

# Thesis and Dissertation Writing: A Case of Hedges in Academic Writing by Polish, German and English PhD Candidates.

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# Contemporary Academia: some facts

- ▶ 5.5 million scholars
- ▶ 2 000 publishers
- ▶ 17 500 research higher education institutions (Lillis and Curry 2010)
- ▶ International publication as a requirement of doctoral or even master's degree
- ▶ 66 166 academic periodicals included in Ulrich's Periodicals Directory (2009)
- ▶ 67% use some or all English

# Inequalities in Academic Publishing

- ▶ Some reward systems favour international publication
- ▶ Scholars who don't publish in English excluded/not appreciated/rewarded???
- ▶ “Domain loss” (Salager–Meyer 2008)
- ▶ “Lost science” (Gibbs 1995)
- ▶ Anglo–American discursive norms (de Swaan 2001)
- ▶ Non–standard language as a reason for article rejection (Hyland 2007)
- ▶ Restricted access to vital networks of people (Belcher 2007, Ferguson 2007, Swales 2004)

## On a more positive note...

- ▶ No native-speakers of academic English/academic writers (Schmied 2013)
- ▶ Language is **not** the primary problem EAL scholars have in publication (Belcher 2007)
- ▶ ⇒ *a study's research design or literature review*
- ▶ Successful EAL scholars are willing to revise their articles and resubmit them, sometimes repeatedly, regardless of the language background of the writer (Belcher 2007)
- ▶ Increasing number of EAL writers become member of editorial boards (Master 1999)

# Theoretical background

## Thesis rationale

The importance of pragmatic competence for EFL writers

**Pragmatic competence** “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 intended” (Fraser 2010: 15)

## Definition of hedging (Hyland 2006)

“A hedge is any linguistic means used to indicate either a lack of complete commitment to the truth of a given proposition or a desire not to express that commitment categorically. Hedges are therefore the means by which a writer can present a proposition as an opinion rather than a fact” (Hyland 2006).

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# Examples of hedges

(1) The *data* below *suggests* that final year students and first year students view this cost differently...(Eng:1)

(2) There *appears* to be a need for more research into the 'other' unwritten curriculum...(Pol:2)

(3) Newfoundland and its Englishes research suggests that the Canadian Shift is much more advanced on the mainland than it *could possibly* be in St. John's...(Germ:3)



# Examples of hedges

(4) Although the study was *apparently* well received by the research participants, given the evidence of their feedback from reading their own case studies, I *may well have affected* their practice just by being willing to engage with them...(Eng:4)

# Four main functions of hedging

1. To avoid absolute statements
2. To distance themselves when the subject is controversial
3. To distance themselves from the evidence if it is well-respected in the field and they want to disagree with it
4. To distance themselves from the evidence if it doesn't have consistent support in the field

# Do hedges matter?

- ▶ “A necessary tool for writers of academic texts“ (Hyland 1994)
- ▶ “Hedges are face saving devices” (Hinkel 2002)
- ▶ Lack of hedging creates a tone of superiority (Hyland 2006)
- ▶ Expectations from the discourse community to master pragmatic competence (Hyland 2006)
- ▶ Kris Liu & Jean E. Fox *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review*, 2012

# Criticism of hedging in writing

- ▶ It is useless to teach the usage of hedges in ESP until an absolute definition exists (Crompton 1997)
- ▶ It is better to be clear and possibly wrong than fuzzy and “not even wrong” Steven Pinker
- ▶ “A good writer counts on cooperative nature of ordinary conversation” A conversation could not proceed unless there was a certain amount of charity between reader and writer” Steven Pinker

# PhD research questions, hypotheses and methods

1. Which hedged strategies are used in Polish, German and English PhD dissertations?
2. What is the strength of the hedges found in the three PhD Corpora?
3. Do non-native academic writers underuse or overuse hedges in their PhD dissertations in comparison to English writers?

# Hypotheses

1 Non-native writers will overuse hedges because hedges for them are teaching-induced

2 Non-native writers will display a more limited variety of hedged strategies in their writing, adhering mainly to modal verbs and modal adverbs

# Methods

- ▶ Corpus-based qualitative and quantitative analysis of English, German and Polish PhD dissertations
- ▶ Self- compilation of three PhD Corpora: Polish PhD Corpus (8 PhD thesis), German PhD Corpus (11 PhD thesis), English PhD Corpus (8 PhD thesis).
- ▶ Application of Hyland's taxonomy of hedges
- ▶ Comparison of normalized frequencies of hedges across the three PhD Corpora (quantitative analysis)
- ▶ Qualitative analysis of each hedge across the three PhD Corpora

# Sampling criteria for the PhD Corpora compilation

## **Representativeness, size, data processing**

“A corpus should capture enough of the language for accurate representation“ (Reppen 2010:32)

“Researchers should ensure the quality of the data they work with is never of lesser importance than the size of their corpora“ (Kennedy 1996:68, Nelson 2010:55)



# PhD Corpora Description

Corpus	Number of PhD thesis	Number of words	Average number of words per thesis
Polish PhD Corpus	8	456.945	57.118
German PhD Corpus	11	1.277.865	116.169
English PhD Corpus	8	560.646	70.080

Table 1: PhD Corpora description

Thesis No	Specialisation	Word tokens	Word types	Publication Year	Author's Gender	Author's Mother Tongue	Country of PhD Submission
Polish_1	Cogn.Ling.	46.588	4.403	2013	F	Polish	Poland
Polish_2	ELL	65.945	5.390	2014	F	Polish	Poland
Polish_3	ELL	74.137	4.803	2015	F	Polish	Poland
Polish_4	App. Ling.	45.472	4.171	2008	M	Polish	Poland
Polish_5	ELL	48.350	3.217	2012	F	Polish	Poland
Polish_6	ELL	114.032	6.769	2015	F	Polish	Poland
Polish_7	ELL	20.378	2.838	2006	M	Polish	Poland
Polish_8	ELL	42.043	4.023	2013	F	Polish	Poland
<b>Total</b>		<b>456.945</b>	<b>16.353</b>				

Table 2: Polish PhD Corpus description

Thesis No	Specialisat.	Word tokens	Word types	Publication Year	Gender	Mother Tongue	Country Submission
Germ_1	Hum.	105.804	10.711	2011	F	German	Germany
Germ_2	Lang. and Lit.	154.251	13.078	2000	M	German	Germany
Germ_3	ELL	77.091	4.541	2009	F	German	Germany
Germ_4	ELL	174.164	7.332	2014	M	German	Germany
Germ_5	Hum.	123.193	11.021	2011	F	German	Germany
Germ_6	Lit.	118.213	10.869	2002	M	German	Germany
Germ_7	Cul.Stud	158.838	12.168	2014	F	German	Germany
Germ_8	Appl. Ling.	92.729	9.395	2005	F	German	Germany
Germ_9	Lit.	109.781	11.075	1999	F	German	Germany
Germ_10	ELL	91.490	7.860	2004	F	German	Germany
Germ_11	Lit.	72.311	6.742	2011	F	German	Germany
<b>Total German PhD</b>		<b>1.277.865</b>	<b>38.994</b>				

Thesis No	Specialisation	Word tokens	Word types	Publication Year	Author's Gender	Author's Mother Tongue	Country of PhD Submission
Eng_1	Lit.	48.965	7.200	1978	F	Eng	UK, Eng
Eng_2	Ed.	54.594	5.041	2006	F	Eng	UK, Eng
Eng_3	Soc. Sciences	86.163	7.459	2002	F	Eng	UK, Eng
Eng_4	Appl.Ling.	98.043	6.282	2003	F	Eng	UK, Eng
Eng_5	Ling.	101.364	6.289	2006	F	Eng	UK, Eng
Eng_6	Ling. and Modern Eng. Lang.	72.528	7.537	2006	M	Eng	UK, Eng
Eng_7	Ed. Research	58.006	4.880	2006	M	Eng	UK, Eng
Eng_8	Ed. Research	40.983	3.334	2007	M	Eng	UK, Eng
<b>Total Eng.</b>		<b>560.646</b>	<b>24.254</b>				

Table 4: English PhD Corpus description

# Hyland's taxonomy of hedges

sensory verbs (*appear, seem*), verbs of perception (*believe*), lexical verbs (*indicate*), performative verbs (*suggest*), adjectives (*likely*), modal verbs (*can*), modal nouns (*possibility*), epistemic adverbs (*virtually*), diminishers (*partially*), concept of evidentiality (*according to*)

# Quantitative and qualitative analysis

Antconc

Some challenges categorising hedges,  
compare:

The results *may* indicate that

We carried out the experiment in *May*.

We *proposed* a new classification of...

He *proposed* to her...

Normalized frequencies, statistical tests (p.  
value, Fisher's exact test)

# Preliminary findings. Hypothesis 1

Non-native writers will use hedges more often because hedges for them are teaching-induced ✓

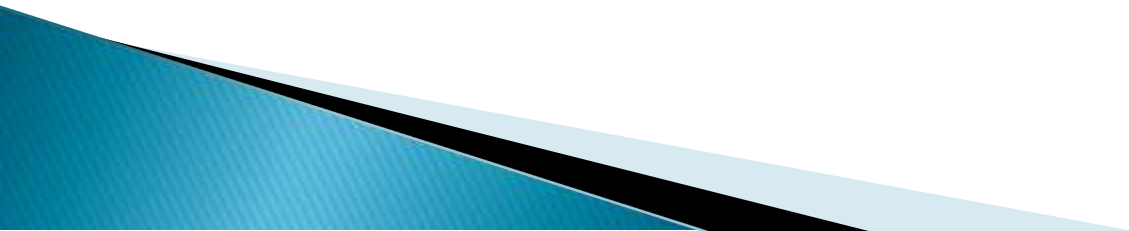
Most hedges were applied more frequently by non-native speakers, which confirms the first hypothesis

## Preliminary findings. Hypothesis 2

Non-native writers will display a more limited variety of hedged strategies in their writing, adhering mainly to modal verbs and modal adverbs **X**

A comparable variety of hedged strategies displayed in the non-native speaker PhD Corpora, which disproves the second hypothesis.





- ▶ Core modal auxiliaries
- ▶ *can, could, may, might, must, ought, shall, should, will, would*
- ▶ German PhD Corpus: 44.21%
- ▶ Polish PhD Corpus: 40.71%
- ▶ English PhD Corpus 40.22%

Freq Rank	Polish PhD Corpus	Per mln words	German PhD Corpus	Per mln words	English PhD Corpus	Per mln words
1	<i>can</i>	2122.7	<i>can</i>	2309.321	<i>can</i>	1913.8
2	<i>will</i>	1947.7	<i>will</i>	1453.988	<i>would</i>	1457.2
3	<i>may</i>	1702.6	<i>would</i>	968.803	<i>will</i>	1360.9
4	<i>would</i>	1177.3	<i>may</i>	692.561	<i>may</i>	1325.2
5	<i>might</i>	881.9	<i>could</i>	490.662	<i>might</i>	634.9
6	<i>could</i>	818.4	<i>might</i>	446.057	<i>could</i>	469.1
7	<i>must</i>	339.2	<i>must</i>	398.320	<i>must</i>	251.4
8	<i>shall</i>	80.9	<i>ought</i>	19.563	<i>shall</i>	107.0
9	<i>should</i>	17.5	<i>shall</i>	13.303	<i>should</i>	19.6
10	<i>ought</i>	2.1	<i>should</i>	9.390	<i>ought</i>	1.7

Table 5: Frequency rank of modal verbs per 1 mln words in the Polish, German and English PhD Corpora

# Nominalization

- ▶ Generally speaking: turning something into a noun.
- ▶ Nominalized structures include nouns that have been morphologically derived from verbs (e.g. development) and verbs that have been converted to nouns (e.g.increase)

# Nominalization

- ▶ **Academics**
- ▶ Subjects were tested under conditions of good to excellent acoustic isolation.
- ▶ *We tested the students in a quiet room*

# Nominalization

- ▶ **Politicians** (Rick Perry–Texas Governor) said it when the tropical storm Isaac threatened the Republican National Convention in 2012
- ▶ Right now there is not any anticipation there will be a cancellation.
- ▶ *Right now we don't anticipate we will have to cancel it.*

# Nominalization

- ▶ **Corporate consultants**
- ▶ “I’m a digital and social media strategist. I deliver programs, products and strategies to our corporate clients across the spectrum communications functions”
- ▶ *I teach big companies how to use Facebook.*

# Nominalization

- ▶ **Products engineers** (Portable generators used to carry the following warning)
- ▶ Mild exposure CO can result in accumulated damage over time. Extreme exposure to CO may rapidly be fatal without producing significant warning symptoms
- ▶ ***Using a generator indoors CAN KILL YOU IN MINUTES.***



# Nominalization

- ▶ Polish PhD Corpus: 6.81%
- ▶ German PhD Corpus: 4.86%
- ▶ English PhD Corpus: 7.23%

<b>Modal Nouns</b>	Per mln words Polish PhD Corpus	Per mln words German PhD Corpus	Per mln words English PhD Corpus
<i>argument</i>	<b>350.1</b>	83.7	251.4
<i>assumption</i>	<b>256.0</b>	93.9	214.0
<i>chance</i>	43.7	<b>99.3</b>	64.2
<i>doubt</i>	50.3	7.8	<b>53.5</b>
<i>estimate</i>	<b>39.3</b>	3.9	14.2
<i>likelihood</i>	<b>24.0</b>	7.0	8.9
<i>necessity</i>	24.0	<b>53.9</b>	53.5
<i>opportunity</i>	61.2	136.1	<b>383.4</b>
<i>possibility</i>	113.7	168.2	<b>231.8</b>
<i>tendency</i>	<b>558.0</b>	94.6	80.2

Table 5: Normalized frequencies of the researched modal nouns in the Polish, German, English PhD Corpora

# Preliminary conclusions

- ▶ Polish and German writers proved sensitive to Anglo–Saxon discourse practices with the variety of hedged strategies they applied in their PhD dissertations
- ▶ Non–native writers used hedges more often in their PhD dissertations, which is most probably teaching–induced
- ▶ Hyland’s (1998) claim that even advanced EFL learners have insufficient knowledge of the discourse conventions (i.e. they do not apply hedges in their writing) is not reflected in the study
- ▶ Some hedges (*undeniably, scarcely, mildly, strictly*) were not present in the English PhD Corpus but they occurred in at least one non–native PhD Corpora. However, the small size of the PhD Corpora may be the reason why certain hedges were not found.

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