

A Corpus-Based Study of Hedges in News Report

—A Case Study of COVID-19 in *China Daily*

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Hedges refer to the speakers who deliberately make the language more vague or clear in order to achieve its target language form. The initial COVID-19 in 2020 is a global epidemic, and people who stay at home relying on Internet media channels to obtain information. People are more likely to take news media as the prior measure to contact with the information. COVID-19 news is closely related to people's daily life. COVID-19 news requires accuracy and high expression of language, and it is easy for readers to find out that reporters use a large number of hedges in COVID-19 news articles. This paper intends to conduct a self-built micro corpus so as to explore the use of hedges in COVID-19 news. Based on this research purpose, this article focuses on solving two problems: (1). The similarities and differences in the frequency and distribution of hedges in COVID-19 news; (2). The pragmatic and public opinion functions of hedges in the news of the COVID-19 epidemic. The result of the study indicated that a great number of hedges are used in the COVID-19 news. According to Prince's classification of Hedges from the perspective of pragmatics, the distribution and frequency of different types of hedges are various. Reports sometimes manipulate the usage of hedges, change their hedging functions to protect the image of countries, enhance reader's confidence and guide a favorable environment to society.

Keywords: hedges, COVID-19, corpus, public opinion, *China Daily*

Introduction

As for the development of the study of hedges, it was Lotfi Aliasker Zadeh who firstly came up with the notion "fuzzy set" on Information and Control in 1965. As far as Zadeh's concerned, in the real physical world there exist fuzzy classes of objects, and even "most of the classes encountered in the real world are fuzzy-some only slightly and some markedly so" (Zadeh, 1965, pp. 338-353). The notion of hedges was initially introduced into linguistics by George Lakoffas "words whose meaning implicitly involves fuzziness, words whose job is to makethings fuzzier or less fuzzy" (Lakoff, 1973, pp. 458-508). As an important part of vague language, hedges change the degree of vagueness in the discourse. Hedges also show different connotations and functions in different contexts. *China Daily* is a national English daily newspaper of China, founded in 1981. As an important threshold for China to contact with the world, world is acquainted with China as well, "China Daily" is a Chinese newspaper that has effectively entered the mainstream international society and has the highest reprint rate in the area of foreign media. It is also the media that has hosted the most large-scale international

conference proceedings in China. It gains a good credibility and authority for a long time. As a window for the COVID-19 epidemic news report, *China Daily* plays a vital role in building the image of the country in news reports. Being good at using, hedges will effectively build a positive image of the country.

Research Design

Methodology

This paper selects 100 news reports about the COVID-19 news on *China Daily* in January 2020 as the research corpus. This study will resort to a corpus-driven quantitative analysis and a qualitative analysis. Quantitative research aims to find out the similarities and differences in the use of hedges in COVID-19 news. For the qualitative research, based on the result of first part study, the author will target on the type of hedge which analyzes some examples under the categorization of hedges by Prince (Prince, Frader, & Bosk, 1982, pp. 83-97). Through the combination of quantitative and qualitative study, the author tries to make the research more objective and persuasive. The topics of the corpus cover a wide range, including illness notification data, determination to fight the “epidemic”, medical supply, drug research and development progress, speeches and inspections of leaders, assistance from various countries, and resumption of work.

Theoretical Framework

Prince (1982) and his colleagues Frader and Bosk (Prince, Frader, & Bosk, 1982, pp. 83-97) carried out an empirical study on hedges and classified hedges into two categories, that is, approximators and shields. Those that can change the understanding of the proposition in accordance with the actual conditions, and even change the original meaning of utterance structure. Approximators can affect the truth value conditions of propositions or amend the original statements of the proposition in an adaptable range according to the given information. Shields are those words and expressions that cannot affect the truth-value conditions of the propositions but show how much the speakers commit to the truth-value of the proposition. Shields can also indicate that the speakers tend to hold the suspicious or reserved attitude by using vague word and expressions. Adaptors and rounders are composed of approximators. Adaptors are those words that are used to amend the original meaning of the propositions to some extent in accordance with the actual situations. In verbal communication, adaptors tend to be used when the speakers are uncertain about whether the proposition is correct or not (Xu Jin, 2017). Shields can be further divided into two types, plausibility shields and attribution shields. Plausibility shields is used to represent the speaker’s surmise and conjecture or they indicate that the speaker holds the hesitant attitude towards the proposition. In this case, plausibility shields tend to include the first-person pronouns that can symbolize the speaker’s outlook towards the proposition (Zhao, 2020, pp. 38-41).

Research Data

According to the categorization of hedges from Prince, etc., hedges can be classified into four types, namely the adaptors, rounders, plausibility shields and attribution shields (Prince, Frader, & Bosk, 1982, pp. 83-97). Specifically, these kinds of hedges are shown as follows:

Table 1

Four Kinds of Hedges

Adaptor	A little bit, almost, kind of, somewhat, generally, commonly, more or less, etc.
Rounder	About, approximately, over, roughly, in most respects, around, less than, etc.
Plausibility Shields	I think, I believe, I suppose, I am afraid, hard to say, as far as I can tell, etc.
Attribution Shields	According to, it is said that, somebody says, as is well known, etc.

The research data of this paper come from one self-built mini corpora which is called the China Daily Corpus (CDC). The COVID-19 news reports of CDC are selected from rather authoritative Chinese newspapers. The COVID-19 news from the newspapers chosen in this thesis contain this kind of news from different areas, and the specific contents can be showed in Table 2.

Table 2

Source of CDC COVID-19 News

Subtype of COVID-19 News	Main COVID-19 Events	Number of News Items	Source	Total Number of Words
China Daily News	The case of initial outbreaking	25	China Daily	86436
	The case of data notification	25		
	The case of medical supply	25		
	The case of vaccine research	25		

As mentioned in Table 2, the newspapers has three common features: representativeness, authority and wide acceptability (Chen, 2020, pp. 97-99). It gains a rather high reputation, has a mass of page views and a great number of readers around the world, so the research materials selected from the newspapers will be considerable representative and convincing.

As we planned, 100 pieces of COVID-19 news will be collected from above mentioned newspaper to build the one mini corpora CDC for this study. In order to guarantee the credibility and the comparability of the final research results, we choose the relative news reports upon the very significant event around the world. The process of choosing these research corpora will start from the beginning of 2020. The reason why selected COVID-19 events as the core of materials selection of the present study is that the personnel casualty and property losses, which have a great influence on people's lifeworld.

Data Analysis

Because of the close relationship between people's life and COVID-19 news, news writers use hedges in their news writing certainly. The overall frequency (n/1000 words) of hedges in the collected data can be showed in Table 3:

Table 3

The Frequency (n/1000 words) of Hedges in Data

Subtypes of COVID-19	Hedges	Word Number of Corpus	Hedges per 1,000 Words
CDC	2367	86436	27.38%

We can get the whole frequency of hedges in the overall number of the one mini corpora (Table 2) and the using frequency of hedges (27.38 per 1,000 words) in CDC. About the specific distribution condition of classification of hedges, we can see Table 4.

Table 4

The Distribution and Frequency of Four Types of Hedges in CDC

Corpus	Variable Hedges		Moderating Hedges	
Hedges	A	R	PS	AS
Frequency	632	721	564	450
% in Hedges	26.7%	30.4%	23.8%	19%

Note: A=Adaptor; R=Rounder; PS=Plausibility Shield; AS=Attribution Shield.

In order to show a clear and explicit distribution of each category of hedges in corpora, a corresponding figure of corpus is drawn.

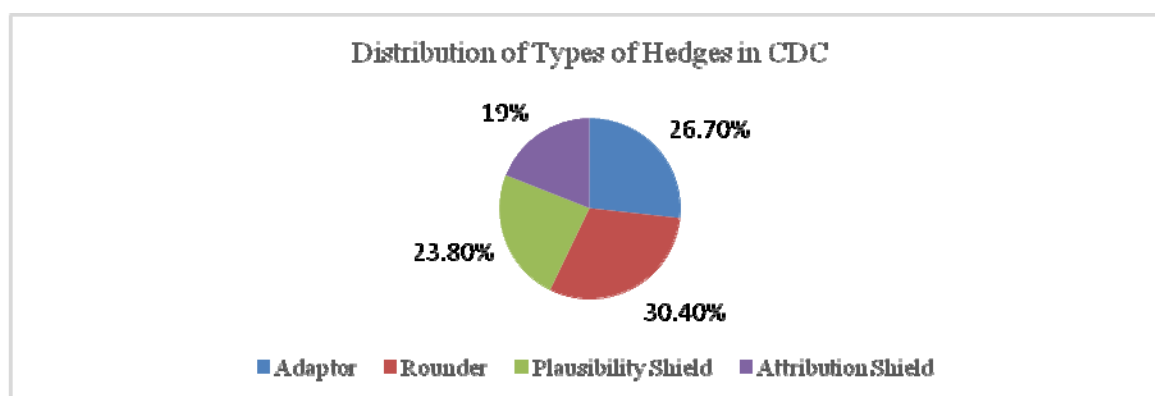


Figure 1. Distribution of Types of Hedges in CDC.

Because the collected materials are small part of the news, we only count the proportion of various hedges in the corpus. The total of hedges appeared 2367 times in the COVID-19 news report, and they were ranked according to the proportion of various types of hedges. The proportions of adaptors and rounders are 26.7% and 30.4%, plausibility shields (23.8%), and attribution shields (19%).

Result and Discussion

A great number of hedges existed in *China Daily*. From Table 3, we can clearly know that the frequency of hedges in CDC is 2,367, which occupies 27.38% (n/1000 words) of the whole numbers of CDC. Among all the 100 selected news items, it is quite obvious that every item is presented by using a rather number of hedges. As Table 4 presents, the overall number of hedges in CDC is 2,367, and the four subtypes of hedges from the total number of hedges in CDC are 26.7% (Adaptors), 30.4% (Rounders), 23.78% (Plausibility Shields) and 19% (Attribution Shields) respectively. It is obvious to know that all the subtypes of hedges are employed in Chinese COVID-19 news writing.

Public Opinion Function and Pragmatic Analysis of Hedges in CDC

According to the classification of hedges in the corpus, we list examples of hedges used in news reports of the COVID-19, and analyze the specific situations of the use of hedges in media news reports, and explain their pragmatic function and public opinion function (Wang, 2014).

Although the median incubation period of the virus is three days, it could be as long as 24 days in very rare cases, according to research led by Zhong published on Sunday. (*China Daily*, 2020, p. 23)

In this sentence, “according to” (attribution shield) tells the source of the information, indicating that the words from a third party, which tells the public that the information comes from the spokes person of an authoritative organization. COVID-19 period may be as long as 24 days news once reported, the over interpretation of some media triggers the chaos of society. “as long as” is misinterpreted intentionally or unintentionally, which leads to the aggravation of public stress syndrome. When the negative emotion accumulates to a certain threshold, it will affect human health, and the impact may equal to the impact of disease on human body.

The ongoing coronavirus outbreak would have temporary, limited economic effects, but it won’t leave a permanent mark on the Chinese economy due to the country’s strong economic fundamentals, according to the nation’s top economic regulator. (*China Daily*, 2020, p. 124)

Vague expressions can serve as a buffer if later statements are proved to be wrong. If we can’t provide complete details, reporters can avoid the absolute description by using hedges. In this way, some negative effects will be transferred. “would” (rounder) is a kind of hedges to express possibility, which avoids absoluteness and self-protection (Wu & Yang, 2021, pp. 45-52).

It shows the advantages of China’s system. The experience of China is worth learning for other countries.

I believe the measures China has taken will effectively control and finally prevail over the epidemic. (*China Daily*, 2020, p. 78)

China Daily reported that “I believe (plausibility shield) the measures China has taken will effectively control and finally prevail over the epidemic.” The hedges in this news indicate that China’s approach has been appreciated by the World Health Organization. It also serves to show countries’ image, set up a positive and noble banner for countries (Chen & Xie, 2020, pp. 100-103).

At 10:46 pm on Friday, the Chinese Academy of Sciences announced that preliminary research had found that Shuanghuanglian Mixture, a kind of herbal medicine, can inhibit the novel coronavirus 2019-nCoV. (*China Daily*, 2020, p. 231)

At the beginning of 2020, when the COVID-19 broke out and the people were panicking and anxious, a news item in the People’s Daily immediately brought “hope” to people. The People’s Daily official Weibo posted “Shanghai Institute of Drugs and Wuhan Institute of virology jointly found that Shuanghuanglian can inhibit the new coronavirus.” As soon as the news came out, the whole Internet was boiling, and Shuanghuanglian Oral Liquid instantly became a “life-saving potion” for the people. People went out or bought large quantities of Shuanghuanglian Oral Liquid through online shopping. On the second day after the

“snatching” incident, major mainstream media and some online media issued a reminder that “inhibition” (adaptor) does not mean “prevention” or “treatment.”

Conclusion

Through the quantitative and qualitative analysis of hedges in COVID-19 news reports, we can find that hedges have some new developments and changes compared with previous functions, which can be summarized into some more specific usages, showing whether they are in The semantic level is still at the pragmatic level. Hedges play a very important role in COVID-19 news reports, which enlightens the writers of country's news report to make good use of hedges. The postivite function will be produced by the correctly use of hedges. In addition, the quantitative analysis shows the use of variable and moderating hedges in *China daily*, and also puts forward new requirements for the writers of our country's epidemic news report. Apart from using attribution shield to enhance the objectivity and authority of hedges in news report. Plausibility shield should be used in order to establish a close relationship between people and authority and guide a good social atmosphere.

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