

Hedges

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1 Introduction

As a brief glance into the registers of linguistic books (especially introductory books) shows, the notion of hedges can be encountered quite frequently in very different disciplines of linguistics. A sufficient explanation, however, is provided rather seldom and - if given - often either incomplete or not up-to-date (cf. Bußmann 2002), who only quotes the definition of the Lakoff model described below).

When looking for more details, one is likely to encounter a great deal of different, sometimes even contradictory definitions, leading to a rather torn picture of the topic. This paper will investigate some of the basic concepts and definitions and try to hint in the direction of a feasible working-solution. It will conclude by giving an account of the practical usability of the concept of hedges. All explanations will necessarily be very brief, owing to the scope of the paper. For a more detailed discussion see the excellent work by Clemen (1998), which mainly contributed to this paper.

2 Historical Review and Basic Concepts

Although hedges might be around nearly as long as language itself, it was only in 1966 that they became the topic of linguistic investigation. Weinreich examined their use, but called them metalinguistic operators. It took until 1972 that they were called hedges, when George Lakoff first used the term (cf Lakoff (1972)). To him, hedges denoted some lexical expressions that were used to shift the borderlines within the prototype theory of Rosch (1973).

This theory states that every object belongs to a semantic category, but represents it to different degrees according to typicality and/or membership. This can be evaluated by the number of features found within the category (the features may vary according to different cultural and social environments). Only the ones shared among all members of a category can be counted as defining. It has to be observed, though, that some features are found with most of the members, but not with all. These features are said to be characterizing. The member exhibiting most of the defining features is said to be the prototype (this explanation is rather simplified, as some categories might be constituted where membership can only be deduced from the fact that a member shares various features with different other members, though not with the prototype). A sparrow is thus said to be a more typical member of the category *bird* than, say, a penguin (at least within our cultural setting).

Lakoff stated that the borders of natural language concepts are not clear-cut but fuzzy. He provided a list of items he found to strengthen his theory. Those were – among others – "strictly/loosely speaking" and "sort of". When used in a sentence making judgements about the degree of membership of an object those lexical expressions provided possibilities to make the borders "fuzzier or less fuzzy" (Lakoff 1972: 195 after Clemen (1998, 17)). "**Loosely speaking**, a bat is also a bird" makes the border more fuzzy, focusing on the characterizing feature of {FLYING} (not found with penguins or ostriches, thus not defining). "**Strictly speaking**, a whale is a mammal" makes it clear that the whale in this case is examined under strict conditions of defining features (otherwise it may qualify as fish). Though in terms of definition it sounded a bit artificial, this was a great accomplishment, as it accounted for the fact that objects in this world are not either black or white, but "kind of" grey (for a practical use of this see Lakoff 1973 as well as Applications further on in this paper).

In the aftermath of Lakoff's discovery, the topic caused a lot of interest and received a good deal of research. Lakoff himself stayed rooted in semantics and cognitive science (cf. Clemen 1997, 239), presenting his wordlists over and over again, incorporating new explanations but failing to acknowledge the fact that lexical items never have only one fixed meaning/function, especially not in context. Clemen (1997, 235) points out that hedges are "achieved primarily by setting utterances in context rather than by straightforward statement", as lexemes are nearly always polyfunctional (cf. Clemen 1998). Without developing his primary ideas further, Lakoff missed the shift in hedge research.

New approaches widened the scope to become mainly interested in the use of hedges in discourse analysis. Within these, the use of hedges for mitigation, vagueness and politeness were discovered in the early eighties. In the following, hedges were examined as a pragmatic phenomenon of discourse analysis. The term *hedge* was stuck on everything that in a way modified the truth-value of a sentence, the commitment of the speaker or commented on the sentence as such (cf. Clemen 1997 and especially 1998). The use of modals of any kind came into focused attention (cf. Definition). Recent investigations concentrated more and more on the written domain, as hedging was found to occur quite often in texts, especially scientific ones. The contrastive analysis received special emphasis here (cf. Markkanen/Schröder 1997 and Clemen 1998).

3 Definition

From the explanations above it can be concluded that it is rather complicated to state any coherent definition incorporating all approaches. Some have pledged for a narrower meaning of the word, others proposed to abandon it or replace it (which would only shift the problem). Nearly every approach has come up with its own theoretical framework and terminology (cf. Clemen 1998, 19 ff) Clemen (1997, 240) states that there is "an overall general discomfort among linguists as to what the term *hedge* designates. Presently, it appears to cover almost 'everything' (...)". It seems promising, however, to discern between strategies and devices when talking about hedges. Strategies might include the following constructions:

- impersonal constructions (G. *man*: "**man** darf hier nicht übereilt handeln")

- passive constructions ("the results **are concluded** in chapter 4")
- parenthetic constructions ("This, **I believe**, is not a good idea.")
- conditional ("**If I was asked**...")
- ...

As devices could be counted (among others):

- modal verbs ("This **may** be too much to handle")
- modal particles ("Es ist **nunmal** so, dass ich das nicht möchte.")
- hedged performatives (modal + performative verb) ("I **must admit** that it is vague.")
- ...

(list modified after Clemen 1997 and Clemen 1998)

Clemen (1998, 18) points out that hedges need not necessarily have a weakening effect, but can as well enforce what is said. This is a point that should not be overlooked when attempting to reach a definition. Her conclusion, however, is rather disappointing: "Eine allgemein gültige Definition ist angesichts der zum Teil kontroversen Deutungsansätze zum gegenwärtigen Forschungsstandpunkt noch nicht realisierbar."

This is true for a definition of the term *hedge*. It should be discerned between the actual item and the function of hedging in general. If this is done, the author of this paper is convinced that a (rather broad) definition might be reached. Summing up all the different approaches outlined neatly by Clemen (1998), one could conclude that hedging is the general use of linguistic means (which have to be divided into strategies and devices) to increase the likelihood of a better acceptance while at the same time minimizing the risk of rejection. Hedging is thus nothing more than a way to adhere to the maxims of conversation (especially tact) by Grice. This is admittedly a very general definition and possibly even the one basic strategy behind any conversation, but then it has to be seen that even such basic concepts need certain means to accomplish them.

Further research has to concentrate on the means (strategies and devices) to show what general linguistic constructions can be made use of to hedge something. A sound basis of reported hedges might dialectically lead to a more refined definition of hedging, facilitating future identification.

4 Applications

Research on hedges is not an end in itself. Knowledge about hedges could be useful in various ways:

Lakoff proposed as early as 1973 that hedges might aid lexicographers in the definition of lexical terms. By quoting examples in which the lemma is modified by a hedge such as regular or real (as in "s/he is a **regular/real** X") a reader could fathom the range of its meanings more easily. This is of course restricted to the semantic approach of Lakoff.

The discourse-analytic approach might be of interest for Second Language Acquisition, as the works in and by Luukka/Markkanen (1997) showed that the use of hedging is L1 dependent. A transfer into the L2 thus leads to unnatural and unidiomatic language use. Better knowledge of this phenomenon could help to prevent it and produce better (i.e. more idiomatic) scientific texts.

Finally, a hedge-based examination of discourse might reveal further information about communication as such and provide further advances in the field of pragmatics.

5 Conclusion

The field of hedge research is still not closed. It lacks a solid definition of hedges and consequently a better understanding of what might be used as a hedge. The different possibilities to apply the knowledge gained that way make it clear that this is not only an issue for overly-sophisticated linguistic investigations but also for practical considerations as well.

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