



ANALYSIS OF HEDGING STRATEGIES FOR MAPPING LINGUISTIC VARIATION ACROSS GENDER

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Abstract

This study is conducted to understand the employment of hedges in males and females in the context of talk shows. To find the evidence for supporting or negating Lakoff's theory (1972) that women use more polite terminologies than men which in turn make them look weak. This study explores hedges among 6 celebrities (three female and three male) selected through purpose sampling in the same context. Mixed method research method is utilized to analyze the data both numerically as well as interpretively. Five episodes of The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon are viewed up to 30 to 45 minutes to collect data in form of speeches of participants. Salager-Meyer's Hedges Theory and Martin-Martin's model of Functional Strategies are utilized as theoretical framework for data analysis. The results of the study reveal that, despite having similar professional backgrounds and conversational contexts, the female celebrities employ great number of hedging strategies than male participants. The least common strategy employed by female participants is depersonalization to reflect uncertainty or fuzziness in a claim to protect it from absolute falsification. Additionally, male speakers prefer subjectification as a method to control epistemic dedication maintaining objectivity. These findings trend to imply that gender identity has significant impact on hedging in entertainment talk show along with other contextual variables of demand of audience, topic sensitivity, and self-presentation. These results add significant value to literature on the binary perspective of gendered hedging with contextualized analyses approving the traditional view about more use of hedges by females than males.

Keywords: *Hedging Strategy, Gender Binary, Linguistic Variation*

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1. Introduction

Language is a medium of communication through which you can share thoughts, ideas, concepts, feelings and emotions. Language functions like a bridge to convey your thoughts from your mind to community. It helps to build social relationships to manage social dynamics as well. Language is profoundly influenced by social and cultural factors, gender being one of the most vital of these factors. Gender is a social construct and anthropological activity that a society expects to be performed by an individual. According to Judith Butler (1990), gender is not about a man and a woman; rather it is about their duties, functions, actions and performances in a society. These social practices and performances shape the words and structures of a language to communicate appropriately.

The association between language and gender has captivated linguists for decades making it the most nuanced analysis in pragmatics, in general, in digital medium in particular. Holmes (2008) argues that, on the basis of way of communication, gender is employed to discriminate between individuals. Tong (2009) states that social identity is marked on the basis of linguistic variation between men and women. Lakoff (1972) is one of the pioneer researchers who initiated this debate on association between language and gender on the basis of hedging strategy, the most stimulating point for empirical exploration.

Hedges are the words or phrases that express dubiousness and ambivalence in language as well as contributing to its politeness, uncertainty and suppleness (Meyer, 1997). There many types of hedging such as lexical and phrasal. Coates (2013) argues that hedges may include topic choices, word choices, tag questions and turn taking in conversation. Hedges may also show the uncertainty of speakers as well as friendly tone.

The unique discursive space in talk shows employs different sort of hedging to negotiate face-threatening acts, manage disagreement, perform social identities, and project epistemic stances. Even in seemingly neutral professional contexts, the language used by male and female presenters reflects and reproduces broader gender norms and social expectations (2012). Phrase hedges are routinely used to support politeness, soften potentially face-threatening statements, and manage epistemic ambiguity in ways that vary between male and female speakers (Fraser, 2010). Therefore, a rich corpus for analyzing how hedging strategies is distributed, functionally motivated, and gender-differentiated in naturalistic spoken discourse is provided by the talk show format, which frequently features mixed-gender conversations on socially significant topics.

2. Literature Review

Language is affected by many factors including social class, culture, age and the gender making it a complex social behavior. Exploration of linguistic features provide insights into these social and cultural practices. Hedging, one of the most striking

linguistic features, has drawn the attention of the researchers for empirical concentration. Scholars are continuously working to see how men and women could have different ways for using the language in real spoken situations. It has become increasingly essential for researchers to look at the hedging on gender level.

This literature review tries to condense major works about how the hedging is performed by males and females especially focusing more on pragmatic studies in the spoken and media contexts. Lakoff (1973) first proposed the idea of hedging, characterizing hedges as words and phrases that make things "fuzzy" or less precise. Coates (1997) devised four main objectives of hedges: expressing confidence and doubt, demonstrating empathy, finding the appropriate word, and avoiding the expert role. Holmes (1982) conveyed that hedges function for consideration and civility along with linguistic ambiguity.

Holmes (1995) focused on variation in hedges across gender and challenged previous deficit models of female speech by arguing in a significant re-evaluation of for what purposes women use hedges. She said that women use hedges primarily to express interpersonal warmth rather than tentativeness. The prevailing belief that hedging is primarily a female linguistic characteristic is challenged by Holmes' suggestion that hedges are typically used by men to convey imprecision and incertitude.

Hyland (1996) distinguished between author-centered and audience-centered hedges in academic writing. His model has influenced later pragmatic studies of hedging in spoken discourse and has been widely used in genre analysis. Tabatabaei and Ramzi (2015) explored that gender has significant impact even out of spoken discourse. They came up with empirical evidence that men use hedges more frequently than women. This finding directly contradicts Lakoff's initial assertion that hedging is a linguistic trait that is primarily associated with women.

Along the same lines, a corpus-based analysis of gender differences in hedging in TED Talks showed that men and women modify their language strategies when speaking in public, with men exercising power overtly and women using indirect and hedging forms in a more courteous manner (Nuraniwati & Permatasari, 2020). This analysis illuminates that the use of hedging across genders is strongly influenced by context, particularly the public and formal nature of conversation.

Studies of spoken British National Corpus data discovered approximators and shields do not occur the same among men and women for several age categories and amounts of educational ranks. Shields about the plausibility are used more in comparison with attribution shields among both male and female speakers (Leláková & Praňicová, 2024). Sometimes the use of these shields vary kind of depending on education and age. The shields of plausibility of men seem to be more frequent than ones of women, or at least that what the data shows. Also, it is interesting how attribution shields appear less

often among female speakers and male speakers alike but not uniformly. There were cases without the use of shields in the weekend and that also affected the results. Overall, this research provides a good insight in the language patterns of different groups. It can help understand social dynamics better, and possibly lead to new linguistic theories.

Study conducted by Precht (2008) indicates that it can be possible for context to influence hedging more than gender does. It was found that the factors from context are more influential for hedging than just the gender of the speaker (Holmes, 1995). Through analysis of hedging used in environments like podcasts, talk shows interviews and press briefings, researchers come to understand more about how gender works together with the communicative requirements of those spoken discourse contexts.

Azizah (2021) made use of Martin-Martin's (2008) way of categorizing hedge and a framework of language details given by Coates (2013) to study how hedging operates in political interviews. The study reports that the linguistic features can be shared as both genders might borrow each other's hedging methods based on what kind of speech environment they are in. This shows that social factors have a big role in how people set up conversations and pick hedging types (Schmitt, 2002; Blum-Kulka, 1997).

Studies on academic presentations and student discussions have regularly discovered gender-related trends in hedges. Motivated by Lakoff's (2004) theory, a qualitative study of Namasaraev (1997) focused on informal conversations between male and female ESL students and examined the category and occurrence of hedging devices, such as rounders (15%), adaptors (7%), plausibility shields (30%), and politeness hedges like question hedges (10%). According to the study, filler-type hedges tend to be uttered more times by female students than male students, a sign of lower confidence levels.

The review of the previous research on hedges and gender indicates the reliance on binary conceptions of gender, which do not take into consideration the performativity and context-dependent aspects of gendered speech (Chai, 2022). This study tries to cover the research gaps left by previous research.

3. Research Methodology

3.1. Research Method

This study employs mixed method approach by using both Quantitative and Qualitative research methods (Sharma, et al., 2023). The data is collected from The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon in qualitative form for quantitative and qualitative data analysis.

3.2. Data Collection

Five episodes of the show The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon are selected, viewed for analysis. Sample consists of 6 participants: three males and three females from different entertainment hubs: Priyanka Chopra (producer and actress), Ella Bright (singer and actress), Angelina Jolie (actress, humanitarian and filmmaker), Hudson Williams

(actor, writer, and director), Owen Cooper (actor), Belmont Cameli (actor and model). Speech of the host is not included. Each selected interview duration ranges from 30 to forty-five minutes segment. Broadcast recordings are transcribed verbatim from official YouTube channel The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon.

4. Theoretical Framework

Hedges are categorized and analyzed using two frameworks: (a) Salager-Meyer's (1997) grammatical taxonomy to highlight modal auxiliary verbs (may, might, can could), lexical verbs (I think, it seems), adjectival and adverbial phrases, approximators (approximately, roughly), introductory phrases (to our knowledge), if-clauses, and compound hedges; (b) Martin-Martin's (2008) three functional strategies for data analysis: subjunctivization to highlight the personal opinion in the speech; Indetermination to make tone of prepositions of less semantically precise, vague and soften impacts of harsh speech; strategy of depersonalization to remove personal attributes to give more of an objective touch. Finally, the findings are discussed in the light of the gender language features described by Coates (2013).

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Frequency of Hedges Used by Individual Female Speakers

Hedge Type	Angelina Jolie	Ella Bright	Priyanka Chopra	Total
Like	15	18	21	54
You know	9	11	12	32
I think	5	9	10	24
Probably	3	6	5	14
Actually	4	6	7	17
Just	13	18	18	49
Total	49	68	73	190

Five single-word hedges, such as "like," "I think," "probably," "actually," and "just," are analyzed from three female participants' conversations during the show to identify significant trends in hedging behavior with the highest frequency of "like," "you know," "I think," and "actually." Priyanka Chopra emerged as the most prevalent hedge user overall. These terms collectively represent a conversational style marked by informality, audience engagement, and epistemic mitigation. Ella Bright, on the other hand, used "probably" the most and "just" as frequently as Priyanka Chopra, indicating a cautious and minimizing speech style that prioritizes qualification over assertion. It is interesting to note that "just" is the only hedge where Priyanka Chopra and Ella Bright's frequency converged, suggesting a common pragmatic inclination towards politeness and understatement. As the least frequent user of "like," "you know," "I think," "probably,"

"actually," and "just alike," Angelina Jolie, consistently recorded the lowest frequency across all hedge categories. This suggests a noticeably straightforward, self-assured, and unhedged communicative style throughout the show.

5.2. Frequency of Hedges used by Individual Male Speakers

Hedge Type	Hudson Williams	Owen Cooper	Belmont Cameli	Total
Like	9	10	6	25
You know	5	6	8	19
I think	10	6	9	25
Probably	8	5	9	22
Actually	4	6	6	16
Just	5	8	11	24
Total	41	41	49	141

Examining how the three male participants—Owen Cooper, Belmont Cameli, and Hudson Williams —use single-word hedges in their conversations during the show provides insightful information about their distinct communication styles. Belmont records the highest frequency of the hedge, while Owen uses it the least. This suggests that Owen's conversational style leans more towards informal discourse marking and approximation; while Belmont's restrained use of this specific hedge reflects a more formal spoken register. Owen, on the other hand, uses this form less frequently, indicating a more straightforward and self-assured declarative style. In terms of “probability”, Owen recorded the least usage, while Belmont once again dominated in frequency. This further supports the larger trend of Belmont as a speaker who regularly uses epistemic distancing to qualify and soften his statements. Lastly, when it comes to “actually”, Belmont and Owen both use this hedge more frequently than Hudson who continues to be the least frequent user. This suggests that both Belmont and Owen use "actually" as a contrastive and corrective device to reframe, emphasize, or redirect their conversational contributions; while Hudson's relatively infrequent use further solidifies his status as the most direct and unhedged communicator among the three male participants.

5.3. Total Frequency of Hedges used by Female and Male Speakers

Gender	Frequency	Percentage
Female Speakers	190	57.5%
Male Speakers	141	42.5%
Total	331	100%

This table shows overall female and male frequency with percentages representing how both genders rely heavily on hedges to communicate. This table also reflects how

females are larger in number to use hedges as compared to male. Traditional view about hedges usage among male and female is clearly reflected in this table.

5.4. Distribution According to Salager-Meyer's Taxonomy

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Approximators	152	42.9%
Shields	51	14.4%
Expressions of Personal Doubt	49	13.8%
Emotionally Intensified Hedges	69	19.4%
Compound Hedges	33	9.3%
Total	354	100%

Approximators are the most used category of hedges with percentage of 40.3%. This frequency includes 49 uses of approximators by male guests and 103 by female guests. These approximators include “about”, “approximately”, “around” etc. Emotional intensifiers are on second position with percentage of 18.3% and frequency of 69. Adverbial phrases include terms like “surprisingly”, “unfortunately”. Shields such as “may”, “might”, “can” comes next with 13.5% and frequency of 51. Personal doubt expressions have percentage of 12.9% with frequency of 49 for terms like “I think”, “it seems” etc. Compound hedges such as “would seem likely”, “could be suggested” with 8.7% and frequency of 33. If clause is the least used category with 6.3% percentage and frequency of 23.

5.5. Hedges Strategies Used by Female Speakers

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
Indetermination	72	37.8%
Subjectification	69	36.3%
Depersonalization	49	25.7%
Total	190	100%

Females tend to favor ambiguous and non-specific language in order to avoid making a direct commitment. Depersonalization is the least common tactic indicating that speakers seldom structurally distance themselves from their statements; while subjectification rank second indicating a moderate tendency among speakers to express personal stance as a softening device. Indetermination is the most commonly used of the three hedging strategies found in the conversations.

5.6. Hedges Strategies Used by Male Speakers

Strategy	Frequency	Percentage
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Indetermination	55	39%
Subjectification	49	34.7%
Depersonalization	37	26.2%
Total	141	100%

Belmont Cemali, Owen Cooper, and Hudson Williams all favor ambiguous and non-specific language as their primary means of avoiding direct commitment in their conversational contributions. Subsequently, depersonalization is recorded as the least frequently used strategy among the three male participants indicating that male speakers also seldom choose to structurally distance themselves from their statements in order to diffuse responsibility or reduce personal accountability within their conversations. Subjectification ranks second in frequency among the male speakers reflecting a moderate tendency to express personal stance.

5.7. Comparison of Strategies

Strategy	Female	Male	Total
Indetermination	72	55	127
Subjectification	69	49	118
Depersonalization	49	37	86
Total	190	141	331

The dominant strategy in both genders is indetermination with frequency of 72 in females and 55 in males but comparative usage is higher in females. The least implied hedging strategy during interviews is Depersonalization with females taking a leap in this strategy as well.

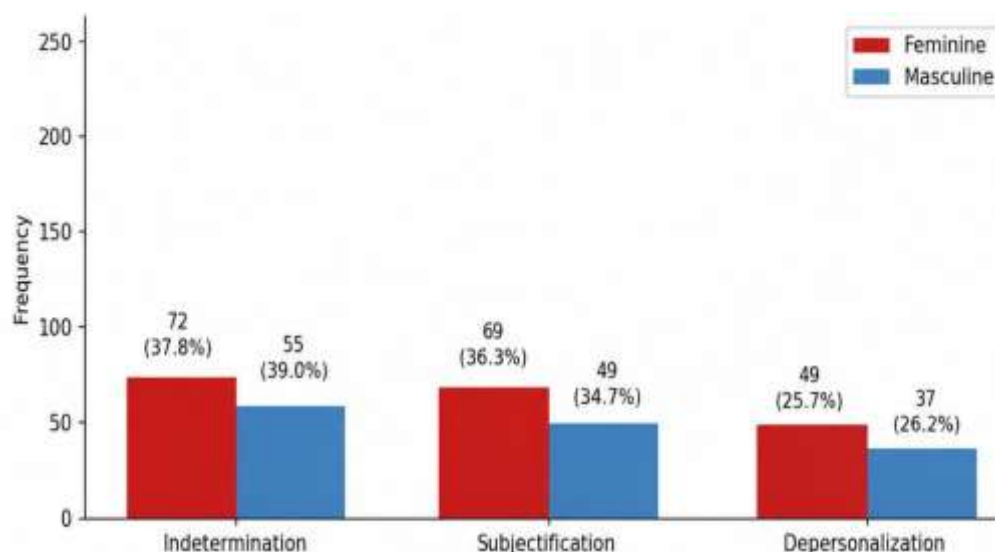


Figure 1: Use of Hedges in males and females according to Salager-Meyer's Taxonomy
Fractional representation of hedges strategies among male and female speakers

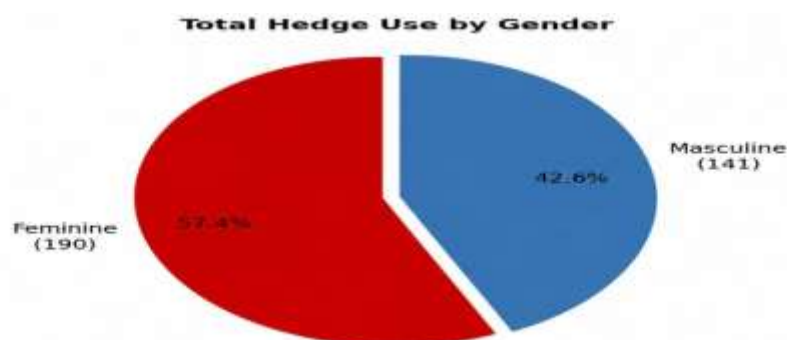


Figure 2: Use of Hedges in Males and Females

Participants from both the groups, male and female, tried to make their statements less stiff and more neutral by using terms like “it seems”, and “just” to keep the communication more cordial and less firm. This implies that hedging involves more than just being uncertain; it also involves fostering social harmony and lowering the possibility of coming across combative linguistic behavior. The long-held belief from Lakoff's (1975) dominance framework that hedging is predominantly female linguistic behavior is approved in these findings. This suggests that hedging does not serve a universal social function that is utilized by all speakers equally.

6. Conclusion

This study looks at the hedging practices of six celebrities on The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon. Using Martin-Martin's (2008) functional strategy framework and

Salager-Meyer's (1997) lexical taxonomy, the results of our study show the greater implementation of hedges in female celebrities. And rather than eliminating male population from users of hedges, the study highlights that the application of hedge terminologies is just a bit lesser in males than females.

The least common strategy employed by female participants is depersonalization to reflect uncertainty or fuzziness in a claim to protect it from absolute falsification. Additionally, male speakers prefer subjectification, indetermination, and, to a lesser degree, depersonalization methods that control epistemic dedication maintaining objectivity. Despite having similar professional backgrounds and conversational contexts, female speakers employ hedging more frequently than male speakers, indicating their indirectness.

These trends imply that gender identity has significant impact on hedging in entertainment talk show discourse along with the contextual variables of demands of audience performance, topic sensitivity, and self-presentation. These results add to an increasing amount of literature on the binary perspective of gendered hedging with contextualized analyses (Azizah, 2021; Namaziandost & Shafiee, 2018; Kholisoh & Setiawan, 2018). Future studies could broaden the corpus to include a greater variety of talk show formats considering cultural origin and background in the celebrity industry to look at the host's interactional style etc.

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