nouns*. It consists of three modal nouns. The findings, as listed in Table (8), demonstrate that *possibility* was the most frequent hedging device used in this category (44.4%), followed by *assumption* (33.3), and *probability* (22.3%). The use of modal nouns in the corpus is shown in the following examples:

a) *The hypothesis of the study is based on the **assumption** that peer feedback enhances the writing skills of the learners.*

b) *There was a greater **possibility** for the students to express their views trough the suggested method.*

Table 8

The frequency of modal nouns

Modal nouns	Frequency	%
Assumption	3	33.3
Possibility	4	44.4
Probability	2	22.3
Total	9	100

The ninth category in Hyland's (2000) classification is *that-clause*. This category involves three types of *that-clause.* As shown in Table (9). The analysis of the corpus makes clear that *it could be the case that* was not used at all in the corpus; *it might be suggested that* was used four times; and *there is every hope that* was used twice. The following is an example of using that-clauses in the corpus:

> *The researcher **hopes that** these findings help the curriculum designers to consider the students' needs.*

Table 9

The frequency of That-Clauses

That-clauses	Frequency	%
It could be the case that …….	0	0
It might be suggested that …..	4	66.7
Hope that ………………………	2	33.3
Total	6	100

The eighth and last category in Hyland's (2000) classification is *adjectives + to-clauses*. This category includes three types of clauses. The findings demonstrate, as listed in Table (10), that *it may be possible to obtain* was used twice; *it is important to develop* was used three times; and *it is useful to study* was used twice. Examples of the use of this category in the course include:

a) ***It is important to develop*** *the students' reading abilities at this stage.*

b) ***It is useful to study*** *the other demographic factors that affect the students' sound production.*

Table 10

The frequency of Adjective + To-Clause

That-clauses	Frequency	%
It may be possible to obtain	2	28.6
It is important to develop	3	42.8
It is useful to study	2	28.6
Total	7	

In relation to Hyland's (2000) classification, Table (11) presents the overall frequency and percentages of hedging words in the corpus. It shows a significant low frequency of hedging usage in the corpus. Despite the fact that the corpus comprised 27,411 words, only 409 (1.5%) hedging words were used. In addition, Table (11) indicates that *modal verbs* were the most frequently used hedging markers in the corpus (27.3%), followed by *introductory verbs* (26.4%), *adverbs of frequency* (15.2%); *modal adverbs* (12.4%); *lexical verbs* (6.80%); *modal adjectives* (6.50%); *modal nouns* (2.30%); *adjective + to-clause* (1.70%).; and *that-clauses* (1.40%). These findings indicate that Saudi students use hedging markers as a rhetorical strategy in their writing when (1) they are uncertain about their statements or propositions, and when (2) they want to protect their face.

Table 11

The overall frequency of each category

Introductory Verbs	Frequency	%
Introductory verbs	108	26.4
lexical verbs	28	6.80
Modal verbs	112	27.3
Adverbs of frequency	62	15.2
Modal adverb	51	12.4
Modal adjectives	26	6.50
Modal nouns	9	2.30
That-clauses	6	1.40
Adjective+ to-clause	7	1.70
Total	409	100

6. Summary and Conclusion

The present study is aimed at investigating the use of hedging, as a pragmatic element, in the genre of Linguistics Master Theses abstracts. This pragmatic descriptive study examined the use of hedging by Arab speakers of of English, which have not been investigated so far. It is geared towards answering the question of how frequently hedging words are used in the abstracts of the Linguistics Master theses written by Saudi students enrolled in the English department at the College of Languages and Translation, Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University, Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. One hundred abstracts were randomly selected and analyzed according to Hyland's (2000) classification of hedging markers, using the online LEXICOOL text analyzer.

The findings indicate that Saudi students rarely used hedging words in writing the abstracts of their Linguistics Master theses. The limited number of hedging words used in the corpus reflects the students' lack of pragmatic competence. It is clear that they are not acquainted with the pragmatic function of hedging in academic discourse, and they perceive hedging as being relatively irrelevant to the meaning of academic texts. Despite the fact that Fraser (2010, p. 15) points out that hedging is an area ''in which the lack of pragmatic competence can create serious problems for a second language speaker'', students paid more attention to style than to the discourse position of pragmatic elements such as hedging.

Moreover, the limited number of hedging words in the corpus may be attributed to the fact that hedging, as pragmatic elements, are culture-specific. Many scholars argued that there are differences across cultures in academic discourse. These results are consistent with the findings of Burrough-Boenisch (2005) and Sedaghat et al. (2015) who argued that hedging is underused in texts written by Dutch scientists and Persians writing in English.

Consequently, the findings of the present study raise a very important issue for future research. As it seems possible that there are differences between Arabic and English in the degree to which hedging words are used

in academic texts, contrastive studies can be conducted to confirm whether there is cross-cultural variation in the use of hedging in Arabic and English academic texts in terms of frequency. The results of such studies can be manipulated to explain the relatively small number of hedging words in academic English texts written be Arab Students. The present study was limited to a single genre, i.e. Linguistics Master Theses Abstracts. Further studies combining both discourse analysis and qualitative interviews, focusing on the use of hedging by Arab speakers of English, with more diverse academic texts in different genres, would enhance the findings, and help explain whether pragmatic competence or cross-cultural variation affects the use of hedging by Arab speakers of English.

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