HEDGING AS a POLITENESS STRATEGY
IN RESEARCH ARTICLE REVIEWS

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Abstract. Metadiscourse in academic communication has been under the analysis of a great number of studies. However, most research was predominantly conducted on English academic texts, while metadiscourse strategies are used in Russian-language academic prose remains understudied and needs to be explored. On the basis of 50 reviews of manuscripts submitted to Russian journals, the present article analyzes types of the lexical realization of hedging as a metadiscourse strategy used by reviewers to mitigate negative evaluations and to show politeness. The study is relevant due to the numerous attempts to reconceptualize the nature of academic discourse and to ascribe it to the interactional rather than informational type of communication. Hedging is used for constructing harmonious relationship between the reviewer and the reviewee. The present study aims to identify lexical items used for hedging in the corpus of research article reviews. When the quantitative analysis reveals that hedging is predominantly realized through the use of verbs and adverbs, the interpretive analysis shows that lexical hedges serve for three pragmatic functions such as shifting the communicative focus, mitigating criticism, and de-intensifying negative evaluations. Hedging is an indicator of the authorial pragmatic competence and is a key to effective communication in the evaluative genres of academic discourse and research articles reviews. It creates a proper balance of negative and positive evaluations, assists in saving face and constructing an image of a competent partner.

Keywords: *academic discourse, scientific review, hedging, meta-discourse, negative assessment, lexical unit*

Научная статья

Аннотация. Цель работы – количественный и интерпретативный анализ лексических средств хеджирования в текстах рецензий на научные статьи. Интерпретативный анализ вы-

явил, что хеджи используются рецензентами для реализации следующих прагматических функций: смещение коммуникативного фокуса высказывания, смягчение критики, деинтенсификация отрицательной оценки. Результаты количественного анализа показали, что в исследуемом корпусе стратегия хеджирования преимущественно реализуется с помощью глаголов и наречий.

Ключевые слова: *академический дискурс, научная рецензия, хеджирование, метадискурс, негативная оценка, лексическая единица*

Introduction

In modern linguistics with the dominant principle of anthropocentrism, academic discourse has become a popular research focus and is often considered as a space for the manifestation of values and attitudes. As Chernyavskaya puts it, the speaking subject interacting with others makes a choice of communicative strategies, operational steps, and linguistic items [Chernyavskaya, 2021]. This creativity is typical for different types of discourse practices, including academic discourse, despite the fact that status roles, dispositions established for perceiving and processing information, evaluative strategies, argumentation structures and textualization stereotypes for repetitive scientific and cognitive actions are assimilated by researchers and impose stable speech behavior patterns [Nefedov, 2022].

The anthropocentric aspect of academic discourse has been explored in a great amount of studies of Russian and foreign researchers who emphasize the relevance of interaction problems in the scientific context due to the fact that academic discourse is increasingly viewed as an interactive space rather than an informational environment. This new approach to scientific communication forces academic discourse researchers to explore metadiscourse as a rhetorical strategy used to construct effective relationships between the interlocutors. The analysis of metadiscourse and its categories (boosting, hedging, self-mention, attitude and engagement) is extremely relevant in relation to evaluative academic genres which are marked by interactive features.

Hedging as a metadiscourse category has been investigated in a number of studies of academic discourse [Boginskaya, 2022; Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2016; Haufiku, Kangira, 2018; Hyland, 1996, 2005; Larina, 2019; Mikolaichik, 2020; Larina, Ponton, 2020, 2022; Takimoto, 2015; Vassileva, 2001]. Varttala, for example, has compared the pragmatic functions of hedging in popular science and academic articles on economics, medicine, and engineering [Varttala, 2001]. Takimoto has identified the frequency and revealed the functions of hedging devices in humanities, social and natural science articles [Takimoto, 2015]. Haufiku and Kangira has studied the role of hedging in master's theses and revealed that the frequency of occurrence of hedges depends on the level of language proficiency and the need to comply with the writing norms adopted by the disciplinary community [Haufiku, Kangira, 2018]. Al-Khasawneh analyzed the discourse structure and language in a corpus of 43 peer review reports and found that the words "well", "good", and "original" were the most frequently-used positive words, while the

words "unclear", "inconsistent", and "poor" were the most frequently-used negative words in the texts [Al-Khasawneh, 2022].

In Russian discourse analysis, hedging as a metadiscourse category has not attracted much attention of researchers. Nevertheless, some linguists focus on rhetorical strategies used for mitigating the illocutionary force of propositional content. In her study on hedging resources and functions, Ustyantseva, for example, revealed differences in the use of hedges by English and Russian authors [Ustyantseva, 2019]. The contrastive method was used by Mikolaichik who analyzed hedges in research article abstracts to compare their frequency in Russian and English texts [Mikolaichik, 2020]. Panchenko and Volkova showed the relationship of categorical/non-categorical with politeness, authority, confidence, subjectivity and emotionality and confirmed the hypothesis that Russian academic discourse is marked by a higher degree of categoricalness and a low frequency of hedges [Panchenko, Volkova, 2022]. Larina made an attempt to compare peer reviews in English and Russian in terms of differences in the implementation of the politeness strategy [Larina, 2019] She identified that Russian reviews are more emotional and categorical, while English ones are more constructive and polite.

While these studies are valuable, there is still a complementary contribution to be made by corpus-based studies that (1) consider hedging as a politeness strategy used to avoid apodictic statements in academic prose, and (2) identify lexical patterns of hedging in the evaluative genres of academic discourse. The current study aims to explore lexical items used for mitigating negative evaluations in research article reviews. To achieve this goal, the types, frequencies and pragmatic functions of lexical items used as hedges will be identified and analyzed.

The concept of hedging was coined by John Lakoff who described the communicative value of hedging markers and claimed that linguistic concepts can have "vague boundaries and fuzzy edges" [Lakoff, 1973]. Lakoff's definition was used as a starting point by some other researchers who have changed, however, the angle of research focusing on the role of hedging as a politeness strategy. As a rhetorical strategy that can help protect writers against potential criticism, hedging in academic prose has been studied in terms of politeness on the basis of Brown and Levinson's theory [Brown, Levinson, 1987]. One of the most crucial concepts of this theory is that of "face" which is defined as the self-image that writers or speakers try to maintain in verbal interactions in order to protect their claims against criticism and ensure their acceptance by readers.

An increasing number of studies has demonstrated how academic discourse is structured to shield authors against potential criticism. In these studies, politeness has been considered to be the main motivating factor for hedging, since academic discourse "consists of interactions among scientists in which the maintenance of face is crucial [Myers, 1989, p. 5]. Politeness has been, for example, emphasized in Hubler's definition of hedging devices used to avoid apodictic statements overlooking the readers' wish to judge for themselves [Hubler, 1983]. Crismore and Vande Kopple defined hedges as elements that "signal a tentative or cautious assessment of the truth of referential information" and allow the author to reduce

his/her responsibility toward the information presented [Crismore, Vande Kopple, 1988, p. 185].

Hedging as a politeness strategy has been treated in a number of other works. Myers was, however, the first scholar who paid attention to the role of politeness markers, including hedges, in academic prose [Myers, 1989]. Following Brown and Levinson, Myers found that politeness strategies applied in oral interactions can be extended to written academic discourse, in which making claims and presenting findings can threaten the negative face of other researchers. In Myers' theory, hedging is employed for dealing with social interactions involved in publishing articles and marking authorial claims as being provisional. Every scientific report makes a claim that is to be taken as the article's contribution to knowledge. The making of a claim threatens both the disciplinary community because it is a demand by individuals for communally granted credit and the negative face of other researchers because it implies a restriction on what they can do now. As Myers put it, "the making of claims always involves a tension: the writer must stay within a certain consensus to have anything to say to members of his or her discipline, but must also have a new claim to make to justify publication" [Myers, 1989, p. 5]. This act, therefore, threatens other researchers whose credit may be questioned and a disciplinary community suspending its absolute authority. The writers feel a need to assure the reader that the claims put forth are not intended to exclude alternative ideas and views.

Myers' concept provided a new theoretical framework for the studies of hedging as a politeness strategy in academic prose. Following Myer, Salager-Meyer showed that hedges can protect author's reputation by making claims tentative and avoiding absolute statements [Salager-Meyer, 1995]. According to Holmes, hedges could "create conviviality, facilitate discussion, show politeness and oil the phatic wheels" [Holmes, 1997, p. 32]. In line with Holmes, Boncea considered hedging markers as helpful in expressing politeness and mitigating face-threats [Boncea, 2014]. Similarly, Demir argued that hedging "acts as a face-saving strategy and represents the certainty of the scientists' knowledge on the study field" [Demir, 2018, p. 74].

The present study has adopted Myer's pragmatically-oriented concept of hedging as a point of departure as it seems to be more extensive and thus more persuasive. Following Myers's ideas, hedging will be treated as a politeness strategy employed to appear humble rather all-knowing in peer review reports. Hedges assist in mitigating the illocutionary force of negative evaluations and criticisms and the categoricalness of claims, ensuring the success of communication by creating psychological comfort [Caffi, 2007] and reducing undesirable effects when the speaker's communicative behavior can lead to conflicts [Fraser, 2010].

Methodology and Results

To achieve the research purpose set in the Introduction section, I collected a corpus of 50 peer reviews provided by the editorial offices of four engineering journals and ten authors who had their manuscripts reviewed. All the reviews deal

with articles in the field of engineering. The selection of the discipline was motivated by the fact that very few disciplinary studies of academic discourse have dealt with hard sciences, leaving an obvious lacuna to fill in. The number of words in the corpus was 121,234.

To explore lexical items used for hedging, the methods of quantitative and contextual analysis were used. The quantitative analysis was supplemented by the contextual analysis in order to identify the pragmatic functions the lexical items perform in the reviews. All the hedges found in the corpus were divided into four lexico-grammatical categories: 1) adjectives, 2) adverbs, 3) verbs, and 4) nouns. The results of the analysis were summarized in a table.

The following are the steps of the analysis as it appears in the article:

(1) Analysis of the research article reviews to identify lexical items used for hedging.
(2) Identification of the pragmatic functions of lexical hedges in the corpus.
(3) Distribution of lexical hedges by four lexico-grammatical categories.
(4) Identification of the frequency of lexical hedges in each category.
(5) Summary of the results obtained in a table.

Table 1 presents the results of the quantitative analysis of lexical items used for hedging in the corpus of research article reviews.

Table 1

Frequency of lexical hedges by lexico-grammatical categories

Category	Frequency
Adjectives	21
Adverbs	44
Verbs	112
Nouns	11
Total	188

The study revealed that the most frequent lexical items used for mitigating negative evaluations were those belonging to the categories of verbs and adverbs.

Discussion

Peer reviews are defined in the present article as "the evaluation of research findings for competence, significance, and originality by qualified experts" [Benos et al., 2007, p. 145]. Evaluation is a key scientific activity. Researchers evaluate results obtained by their peers both in their own articles and research article reviews. Evaluations may be both positive and negative as researchers' task is to defend their ideas in scientific discussions. In addition, as Larina and Ponton claim, unless the article is perfect, the reviewer is obliged to engage in criticism or a face-threatening act. [Larina, Ponton, 2019].

Negative evaluation and disagreement are speech acts typical of the genre of academic reviews. Although being the engine of scientific progress, negative evaluation may have a strong impact on the emotional state of the researcher. According to Langlotz and Locher, "conflictual disagreements are closely linked to negative emotional reactions, especially when one feels offended or treated rudely."

[Langlotz, Locher, 2012, p. 1591]. To prevent this state, hedging as a metadiscourse strategy is used to reduce communication risks and avoid disagreement regarded as destructive. Similarly, Gea Valor claims that criticism is "combined with an attempt to maintain social harmony and solidarity with the reviewee" [Ge Valor, 2000, p. 146].

Linguistic resources used as hedges help de-intensify negative evaluations, decrease their strength, and mitigate categorical claims.

The analysis of peer reviews on engineering articles revealed lexical items that are frequently used to mitigate negative evaluations. These include: 1) adjectives, 2) adverbs, 3) nouns, 4) verbs.

Adjectives

The corpus contained altogether 21 adjectives deemed as hedging markers. This lexico-grammatical category is presented by adverbs of degree and epistemic adjectives. Here is an example from the corpus.

(1) *Считаю* **возможным** *отметить, что название работы и цель работы отличаются друг от друга.*

To mitigate the negative emotional impact on the reviewee, the reviewer hedges the claim thereby reducing the illocutionary force of the utterance. The hedge *возможный* acts here as a modus mitigator.

The choice of degree adjectives was wider than that of epistemic adjectives as the analysis revealed only one lexical item from this sub-category – *возможный*. Below are examples of sentences with the most frequent adjectives of degree used for mitigating negative evaluations.

(2) *Данное утверждение автора вступает в* **некоторое** *противоречие с тем, что было заявлено в вводной части статьи.*

(3) *Это привело к тому, что* **отдельные** *положения разработаны с различной степенью доказательности.*

(4) *Однако не всегда это сравнение в* **достаточной** *мере обосновано.*

The critical tone is weakened with the help of semantic operators that reduce the intensity of the evaluation and the accuracy. De-intensification of the evaluation makes it less categorical, softening the negative emotional impact on the reviewee. In the same vein, Nefedov claims that to mitigate categorical words and expressions, the reviewer uses careful, polite formulation in order to avoid possible critical reactions of the discourse community [Nefedov, 2022].

Adverbs

In contrast to adjectives, the corpus of reviews featured more examples of adverbs serving the hedging purpose. The data drawn from the 50 reviews included 44 adverbs that were interpreted as hedges. The analysis revealed that the most common adverbial items were adverbs of frequency that reduce the accuracy of propositional content:

(5) **Недостаточно** *чётко сформулированы основные научные и производственные проблемы.*

Adverbs of frequency can be considered a productive resource used to create positive modality in evaluative texts and mitigate the negative impact on the

reviewee by emphasizing the irregular nature of the negative feature. Here are two examples that illustrate the case:

> (6) *В математических зависимостях* **порой** *не учитываются механические свойства материала.*

> (7) *В списке литературы* **иногда** *отсутствуют ссылки на работы, упомянутые в тексте статьи.*

The reviewer uses hedges to "mitigate the negative force of criticisms and minimise their imposition on the reviewee" [Gea Valor, 2000, p. 66].

The less frequently used sub-categories of adverbs were epistemic and alethic adverbs which appeared nine and ten times respectively and allowed the reviewers to verbalize negative evaluations in a more acceptable and less traumatic way.

> (8) **Наверное,** *автор не учел побочный эффект данного процесса.*

> (9) **Скорее всего,** *автор рассматривает квазистатическое движение.*

> (10)   *В рамках данных процессов* **возможно** *выделение большего количества групп, чем это сделал автор.*

> (11)   **Возможно,** *следовало бы показать сферические углубления на торцевой поверхности диска.*

As is evident, these adverbs indicate the reviewers' intention to build cooperative, friendly relations with the reviewee. Relying on the principle of politeness, in (10), for example, the reviewer avoids expressing explicit disagreement with the taxonomy suggested by the author and the results of the analysis described in the article. In (11), the reviewer uses two hedging devices – the adverb *возможно* and the deontic verb *следовало* which helps minimize the negative impact of criticism.

Verbs

Altogether 12 different verbs were interpreted as hedges in the corpus, constituting a total of 112 instances. The analysis revealed three sub-categories of verbs used as hedges: epistemic verbs, deontic verbs, and alethic verbs. The first sub-category was more productive (58 occurrences). Here are some examples from the research article reviews.

> (12)   **Полагаю,** *что результаты, представленные на рис. 1, требуют математической обработки для выявления закономерностей.*

> (13)   **Представляется,** *что расшифровку подрисуночных надписей следовать давать после рисунка, а не наоборот.*

> (14)   **Думается,** *что автору следовало бы обосновать в работе принятие данного решения.*

> (15)   *Мне* **кажется,** *что автор не учел факт «ослепления солнцем» при оценке БДД.*

The modus modification of propositional content allows the reviewer to mitigate the categoricalness of the claims by shifting the focus from negative evaluations to the subjective nature of the reviewer's opinion. The epistemic predicates *полагаю, представляется, думается, кажется* serve this purpose. They indicate that the reviewer's claims are based on personal reasoning rather than on established normative knowledge, which creates more comfortable conditions for a further discussion. In pragmatic terms, the claim *мне кажется, что автор не учел*

... ('It seems to me that the author has not taken into account ...') is different from the unmodalized statement *факт «ослепления солнцем» не учтен* (The fact of sun blinding has not been taken into account').

In addition, the markers of subjectivity are used by the reviewers to recognize the existence of alternative positions. Hedging in these examples, as Larina and Ponton put it, "tends to position the reviewer's opinions as of comparable validity with those of the interlocutor, and thus respects the negative politeness strategies "be conventionally indirect". [Larina, Ponton, 2019, p. 483].

The frequency of deontic verbs was lower than that of epistemic ones (24 occurrences). Below are some examples from the corpus:

(16) **Рекомендую** *в последующих публикациях избегать упрощений в анализе сложных явлений.*

(17) **Следовало бы** *указать, какие мероприятия привели к снижению числа ДТП.*

(18) **Хотелось бы** *в дальнейших трудах автора увидеть такие результаты.*

(19) *Я бы* **предложил** *более подробно описать, почему коэффициент сцепления относится к группе С.*

Deontic verbs were used by the reviewers to express advice or provide recommendations to improve the work or to continue developing the problem. The analysis revealed 18 occurrences of the lexical items from this sub-category. The employment of deontic verbs indicates the reviewers' intention to explicate a respectful attitude towards the reviewee, readiness for a productive dialogue, and a desire to follow both the cooperative principle and the principle of politeness.

Finally, alethic verbs indicating possibility/impossibility accounted for the lowest share in the verb group used in the corpus for mitigating negative evaluations. Only 12 instances of alethic verbs appeared in the reviews. Here are two examples from the corpus.

(20) *Подобная оценка* **может** *оказать влияние на недостоверность выводов.*

(21) *То же самое* **можно** *сказать о морфологическом анализе.*

Nouns

What is interesting, nouns were the least frequently used category in the corpus presented by one cognition noun *сомнение* that appeared 11 times in the corpus to express the reviewers' doubt about the reliability or accuracy of research results.

(22) *Также вызывает* **сомнение** *правомерность построения зависимостей шероховатости от параметров орбитального выглаживания.*

Similar to epistemic adverbs, the noun *сомнение* expresses the reviewer's doubts about the accuracy of their own position, thereby mitigating the evaluative illocution. Hedging allows the writer to vary the truth of the propositional content by emphasizing uncertainty.

Conclusion

Creativity of speech behavior of the writer manifests in the choice of linguistic resources determined by the mechanism of focusing attention on a certain component of the context. Defocusing the negative information implies de-intensification and mitigation of the utterance through the use of a whole range of lexical items – hedges – which allow the writer to avoid communication risks.

The present study aimed to explore lexical items used for mitigating negative evaluations in research article reviews. The study revealed that hedging plays a vital role in academic discourse, being a metadiscourse category intended to weaken the illocutionary force of categorical statements and establish harmonious relationships between the interlocutors.

The analysis showed that reviewers used hedges to achieve the following communicative goals: (1) shifting the communicative focus; (2) mitigating criticism; (3) de-intensifying negative evaluations through semantic restriction or indication of the irregularity of a negative feature.

The study revealed that hedging was realized through a whole range of lexical items, the most productive of which were verbs and adverbs.

It was concluded that hedging in the evaluative academic genres is an indicator of the pragmatic competence of the reviewer and a key to effective communication creating a balance of negative and positive evaluations, saving face and constructing an image of the communicatively competent partner.

It should be admitted here that the research results presented in the article are limited due to a small corpus built. Further research involving more reviews from different disciplinary communities would be required to verify findings on the use of lexical patterns of hedging as a politeness strategy. Lexical realizations of hedges could be also investigated from other perspectives. In this way, we will be able to reveal differences in the employment of lexical patterns of hedges in the disciplinary context and provide novice reviewers with guiding principles regarding the ways to mitigate face-threats in academic prose. Last but not least, future research could involve interviews of reviewers to analyze considerations they take into account when choosing lexical patterns of this type of politeness marker in their research articles. Diachronic changes in the frequency of hedges both within one discipline and from a cross-disciplinary perspective may also be an avenue for further research.

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