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ANALYZING TURKISH MA STUDENTS' USE OF LEXICAL HEDGING STRATEGIES IN THESES ABSTRACTS [1]

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ABSTRACT

Hedging is a type of interpersonal metadiscourse strategy. Hedging strategies not only show writer's degree of confidence in the truth of a proposition but also reveal writer's attitude to the reader. Compared to other parts of theses, abstract writing has received less attention and the focus has largely been on length, summary and keywords. Abstracts are important components of academic studies because readers decide to continue or stop reading depending on what they get from the content of the abstracts. Therefore, the present study tries to reveal Turkish MA students' use of lexical hedging strategies in MA theses abstracts from the fields of ELT, Chemistry, Biology and International Relations and Political Science. The aim is to analyze if there is any subject specific variation in the use of hedging strategies with respect to frequency counts on lexical bases.

Key Words: *Hedges, Interpersonal Metadiscourse, Academic Discourse, Abstract.*

ÖZET

Kaçınmalar kişilerarası üstsöylemin bir parçasıdır. Sadece yazarın söylemin doğruluğuna olan inancını değil yazarın okura karşı takındığı tutumu da gösterirler. Tezin diğer bölümleriyle kıyasla, öz yazımı daha az ilgi görmüş ve genelde gösterilen ilginin odak noktasını, uzunluğu, özet yapması, içerdiği anahtar kelimeler oluşturmuştur. Özler akademik çalışmaların önemli kısımlarıdır çünkü okurlar özün içeriğine bağlı olarak okumaya devam ederler ya da okumayı bırakırlar. Bu çalışmanın amacı; tez öz yazımında İngiliz Dili Eğitimi, Kimya, Biyoloji, Uluslararası İlişkiler ve

(1) *Yüksek lisans tezi çalışmasından oluşturulmuştur.*

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Siyaset Bilimi alanlarında Türk yüksek lisans öğrencilerinin kullandıkları sözcüksel kaçınma stratejilerini ortaya çıkarmak ve kaçınma stratejileri bakımından disiplinler açısından bir farklılık olup olmadığını irdelemektir.

Anahtar Sözcükler: *Kaçınmalar, Kişilerarası Üstsöylem, Akademik Söylem, Öz.*

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1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, increased attention has been given to the notion of language use and particular importance has been given to different language uses in different contexts. Language use can be interpreted in relation to its social context. Academic discourse is one of these social contexts. Through published texts, members of that discipline, namely discourse community, establish and maintain its authority.

A discourse community can be established with regards to academics or the readers a text chooses to address. Academic discourse communities are not necessarily located in a particular physical setting, but we can understand their existence from the discourse that members of the community use to communicate with each other. When language users travel from one community to another such as from home to school, from high school to college, from college to graduate training, from graduate training to professional life, they must learn new ways of speaking, reading, writing and other study skills that are appropriate within each community.

In this case, English as the main language of international science and academic research is mostly the language one should learn in international academic community. **R**esearchers whose native languages are not English prefer to publish their research in English in international journals so English has become increasingly "lingua franca" in the academic community. So, in a context where native speakers can have difficulty in adapting, L2 learners have already had a disadvantage and this brings the need for pedagogical support. There should be an approach in accordance with this view.

Non-native students need a new way of introduction to these academic discourses and new ways of employing them critically. There are features one must have in the learning process of a foreign language but apart from these, there are some other features which should be learned and possessed in academic writing and discourse, namely features of metadiscourse.

1.1. Metadiscourse and its main features

Writers embed their writing in a particular social world and they reflect approved discourse practices to their writings. To do this, there are some features which make a piece of writing an academic writing. There are the metadiscourse features which relate the text to its context and they are highly used in academic texts. As Hyland (2004: 133) defines it; "metadiscourse is self-reflective linguistic expressions referring to the evolving text, to the writer, and to the imagined readers of that text". Metadiscourse refers to the linguistic devices writers use to shape their arguments. It is used as an umbrella term for features which help relate a text to its context. Metadiscourse helps the writer assert control over the text and how it is to be read.

It gives the mechanism for control of the text and readership. It can be classified into two main categories: *textual metadiscourse, interpersonal metadiscourse*. Textual metadiscourse help the writer organise information in a coherent and convincing way, and overcome readers' possible processing difficulties. There are five subgroups under textual metadiscourse: *logical connectives (and, but, therefore, in addition, etc.) frame markers (to start with, to conclude, etc.) endophoric markers (see/noted/ discussed below, etc.), evidentials (according to X, cite, quote, X claims, etc.), code glosses (for example, e.g., in fact, etc.)*. On the other hand, interpersonal metadiscourse influences the writer's intimacy, remoteness, expression of attitude, commitment to claims and extent of reader involvement (Hyland, 2000). It can be identified under five subgroups: *attitude markers (admittedly, amazingly, appropriately, etc.), relational markers (by the way, us, you, think about, etc.), person markers (I, we, me, my, our, mine, etc.), hedges (about, almost, assume, largely, likely, presumably, relatively, maybe, might, etc), emphatics/boosters (actually, certainly, definitely, must, never, undoubtedly, evidently, etc.)*.

1.2. Hedges and perspectives on language use

One can indicate certainty or commitment in varying degrees. George Lakoff named this cautious language as hedging in 1972 and 1973 (Jordan, 1997). Hedges and boosters are the lexical items used in interpersonal metadiscourse. The central questions are concerned with the role they play in interaction. Salager-Meyer (2000: 177) mentions that one cannot study or teach a concept like "hedges" without giving a clear definition or description of that concept. Yet, as he puts it, a clear-cut definition is hard to offer as it overlaps with several other concepts.

Another scholar who mentions the difficulty of defining hedges is Johns. Johns (2001: 200) calls hedges as "the often slippery characteristics that are subsumed under the "hedging" rubric as found in the scientific article (RA)". However, hedging strategies are not only used in academic writing, it is also a part of daily conversation to save the face needs of both the speakers and the

listeners. We try to show our modesty and avoid making certain assumptions. Hedging and boosting strategies have both textual functions and interpersonal functions of language. Some definitions are interested in the textual function of hedges whereas the others are interested in the communicative function of hedging. Hyland (1996) (cited in Varttala 1999: 202) agrees with this idea and says that "hedges are best described as polypragmatic as expressions whose meanings can rarely be interpreted in one way only".

There are studies searching on forms and frequencies of hedges (Hyland 1994; Varttala 1999; Lewin 2005; Burrough-Boenish 2005; Koutsantoni 2006). Salager-Meyer (2000: 176) notes that the interest of scholars in the subject of hedging lies in the fact that it reveals how life in community compels us to modulate, camouflage, mitigate and adapt our language according to the situation we find ourselves involved in. Up to now some of the studies (Koutsantoni 2006; Salager-Meyer 1994) have focused on pieces of writing from a particular discipline such as engineering texts or medical research articles. This interest has resulted in several studies that define and classify hedges. However, in these studies, compared to introduction, conclusion parts of theses and research papers, abstract writing has received less attention and there is also limited guidance provided as the focus is on length, summary and keywords.

In international environments and EAP abstracts are also getting more and more important. For a non-native speaker writer, "abstract is the only piece of published writing done in English" (Swales, 1990: 179). This piece of task as a research process genre needs effort. Abstracts are worth studying as one can understand where writers position themselves in the discourse community. Giving the gist of the whole text in a limited space requires competence and it should also be noted that "it is shaped by the genres and power relations of the academy, which in turn shape 'academics' and how they are read by others" (Kamler & Thomson, 2004: 197). Academics' one of the main tasks is to scan and read the abstracts to decide from which research article or thesis they can benefit the most. It is the point at which "a piece of research may stand or fall- at which the reader must be 'hooked' (Hyland, 2000: 65). Abstracts can be considered to be the main means employed by academicians to reach the new findings and claims in the community. So they are essentially persuasive in nature.

Furthermore, analyzing texts even abstracts from a single discipline usually does not reveal much about disciplinary variation. There is an increasing interest in the construction of knowledge in different disciplinary fields. Yet there is still scope for research on abstract in a comparative perspective and therefore this study aims to focus on abstracts from four different disciplines. The issue of disciplinary variations has become a subject of research. Writing as a chemist, biologist, or an English teacher means being able to construct an argument "not

only in terms of relevance and plausibility but also of the social relationships that can be appropriately appealed to" (Hyland, 1999: 121). As a part of academic discourse, abstract should be appropriate to the expectations of the community. At the same time, an abstract should also be sellable and credible and this idea causes a further point of research: Does the idea of abstract as a "selling device" increase or decrease hedges?

The present study tries to have an understanding of lexical hedging strategies employed by Turkish MA students from four different fields. The present study tries to reveal Turkish master students' general tendencies in using lexical hedging devices in abstract writing and analyze if there is any subject specific variation in employing hedging as a strategy. The following research questions served as a guide in this study:

a) Do Turkish MA theses writers use any hedging strategies?

b) Do these hedging strategies show variation in different disciplines?

2. METHODOLOGY

The present study aims to explore the general tendencies Turkish students have in writing abstracts for their MA theses which are in English. The analysis of texts focuses on the density and function of hedges. The occurrence of a number of selected hedging devices in a corpus was examined. The corpus comprised 40 MA theses abstracts from the fields of Biology, Chemistry, English Language Teaching and International Relations and Political Science, each of which comprises between 200-250 words. The theses which were randomly chosen date from 2005 to 2007 which are submitted to 13 different universities as part of the fulfilment of MA programs: Marmara University, Middle East Technical University, Bilkent University, Koç University, Sabancı University, Yeditepe University, Hacettepe University, İzmir Yüksek Technology Institute, Boğaziçi University, Ege University, Çukurova University, Muğla University, Anadolu University. This selection procedure was made in an attempt to have a subset of theses written in English by research students who are not native speakers of English.

For the classification of hedges extracted from the four corpora, Koutsantoni (2006)'s taxonomy of hedges is adopted and some other categories such as pronouns and impersonalisation strategies (passives, inanimate nouns) have been added to the list. In order to find hedging devices, the list of McEnery and Kifle (2002)'s 100 items from the most frequent epistemic devices in academic writing (see Appendix1) the list of items expressing doubt and uncertainty provided by Hyland (2000) (see Appendix 2) and a list of devices compiled from academic corpuses such as MICASE, AWL (academic word lists) and university websites which provide academic word lists were used as guidelines.

3. FINDINGS

Tablo 1: The Total Number of Occurrences in 9058 Words Corpora

	Eng.	Chemistry	Biology	Pol.	Total	Percentages (%)
Modal V.	12	12	12	9	45	0.5%
Evid. V.	46	49	51	50	196	2%
Inanim. N	22	7	13	19	61	0.6%
Passive	43	70	50	24	187	2%
Sens. V.	4	0	0	3	7	0.07%
Cogn. V.	12	6	7	8	33	0.3%
Ded. V.	3	2	2	0	7	0.07%
Spec. V.	5	0	3	3	11	0.12%
Epist. N.	12	6	5	8	31	0.3%
Epist.Adj.	0	3	8	4	15	0.16%
Epist.Adv.	8	11	10	6	35	0.4%
Determ.	4	8	8	1	21	0.2%
Pronouns	14	3	18	12	47	0.5%
DisDeixis	8	5	3	2	18	0.2%
Total	**193**	**182**	**190**	**149**	**714**	**7.8%**

The presence of hedges in this corpus demonstrates that all the disciplines which are the focus of this study employ hedging. The corpora contain 366 sentences and 9058 words. The hedges strategies constitute 7.8 per cent of this 9058 words corpus. Looking within these major categories in the table, one can also see variations in how writers from four different disciplines use hedging strategies. The table shows that English Language Teaching was the field which had the highest frequency of occurrence of hedges. Given the results, it appears that authors in the field of English Language Teaching exhibit more usage of hedges (193). Biology is the second (190) and Chemistry the third (182). International Relations and Political Science was the discipline which has the fewest frequency (149). It is clear that the use of hedges is evident although to different degrees and in different ways. For instance, there was less divergence in modal verbs.

The findings also indicate that practices of each discipline reflect the view that each discipline is different and students who want to be a member of the disciplinary community follow certain rules in writings. For instance, mostly theses authors in the field of Biology diffuse their responsibility by making it

seem more collective, it is also the case in Koutsantoni's study (2006), theses authors use *we* to diffuse responsibility.

Table 2: Subject Pronouns Identified in Theses Abstracts

Subject Pronouns	Eng.	Chemistry	Biology	Pol.	Total
I	3	0	0	0	3
It	2	1	1	3	7
We	0	0	15	7	22
You	0	0	0	0	0
They	9	2	2	2	15
Total	**14**	3	**18**	**12**	**47**

The use of *we* is common and plays a far more visible role in Biology with the number of (15) occurrences. First person plural pronouns function as sentence subjects in Biology; also Biology abstracts contain more than one first-person plural pronoun in a single abstract. In the academic world *we* is generally used to take and accept responsibility. It is a matter of debate why writers avoid using *I* in academic writings; the table above also confirms this idea that writers avoid using *I* in their writings except the authors in English Language Teaching, only (3) occurrences.

Table 3: Modal Verbs Identified in Theses Abstracts

Modal verbs	Eng.	Chemistry	Biology	Pol.	Total
be able to	0	0	1	0	1
Can	4	6	3	3	**16**
Could	1	3	3	0	**7**
May	1	2	1	3	**7**
Might	0	0	1	1	**2**
ought to	1	0	0	0	1
Should	3	1	1	0	**5**
Would	2	0	2	2	**6**
Total	**12**	**12**	**12**	**9**	**45**

Having arrived at the frequency distribution of modal verbs across disciplines, the modal verb *can(16)* is the most widely used one. *Might* as a modal verb is more likely to be accepted as a hedge, but it is interesting to note that *might* (**2**) is among the least preferred ones. There are also two

occurrences of *would* equally in English Language Teaching, Biology and International Relations and Political Science. *May (7)* and *could (7)* are employed equally in the corpora. *Could* is employed equally in Chemistry (3) and Biology (3). As to the total occurrences of modal verbs, no substantial differences between English Language Teaching (12), Chemistry (12) and Biology (12) were observed while total number of occurrences in International Relations and Political Science is (9).

The findings indicate that thesis authors did not use personal attribution to persuade the readers but they preferred to distance themselves from the claims by using impersonal strategies when we look at the frequencies of inanimate nouns and passives. Passives are highly used in the abstracts in the field of Chemistry. Although the choices of evidence verbs are scattered in the disciplines, the number of occurrences of evidence verbs are almost the same in four disciplines, English Language Teaching (46), Chemistry (49), Biology (51), International Relations and Political Science (50). Inanimate nouns are employed with (61) occurrences. It is interesting to note that epistemic adjectives have (15) numbers of occurrences and no incident of occurrences in English Language Teaching. Among the categories, the least preferred ones are sensory verbs with a number of (7) occurrences and deducing verbs with the number of (7) occurrences.

4. DISCUSSION

Analyzing texts from a single discipline usually does not reveal much about disciplinary variation. Therefore, four disciplines were chosen for this analysis. Information from authentic data is of great value to show a wide variety of hedging devices. Abstracts from four disciplines do not appear very dissimilar in terms of hedging strategies, but there are some subtle differences in the frequency of some types of hedges but in other cases there was extensive difference, in the use of hedging device such as verb categories, impersonalisation strategies it showed field specific variations. The findings of the study reflected no clear-cut differences between disciplines but they indicate presence of hedging strategies used by university graduate students. The uneven distribution of hedging indicates that these conventions may be constrained by the practices of different disciplines. More research is needed to confirm these distinctions.

Since the findings are based on a small sample of theses, no generalizations can be made, but they point to new directions for inquiry on a larger scale. The current study is limited to a selection of lexical items that the readers of scientific texts are most likely to interpret as hedges. Naturally, such a narrow choice excludes many non-lexical hedges, but some of them are categorized as strategic hedges. Since strategical hedges involve macro reading of the abstracts are relatively subjective, this type was not included in

the categorization of hedging devices. It is not always easy to mark off hedges from non-hedges. Researchers or linguists generally rely on their consciousness to identify hedges, in other words identifying hedges is subjective. **S**ometimes they reveal themselves in ongoing discourse so lexical based approaches can not pinpoint at all. Part of the debate has involved the extent to which hedging devices can be distinguished. There are classifications which I have made use of, but it is not easy to differentiate which lexical items, syntactic structures should be classed as hedges or which word or phrase function as a hedge.

5. CONCLUSION

Hedges make a text more reader-friendly. Uncertainty, politeness, modesty, writer's audience considerations, saving one's own face, evading responsibility, toning down claims can be seen as general motivations for hedging. With hedges, readers feel that they have room to judge the statement for themselves. With all these possible functions of hedges, the observations suggest that the use of hedging is an important aspect of academic discourses, in this case abstracts.

It was seen that some types of hedges are frequent in the writings of university graduate students. There can be lack of formal instruction that students in the disciplines have on the frequency and function of these hedging strategies. It shouldn't be underscored that the use of hedges reflects a certain maturity in writing. **O**n the other hand, the high frequency of use of these strategies can be a marker of novice writers, but the absence of these strategies in students' academic writing may result in inadequate writing. As Lewin (2005) mentions hedges make a text more reader-friendly allowing negotiation between the writer and the reader. Although these devices (maybe in fewer amounts) exist in our first language Turkish, they are not the same as we encounter in the written language of English. Also the effect of proficiency should be considered, students' competence is an affective factor. This study did not account for features of second language writing such as proficiency level, background information about which courses they have taken, their writing competencies, etc. Further research will help for the more clear-cut preferences. As to the summary of findings, one can easily see that;

- In some categories like modal verbs and evidence verbs, the frequency distributions do not show much variation.
- As to the impersonalisation strategies, inanimate nouns are used mostly in social sciences (English Language Teaching, Political Science). Agency is attributed to the research, thesis or paper rather than to the researcher. On the other hand, passives are mostly used in hard sciences (Chemistry and Biology). In these disciplines, the researcher is entirely absent so that actions have no source, *the data were collected* or *the study was conducted* but by no one in particular.
- As to the total number of verb categories such as cognitive verbs, deducing verbs, speculative verbs English Language Teaching takes the lead.
- It is also interesting to note that none of the abstracts in English Language Teaching utilize epistemic adjectives.

Novice writers should be shown which claims should be toned down and taught the reasons for adopting hedging strategies. McEnery & Kifle (2002) mention that ELT textbooks present students with a limited range of options for expressing possibility, tentativeness, opinion and so on. The research on hedging strategies can be a starting point to revise syllabuses and teaching materials as modal verbs is a kind of category mostly recommended by textbook writers to convey epistemic meaning, but it should also be noted that there are other categories, some of which are used in this study.

More research needs to be done. The study is restricted to MA theses and does not address the other research genres such as research papers, proposals, etc. Clearly, these results needed to be treated with little caution. With the lack of generalisability of such a small study mean larger scale research needed to confirm these findings. The results of this study showed that a greater priority should be given to hedges in both our teaching and research. The mastering of hedging devices will help the writer to negotiate views and ideas and determine the appropriate level of commitment to the claims.

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Appendix 1

100 ITEMS FROM THE MOST FREQUENT EPISTEMIC DEVICES IN ACADEMIC WRITING (taken from McEnery, 2002: 195-195)

Modal verbs	**Adjectives**	**Nouns**	**Lexical** verbs	**Adverbs**	likely
could	apparent	assumption	appear	about	maybe
couldn't	certain	belief	argue	actually	never
may	a certain extent	certainty	assume	almost	naturally
might	clear	chance	believe	always	necessarily
should	likely	claim	claim	(not) always	normally
shouldn't	obvious	danger	doubt	apparent	obviously
would	evident	doubt	estimate	approximately	of course
wouldn't	possible	estimate	expect	around	often
will	probable	evidence	indicate	certainly	perhaps
won't	sure	explanation	know	clearly	possibly
	unlikely	fact	predict	commonly	presumably
		fear	presume	definitely	quite
		hope	propose	doubtless	rarely
		idea	seem	essentially	relatively
		opinion	speculate	evidently	sometimes
		possibility	suggest	frequently	surely
		tendency	suppose	generally	undoubtedly
		theory	tend	in fact	usually
		view	think	in general	
				in theory	
				in X's opinion	
				indeed	
				largely	

Appendix 2

Hyland (2000: 188-189) provides 108 hedges indicating doubt or certainty.
HEDGES

About	Frequently	Perhaps	Speculate
Admittedly	(in) general	Plausible	Suggest
Almost	Generally	Possibility	Superficially
(not) always	Guess	Possible(ly)	Suppose
Apparently	Hypothesise	Postulate	Surmise
Appear	Hypothetically	Predict	Suspect
Approximately	Ideally	Prediction	Technically
Argue	(we) imagine	Predominantly	Tend
Around	Implication	Presumably	Tendency
Assume	Imply	Presume	In theory
Assumption	Indicate	Probable(ly)	Theoretically
Basically	Infer	Probability	Typically
My/our belief	Interpret	Provided that	Uncertain
I believe	Largely	Propose	Unclear
A certain X	Likely	Open to question	Unlikely
Certain extent	Mainly	Questionable	Unsure
I /we claim	May	Quite	Usually
Conceivably	Maybe	Rare(ly)	Virtually
Conjecture	Might	Rather	Would
Consistent with	More or less	Relatively	
Contention	Most	Seen (as)	
Could	Not necessarily	Seem	
Deduce	Normally	Seemingly	
Discern	Occasionally	Seldom	
Doubt	Often	(general) sense	
Essentially	Ostensibly	Should	
Estimate	Partly	Shouldn't	
Evidently	Partially	Somewhat	
Formally	Perceive	Sometimes	