

A Pragmatic Analysis of Hedges in English Economic News: Taking the Financial Times as an Example

Jiali Han^{1,a,*}

¹Teachers College, Columbia University in the City of New York, NY, 10027, US

a. jh4751@tc.columbia.edu

*corresponding author

Abstract: Since Professor L. A. Zadeh put forward the vagueness theory in 1965, a growing number of scholars have used it as a theoretical basis for preliminary discussions on the fuzzy phenomenon in many fields. However, there are not many studies on the analysis of the fuzzy phenomenon in news, especially the study of hedges in English economic news is yet to be enriched. Economic news plays an important role in people's daily lives. Economic news requires accuracy, objectivity, and conciseness, as well as acceptability and politeness. It seems to imply that hedges cannot exist in English economic news. However, the use of hedges in economic news can precisely achieve these purposes. To prove that there are a large number of hedges in economic news and that hedges play an important role in strengthening the credibility of news, avoiding giving details, achieving politeness, and enhancing self-protection, I take the news from the Financial Times as the source and explores the pragmatic function of hedges in English economic news and its specific application by combining the classification of hedges from the perspective of pragmatics, namely, strengthening the credibility, avoiding giving details, enhancing self-protecting and achieving politeness. By analyzing these results, the author hopes to contribute to the further development of economic news theory in English and also to help readers better grasp the essentials of economic news writing.

Keywords: hedges, pragmatic analysis, pragmatic functions, economic news, the Financial Times

1. Introduction

This study will focus on the pragmatic analysis of hedges in English economic news in the *Financial Times*. In the first chapter, the paper will introduce the study's background information, the study's objectives and significance, and the thesis's structure.

A hedge is a linguistic phenomenon widely existing in human communication. It did not arouse much interest until the middle of the 20th century. In 1965, Professor L.A. Zadeh published a paper entitled *Fuzzy Sets*, in which he proposed fuzzy concepts and fuzzy theory in both quantitative and qualitative ways. In 1972, the American linguist Lakoff first introduced the concept of "hedges" from a linguistic perspective in his article *Hedges: A Study of Semantic Standards and the Logic of Fuzzy Concepts* and defined them as "words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy".

In the 1980s, hedges were gradually integrated into the pragmatics and discourse analysis field. The application of hedge language involves many disciplines, such as scientific and technical articles, business negotiations, political diplomacy, etc. It has important linguistic functions and application values. But the research on vagueness in news is assigned little attention and the research on hedging in economic news is even less. It is generally acknowledged that news reporting is an effective vehicle to inform and influence. Hence, along with the development of the research on English for a specific purpose, it becomes increasingly important to conduct a study on the use of hedges in English economic news.

The objective of the study is to answer the following two questions:

How are adaptors, rounders, plausibility shields, and attribution shields used in English economic news of the Financial Times?

What are the pragmatic functions of hedges in English economic news of the Financial Times?

This thesis uses both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The data in this thesis are based on a self-established corpus, the corpus of English economic news. To explore the questions mentioned above, E.F. Prince's classification of hedges will be adopted.

While many studies have been done on the Financial Times, few have focused on vague language in their news reports, much less on the use of hedges in English economic news. Therefore, the research on the hedge in the economic news is very valuable. It can help reporters and readers to have a better understanding of the pragmatic functions of hedges in economic news, which will help them to achieve the desired communication effect. This paper analyzes the practical application of Hedges in English economic news in the Financial Times based on the theoretical framework and concludes that the appropriate use of hedges can fulfill the pragmatic functions in English economic news.

The paper consists of five parts. The first part is mainly about the background, the aim and significance of the study, and the thesis's structure. The second section presents a literature review, reviewing scholars' research on hedges in English news at home and abroad. The third section introduces the paper's theoretical framework and outlines the definition of hedges and their classification, which are divided into two categories, approximators, and shields. In the fourth section, the author selects some English economic news from the Financial Times and discusses the usage of hedges from a pragmatic point of view. Then, this chapter further explores the four major pragmatic functions of hedges in economic news, namely, strengthening creativity, avoiding giving details achieving politeness, and enhancing self-protecting. The final part is the conclusion of the study, which contains the main findings and the limitations of the study.

2. Literature Review

Fuzzy language refers to words or phrases that convey a degree of uncertainty. But for a long period, few scholars paid attention to fuzzy language in news, because news coverage was considered to be objective, truthful, and accurate. Nevertheless, many scholars at home and abroad have conducted extensive studies on hedges since the 20th century and have achieved great success in these studies, which are especially useful for our further studies. Therefore, this chapter will briefly review previous studies on English hedges done by both Western and Chinese scholars, especially hedges in news discourse.

2.1 Overseas Studies on Hedges in News

The fuzziness of language has attracted the attention of linguistics since the 1950s. American professor L. A. Zadeh who is a major pioneer in the hedging study published the article *Fuzzy Sets* in 1965, studying the fuzziness of natural language and establishing the quantitative fuzzy semantics in

which the fuzzy language is counted with mathematical functions.

Since the 1980s, linguists have tended to study hedges from the perspective of pragmatics and their application in different genres. Brown and Levinson who focused on their study of the aspects of pragmatic politeness considered hedges as a strategy and device to keep away from disagreement and Brown and Levinson held that hedges can be regarded as one efficient method to convey positive and negative politeness during verbal communication [1]. Moreover, Joanna Channell is a pioneer in the hedge study from the perspective of pragmatics. In 1994, he published a systematic book *Vague Language* with comparatively mature viewpoints which were composed based on authentic data [2]. In a study carried out by Jensen [3], it was believed that the uncertainty conveyed by hedges in the news of scientific research greatly contributes to the credibility of science. Yang then researched the use of hedges in three academic writing corpora [4], all of which were corpora of scientific articles. In the study, Yang identified the hedges in these corpora and then used the quantitative method.

2.2 Domestic Studies on Hedges in News

Chinese researchers have also done several researches on the use of hedges in the news. Professor Wu Tieping who first brought fuzzy-set into our country through his paper *A Tentative Study on Fuzzy Language* is considered the pioneer in hedges study in our country [5]. In 1979, he divided hedges into four categories in terms of their grammatical manifestation.

Besides, many linguistics have analyzed hedges in different discourses from pragmatic perspectives. For example, in the field of verbal communication, Chen analyzed the hedges and their pragmatic functions [6], believing that the appropriate use of hedges can make language expressions more subtle, euphemistic, and polite, and can enhance the flexibility and efficiency of language expressions. In the field of English news discourse, Sun carried out a descriptive and qualitative study on hedging in *A Pragmatic Analysis of Hedging in English News* [7], and he tried to show the way to create hedging. Luo in *An Analysis of Hedges and Their Pragmatic Functions in English Economic News* analyzes the reasons for the inevitability of the presence of hedges in economic news and makes a pragmatic analysis of hedges in economics with the aid of the cooperative principle, relevance theory, politeness theory, and speech act theory [8].

Compared with the studies of hedges in the field of communication, foreign language teaching, etc., the study of hedges in news especially in economic news has not drawn enough attention from researchers. Very few articles can be found concerning this study. Hence, it is worthwhile for us to carry out the research for hedges in economic news from the pragmatics perspective.

3. Theoretical Framework

Since Zadeh first proposed the Fuzzy Theory and the concept of “fuzzy sets”, a lot of researchers have started to research the special phenomenon in natural language and therefore contributed to the development of the hedge study. The extension of the notion of hedges to include the modification of commitment to the truth of propositions has also led some researchers to believe that it is necessary to classify hedges. This chapter will present the theoretical basis of the thesis concerning hedges, including the definition of hedges and the classification of hedges.

3.1. Definition of Hedges

Hedging is one of the most common and typical phenomena of fuzzy language. Although the terms hedge and hedging have been established in linguistics for more than thirty years, no unified description of them can be found in the literature. Research on hedges provides different accounts for

this linguistics phenomenon from diversified perspectives, leading to different definitions.

The concept of “hedges” first appeared in the paper *Hedges: A Study in Meaning Criteria and the Logic of Fuzzy Concepts* written by Lakoff [9]. He defines hedges as “words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy.” Lakoff also lists more than sixty hedging words and phrases including “sort of”, “kind of”, “roughly”, “somewhat”, “rather”, “nearly”, “mostly”, “in a sense”, “more or less” and so on. Brown and Levinson believe that hedges can be used to modify the degree of membership of a predicate or a noun phrase in a set [1]. The definition proposed by them is following that put forward by Lakoff.

In fact, from the development history of hedges, it is very visible to discover that the development trend of this vague phenomenon in the language is proved to tilt from the semantic perspective to pragmatics.

3.2. Classification of Hedges

Regarding the difference in the understanding of the notion of hedges, the linguists have proposed their viewpoints on categorizing hedges through their research.

Based on the analysis of the corpus of physician discourse, Prince and his colleagues Frader and Bosk classify hedges into two groups [10]. One is the approximator that affects the truth conditions of propositions, the other is the shield that does not affect the truth conditions but reflects the degree of the speaker’s commitment to the truth value of the whole proposition. They designated approximators as a semantic phenomenon and shields as a pragmatic one. This kind of categorization is more influential and more scientific.

According to Prince et. al. taxonomy, the diagram of hedges is given here with proper instances [10]:

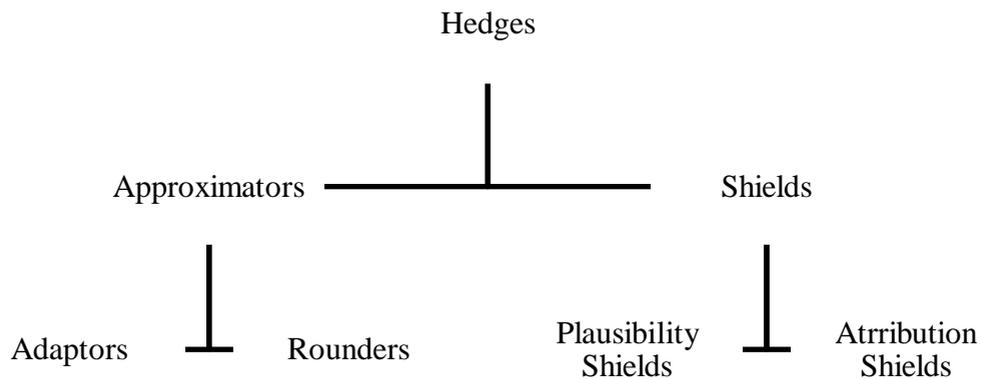


Figure 1: Prince et. al.’s Model [10]

3.2.1. Classification of Approximators

Approximators refer to words and phrases that affect propositions' truth conditions, while it does not influence the speakers’ commitments. Such a hedge can modify or even cancel the original meaning of an utterance to a certain extent or provide an alternative range to the speech that follows the actual situation.

Approximators can be subdivided into adaptors and rounders, which give the original discourse a range of changes.

Adaptors. Adaptors are those that can modify the degree of an utterance when the sentence is quite precise but the speaker cannot be sure. In other words, they can change the meaning of the original discourse to some degree according to the actual situation. Through the use of adaptors, the truth degree of an utterance can be altered. Thus, the expression is more suitable and realistic, thereby avoiding subjective absoluteness. Expressions such as “kind of”, “almost”, “more or less”, “to some degree”, “somewhat”, and “really” are all members of this type. And the use of such expressions enables writers to make a statement more tactfully, and also makes the meaning a little fuzzy but more precise.

Rounders. In contrast, rounders refer to those often used when the speaker describes a person or a thing but the precise term is not relevant or immediately available. This kind of approximator is often used in measurement and it can give the listeners a rough range of the quantity and make them able to understand the matter in this range. Given the scope, it is possible to avoid misunderstandings to some degree. These words include “roughly”, “around”, “approximately” “at least”, “more than”, “about”, etc.

3.2.2. Classification of Shields

Different from approximators, shields cannot affect the truth conditions of propositions but reflect the speaker’s commitment to the truth value of the propositions. A shield is just like an explanation to an utterance which is the point of view made by the speaker or the point of view raised by a third person. They are concerned with the relationship between the speaker and the content of the proposition. The original meaning of an utterance cannot be changed when shields are used, but the positive tone of the true condition of the proposition can be mitigated in this process.

Like approximators, shields can also be further classified into two categories—plausibility shields and attribution shields, which can help mitigate the speaker’s responsibility when he or she makes an assertion.

Plausibility Shields. Plausibility shields are applied to show the speaker’s conjecture, uncertainty, or hesitant attitude toward the truth value of a proposition. When they are used, it often means the speaker does not have complete confidence in the truth value of the proposition. People use plausibility shields I believe to represent a tentative or cautious assessment of the truth of the proposition. In this way, they reduce the degree of liability that they might face in expressing the proposition. Typical plausibility shields include “I believe”, “I assume”, “I suppose”, “I think”, “as far as I know”, “probably” etc. The affirmative tone can get milder when these expressions are used.

Attribution Shields. Attribution shields are used to express the speaker’s hesitant attitude towards a proposition indirectly by citing opinions from other sources. In general, they always include either a third-person structure or a non-personal structure to exclude the speaker from the effect of the absence of the speaker. By using attribution shields, one can make his or her speech much more objective and impartial. In this category, there are “it is said that”, “according to”, and “the probability is”, which are all examples of attribution shields. Compared with plausibility shields, they are more indirect.

4. Pragmatic Analysis of Hedges in English Economic News in the Financial Times

As an indispensable part of all kinds of news, English economic news plays an important role in people’s daily lives. In this chapter, the frequency and distribution of hedges in English economic news will be examined, and pragmatic functions of hedges in English economic news reports will be

explored by taking some economic news reports from the *Financial Times* as subjects. The data appearing in this thesis are based on a self-established corpus. All the news was collected from the website of the *Financial Times*, including 120 pieces of *Financial Times* with 187510 words, and all the news was collected from October 1, 2011, to February 10, 2023.

4.1. Analysis of Hedges in Economic News in the Financial Times

The first section, the paper will list some examples extracted from economic news of the *Financial Times* and analyze the application of hedges in specific situations. This paper will analyze four types of hedges in English economic news. These include adaptors, rounders, plausibility shields, and attribution shields. The following Table 1 shows the frequency and distribution of four types of hedges.

Table 1: The frequency and distribution of four types of hedges in English economic news

	Approximator		Shield	
	Adaptor	Rounder	Plausibility Shield	Attribution Shield
Frequency	2384	1647	2213	2207
Percentage	28.20%	19.49%	26.19%	26.12%

Table 1 shows that the approximators take up 47.69% of the total number of hedges in English economic news while shields cover 52.31%. In short, we can easily conclude that a large number of hedges exist in English economic news and shields are more frequently used than approximators in English economic news. Furthermore, adaptors and plausibility shields appear more frequently than rounders and attribution shields in English economic news.

4.1.1. Adaptors in Economic News in the Financial Times

Example 1:

*“Independent South Australian senator Nick Xenophon switched sides after winning a commitment from Wayne Swan, Australia’s Treasurer that the Labor government would commit **almost** \$1bn to help improve water flow in the ailing Murray-Darling River system.”*

The adapter in this example is “almost” which indicates that the actual rates are just around \$1bn and \$2.6bn respectively. In the example above, although the news reporters probably knew or were given the exact figures for the release, they still deliberately used variable adaptors such as “almost \$1bn, nearly £2.6bn” instead of giving the exact figures because they know exactly what readers want. Most readers only care about what the news is about and an approximate amount. Whether the government spends \$0.99bn or \$0.98bn, they do not care, as long as they know it’s about \$1bn.

4.1.2. Rounders in Economic News in the Financial Times

Example 2:

*“The WHO said just **over** 650,000 people died of malaria in 2010.”*

Example 3:

*“**After** four years of negotiations, Ukraine hopes to sign a free trade agreement with the EU in December.”*

The two examples are both extracted from the same piece of economic news, which is about the negotiations between Ukraine and the EU. It is a good method to use rounders when the reporters lack precise or sufficient information. The use of “over” and “after” in the examples above is a strategy to modify concrete and precise numbers and make them indeterminate. The rounder “over” provides a limitation on the number of dead people. The rounder “after” provides a limitation of the time when Ukraine signs a free trade agreement with the EU. Through their employment of them in English economic news, readers can obtain general information about the event.

4.1.3. Plausibility Shields in Economic News in the Financial Times

Example 4:

“Rather, I think it is a reflection of Abu Dhabi’s view of the market, which has probably run up faster than anticipated, so maybe it is time to pause to catch up.”

In English economic news, most of the plausibility shields are shown through modal auxiliaries. In this way, reporters could infer or forecast the news to express their conjecture. The above example discusses the affection of Abu Dhabi’s sale on the bank that does not happen. So, the use of plausibility shields “probably”, and “maybe” suggests that what follows is a hypothesis of the author, the author himself is not sure of its actual situation. Therefore, the plausibility shield is embedded to mitigate his responsibility.

4.1.4. Attribution Shields in Economic News in the Financial Times

Example 5:

“There’s no point digging a diamond out of the ground when you don’t have a client ready to buy it.”

The attribution shields allow reporters to maintain a distance from propositions and thus the possible responsibility is reduced. In Example 5, the reporter adopts “there’s no point” to express the reporter’s idea, which limits the possible damage if the statement turns out to be wrong.

4.2. Pragmatic Functions of Hedges in Economic News

Truthfulness, accuracy, and objectivity are the key factors of the news, which seems to be quite contrary to hedges. However, hedges are frequently employed in English economic news, so their values should not be ignored. Then to use the hedges flexibility, we should master the pragmatic functions of hedges clearly in English economic news. Therefore, the author takes several examples from the *Financial Times* as the object of study to explore the pragmatic functions of hedges in English economic news reporting. There are four major pragmatic functions: strengthening credibility, avoiding giving details, enhancing self-protecting, and achieving politeness.

4.2.1. Strengthening the Credibility

Most hedges used in economic news that adapt to the accuracy and objectivity rules of English economic news are accuracy-oriented. Reporters use these hedges to make sure the actual situations are presented accurately and objectively. One of the main characteristics of news reporting is timeliness, which requires practitioners to report the latest news and updates in the shortest possible time. Therefore, the appropriate use of hedges in news reports can avoid arbitrariness and absolutes, make the reports more accurate, realistic, and more in line with objective facts, and thus more

conducive to improving the quality of news reports. Let's look at the following examples:

Example 6:

*“Israeli forces say they killed **at least** 100 Palestinians and captured **nearly** 700 others, including **some** on Israel’s list of terror suspects. **Dozens of** civilians perished, some crushed by falling walls, others in the crossfire.”*

In Example 6, it was difficult for the news reporters to know personally how many people had died and how many had been injured in the conflict, let alone how many suspected terrorists had been arrested. By using hedges such as “nearly”, “some”, and “dozens of”, the reporter is implicitly telling the reader that he or she does not have sufficient evidence or certainty about the data in the story, and therefore can only use a vague estimate.

4.2.2. Avoiding Giving Details

Timeliness is one of the major requirements in reporting the news. Because of this requirement and the ever-changing situation in the world, it is unnecessary and impossible to convey the information in great detail. It only needs to give a recapitulative introduction to readers by hedges. In such cases, news reporters may intentionally withhold information by using shields such as "according to reliable sources" or "according to anonymous sources. Let's have a look at the following example:

Example 7:

*“Australia’s wheat supply and grain safety will not be influenced by the worst dry spell in 50 years that has parched more than 40 percent of the nation’s total wheat land, **an agricultural minister said Thursday.**”*

In this case, the reporter probably knew who the agriculture minister was, yet deliberately used the vague phrase "a minister of agriculture" to avoid reporting details, due to that minister's reluctance to disclose his or her identity or for some other reason.

4.2.3. Enhancing Self-protecting

In verbal communication, people inevitably have to express their opinions and positions on an event or phenomenon. However, to avoid the absolutization of words, people often use hedges to reduce the responsibility and risk they have to take for what they say. This kind of expression is always employed to weaken the reporter’s commitment to the truth value of the utterance, which means the responsibility that the reporter has can be reduced. Some examples are cited:

Example 8:

*“In the US, which has the most liquid market, prices have fallen to the lowest level in seven years, and sharply rising production points to low prices for some time, **forecasters say.**”*

For this example, the hedges of “forecasters say” are added as the above information source. There is no specific name or other information about the person, which effectively protects the reporter. The reason why the reporter does like that is he or she wants to protect those professionals of the news because even though the news is not accurate, those providers of the news should not deserve the complaints from the listeners.

4.2.4. Achieving Politeness

According to G. Leech, six principles of politeness, namely decency, generosity, praise, humility, consistency, and sympathy, the appropriate use of semantically ambiguous words in communication

can make the discourse subtler and politer [11]. As an indirect form of interpersonal communication, news reporting is equivalent to a written form of conversation, and the subject of the news report and the reader are also participants in the conversation, so news reporters need to pay equal attention to interpersonal means of expression. An example is cited:

Example 9:

*“It’s not the same urgency as the Big 19, but **I think** we are going to see the need for additional capital, and one way to get that is to be swallowed up.”*

The hedge of “I think” is the first-person pronoun that marks the reporter’s direct involvement and it serves as a conscious strategy to hedge the generalization of propositions. They signal personal opinions rather than definitive truth, allowing the reader to choose the more persuasive ones. So, it allows an active role for readers to judge by themselves, they are used to avoid unacceptable over-confidence and make the statements politer. In the above example, the use of the plausibility shield “I believe” makes the writer's opinion less aggressive and the discourse more appropriate.

5. Conclusion

The thesis has detailly analyzed the pragmatic functions of hedges in English economic news coverage from the *Financial Times*. This chapter is a summary of the whole thesis, it will conclude the major findings, identify its limitations, and make some suggestions for further studies.

From the above analysis, the writer has attained several findings. On one hand, the abundant existence and use of hedges in news reports do not conflict with the truthfulness and accuracy required by news reports. On the contrary, hedges guarantee the timeliness and authority of news reporting to the greatest extent, making news reporting more accurate and more acceptable to readers. All four kinds of hedges can be found in English economic news, including adaptors, rounders, plausibility shields, and attribution shields.

On the other hand, based on the analysis of several examples from the *Financial Times*, the paper has found four pragmatic functions of hedges in English economic news: enhancing the credibility of the news, avoiding giving details, achieving politeness, and enhancing self-protection. The existence of hedges in news is very important because news relies on hedges to disseminate information objectively and credibly and achieve effective communication between viewers, readers, and media workers.

Although some findings have been attained in this thesis, the study still has some limitations. Needless to say, limited by time and research competence, this paper does not reach the point of satisfaction in many aspects. The data are collected only from one American newspaper the *Financial Times*, which makes the collected data not so comprehensive. Besides, the present study might suffer from the problem of oversimplification to some degree and some statements might be sketchy. Consequently, while this thesis has focused on the pragmatic analysis of hedges in use, it is far from adequate to carry out a profound and significant study of hedges from the pragmatic perspective.

References

- [1] Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1987). *Politeness: Some Universals in Language Use*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [2] Channell, J. (1994). *Vague Language*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [3] Jensen, J. D. (2008). *Scientific Uncertainty in News Coverage of Cancer Research: Effects of Hedging on Scientists' and Journalists' Credibility*. *Human Communication Research*, 34(3), 347-369.
- [4] Yang, Y. (2013). *Exploring linguistic and cultural variations in the use of hedges in English and Chinese scientific discourse*. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 50(1), 23-36.
- [5] Wu, T. P. (1999). *Fuzzy Linguistics*. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press.

- [6] Chen, Y. (2000). *Fuzzy restrictive language in verbal communication and its pragmatic functions*. *Journal of Xiangtan Normal University*, (4), 135-137.
- [7] Sun, S. (2008). *A pragmatic study of vague restrictive language in English news (Master's thesis)*. Hebei Normal University.
- [8] Luo, Z. (2008). *An analysis of vague restrictive language and its pragmatic functions in English economic news (Master's thesis)*. Nanjing Normal University.
- [9] Lakoff, G. (1972). *Hedges: A Study in Meaning Criteria and the Logic of Fuzzy Concepts*. *Chicago Linguistic Society Papers*, 3, 183-228.
- [10] Prince, E., Frader, J., & Bosk, C. (1982). *On Hedging in Physician-Physician Discourse*. In R. J. Di Pietro (Ed.), *Linguistics and the Professions*. Amsterdam: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- [11] Leech, G. (1983). *Principles of Pragmatics*. Longman.