EFL Learners' Strategy Use in Online Discussion

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1. Introduction

This study investigates the effect of relationship closeness and gender on hedge use. A hedge is a politeness strategy in an interaction that protects the "negative face", which is defined by Brown and Levinson in their discussion of politeness theory (1978) as "The desire not to be imposed or intruded upon".

Brown and Levinson further specified that more politeness strategies will be employed between interactants who are distant, in other words, with less relationship closeness. Studies that further expanded upon the understanding of this phenomenon (Goldsmith and MacGeorge, 2000; Holtgraves and Yang, 1992), confirmed Brown and Levinson's theory, by discovering evidence that politeness strategies were employed at a greater frequency between interactants who were distant.

Lakoff's observation (1973) that women's speech is politer and less imposing than men's speech was confirmed by subsequent studies that compared the use of politeness strategies between the genders (Brown, 1980; Christie, 2002). One of the most significant examples of the difference between men and women's use of politeness strategies are in studies performed in Japanese interactions (Smith, 1992; Takano, 2005), where women's speech was found to be consistently politer than men's speech.

2. Method

The participants in the study are first year Department of English students from two separate classes at a middle-ranking Japanese university. Class A has 19 females and 8 males, while Class B has 21 females and 9 males. First, participants rate their relationship closeness with their classmates by filling out a questionnaire. Then, they participate in a Google Classroom online discussion forum for eight weeks where they use their own names or easily identifiable nicknames. Finally, we develop an EFL corpus from their conversations and analyze the data.

3. Hypotheses and results

Hypothesis 1: Participants who are closer will employ fewer hedges than participants who are less close.

Class A				Class B			
	H	W	R		H	W	R
1	11	131	8.40	1	57	1707	3.34
2	10	181	5.52	2	51	1482	3.44
3	39	844	4.62	3	107	2731	3.92
4	51	1380	3.70	4	142	3785	3.75
5	11	168	6.55	5	31	1224	2.53

Table. 3.1. Number of hedges (H), words (W), and hedges per 100 words (R) across five levels of relationship closeness for Class A and Class B. Relationship closeness is listed from closest to least close (i.e. One is the closest and five is the least close). Inconsistent with hypothesis 1, the highest hedge-to-word ratios for Class A were from the relationship closeness levels one and five, while the highest hedge-to-word ratios for Class B were from three and four. Additionally, the differences in the hedge-to-word ratios across different levels of relationship closeness were much more significant for Class A, whereas the differences were not as significant for Class B.

Hypothesis 2: Female participants employ more hedges than male participants.

Class A									Class B								
	FF		FM		MF		MM			FF		FM		MF		MM	
	H	W	H	W	H	W	H	W		H	W	H	W	H	W	H	W
	73	1500	38	748	5	324	8	199		219	5024	76	2402	75	2458	21	1157
R	4.87		5.08		1.54		4.02		R	4.36		3.16		3.05		1.82	

Table 3.2. Number of hedges (H), total words (W), and hedges per 100 words (R) in statements that involve a female responding a female (FF), a female responding to a male (FM), a male responding to a female (MF), and a male responding to a male (MM) for Class A and Class B. Consistent with hypothesis 2, the female participants had higher hedge-to-word ratios than male participants for both classes. This was true when females replied to either gender.

4. Conclusion

Regarding the first hypothesis, we conclude that relationship closeness may have an effect on the use of hedges, though not as predicted by this study's hypothesis. The variance of hedge use across different levels of relationship closeness followed unexpected patterns. Concerning the second hypothesis, we conclude that females may employ more hedges than males in a discussion forum. In general, females may employ a greater number of hedges in conversation than their male counterparts, regardless of the gender they are speaking with. Since this study involved a relatively small number of males compared with the number of females, a future study should attempt to recruit more male participants in older to bolster the results of the current study.

5. References

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