Hedging in Thesis Abstracts on Applied Linguistics across Persian and English

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Abstract
The present study investigated the employment of hedges in abstracts of applied linguistic theses written by English and Persian writers. To this end, 300 abstracts of master theses during the year 2000 through 2013 written by 2 groups were selected as the corpus. These 2 groups were M.A. English theses in applied linguistics written by native and M.A. English theses in applied linguistics written by non-native writers (Iranian). This study investigated the hedge in thesis abstracts to understand how the writers of these theses make their claims about their new findings. The categories of hedges were applied according to Crompton's (1997) taxonomy of hedge, and the data were analyzed through two-way Chi-Square, SPSS version 16. The results showed that there was a significant difference between natives and non-natives in terms of using hedges in abstracts of linguistic theses written by English and Persian writers. Native English writers used more hedging devices, while non-natives (Iranian) writers employed less hedge devices in their M.A. abstracts. The differences are attributed to the degree of rhetorical sensitivity and modality, awareness of audience, purpose, and cultural background of the learners. The implication of this study can be helpful in academic writing, and EFL writing instruction.

Keywords: Hedges, Native and non-native Writers, Master thesis abstracts.

Introduction

Recent investigations of academic discourse have revealed variations in the uses of language (Burneikaite, 2008). Language is used to express knowledge, ideas, attitudes, and experiences

in academic discourse. To be successful in academic writing, the writers must have an ability to "control the level of personality in their texts, claiming solidarity with readers, evaluating their material, and acknowledging alternative views" (Hyland, 2004, pp. 133-134). Academic writers use linguistic means to persuade their readers and make social relationship with them. One of the linguistic devices and aspects of writing for which students should receive instruction is the use of metadiscourse (Marandi, 2003). Crismore and Vande Kopple (1988) proved that there is a link between hedging and metadiscourse. They believed that because the hedges function interpersonally and indicate the modality, they are parts of metadiscourse. Hedges in metadiscourse are interaction elements that make a relationship between writers and readers.

The present study tries to examine the use of hedges in M.A. theses in applied linguistics to find out the extent to which language specificity of hedges as metadiscourse markers is taken into account in developing abstracts of linguistics M.A. theses by non-native Iranian speakers of English (applied linguistics), and native speakers of English (applied linguistics). More specifically, the research question is as follow:

1-   Is there any statistically significant difference between native and non-native (Iranian) English abstracts of M.A. theses in applied linguistics in terms of using hedging devices?

2. Review of the Related Literature

The role of metadiscourse markers in the construction and attainment of persuasion according to cross-linguistic or cross-cultural preferences in British and Spanish newspapers was done by Dafouz (2008). Among interpersonal markers, hedges were the most frequently used categories in both sets of writers. "This finding seems to confirm the crucial importance of combining fact and mitigated opinion in newspaper discourse in order to attain effective persuasion" (Dafouz, 2008, p. 103). This finding also reveals that both of the writers follow parallel rhetorical conventions to persuade the readers. From linguistic point of view, modal epistemic verbs are the most frequently used strategy to express caution. Hyland (1994) also discussed the importance, functions, and expression of epistemic modality in scientific discourse in order to evaluate the treatment given to hedging devices (as one of the element of metadiscourse) in a range of EAP and EST writing textbooks. According to the result of the study, Hyland believed that there is a need for greater and more systematic attention to this important interpersonal strategy. In this study, the hedges were analyzed in four categories: modal verbs, lexical verbs, adverbials, nouns, and adjectives. The range of modal verbs given the fact that modals are the most easily identified and widely used means in academic writing.

Salager-Meyer (1994) talked about hedges as communicative devices that are used in rhetorical sections of papers and case reports of medical English texts. The findings of this research showed that three categories of hedges use more in both text-types; shields, approximators and compound hedges. The most heavily hedged sections were the discussion section in research papers and comment in case reports. The least hedged sections were methods in research papers and case report section in case reports. The least hedged sections were methods in research papers and case report section in case reports. Another research article about exploring metadiscourse in master's dissertation abstract was written by Erdem Akbas (2012). In this study metadiscourse was investigated in the dissertation abstracts written by Native Speakers of Turkish, Turkish Speakers of English and Native Speakers of English. Non-native speakers used a mixture of their cultural tendencies and an adaptation of themselves to the target language conventions. Native speakers of English, according to the result of this study, preferred the use of hedges more in their style of writing in their abstracts, whereas Turkish writers tend to use more boosters to show their claims with more confident. The cross-cultural comparison indicated that "Turkish writers of English followed similar

rhetorical strategies to those used by the native speakers of English, producing a more caution and engaging level of interaction even though the levels are all higher in the native speaker of English texts"(Akbas, 2012, p. 21).

3. Method

3.1 The Corpus

The corpus of 300 M.A. thesis abstracts were randomly selected from among the two groups in applied linguistics:150 thesis abstracts written by native (British) speakers of English in applied linguistics, 150 thesis abstracts written by non-native (Iranian) speakers of English in applied linguistics. All theses were selected from among those dated between 2000 and 2013. The thesis abstracts written by non-native Iranian speakers of English (applied linguistics) were selected from among theses of Iran universities and thesis abstracts by native speakers of English (applied linguistics) were selected from different electronic resources available. The statistical technique of Chi-Square was used to compare these theses in each group.

3.2 The Procedure

Selecting the native writers' abstracts for the corpus study was very important for comparing the native writers with non-natives ones. The importance of abstracts has been receiving increasing attention. The abstracts help readers to "exchange essential part of their work by means of combination of community-based practices" (Akbas, 2012, p. 12). To insure that these writers are native or non-native, the researcher sent an email to all the writers. Those who answered the email and announced that they were native speakers were chosen for this study.

In this study, the classification of hedge markers by Crompton (1997) was taken into account for investigating hedges used in abstracts of M.A. theses in linguistics. The use of hedging devices and their categories were functionally investigated across Persian and English abstracts.

3.3 Data Analysis

The data collected in this study were non-parametric. The frequencies of using the hedging devices in each group were considered. Hatch and Farhadi (1981) in the use of Chi-square analysis argued that "if you feel more comfortable with describing the data as frequencies (how many and how often) rather than amounts (how much), then the X^2 is probably the best statistical procedure to use" (p. 172). Thus the frequency of hedges in each group was accounted separately and the Chi-square test was used to compare and contrast the use of hedges across both languages (Persian and English). Crompton (1997) considered hedges in sentences not as separated words, thus the interpretation of hedges was difficult to calculate and it needed much attention. The sentences must be read carefully in order to determining the purpose of the writers as hedge. The corpus was analyzed by two researchers, one of them was the researcher herself, and the other one was a university teacher who had done a similar project on research abstracts. The inter-rater reliability was taken between these two raters. The Kappa formula was used for computing inter-rater reliability and the results showed the consistency of about (82 %) of the results was obtained from the data gathered by the two raters. Hallgren (2012) emphasized that Cohen's (1960) kappa and related kappa variants are commonly used for assessing inter-rater reliability for nominal variables, thus it was used in this study.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Categories of Hedges and their Frequencies in this Study

Crompton (1997) believed that in taxonomy of the hedges, it is not appropriate to consider hedges as individual words. A list of common sentence patterns is appropriate. He highlights the following characterizations of hedged propositions:

1-   Sentences with copulas other than *be*,
2-   Sentences with modals used epistemically,
3-   Sentences with clauses relating to the probability of subsequent propositions being true,
4-   Sentences containing sentence adverbials which relate to the probability of the proposition being true,
5-   Sentences containing reported propositions where the author(s) can be taken to be responsible for any tentativeness in the verbal group, or non-use of fictive reporting verbs such as *show*, *demonstrate*, *prove*. This category is divided into two subcategories:

5_a-   Sentence whether the authors explicitly designate themselves as responsible for the proposition being reported,
5_b-   Sentences whether the authors use an impersonal subject but the agent is intended to be understood as them,

Due to the reporting verbs, Crompton believed that if authors use them to report their own proposition, these verbs counts as a hedge, otherwise they would not be regarded as a hedged version. This example is suggested by Crompton for clarifying his idea about reporting verbs:

-      In the sentence, <u>I suggest that pigs fly,</u> "suggest" can be regarded as hedge, the reporting verb in the sentence, <u>Smith suggests that pigs fly,</u> is not a hedge because the author do not used it to report his own proposition.

6-   Sentences containing a reported proposition that a hypothesized entity X exists and the authors can be taken to be responsible for making the hypothesis.
7-   The compound hedges were considered as the seventh category in this study.

The frequency and presence of eight categories of hedges according to Crompton's (1997) model was shown in Table 1. In this table the numbers showed these taxonomies simultaneously. As we can see in this table the percentage of the use of each hedging devices for the two groups were compared with each other.

Table 1: Frequency and percentage distribution of hedging devices in native and non-native English thesis writers in applied linguistics

Type of hedges	Native English in applied linguistics	Non-native English in applied linguistics
1	17(3.7)	17(4.1)
2	146(32.4)	129(31.5)
3	23(5.11)	8(2)
4	39(8.6)	55(13.4)
5a	25(5.5)	2(0.48)
5b	69(15.3)	31(8)
6	88(19.5)	138(34)
7	43(9.5)	29(7)
T	450	409

The result of current study shows that native English thesis writers in applied linguistics use more hedge than non-native Iranian speakers of English. Sentences containing adverbials which relate to the probability of the proposition being true and also sentences containing a reported proposition, as the data that had been obtained in this study showed, had most frequency among non-natives. The terms such as "often" and "the result shows" are common in non-native thesis abstracts.

The difference between these two groups according to two-way Chi-square (Table 2) analysis is significant. The result of the two-way Chi-square shows that the critical value of X^2 with 7 df is 14.06 at the 0.05 level (p<0.05, df=7, X^2=14.06). The observed value of X^2 exceeds this critical amount (65.39), representing that there is a significant difference between native and non-native (Iranian) English thesis writers in applied linguistics in terms of using hedging devices.

Table 2: The Two-way Chi-square analysis for native and non-native English thesis writers in applied linguistics

Row $(O-E)^2/E$	Column	O	E	O-E	$(O-E)^2$
1 0.036	1	17	17.81	-0.81	0.65
1 16.16	2	17	6.64	10.36	107.32
2 0.02	1	146	144.06	1.94	3.76
2 0.02	2	129	130.93	-1.93	3.72
3 2.82	1	23	16.23	6.77	45.83
3 3.09	2	8	14.76	-6.76	45.69
4 2.68	1	39	49.24	-10.24	104.85
4 2.34	2	55	44.75	10.25	105.06
5 0.34	1	25	14.14	10.86	117.93
5	2	2	12.58	-10.58	111.93

8.89					
6	1	69	52.36	16.64	276.88
5.28					
6	2	31	47.61	-16.61	275.89
5.79					
7	1	88	118.39	-30.39	923.55
7.8					
7	2	138	107.60	30.4	924.16
8.58					
8	1	43	37.71	5.29	27.98
0.74					
8	2	29	34.28	-5.28	27.87
0.81					

$X^2=65.39$

4.2 Discussion and Conclusions

Regarding the use of hedging by non-native speakers of English who want to function in the academic context Salager-Meyer (1994) believed that they must be able to recognize hedging devices in written texts and employ these markers when necessary in their own research work. The results of this study showed that there was a significant difference between native and non-native writings in terms of using hedges. The differences are attributed to the degree of rhetorical sensitivity and modality, awareness of audience, purpose, and cultural background of the learners.

The large number of use of hedges by native English writers seems to be an evidence for their familiarity with interactiveness feature of applied linguistics (Atai & Sadr, 2008). The native English thesis writers seem to use various forms of sentences to show their tentativeness and their degree of commitment towards their findings. This finding is in contrast with Dafouz's (2008) finding that revealed both native and non-native (Spanish in the study) writers "follow parallel rhetorical conventions in the articulation of persuasion by means of metadiscourse hedges" (p. 103).

Due to two-way Chi-square analysis we can conclude that native English thesis writers employed more hedges than non-native (Iranian) thesis writers. Persian speakers assert their claims without any tentativeness, and they feel less need to hedge according to "their having frequently documented their work through the use of attributors", while the native speakers of English employ hedging devices more "to compensate for having used less attributors" (Marandi, 2003, p. 38). The findings of this study revealed that some specific hedges are most commonly used by native English thesis writers such as modal verbs *might*, *could*, *may*, and *should*. In other word, the sentences with modals used epistemically were the most frequent sentences used by native thesis writers; applied linguistics. The results also show that the non-natives (Iranian) thesis writers used the sentences containing a reported proposition. The common examples of these sentences were "the results show that …", "the findings show…", "the data reveal that …", and "the results suggest …". It appears that non-native (Iranian) students who want to write English theses follow the similar strategies for writing. All of the similarities and differences among native and non-natives indicate different strategies for persuading readers that are employed by different writers with various background cultures and with different instructions.

Conclusions and Implications

The ways writers of scientific texts "choose to address their readers are also affected by the degree of the authors' enculturation in the academic community" (Koutsantoni, 2005, p. 107). In all languages and cultures, it seems that the metadiscourse markers are used by academic writers, but the interpretation and performances of these markers are different (Marandi, 2003). The difference may relate to person's writing and how this writing is received by readers. In addition, according to the importance of these metadiscourse markers, Hyland (2000) insisted on more teaching and researching of hedge findings. The raise of awareness for students and the education instructions is necessary. The appropriate academic instructions and pedagogical programs may need for raising this awareness. As Abdollahzadeh (2011) argued both ESL and EFL students "need to gain sensitivity to and skill with these markers in English, a task which usually involves overcoming several daunting sociolinguistic challenges" (p. 296).

The findings of this research help M.A. students understand the extent of using metadiscourse markers especially hedges in different textbooks. And these findings are beneficial to academic students for developing theses. In addition, it helps thesis developers to improve their writing ability in their uses of metadiscourse markers. The analysis of data in this study was limited to frequencies of hedging devices used in thesis abstracts, and the texts were collected as corpus; some other methods of data collection such as interviews with authors or questionnaires can be used for analyzing the data, too. Other fields of study, such as literature or any other research studies can be considered as corpus study for further research.

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