Exploring Hedges and Boosters in 9/11 English Front Page News Articles

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Abstract

This study motivated to examine the role of interpersonal metadiscourse markers such as hedges and boosters. In order to illuminate this relation, 27 front pages of widely read newspapers in US. were selected randomly from around 50 news about 9/11 events. Therefore, quantitative and qualitative methods were applied to answer the research questions to identify the frequency of hedge and booster employment. Moreover, to determine the supposedly meaningful differences between hedge and booster application in the corpus, the chi-square test was used. The findings showed that hedges were the most frequently used metadiscourse markers in English front page news articles. As the subcategories of hedging devices, probability adverbs occupied the highest position, while verbs as booster subcategories, were the most numerous devices used to describe writers’ certainty. It was concluded that journalists preferred to be conservative by using indirect strategies like adverbs and adjective employment about controversial issues like 9/11.

Keywords: discourse analysis, interpersonal metadiscourse markers, hedge and booster, Hyland, 9/11 English front page newspaper
1. Introduction

Discourse analysis is regarded as a study of language in use. Barton (2004) defines it as a “method for analyzing the ways that specific features of language contribute to the interpretation of texts in their various contexts. (p.57). The meaning that would be inferred from this definition is that discourse analysts not only are trying to provide a detailed analysis of text, but also intend to search beyond the meaning of sentences to consider the impacts that participants, situations, goals and results of an interaction will have on text, as well. Therefore, discourse analysis realizes forms and functions of a language as well as its social and cultural features. Moreover, it would lead to a better understanding and an effective communication. Schiffrin (1994) assumed six various theoretical viewpoints and analytic approaches toward discourse analysis: speech act theory, interactional sociolinguistics, ethnography of communication, pragmatics, conversation analysis and variation analysis. Although these approaches highlight a different aspects of language use, but the common ground for all of them is to consider language as a means of interaction and social communication. One of the resources that would be helpful for realizing this fact is metadiscourse markers.

Metadiscourse is usually speculated as “discourse about discourse” or “communication about communication” (Kopple, 1985, p. 83). But more recently, researches have been found that metadiscourse is more than just pointing out toward discourse. However, it involves the relations between text, writer, and reader. This would be due to the fact that writers using metadiscourse to engage readers in their text and inclined to conduct readers through the text to grasp the inputs they meant beyond the text. Hyland (2005) considered metadiscourse as “an umbrella term to include an apparently heterogeneous array of cohesion and interpersonal features which help relate a text to its context (p.16); hence, he divided these markers into interactive and interactional resources; the former focuses on conducting readers through text by applying transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials, and code glosses while the latter engages readers in the text by using hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mention, and engagement markers.

The focus of this study is to explore the role of hedge and booster. Since Hyland’s assumption of writer-reader relation might be achieved by balanced employment of tentativeness and assertion to represent interpersonal aspect; hence this probably shape the text effectively. Hyland (1996, 1998) defined hedges as “emphasis on the subjectivity of a position by allowing information to be presented as an opinion rather than a fact and therefore open that position to negotiation. On the other hand, boosters as Hyland (2005) claimed are “words which allow writers to close down alternatives, head of conflicting views and express their certainty in what they say”. Thus, investigating hedges and boosters in a text might help understanding the stance of writers and their perspectives toward a proposition.

One way to demonstrate writer’s viewpoint is mass media. Media are believed to be a powerful means for exchanging information. Newspapers are one of these mediums and are still popular. Unlike TV or radio, newspapers would provide signs that readers could interpret at their free time without a time constraint. Thus, editors try their best to get the attention of their readers by putting important news on the front page. Front page of newspaper as Oxford dictionary defines is “the first page of a newspaper containing the most remarkable news of the day. News of the front page should be important enough to get the
readers’ attention like 9/11 events. In 2001, the world witnessed a horrific event that shook everyone’s heart. In 9/11, the two world Trade Center towers, where at least 50,000 people worked, collapsed. The way journalists, from all around the world, tend to report their news, despite covering the same event, had their differences. These diversities might be discovered through their usage of metadiscourse markers.

**Objectives of the study**

The purpose of the present study is to illuminate the interpersonal aspects of metadiscourse by employing hedges and boosters in the text. It aims to addresses the following research questions:

1. What is the frequency of hedge and booster used in English news articles?
2. Is there any significant difference between applying hedge and booster in English news articles?

In this study, section 2 will briefly present some theoretical and empirical background of metadiscourse. Materials, data collection and analysis would be explained in section 3. Findings of the present study include number and frequency of metadiscourse markers and related discussion will be analyzed in section 4. Finally, section 6 will describe the conclusion and implication of the study respectively. Finally, the study will conclude by pointing out some suggestions for further researches.

2- Literature Review

Zellig Harris introduced the concept of “metadiscourse” in 1959 as an aspect of interaction by language usages. Developing language researches in written discourse, Meyer (1975) further expanded this concept and since then, many definitions and classification systems have been propose for metadiscourse markers (Schiffrin, 1980; Williams, 1981; Kopple, 1985; Crismore, 1993; and Hyland, 2005). All of these carried out studies over the past decades have suggested two planes for discourse. They considered the propositional aspect in the first plane and regarded metadiscourse markers in second. Among initial classification systems, Williams, Kopple and Crismore considered a place for hedges and boosters in their proposed models. In spite of regarding these types of statements as interpersonal markers, but their labeling were different. To discuss the certainty and uncertainty of writer, Williams considered hedges and emphatics, while Kopple expressed hedge and emphatics as a sub-categories of validity markers. Nevertheless, Crismore introduced the terms hedge and certainty marker to mention writer’s commitment or caution toward a proposition.

But in 2004, Hyland and Tse, rejected this claim and proposed a new frame work. They believed that “metadiscourse is a self-reflective linguistic material referring to the evolving text and to the writer and imagined reader of that text (Hyland and Tse, 2004). Hyland presented his idea by suggesting that these two levels of discourse should not be separated since they complement each other. In the previous models, metadiscourse markers were divided into textual and interpersonal categories. Nevertheless, Hyland, considering the interaction between writer, text, and reader, claimed that all metadiscourse markers are interpersonal. Thus, he expressed these markers as interactive and interactional resources based on Thompson and Thetela’s (1995) model. Indeed, he regarded hedge and booster as interactional category.
So far, there have been many researches carried out on metadiscourse markers such as research articles (Hyland, 1998; Hyland, 2000; and Touni, 2009), academic writing (Hyland and Tse, 2004; and Jones, 2011), educational texts (Crismore, 1989; and Camiciottoli, 2003) and cross-cultural studies (Blagojevic, 2004; and Burneikeite, 2008).

Despite of importance of newspaper as a powerful medium, only few researchers investigated the role of metadiscourse markers in this type of discourse (Le, 2004; and Dafouz-milne in 2008).

To demonstrate the editorials' argumentative structure, Le (2004) investigated three metadiscourse markers- evidentials, person markers and relational markers- in one of the France elite newspaper, Le Monde. Le tried to show the presence of editorial’s authority within written argumentation. The findings of the study represented the fact that Le Monde editorialists regarded themselves as a committed, responsible and the kind of journalists who reflects people’s ideas. The concluding parts of Le study illuminated the fact that these three metadiscourse markers had an influential role in presenting universality, actuality, fairness, rationality.

In order to explore the role of textual and interpersonal metadiscourse markers, Dafouz-milne (2008) collected 40 opinion columns from two leading newspapers in Britain- The Times- and Spain- El País. He aimed to identify the role of metadiscourse markers in achieving persuasion based on cross-cultural and cross-linguistic preferences of these two newspapers’ journalists. Findings of his study showed diversity in metadiscourse markers distribution in both newspapers, particularly in the case of logical markers and code glosses. The result also emphasized on the presence of metadiscourse markers in text as an essential means of persuasion.

Front page is considered as the most important page of a newspaper, due to the fact that it acts like a showcase and plays a significant role in selling newspapers. Editors are fully aware of the importance of this page; hence they carefully select and arrange the front page information. In spite of newspaper fundamentality in community, to author’s knowledge, there has been no study in examining the role of hedges and boosters in newspaper discourse. Therefore, the present study aims to fill this void by investigating these two markers used by American journalists to cover 9/11 news reports.

3- Methodology

3-1- Materials

In order to fulfill the purpose of the present study, 27 front pages of widely read newspapers in United States were chosen (see appendix A). These newspapers were selected randomly from around 50 news articles to deal with the problem of specificity of writers’ styles. All of these front pages were about 9/11 events and published on the 12th September in 2001. These news reports were retrieved from an online newspaper archive (see appendix B). To make the corpus data comparable, all of the chosen articles were matched in length.

3-2- Data Collection and Data Analysis
To examine the role of hedge and booster in newspapers’ front page, Hyland (2005, p.49) classification system of interpersonal metadiscourse were used. (See table 1). This framework has been widely employed in most of the recent studies on metadiscourse due to its justified explanation and exemplification to clarify the relation between writer, text and reader.

Table1- Hyland’s (2005) classification of interpersonal metadiscourse markers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1. Interactional metadiscourse markers</th>
<th>2. functions</th>
<th>3. Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10. Attitude marker</td>
<td>11. Express writer’s attitude</td>
<td>12. To my surprise, unfortunately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Self-mention</td>
<td>14. Explicit reference to author(s)</td>
<td>15. I, we</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In order to identify the number of metadiscourse markers, all newspapers’ front page were investigated manually. Then, for determining the frequency of these markers and to answer the research questions, a quantitative analysis was carried out. In addition, for statistical data analysis of this study, SPSS 18 was used and to examine the fact that whether there is a significant difference between hedge and booster usage in the corpus, the Chi-square test was applied.

4- Results and Discussion

As it can be seen in table 2, the total numbers and frequencies of the interactional metadiscourse markers in the corpus are represented.

Table2- Numbers and frequencies of interactional metadiscourse markers

As it can be seen in table 2, American journalists employed hedges (72.2%) more than boosters (27.8%). In order to determine whether there is any significant difference between hedge and boosters applied in these data sets, the chi-square test was used. In table 3, the observed value of chi-square ($\chi^2 = 21.33$) is meaningful at $\alpha$ level ($\alpha = 0.05$) with a degree of freedom of 1.

**Table 3 - Results of chi-square test of hedge and booster usage in corpus**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>46. P</th>
<th>47. df</th>
<th>48. value</th>
<th>49.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50. 0.000</td>
<td>51. 1</td>
<td>52. 21.33</td>
<td>53. X</td>
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<td>55.</td>
<td>56.</td>
<td>57. 108</td>
<td>58. n</td>
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<td>54. &lt; 0.05</td>
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</table>

As figure 1 demonstrates the fact that the difference between hedge and booster usage is significant since the hedges are employed in a higher degree.
Hyland (2005) claimed that all types of metadiscourse markers are interpersonal due to the fact that these markers help writers to express their attitudes and perspectives toward a proposition, and simultaneously, engage readers in their text by leaving the opportunities open for them to alter ideas or construct their interpretations. Hedges and boosters are contributing factors in creating relations between writer, reader and text.

The analysis of data demonstrates that American journalists used hedges as the most numerous markers (72.2%). The reason for applying hedge in a text is because it reveals writers’ uncertainty and cautious in a texts. Since 9/11 was a controversial and political issue, journalists preferred to be conservative and indirect by avoiding assertion or confining their commitment toward the truth level of the text. This strategy would journalists to fuzz the writer-text relation and hence, to wriggle out of responsibility for expressing their personal claim by using epistemic verbs or probability adjectives or adverbs.

As for the subcategories of hedges, according to table 2, probability adverbs (e.g. apparently, probably, possibly) occupied the highest position (39.7%) followed by epistemic verbs (e.g. could, might, seem, indicate) and probability adjectives (e.g. possible, most) which both were the second frequently used features (25.6%) in English news articles. Figure 2 presents the percentage of hedging devices.
In the following, some related examples, taken from American front page news reports, are presented (see appendix A):

1- Hundreds were apparently killed aboard the jets. (probability adverb)

2- Hatch also said law enforcement has data possibly linking one of the ill-fated flights to bin Laden’s organization. (probability adverb)

3- In the most devastating terrorist attacks ever against the US. knife-wielding hijackers crashed 2 airliners into the World Trade Center on Tuesday, toppling its twin 110-story towers. (probability adjective)

4- Bin Laden agents also might have worked with other groups. (epistemic verbs)

5- The sophisticated strikes stunned America and seemed to push the nation toward a wartime footing. (epistemic verbs).

The data analysis also presented that boosters, also known as emphatics or certainty markers, were the least and minimally employed markers in the front page news articles. According to Hyland (2005), boosters to write with assurance, while effecting interpersonal solidarity, setting the caution and self-effacement suggested by hedge against assertion and involvement (p.179). It has believed that boosters, unlike hedges, used to describe writers’ confident and their commitment toward a proposition; furthermore, it helps writers’ to build a relationship with their readers by focusing on the shared thoughts and experiences in addition to emphasizing the fact of being a member of a specific community. For the purpose of being intimate and close to the reader, writers might use features like verbs, adjectives or adverbs.

As it is shown in figure 3, among three subcategories of boosters occurred in corpus, verbs (e.g. show, prove) received the highest position (43.3%), followed by adjectives (e.g. worst, highest) which were the second frequently used features (30%), and finally the least used devices (26.7%) were adverbs (e.g. obviously, absolutely).

Figure 3- Percentage of booster subcategories
There are some related instances taken from American front page in the following (see appendix A):

1- President Bush and congressional leaders sought to calm a shaken nation and show the government was functioning and determined after Tuesday’s deadly terrorist attacks. (verb)

2- US. President George W. Bush last night vowed swift and severe retribution against those who carried out the worst terrorist attacks in history. (adjectives)

3- In the immediate aftermath the calamity was being ranked as the worst and most audacious terrorist attacks in American history. (adjective)

4- Their defense was completely useless. (adverb)

5- They have reduced the hated Bush to a pitiful president refugee,…, by a staff which obviously knows less about the power of symbolism than American’s enemies do.

In order to compare and identify the difference between verbs as subcategories of hedges and booster, the second chi-square test was used. In table 4, the observed value of chi-square ($x^2=1.48$) is not meaningful at $\alpha$ level ($\alpha=0.05$) with a degree of freedom of 1 ($\text{sig} > 0.05$). This indicates that there is no significant difference between verbs usage in both hedges and boosters subcategories.

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<td>63. 0.223</td>
<td>64. 1</td>
<td>65. 1.48</td>
<td>66. X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>67. &gt;0.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>68.</td>
<td>69.</td>
<td>70. 33</td>
<td>71. n</td>
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</table>

The third chi-square test was run to analyze the supposedly difference between adverbs as hedges and boosters subcategories. As table 5 represented, the value observed of chi-square test ($x^2= 13.56$) is meaningful at $\alpha$ level ($\alpha=0.05$) with a degree of freedom of 1 ($\text{sig} < 0.05$). Therefore, considering the usage of adverbs, there is a significant difference in these two groups; because of a higher percentage of using adverbs in hedge categories in comparison to booster categories.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>72. P</th>
<th>73. df</th>
<th>74. Value</th>
<th>75.</th>
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</table>
The final chi-square test was applied to indicate the difference between adjectives used in both hedges and boosters subcategories. As it can be seen in table 6, the value observed of chi-square ($X^2 = 4.17$) is meaningful at $\alpha$ level ($\alpha=0.05$) with a degree of freedom of 1 ($\text{sig}< 0.05$). Hence, the significant difference is because of higher employment of adjectives in hedge subcategories.

Table 6 - Results of hedge and booster subcategory (adjectives)

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<tr>
<td>85. P</td>
<td>86. df</td>
<td>87. Value</td>
<td>88.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>89. 041</td>
<td>90. 1</td>
<td>91. 4.17</td>
<td>92. X</td>
</tr>
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<td>93. &lt;0.05</td>
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<tr>
<td>94.</td>
<td>95.</td>
<td>96. 29</td>
<td>97. n</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

As findings demonstrates, it seems that a reason why journalist preferred to use a fair amount of verbs in their news articles might be due to the fact that verbs could be more overt in describing commitments. However, being essential factors of writing, adjectives and adverbs assist writers in adding details and expressing their opinions toward a proposition, while helping readers to build an image and figure out the mental attitude of writers. Thus, employing adverbs or adjectives help journalists to indicate their claims covertly and indirectly, yet politely, toward a controversial issue like 9/11.

5-Conclusion

The present study aimed to illuminate the role of hedges and boosters as devices of indicating interpersonal metadiscourse markers. With the growing interest over written discourse studies, researches have concentrated on markers which demonstrate discourse beyond a simple and pure information exchange. To fulfill this purpose, this study investigated the role of hedges and boosters in front page of American news articles about 9/11.

The findings revealed that journalists preferred to employ hedge more than booster. One reason is because of conservatism policy to express their perspectives indirectly and tentatively to reduce the level of their commitment toward a proposition to avoid the unwanted consequences.
The further analysis of the data also presented adverbs as the highest employed hedging devices for describing writer’s uncertainty and caution in news articles, while verbs, as one of the booster’s subcategories, received the highest degree of application in news reports to mark the writer’s confidence about a claim.

The results of chi-square test illuminated the significant difference between usage of adverbs and adjectives in both hedge and booster subcategories; due to the fact that the number of the adverbs and adjectives employed by American journalists were higher.

The findings of this study might motivate some ideas for further researches. So far, many studies have carried out to investigate the role of interpersonal metadiscourse markers like hedge in various fields, but unfortunately, the news discourse has taken for granted. Despite the importance of news articles, the journalists’ strategies for representing their inputs need to be analyzed to clarify the positive and negative points of them.

References


**Appendix A:**

List of the selected front page news articles:

1. The National Post
2. The Globe and Mail
3. The Leaf-Chronicle
4. The Sun Herald
5. Herald Tribune
6. The Wichita Eagle
7. The Anniston Star
8. The Advocate
9. The Idaho Statesman
10- Sun Journal
11- The Burlington Free Press
12- The News Leader
13- The Town Talk
14- The Forum
15- Times Tribune
16- Tribune
17- The Daily Telegraph
18- The Norwich Bulletin
19- Journal Star
20- The Clarion Ledger
21- Portland Press Herald
22- The Jackson sun
23- The Gazette
24- Statesman Journal
25- Concord Monitor
26- Chicago Tribune
27- The News & Observer

Appendix B:

All of the English news articles used in this study were retrieved from: