"Contrastive Study of Hedging in English and Farsi Academic Discourse"

Reza Falahati

This study examines the distribution of forms and functions of hedging in academic research articles (RA) in two languages (English and Farsi), three disciplines (medicine, chemistry, and psychology), and between two rhetorical sections of RAs (Introduction and Discussion). The significant role of hedging in academic writing and research articles is well documented in different studies (Hyland, 1994, 1996a, 1996b, 1998, 1999; Salager-Meyer, 1994; Schefter, 1996; Vande Koppel & Crismore, 1990; Varttala, 2001). Hedges are defined as “the means by which writers can present a proposition as an opinion rather than a fact: items are only hedges in their epistemic sense, and only when they mark uncertainty” (Hyland 1998, p. 5).

Previous studies in this area have shown some variations in the use of hedges across languages (Clyne, 1991; Crismore et al., 1993; Vassileva, 2001; Yang, 2003) and across disciplines (Varttala, 2001). The cross-linguistics studies on hedging have mainly focused on those languages which belong to western culture. This study examines hedging in non-western European languages such as Farsi to see if there are any differences in the distribution of forms and functions of hedges between this language and English. The three disciplines focused on in this study are also selected to address the scarcity of studies on hedges in these areas. The selection of these disciplines will also help the Farsi-speaking students of these disciplines who receive reading assignment in English to better interpret and write English research articles.

Data consist of 24 research articles representing three disciplines, with four articles in each discipline for each language. Thus there are 12 English and 12 Farsi articles. The total number of words in the two sections of English and Farsi RAs (Introduction and Discussion) were 25,983 and 19,872, respectively.

Data were analyzed both in terms of forms and functions of hedging. In the first analysis the lexical items acting as hedges were identified and classified. Some of this decision was making a distinction between “epistemic” and “root” meanings of the lexical devices which had these two meanings. In the second analysis, the functions of the hedging forms were examined and analyzed. Hyland’s (1998) scheme for the functions of hedges was used for the purpose of this study.

The findings showed that the English RAs were 61.3 % more hedged than the Farsi RAs. The results also showed that the Discussion sections of RAs, in general, favor more hedges than the Introduction sections. The Discussion sections were also found to contain more writer-oriented hedges and fewer accuracy-oriented hedges compared to Introduction sections. Moreover, the distribution of hedging devices was shown to be different across disciplines. The English psychology and Farsi medicine RAs were found to be the most heavily hedged disciplines.

The epistemological and interpersonal significance of hedging in academic discourse, as well as Hinds’ (1987) classification for reader versus writer responsibility languages, are used to discuss the difference in the frequency of hedging across two languages. It is suggested that the main concern of the writers in Farsi is the propositional content of their text, rather than the affective nature of their discourse. The resulting texts contain little metadiscourse and writers are not much concerned with leading and orienting the readers. Therefore, the extent of reader’s involvement in the writer’s mind within the process of writing in Farsi may vary from a language like English, in which writers are always very conscious of the reader’s presence. Such a difference, may partially accounted for the variation in the distribution of hedging devices in English and Farsi.

The different purposes of the rhetorical sections of an RA are suggested to account for the variation of hedging across rhetorical sections. The general nature of disciplines and the kind of materials and methods used in the study are discussed as the main reasons for the variation of
hedging across disciplines. The pedagogical implications of the study are discussed in the last section.

References


