



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 5.2
IJAR 2017; 3(11): 94-100
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 16-09-2017
Accepted: 17-10-2017

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Brain word-bank and language: The frequency of hedges as word choice among users of the English language in a Nigerian community setting

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Abstract

Language as a major tool for communication is the core identifying mark that distinguishes man from the lower animals. This is because language is deposited with intrinsic attributes specific to human brain. Communication is brain-based and memory plays a key role in appropriate retrieval of mental signals expressed as words; the interpretation of such as premised on previous knowledge and experience as well as the impressions carried by the expressions. The above fact also points to the fact that the choice of hedges in communication could vary between people on the basis of experience, culture and environmental factors. Most facts about communication in English as promised on the use of the language by native or traditional users of the language. The evolution that the language has undergone due to its adoption and adaptation by various people across the world warrants society-based findings. As such, this research hypothesised that the use of hedges varies among various groups of English Language users. Furthermore, these changes are largely attributable to culture, environment, biology and environmental factors. The research used a community for the study, and sample was drawn from the community with a defined culture and prevalent environmental factors. Data on the use of hedges was collected using structured questionnaire. Results were analysed to observe the frequency of the use of specific hedges within the community. The preference and choices of hedges aligned with the principle of politeness. Results show that the choice and use of hedges vary among users and this may be associated with culture society and environmental factors. Further investigation should compare societies and native and L1 users of the language.

Keywords: Brain, language, English, memory, hedges, communication

1. Introduction

Hedges are devices [words] used by speakers usually to soften or explain utterances beforehand and are usually regarded as euphemism which is intentionally. It is an integral part of everyday communication and as a discourse strategy, it is important part of polite conversation, this is because they make utterances less direct. Hedges often occur in the forms of politeness, adjectives, slot fillers, or adverbs, but can also be clauses such as one of tag questions; softening the blow, avoiding the appearance of bragging, correction of error or personal idiosyncrasies.

Neuroscience, as applicable to language has provided useful insight into internal brain processes that result in speech production, and how these internal processes, their intensities and interpretation are fundamental to the effectiveness of communication (Grimaldi and Craighero, 2012; Poeppel *et al.*, 2012) ^[3, 7]. The primary objective of language-neuroscience is to establish the brain correlates of linguistic processes and representations (Pulvermüller, 2010) ^[8]. This is why this study on the choice of hedges in communication has considered memory as the mental archive that is fundamentals to the choice of hedges and how they are used. It is also expected that people who live in a similar environment, due to similar language programming would share certain similarities in their patterns and choices of hedges in communication.

The use of hedges involves internal mental processing of information that attempts to predict or modulate possible effects of verbal communication. This process may be termed 'internal mental dialogue'. While this is ongoing, the brain *consults* itself by accessing the memory for appropriate hedges. Naturally, the choice of hedges has almost everything to do with the collection of words (vocabulary) in the mental archive; it has to do with the following:

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1. Quality, quantity and varieties of archived hedges
2. Accessibility of the hedges considering memory state
3. Appropriateness of the introduction
4. Judgment to determine the applicability or need for hedges

One can therefore posit that the appropriate use of hedges in communication is a mental function and the effectiveness of its use is also a reflection of mind state and neurolinguistic competence. While there is the natural communication loop between speakers, the internal mental loop is responsible for the hedges as illustrated below:

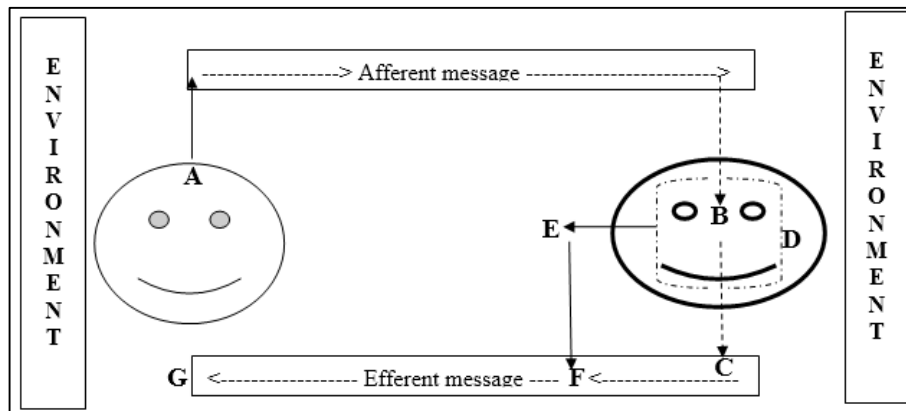


Fig 1: An illustration of the ‘communication loop and hedge loop’ Afferent message from Speaker A is received by Speaker B and given a direct and commensurate response as C; concurrent internal mental dialogue loop D produces a hedge E that is introduced at F to mitigate the original response C, hence it breaks the original intensity and mitigates the impression of the final reply at G. Hedges, therefore, are evidences of the communication double loop- the original A, B, C G loop and the internal D loop.

According to Tang (2013) ^[10], it is important to “point out that improper use of hedges fails to maintain politeness and leads to pragmatic failure. Most common types of Hedges include tense and aspect, modal expressions- modal verbs and adverbs as well as vague language such as sort of, kind of and some verbs. Some popular instances that involve the use of hedges include the following:

Tense and Aspect are typically used as hedges. For instance, wondered may be used in a statement as follows:

Dickson *wondered* if he could have your room for the party [less direct and more polite]

Dickson wanted to have your room for the [direct and less polite]

Modal expressions can be used as hedges as illustrated below:

It *could* be that he is sick
He is sick

Maybe you’ll help us with the task
Help us with the task

The is *possibly* the best performance ever
The is the best performance ever

Vague Language is often employed; it does not add any significant meaning to the expression, but it helps in achieving politeness less direct communication.

- a. It’s *sort of* difficult to please him
- b. It’s difficult to please him
- c. You may *just* wait for the instruction
- d. Wait for the instruction

Verbs are also used as hedges. Verbs, including feel, suppose and reckon are often used as hedges in communication, in an individual’s attempt to make personal

utterances, utterances less direct. For stances rather than a direct statement such as: This is the best option, the speakers says ‘I *suppose* that this is the best option’. We reckon that this is the best option among all rather than. This is the best option among all. In the above examples, the original meanings and intentions are retained; the statements are however less direct. They are also more pleasant to the audience.

Use of hedges is not limited to the fields of arts and languages. It is also greatly valued and employed in the sciences. In fact, Sciences has its peculiar and almost unavoidable collection of hedges as illustrated in the thesis of Teppo Varttala (2001) ^[11]. For instance in academic writing, hedges are employed to show that statements are not totally based on personal opinions. It is also used to show that statements are not expressed as absolute truths that cannot be improved, adjusted or even controverted. This, in the sciences, is a way to avoid absolute assertiveness is making judgments and inferences. Sentence Structures are constructed in the passive. For instance, scientific references are made as follows:

- i. It is *reported* that
- ii. It has been *observed* that
- iii. It is generally *believed* that
- iv. It is *probably* the only specie in existence

It is often believed that academic writing, particularly scientific writing, is factual, simply to convey facts and information. However it is now recognised that an important feature of academic writing is the concept of cautious language, often called ‘hedging’ or ‘vague language’. In other words, it is necessary to make decisions about one’s stance on a particular subject, or the strength of the claims one is making. This is achieved in a number of ways depending on subjects, culture and audience among others. Also, though subjects and culture may vary, it is important to point that that pragmatic competence must always be achieved in effective communication relative to the use of hedges, irrespective of the audience. Bruce Fraser wrote:

‘Pragmatic Competence is the ability to communicate your intended message with all its nuances in any socio-cultural context and to interpret the message of your interlocutor as it was intended. As critical as this ability is for communication success, it is often not given the emphasis it deserves in the teaching of a second language, with the result that second-language speakers, who lack pragmatic competence, may produce grammatically flawless speech that nonetheless fails to achieve its communicative aims’

In addition to the difficulty being faced concerning the use of hedges by various people particularly as a second language; another fact to bear in mind is the author’s emphasis on the evolution of hedges from what they were defined to be by Weinreich (1966)^[13] and Lakoff (1972)^[6]. Hence this particular study is justified on two major grounds among others: the first is the peculiarities associated with the use of hedges in English and a second language by the studied group and the second is the elements of language evolution that could be observed.

Language used in hedging.

1.	Introductory verbs	Seem, tend, look like, appear to be, think, believe, doubt, be sure, indicate, suggest
2.	Certain lexical verbs	Believe, assume, suggest
3.	Certain modal verbs	Will, must, would, may, might, could
4.	Adverbs of frequency	Often, sometimes, usually
5.	Modal verbs	Certainly, definitely, probably, possibly, perhaps, conceivably
6.	Modal adjectives	Certain, definite, clear, probable, possible
7.	Modal nouns	Assumptions, possibility, probability
8.	That clauses	It could be the case that, It might be suggested that, There is every hope that
9.	To – clause + adjective	It may be possible to obtain, It is important to develop, It is useful to study

Hypothesis

Words and expressions that are typically chosen and favoured as hedges will differ among societies or groups of language users following a defined pattern determined by at least one of the following: culture, experience, education, environment. This further suggests that people or populations across the world would favour certain specific groups of hedges at the expense of others. Hence, the use of hedges in English Language cannot be generalised. It is also therefore very important to determine these peculiar patterns and identify them. They would be very useful factors that influence effective communication especially between groups of the users of the Language.

Methodology

Structured questionnaires were administered to individuals following systematic sampling procedure to 125 respondents in a university community. The questionnaire contains a list of words that are typically employed as hedges in English language. Individuals were requested to complete the questionnaire after a brief introduction of the topic of study as well as the purpose and essence of the study. A paragraph of introduction captured the meaning, importance and uses of hedges in everyday communication using English Language.

Questionnaires were administered only to members of the community under study as a criterion for inclusion. Completed questionnaire were collected; responses were collated as raw data and analysed to observe the frequency of uses of the worlds by members of the community and determined by the frequencies of choices on the questionnaire. Results were presented as charts and tables.

Results

Data presentation and analysis

Table 1: Table showing the distribution of respondents based on their gender.

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Sex		
Male	95	76.0
Female	30	24.0
Total	125	100

Table 2: Table showing the distribution of respondents based on their local or primary languages. The local languages were all represented as well as the pidgin and other local minor languages. This reflects the typical Nigerian scenarios of the use of Languages.

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Ethic group		
Hausa	15	12.0
Igbo	25	20.0
Yoruba	70	56.0
Pidgin	10	8.0
Others	5	4.0
Total	125	100

Table 3: Table showing the distribution of respondents based on their educational qualifications. Results showed that all respondents had at least the ordinary level certificate, showing that respondents were educated enough to be users of the English Language.

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Education qualification		
O’ Level	40	32.0
OND/ HND	20	16.0
NCE	-	-
Bachelor Degree	53	42.4
Postgraduate Degree	12	9.6
Total	125	100

Table 4: Table showing the distribution of respondents based on their primary fields of education, study or knowledge. The distributions showed that respondents were distributed across various walks of life and as proportionally represented in the population.

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Background		
Sciences	55	44.0
Art and Humanities	26	20.8
Medicine	5	4.0
Law	1	0.8
Engineering	14	11.2
Others	24	19.2
Total	125	100

Table 6: Table showing the distribution of respondents based on their employment status. Most respondents were formally employed or engaged; an indication that they would be required to communicate in the official National and formal language regularly.

Variable	Frequency	Percentage
Place of Work		
University	88	70.4
Self-employed	12	9.6
Student	24	19.2
Civil servant	1	0.8
Total	125	100

Table 7: Table showing the distribution of respondents based on if and how often they use introductory verbs as hedges. Results showed that many respondents regularly used introductory verbs and 'seem' was the most popularly used of them.

Introductory Verbs	I don't Use	I use Often	Use Rarely	Use Very Often	Total
Believe	10 (8.00)	25 (20.00)	75 (70.00)	15 (12.00)	125 (100)
Doubt	66 (52.80)	27 (21.60)	12 (9.60)	20 (16.00)	125 (100)
Be Sure	70 (56.00)	25 (20.00)	0 (0)	30 (24.00)	125 (100)
Suggest	14 (11.20)	26 (20.80)	30 (24.00)	55 (44.00)	125 (100)
Seem	24 (19.20)	88 (70.40)	12 (9.60)	1 (0.80)	125 (100)
Tend	30 (24.00)	50 (40.00)	20 (16.00)	25 (20.00)	125 (100)
Look like	0 (0)	32 (26.60)	59 (47.20)	34 (27.20)	125 (100)
Appear to be	15 (12.00)	40 (32.00)	0 (0)	70 (56.00)	125 (100)
Think	1 (0.80)	24 (19.20)	12 (9.60)	88 (70.40)	125 (100)

Table 8: Table showing the distribution of respondents based on their use of lexical verbs. Respondents regularly used lexical verbs as hedges and the word 'assume' is the most popularly used.

Certain lexical verbs	I don't Use	I use Often	Use Rarely	Use Very Often	Total
Believe	0 (0)	55 (44.00)	40 (32.00)	30 (24.00)	125 (100)
Assume	10 (8.00)	20 (16.00)	55 (44.00)	40 (32.00)	125 (100)
Suggest	0 (0)	32 (26.60)	59 (47.20)	34 (27.20)	125 (100)

Table 9: Table showing the distribution of respondents based on their regular use of specific modal verbs. There are disparities in the choice of modal verbs among users with majority of respondents using 'would' most regularly.

Certain modal verbs	I don't Use	I use Often	Use Rarely	Use Very Often	Total
Will	40 (32.00)	55 (44.00)	30 (24.00)	0 (0)	125 (100)
Must	1 (0.80)	24 (19.20)	12 (9.60)	88 (70.40)	125 (100)
Would	0 (0)	70 (56.00)	25 (20.00)	30 (24.00)	125 (100)
May	15 (12.00)	40 (32.00)	70 (56.00)	0 (0)	125 (100)
Might	10 (8.00)	25 (20.00)	75 (60.00)	15 (12.00)	125 (100)
Could	40 (32.00)	55 (44.00)	0 (0)	30 (24.00)	125 (100)

Table 10: Table showing the distribution of respondents based on their uses of adverbs of frequency. The most popularly used adverb of frequency was 'usually'.

Adverbs of frequency	I don't Use	I use Often	Use Rarely	Use Very Often	Total
Often	15 (12.00)	25 (20.00)	15 (12.00)	70 (56.00)	125 (100)
Sometimes	50 (40.00)	30 (24.00)	20 (16.00)	25 (20.00)	125 (100)
Usually	26 (20.80)	55 (44.00)	30 (24.00)	14 (11.20)	125 (100)

Table 11: Table showing the distribution of respondents based on their regular choice of other modal verbs. The word ‘possibly’ was the most popularly used word in this category.

Modal verbs	I don't Use	I use Often	Use Rarely	Use Very Often	Total
Certainly	0 (0)	40 (32.00)	0 (0)	85 (68.00)	125 (100)
Definitely	10 (8.00)	30 (24.00)	15 (12.00)	70 (56.00)	125 (100)
Clearly	50 (40.00)	50 (40.00)	0 (0)	25 (20.00)	125 (100)
Probably	14 (11.20)	26 (20.80)	0 (0)	85 (68.00)	125 (100)
Possibly	32 (26.60)	59 (47.20)	0 (0)	34 (27.20)	125 (100)
Perhaps	12 (9.60)	27 (21.60)	20 (16.00)	66 (52.80)	125 (100)
Conceivably	55 (44.00)	30 (24.00)	0 (0)	40 (32.00)	125 (100)

Table 12: Table showing the distribution of respondents based on their regular choice of other modal verbs. The word ‘possibly’ was the most popularly used word in this category.

Modal adjectives	I don't Use	I use Often	Use Rarely	Use Very Often	Total
Certain	40 (32.00)	55 (44.00)	15 (12.00)	15 (12.00)	125 (100)
Definite	100 (80.00)	25 (20.00)	0 (0)	0 (0)	125 (100)
Clear	95 (76.00)	0 (0)	0 (0)	30 (24.00)	125 (100)
Probable	0 (0)	55 (44.00)	0 (0)	70 (56.00)	125 (100)
Possible	0 (0)	55 (44.00)	30 (24.00)	40 (32.00)	125 (100)

Table 13: Table showing the distribution of respondents based on their regular choice of modal nouns. The word ‘possibility’ was the most frequently used modal noun among respondents.

Modal nouns	I don't Use	I use Often	Use Rarely	Use Very Often	Total
Assumptions	30 (24.00)	25 (20.00)	70 (56.00)	0 (0)	125 (100)
Possibility	25 (20.00)	80 (64.00)	0 (0)	20 (16.00)	125 (100)
Probability	1 (0.80)	24 (19.20)	12 (9.60)	88 (70.40)	125 (100)

Table 14: Table showing the distribution of respondents based on their regular choice of ‘that clauses’. Most respondents would use the clause ‘It could be the case that’.

That clauses	I don't Use	I use Often	Use Rarely	Use Very Often	Total
It could be the case that	25 (20.00)	88 (70.40)	12 (9.60)	0 (0)	125 (100)
It might be suggested that	0 (0)	55 (44.00)	0 (0)	70 (56.00)	125 (100)
There is every hope that	40 (32.00)	70 (56.00)	14 (11.20)	1 (0.80)	125 (100)

Table 15: Table showing the distribution of respondents based on their regular use or choice of ‘to-clause + adjective’. There was wide disparity in the uses of these hedges.

To – clause + adjective	I don't Use	I use Often	Use Rarely	Use Very Often	Total
It may be possible to obtain	113 (90.40)	0 (0)	12 (9.60)	0 (0)	125 (100)
It is useful to study	0 (0)	0 (0)	125 (100)	0 (0)	125 (100)
It is important to develop	1 (0.80)	54 (43.20)	0 (0)	70 (56.00)	125 (100)

Discussion

Respondents and their Education and Communication Skills

Results showing the distribution of respondents based on their gender show that the respondents were adult males and females and the majority were males. Since questionnaires were distributed without gender bias; results would provide information on the population structure. English users in the studied community had major local languages. Table 2 shows the distribution of respondents based on their local or primary languages. Results also indicated that the local languages were all represented and these included Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. There is also the Pidgin, which is a main language that is used by a significant proportion of Nigerians, especially to communicate with others in situations where the official national language- English and the other aforementioned major local languages might not be useful. This observation reflects the typical Nigerian scenarios of the use of Languages. A major factor to consider alongside the punctualities associated with the use of English language in the studied population is how they could affect communicative competence (Hymes, 1970) [5].

Generally, respondents had at least the ordinary level certificate, showing that respondents were educated enough to be users of the English Language. Furthermore, more than fifty percent of them had bachelors or postgraduate qualifications. These facts would show that they were educated people, who would have the basic knowledge and understanding as well as communication skills involving the use of English Language.

Result showing the distribution of respondents based on their primary fields of education, study or knowledge indicated that the that respondents were distributed across various walks of life and as proportionally represented in the population. They were distributed across various fields with majority being scientists, followed by individuals in humanities and Engineering. This is a fair reflection of the studied community in terms of the distribution of individuals based on fields of study. Sciences had the largest proportion, arguably because of the large size of the fields and its large sub-fields. A very important fact to deduce from this results also is that the individuals in the studied community were people that would make use of English language in everyday communication as regular non-specialist users. Hence, results would provide a fair reflection of how lay people use hedges in their everyday communication in this community.

Most of the respondents were formally employed or engaged; an indication that they would be required to communicate in the official National and formal language regularly. In line with the observation that these people also have their primary local languages which are considered major local languages; it is important to understand that these group of people would require an above the average standard and quality of language use in their day to day communications. These results, obtained from their responses should therefore reliably provide information on the use of hedges in this community.

Respondents and their Use of Hedges in Communication

The Table 7 has the distribution of respondents based on if and how often they use introductory verbs as hedges. Majority of the respondents would use introductory verbs. Also, results showed that many respondents regularly used

introductory verbs and 'seem' was the most popularly used of them; followed by 'tend'. On the other hand, many respondents indicated that they did not regularly use words like 'be sure' and 'doubt'. While it is obvious that individuals in the studied group were selective of the specific word they use as hedges; their selections has much to do with 'politeness' which a major consideration in the use of hedges in communication. Notably, the studied population, being African is very conscious of being polite and being very much indirect in communication. Hence, preference of verbs such as 'seem' and 'tend' were favoured while other 'be sure;' were rarely used. Again, the preference of words like 'think' and 'appeared to be' as being used 'very often' is in line with the societal principle of politeness not being overly direct in communication. Another possible relationship between these choices and the backboard of the individuals in the fact that many of them were scientists; communication in sciences, are though expected to be factual are often required to be less absolute and assertive.

With respect to the use of lexical verbs; people used 'believe' and 'assume' much more than they would use 'suggest'. These two words, though not necessarily direct are seen to be more emphatic than suggest. Again, 'believe' carries positive impression in context; while 'assume' shows a positive though relatively less factual or empirical impression.

Table 9 showing the distribution of respondents based on their regular use of specific modal verbs. There are disparities in the choice of modal verbs among users with majority of respondents using 'would' most regularly. Would, could and must are favoured by respondents among the modal verbs. While 'would' and 'could' would be used by people as been favorite hedges to indicate politeness and give impression of not being too direct; 'must' would be required to shows emphasis. Interestingly, the verb may, which appeared to be a typical favourite in conventional use of the English Language was never used 'very often'-scoring zero- according to the respondents choices.

The most popularly used adverbs of frequency were 'usually' and 'often'. Notably, their contexts of use would be expectedly different. Their use however still attest to the fact individuals in the studied group would want to emphasise frequency of a deed or activity or event, and perceive it as not being an indication of directness but emphasis. The same applies to the use of usually. In fact, sizable number of respondents indicated that they either would not use the word 'sometimes' or would used it rarely. Understandably, it does not indicate emphasis as people would want to use hedges to indicate. Also, people might not want to emphasise negative impressions typically, hence the rare use of sometimes.

Table 11: Table showing the distribution of respondents based on their regular choice of other modal verbs. The word 'possibly' was the most popularly used word in this category. 'Perhaps' was also popularly used. These choices, again, followed the principle of politeness in communication which is often archived though the use of hedges.

Results on the distribution of respondents based on their regular choice of other modal verbs showed that the word 'Probable' and Possible' were the most popularly used word in this category. Words like 'certain' 'definite' and 'clear' were rarely used. This, again clearly shows that the basic principle guiding the use of hedges is politeness and being

less direct. Words that were overly assertive were rarely used. This also has a sociocultural bearing as the studied population would naturally favour the principles of politeness and being relatively indirect in communication. Concerning the use of Modal nouns; results showing the distribution of respondents based on their regular choice of modal nouns. The words 'possibility' and Probability' were favoured relative to 'assumptions'.

Respondents on their regular choice of 'that clauses' also indicated that they would use the clause 'It could be the case that' most often when compared with their choices of 'It might be suggested that' and 'There is every hope that'. Interestingly 'may' and might' appeared not relatively favored by the respondents, generally. With respect to the results showing the distribution of respondents based on their regular use or choice of 'to-clause + adjective'; there was wide disparity in the uses of these hedges. A number of respondents would choose 'it is important'. This expectedly should be used to indicate emphasis, albeit strongly, while avoiding being overly direct.

Choices and Preferential Uses of Hedges

The data on the preferential uses of hedges obtained from respondents provides very useful information on the peculiarities associated with the choice of these words and expressions by the studied group. This has not been studied in many populations. However, since various people across the world use English Language as influenced by a number of factors including culture and other major languages, it is expected that there would be favour levels of variations in the use of hedges. To this end, it is important to pay attention to the variations and peculiarities that were recorded in this study. Notably, He Ziran (2003) wrote that 'politeness is a linguistic universal', the choice of words may however vary. Understandably, second language acquisition has its features (Rod, 1999) ^[9]. Another implication of social and cultural influence is termed *cross-cultural pragmatic failure* (Thomas, 1983) ^[12].

Socio-cultural implications

Respondents choice of hedges align largely with the politeness and less directness principles of hedges and this also aligns with the cultural practices of the target population. The implication of this would mean that English language would vary between groups based on sociocultural factors. Hence, aside for the basic principles of grammar especially in terms of lexis and structure; culture plays a principal role in language variations. It is therefore important to explore this factor and the patterns of variations between various groups of people that use English Language globally. For instance Yongqing Teng, while analysing the functions of hedging devices in American presidential inaugural addresses wrote:

'In American presidential inaugural addresses, the application of hedging contributes a lot to the mildness, politeness and flexibility of linguistic expressions, thus fulfilling the needs of some special political purposes'

The above instance is an example of communication in the political arena; here intention is clear, yet communication is made as polite and mitigating as possible. Interestingly, such mode of communication is considered an aspect of political culture, in America. He further stated that the style of communication helped in:

1. Avoiding Absoluteness
2. Achieving Politeness
3. Accomplishing Tactfulness

Conclusion

There are prominent variations in the preference and uses of hedges in the studied population. The choices align largely with the politeness principle. There is however, the underlying danger of pragmatic failure or compromised pragmatic competence in this group of user of the English as a second language.

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