PRAGMATIC COMPETENCE: THE CASE OF HEDGING

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ABSTRACT

This chapter looks at hedging as an aspect of pragmatic competence. After describing the evolution of the concept of hedging from 1972 to the present day, it reviews the principal properties of hedges and discusses the relationship between hedging and the discourse effects of vagueness, evasion, equivocation, and politeness. The final part of the chapter presents examples of hedging from a range of sources, illustrating the ubiquity of the concept.

1. INTRODUCTION

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.

One area in which the lack of pragmatic competence can create serious problems for a second-language speaker is that of HEDGING, a rhetorical strategy that attenuates either the full semantic value of a particular expression, as in He’s sort of nice, or the full force of a speech act, as in I must ask you to stop doing that. When non-native speakers fail to hedge appropriately, they may be perceived as impolite, offensive, arrogant, or simply inappropriate. Failing to recognize a hedged utterance, they may misunderstand a native speaker’s meaning. This is especially
unfortunate when speakers are otherwise fluent, since people typically expect that someone who speaks their language well on the grammatical level has also mastered the pragmatic niceties.

In this chapter I look at hedging as an aspect of pragmatic competence. In Section 2, I describe the evolution of hedging from the point at which it was introduced into the linguistic literature in 1972 until today. In Section 3, I address the properties of hedges, the devices through which hedging is implemented, and in Section 4, I discuss the relationship between hedging and the discourse effects of vagueness, evasion, equivocation, and politeness. In Section 5, I present examples of hedging from a range of sources, including everyday conversation, formal academic writing, and mass media (radio and television). These examples illustrate the ubiquity of hedging and highlight the perils its misuse holds for non-native speakers.

2. THE EVOLUTION OF THE CONCEPT OF HEDGING

As far as I can determine, Weinreich (1966: 163) was the first person to write about hedging in the linguistic research literature when he talked about “metalinguistic operators,” arguing that

for every language “metalinguistic operators” such as (in) English true, real, so-called, strictly speaking, and the most powerful extrapolator of all, like, function as instructions for the loose or strict interpretation of designata.

However, it was Lakoff (1972) who had the greatest initial impact, and it was his papers that popularized the concept. He drew on the work of Zadeh (1965), and that of Rosch (1973). Zadeh worked with fuzzy sets and noticed that categories such as animals, which were thought to have a fixed membership criteria, had a “continuum of classification grades.” Rosch-Heider challenged the notion that properties defining a category are shared by all members equally. For example, a robin is not just a “sort of a bird” but rather a “bird par excellence,” whereas a penguin is a “sort of bird.”

Lakoff suggested that any attempt to limit truth conditions for natural language sentences to true, false, and “nonsense” would distort the natural language concepts by portraying them as having sharp rather than vaguely defined boundaries. Suggesting that this is an area that deserves study, he wrote that

For me, some of the most interesting questions are raised by the study of words whose meaning implicitly involves fuzziness – words whose job it is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy. (Lakoff, 1972: 195)

He was interested in the properties of words such as rather or sort of and how they make things fuzzy or less fuzzy (vague or less vague). For Lakoff, hedging involved the attenuation of the membership of a particular expression, for example,

(1) a) John is sort of smart.
   b) That is technically a bookcase.