The Clausal Realization of Hedges in Teacher Talk

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Abstract

Hedges as a linguistic device has been studied from different perspectives since Lakoff proposed this linguistic concept. The preceding researches focused on definition, classification and research domain of hedges. This thesis is aimed at the application of hedges by teachers in the spoken English class context through classroom observation and transcription from the teacher-student interaction. Based on the functional analysis of the excerpts from the spoken English classes, pedagogical implications of hedge use are illuminated. Thus, teachers can motivate the classroom participation on the part of students in thinking and speaking.

Key words: hedges; systemic-functional grammar; discourse structure; teacher talk

1. Introduction

The first formal linguistic treatment of hedges is considered to be carried out by Lakoff, who defines hedges for the sake of semantic approximating in his thesis *Hedges: a study in meaning criteria and the logic of fuzzy concepts* as "words whose meaning implicitly involves fuzziness, words whose job it is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy" (1972: 195). He investigates hedges from the semantic perspective and the study of hedges discovers the phenomenon as regards semantics. In view of their definitions of hedges, we can distinguish the two: the former means that linguistic hedges are operators modifying the fuzziness in the meaning of other terms, while the latter means that hedges can be the lexical categories changing the fuzziness of other lexical elements whether they themselves are fuzzy words or not. In some degree, Lakoff broadens the range of hedges.

The avant-garde abroad and at home make the classifications of hedges respectively, which contribute to the systematic probe into the phenomenon. Zadeh (1972) divides linguistic hedges in two categories: one can directly modify the fuzzy words rather than the non-fuzzy words, so we can say *very inexact* instead of *very exact*; the other can explain in which regard they have effects on the fuzzy words, such as the words *essentially*, *technically*, *virtually* as well as the phrases *in a sense*, *strictly speaking*. His semantic categorization is still focused on the lexical stratum while the domain of hedges appears to cover more grammatical items with the emphasis on the modifying force of the hedges. Lakoff (1972) indicates that hedges are useful for lexicography in two ways. One is that there are words such as *sort of*, *regular*, whose meanings can only be decided by the way they affect other words, which is also the defining

features of hedges. The other is that hedges can reveal that meaning criteria include a structure, which is inadequately revealed in a dictionary.

Wu Tieping is one of the first proponents of hedges study in China, and he supplements and summarizes the semantic research with varied classifications. In his work published in 1999 he demonstrates that hedges can be classified in four ways: 1) classification according to their effects on the fuzzy words: a. hedges directly modifying fuzzy words, such as *very*, *more or less*, etc. b. hedges themselves suggesting how they modify the meaning of fuzzy words, such as *essentially*, *strictly speaking*, etc; 2) classification according to words they modify: a. hedges modifying only fuzzy words, such as *very*, *basically*, etc. b. hedges modifying both fuzzy words and precise words; 3) classification according to parts of speech: a. the lexical items, like *very, much, actually*, etc; b. some suffixes like *–ish* in order to express the approximation or resemblance in certain degree; c. the idiomatic structures that can qualify the degree of fuzzy adjectives or fuzzy adverbs, like *so…that,* etc; d. the phrasal elements or clauses which can express the sources of information or the affirmative attitudes, such as *according to*, *in my opinion, I think, I believe,* etc.; 4) classification into three types in accordance with the categorization of fuzzy expressions hedges modify. a. hedges modifying the upper limit, e.g. *very tall*; b. hedges modifying the lower limit, e.g. *a little tall*; c. hedges modifying both the lower limit and the upper limit, e.g. *neither tall nor short*.

Generally speaking, the initial study of hedges is constrained on the lexical elements as modifiers of the immediate ones or the propositions. In a sense they find the research in hedges is focused on the logical properties of hedging words rather than the communicative value of the use of them. Thus, it is essential to study hedges from the perspective of syntactic structure, especially the research with more variables in practical fields.

This research focuses on the clausal realization of hedges in teacher talk. The special register of teacher talk is determined by the contextual variables, and it can enable learners to move beyond their current interlanguage receptive and productive capacities. Jiang (2006: 78) holds that the negotiation of meaning is often characterized with the modification and restructuring in interaction when learners and their interlocutors anticipate, perceive, or experience difficulties in message comprehensibility. The negotiation between teachers and students can be dynamically promoted with the mutual linguistic and paralinguistic efforts.

2. Clausal realization in teacher talk

"A language is a resource for making meaning, an indefinitely expandable source of meaning potential; constituent structure is a device for mapping different kinds of meaning onto each other and coding them in concrete form" (Halliday, 1994: 16). In the constituent hierarchy, clause is the basic unit for the systemic analysis on the pivot of metafunctionality, and the correspondence between meaning and form suggests the value to delve into the variation in form in line with the modifying needs for meaning. Thus, it is necessary to study how hedges are realized through clauses in teacher talk in spoken English classroom to help both teachers and students bridge the gap of understanding each other.

2.1 Tag questions

The hedging value of tag questions has been brought into question by He (1985) as well as Brown & Levinson (1987) from the pragmatic perspective, while the data collection suggests that it is also one of the frequently adopted syntactic structure in teacher talk.

(1) Teacher: *Here "park" is a verb*, ***isn't it***?

Student: Yes.

(2) Teacher: *Here we can use an adjective,* ***isn't it***?

Student: Of course.

(3) Teacher: *It means exercise sometimes is very dangerous,* ***isn't it***?

Student: Yes, it is.

According to Halliday (1994/2000), the speaker can forestall the choice made by the listener by adding a tag to the statement, which is a reminder of what is expected. Teachers can explicitly arouse the interest of students to consider the information he or she has just offered. In this sense, the tag signals that a response is required and students cannot hedge the choice but respond with discretion.

The tag questions in the preceding examples tone down the instructions of the teachers and even distance the teachers from their statements so that the absolutely decisive tone is hedged. The syntactic features signal the clues for the students' response selected from the two ends of *yes* and *no*, and the statements can be affirmed or denied, so the students are given more chances to make independent choices, and teachers' roles in classroom are not confined to the mechanic instructor with assertive statements.

The two alternatives of statements and questions "serve as a point of entry to a great variety of different rhetorical functions" (Halliday, 1994/2000: 71). The transference between the two speech function by the tag indicates that teachers are inclined to switch the role in exchange from giving to demanding, and thus the intrusion on the part of teachers is implied in the syntactic fuzziness. Apart from that, it does not appear to be very imposing for students to answer, so teachers use the syntactic structure when students confront difficulties or embarrassment to some challenging questions. In this sense, tag questions contribute more to the interpersonal meaning than the construal of experience by means of soothing the tension students usually encounter in teacher-student interaction.

2.2 Conditional clauses

"The clause complex does not depend on the written language and is well developed in the speech of children a long time before they can read or write" Halliday (1985: 79). The clause complex plays an important part in the processes of oral communication, and according to our classroom observation conditional clauses tend to be one of the focuses of the hedge encoding by the adverbial clauses.

(4) Teacher: *You can take notes and write something down,* ***if you think it necessary***.

(5) Teacher: *You are supposed to tell about your college life,* ***if you are in an interview***.

(6) Teacher: ***If you can't manage it***, *you can write it down and keep it in mind*.

(7) Teacher: ***If they spoke a bit louder***, *it would be much better*.

The four transcripts are excerpts from the discourse of the teachers we observed, and the proposal

held by the teachers is encoded with fuzziness realized by the dependent if-clause. Teachers could simply omit the precondition of their proposal without much change to their communicative intention in the initiation move and the feedback move, but the specification of the precondition otherwise hedges the imposition due to the uncertainty of the precondition. It appears that students are given more freedom in classroom performance, and teachers undertake the role as a reliable and thoughtful consultant. The if-clause above hedges the command to students as suggestion, which is also a communication strategy we often adopt in real-life communication. Accordingly, the hedging function of teacher talk imparts the knowledge for students to cultivate communication competence.

The negotiation efforts on teachers' part can be fulfilled with the students' digestion of them with non-verbal response. The negotiation of meaning in this respect is the mutual intrusion of interaction in terms of interpersonal meaning. In other words, the syntactic structure in wording of teachers can serve the redefinition of teacher on the learning efficacy.

With reference to textual metafunction, the if-clause is relatively moveable in the constituent ordering, and the location in the configuration functions as the factor to decide the thematic structure. Obviously, the thematic structures of (32) and (33) both locate *if* at the very beginning, which signals the primary importance of the content in the precondition. Since the precondition is thematized by the if-clause as the Theme in the clause complex, it is the starting point or the grounds of the message conveyed by the teacher. On the other hand, students are expected to understand the distinction arising out of the location of the conditional clause, for the choice in the context always makes sense, and in the process the meaning is hedged and negotiated. It suggests the linguistic efforts by teachers for the benefit of more positive learning atmosphere in the classroom.

2.3 Projection nexus

"The notion of projection is one dimension of the logical-semantic relationship whereby a clause comes to function not as a direct representation of (non-linguistic) experience but as a representation of a (linguistic) representation" (Halliday, 1994/2000: 250). Besides, it represents an inter-clausal relation, or rather, a relation between processes. The verbal process and the mental process are demonstrated to be the two types of projecting process, and the report can be in combination with the tactic system by hypotaxis. Locution, idea and fact can be encoded in the projected clause dependent on the projecting process while wording is represented as meaning in the projected clause.

Projection is manifested interpersonally to cover the modal assessment and thus it includes the hypotactic projection of ideas or reports and facts serving in the mental, verbal or relational transitivity configuration (Halliday, 2004: 605).

(8) Teacher: **She told us** *Halloween is on Oct 31ˢᵗ and it is the Western Ghosts' Day.*

Student: Maybe.

(9) Teacher: I'd like two of you to role play Model A, okay? Can you?

Student: Sorry.

Teacher: **You see** *it's very simple, so take it easy.*

Student: Okay. I will have a try.

(10) Teacher: **You thought** *the study on campus is easier for you to do the academic research.*

(11) Teacher: **Most of you think** *you can have priority living off campus.*

(12) Teacher: **As we all know**, *some people keep some little rats as pets, don't they*?
    Students: Yes.

(13) Teacher: **It seems** *that your voice is quivering, but actually you needn't be so nervous.*
    Student: Okay.

(14)Teacher: **I wonder** *whether you can find such a club*.

As is suggested by the prior examples, the teachers employ the hypotactic report to hedge their direct attitudes towards the projected proposition. In (34) the teacher clarifies the source of information with the Sayer (e.g. *She told us*) through the verbal process and the modulation gives some indication of mood, but in a form which excludes it from functioning as a move in an exchange, and hence the speaker makes no claim to be abiding by the wording. In other words, the teacher is not accountable for reporting one student's opinion to the class while withholding her own attitude towards it, so the meaning is hedged with semantic space for further negotiation.

As to the next four examples, teachers hedge the source of ideas by the projection through the mental process (e.g. *You see, You thought, Most of you think, As we all know*), which is encoded with the shift of the deictic orientation. The Senser of the fact is hedged by the shifting from the first personal deixis *I* and the Phenomenon appears to be distanced from teachers' authoritative role as an instructor or become a common sense to make the proposition convincingly projected. Furthermore, (39) transfers the proposition in the objective explicit form, i.e. *It seems*. The objective orientation leaves off the projector of the statement in a relational clause without a Senser or Sayer, and thus the interpersonal assessment is implied in the motivated wording. First, the interpersonal rhetoric effects are achieved in that the teacher' subjective intrusion of the comment is blurred with the unnamed source of the judgment, so the face of the addressee can be protected. Second, the fuzziness embedded in the objective orientation conveys uncertainty, which bridges the power gap between teachers and students, while teachers figure more like a negotiable participant and consultant.

In addition, the last example implicitly expresses the command made by the teacher, while the tone of proposal is obscured by the mental process of *I wonder* signaling the parternership between the teacher and the students, while the students are asked to take more initiative to participate in the interaction in the more relaxed classroom environment.

3. Pedagogical implications through the functional analysis of hedges

Hedges are part of the linguistic repertoire of a competent language user, who uses them to accomplish the particular communicative goals. The registerial variables of teacher-student exchange suggest that hedges need to be employed by teachers to motivate the communicative dynamics of their interaction. On the other hand, it is through the classroom observation that students can be motivated to be more active in classroom participation of negotiation by the intricate hedging device, so it is necessary that we understand the implications of the hedges analysis in terms of the enlightenment to the registerial

correlation.

First of all, teachers' roles are redefined in the classroom. The hedges analysis of teacher talk suggests that teachers reflect on their classroom language which is concerned about the learning efficacy of students, even though there is sill much scope for the negotiation to be further developed and diversified. The meaning potential is indefinitely expandable for teachers to make choice, and the hedging function can be realized by the semantic configurations at lexicogrammatical level and phonological level. Thus, the efforts made by teachers in the discourse moves manifest that teachers' roles are redefined in classroom interaction. First, teachers are no longer a controller of the interaction but a facilitator in the process. The reallocation of power suggests that teacher talk should guide students for more active contribution to classroom activities. Second, teachers cannot simply focus on the language input to students as an instructor but attach more importance to their roles for the language output of students in classroom as a prompter. Third, teachers often intentionally dissimulate the authoritative status of themselves in the communication encounter, and they often pose remarks on students' classroom performances as a consultant; hence, more semantic space should be negotiated, and students can be motivated for thinking and speaking. Last but not least, teachers should help students to cultivate the communication competence. College students of higher English proficiency need to acquire more knowledge about language appropriacy in use, and the linguistic device of hedges making difference to communication should be mastered by them. In the process of teacher-student interaction, students can gradually enhance their awareness and understanding of hedges modulated in teacher talk.

Secondly, in can make positive differences on students' affective factors. Hedge (2000: 21) discusses the correlation between affective factors and language learning and thus concludes that teachers have both the power and the responsibility to counter the development of anxiety by building self-confidence through positive early experiences, through providing reassuring feedback, and through promoting self-perception of developing proficiency.

4. Conclusion

The author combed through the origin and development of hedge theory. Then, three categories of hedges which are realized through syntactic structures are expounded in details. The functional research of the transcripts of teacher talk of college teachers in this research implies that teachers can achieve the teaching objectives and enlighten the teaching mode with more humanistic characteristics. The analysis suggests that interpersonal metafunction is the predominant determinant in the hedges application by teachers, so the tenor, or rather, the classroom environment or teacher-student relationship becomes a concern for the registerial features of teacher talk in EFL classroom. The use of hedges is intended to facilitate students' language learning and redefine teachers' roles in their negotiation. Students-centered classroom learning environment needs the adaptive and flexible choice of hedge potentials concerning the three metafunctions. Classroom learning experiences can gear the *affective filter* (Krashen, 1985) and the application of hedges can contribute to the positive emotional response in the process of learning.

The spoken English classes manifest that the meaning potential of language is fairly explorable, or rather, the realization of hedging function is also associated with the non-verbal features, which are covered as

kinesic hedges. The spoken mode is on many occasions related with the paralinguistic features and the contextual contribution of them deserves our attention. Moreover, the tentative work could be promoted based on substantial samples in classes or even the establishment of a corpus for further study.

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