

How to Hedge in Psychology Discipline? A Cross-National Study

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Abstract: Communication in academic setting is necessary for all researchers in any field. One of the ways of this communication is through article writing. Therefore analyzing the features of articles in different disciplines is essential. Hence, the purpose of this study was to analyze the use of hedges, as one of the important elements in academic writing, in psychology discipline. To this end, 30 research articles written by American authors as Native Authors (NAs), Iranian Authors (IAs), and Turkish Authors (TAs) were selected and their discussion section were analyzed. After applying chi-square procedure for groups, it was found that significant difference existed between NAs and non-native authors. This means that IAs and TAs used more hedges in their writings. However, there was no significant difference between IAs and TAs. This can be meant that the regional norms in Iran and Turkey are the same. If non-native psychology researchers want to publish their works in international journals they should adapt their hedges to the standard norms in their discipline.

[M. Yavuz Konca, Sina Nasiri. **How to Hedge in Psychology Discipline? A Cross-National Study.** *J Am Sci* 2014;10(10):1-5]. (ISSN: 1545-1003). <http://www.jofamericanscience.org>. 1

Key words: Articles, Hedges, NAs, IAs, TAs

1. Introduction

Writing skill is one of the basic language skills that represent the mastery of a language user over the language. Writing can be regarded as the manifestation of a person's thoughts, feelings, understandings, and ideas. It is a sort of communication that writer sends comments to readers. Writing is an effort to communicate with the readers. A writer not only has an inclination and purpose but also has concepts to transfer. If the writer meets the needs and expectations of readers, his writing will be considered as a good writing (Widdowson 1979).

Different texts have various structures that differ due to purpose, status, author, audience, information load and genre (Grabe & Kaplan 1996). Therefore, texts are organized by the writer's relation to it, the reader's assumed knowledge, the subject matter and the situation.

One context which needs writing among participants is academic context since the researchers require presenting their findings to their counterparts in an accepted and standard way. However, great differences exist in various fields like in rhetorical structures, author-reader relations, discipline's conventions, and organization of a text. Learning to write academically means learning how to use complex rhetorical structures, but as these vary from one discipline to another, the writing skills that the authors acquire should cover the conventions of their own discipline (Nasiri, 2012a).

The notion that the rhetorical structures of the texts in different languages vary and that such variation must be considered in language teaching

programs has received significant attention since it was proposed by Kaplan (1966). The term contrastive rhetoric was introduced by Kaplan (1966) for the first time and it was affected by Sapir-Whorf hypothesis which offers a close connection between language and our understanding of the surrounding world. It has been hypothesized that each language, culture and discipline has exclusive rhetorical conventions (Grabe & Kaplan, 1989; Kaplan, 1966, 1972, 1988). Needless to say, writing and rhetoric have the important roles in the construction of knowledge in any discipline. Accordingly, authors should be provided with regular chances to develop their academic writing skill within the context of their own disciplines.

Investigations in the filed of writing and academic writing show that writing is not an ability that can be developed and improved once and then automatically transferred to new environments. Rather, new types of writings demand new capabilities and understandings. It is clear that the construction of knowledge in any discipline requires enough recognition of rhetoric and style of writing in that particular discipline. A key concept here is discourse communities which have a common set of rhetorical goals (Swales, 1990) and each community has its own language that is used as a part of social behavior to develop the community's understanding.

As it was mentioned, persons use language to help them become members of a particular discourse community and to create relations with the community. Publication, and especially article publication, is a kind of methods that researchers in a

field can have relations with their colleagues. Thus, writing is a valuable activity in each academic and scientific context and to do it successfully one needs a particular audience and an ability to convey information.

Therefore, researchers should try to have enough knowledge about the particular features and conventions of academic writing in their own disciplines to present their findings in a persuasive way that their community-mates accept the submitted information. This can be done through the understanding of the term metadiscourse. The term metadiscourse, or metatext is used to refer to "the linguistic material in texts, whether spoken or written, that does not add anything to the propositional content but that is intended to help the listener or reader organize, interpret, and evaluate the information given" (Crismore, Markkanen, & Steffensen, 1993, p. 40).

One of the interpersonal metadiscourse features which authors must consider is the use of hedges in their works. "Hedging means the way people express their uncertainty about something or state something uncertain, and "hedges" are words or phrase which carry the speaker's uncertainty" (Bonano, 1982, p. 36). Salager-Meyer (1997) investigates hedges as threat minimizing strategies, strategies to deal with certainty of knowledge which include politeness strategies in the social interactions and negotiations between writers (speakers) and readers (listeners).

Hyland (1996a) appropriately explained the term hedge as a variable which influences communicative ability. He conducted a study on hedging in academic writing and revealed that generally non-native writers (NNWs) are not able to hedge their claims when they write in "English as a main language of communication among the researchers around the world" (Nasiri, 2012b, p. 3). Therefore he concluded that NNWs "invariably require training in the appropriate use of hedging" (Hyland, 1996a, 278). The reason given was that NNWs often had hardships in uttering their commitment to and detachment from the propositions in their academic writings. Hyland (1996b) also observes that the inability to hedge statements properly is an obstruction to the non-native writers to participate actively in the academic world. Along with these statements, Kaplan (1987) points out that there is a lack of subtle writing skills among NNWs. He argues the differences between NNWs' and NWs' (native writers') texts and concludes that a non-native writer lacks the enough information to make choices properly.

The above discussion showed the importance of the analysis of articles in different disciplines in a contrastive way, by native and non-native authors, to

inform non-native authors about the conventions of a particular discipline. Reviewing the literature reveals great number of studies in this field. For example, Nasiri (2012a) conducted a study to find out the use of hedges in the discussion sections of Civil Engineering articles written by American and Iranian writers. The finding of his study showed that what is important in utilizing hedging devices as the linguistic phenomenon is the discipline-influence not the nationality or cultural backgrounds of the authors. He argues that the non-native authors, i.e. Iranians, could use hedges like their native counterparts, and this shows that the hedging devices are teachable and can be used by non-natives like natives. In the other study, Tahririan and Shahzamani (2009) examined the hedging phenomenon in journalistic English. Their study specifically aimed at examining English and Persian social, economic and political newspaper editorials to describe the similarities and differences in the frequency of hedging devices in the two languages. The results of their study revealed that English newspaper editorials enjoyed more hedges than Persian ones. Regarding topic variations, English political editorials were slightly more hedged than the economic and social ones; whereas, Persian economic editorials were slightly more hedged than the political and social ones.

Despite many studies have been done in the field of hedges (e.g. Varttala, 2001; Hyland, 2000; Seskaukiene, 2005), however, there is no effort to study hedges considering three types of writers from different countries. Therefore the purpose of this study is to compare and contrast the use of hedges in the discussion sections, as the most heavily hedged sections, of psychology articles written by Native Authors (NAs), Iranian authors (IAs), and Turkish Authors (TAs). Iran and Turkey are neighbors but as Turkey has more contacts with European countries, in which English is spoken widely, it will be more fascinating to know which of Turkish or Iranian authors are more close to their native counterparts in psychology discipline. In other words, we should to know that the use of hedges is affected by discipline or by nations.

Considering the aim of this study, we are going to answer the questions:

Is there any significant difference in the use of hedges in discussion sections of psychology articles between NAs and IAs?

Is there any significant difference in the use of hedges in discussion sections of psychology articles between NAs and TAs?

Is there any significant difference in the use of hedges in discussion sections of psychology articles between IAs and TAs?

2. Methodology

2.1 Instrument

In order to classify the different kinds of hedges, Salager- Meyer's (1994) taxonomy of hedges were utilized. They were:

- **Shields (Category 1)**, such as *can, could, may, might, would, to appear, to seem, probably, to suggest*.
- **Approximators (Category 2)** of degree, quantity, frequency and time: e.g., *approximately, roughly, about, often, occasionally*, etc.
- **Authors' personal doubt and direct involvement (Category 3)**, expressions such as *I believe, to our knowledge, it is our view that ...*
- **Emotionally-charged intensifiers (Category 4)**, such as *extremely difficult/interesting, of particular importance, unexpectedly, surprisingly*, etc.

- **Compound hedges (Category 5)**, the examples are: *could be suggested, would seem likely, would seem somewhat*.

2.2 Procedure

In order to get the data, 30 articles in the field of psychology were selected from different journal; 10 articles for each group of authors, 10 for Americans as NAs, 10 for IAs, and 10 for TAs. Then the discussion sections of them were analyzed based on Salager- Meyer's (1994) taxonomy.

2.3 Data analysis

At first, each type of hedges was counted and their frequencies were presented in a table. After that, Chi-Square analysis was applied to represent the probable significant difference between the frequencies.

3. Results and discussion

The first table of this section represents the number of used hedges by NAs, IAs, and TAs in the discussion sections of psychology articles.

Table 1. Frequency of hedges by NAs, IAs, and TAs

Hedging Categories	Category 1	Category 2	Category 3	Category 4	Category 5	Total
NAs	161	44	12	23	15	255
IAs	136	105	31	86	70	428
TAs	152	132	23	68	54	429

The table 1 shows that category 1 of hedges has been applied as the most frequently used hedges by NAs, 161, followed by TAs, 152, and IAs, 136. As Smith (1984) states this category of hedges are the most frequent devices in scientific and academic studies. TAs employed category 2 hedges, 132 times, more than NAs and IAs who utilized 44 and 105 times, respectively. Considering category 3, it is clear that IAs had more inclination to use this category than other groups; because they used 31 times of this category while NAs employed 12 and TAs 23 times. Like category 3, IAs showed their preferences in utilizing hedges of category 4 and 5, i.e. 86 and 70 times, more than other writers.

Regarding the total number of hedges of each group, it was found that TAs, as the first rank, employed 429 hedges, IAs, as in the second place, used 428 hedges, and NAs utilized 255 hedges in writing the discussion sections of their articles in psychology discipline. However, the results showed that there are some preferences toward the use of different kinds of hedges by different authors from various nations. In other words, it can be viewed that NAs used category 1 of hedges as the most preferred one in comparison with their colleagues while IAs preferred 3, 4, and 5 meanwhile TAs used category 2 more than their counterparts.

In order to know whether the significant difference exists between the writers, in a contrastive

manner, Chi-square analysis was used to do so.

Table 2. Data Contingency and Expected Contingency Table for NAs and IAs

	1	2	3	4	5	Total
NAs	161 <i>110.89</i>	44 <i>55.63</i>	12 <i>16.05</i>	23 <i>40.70</i>	15 <i>31.73</i>	255
IAs	136 <i>186.11</i>	105 <i>93.37</i>	31 <i>26.95</i>	86 <i>68.30</i>	70 <i>53.27</i>	428
	297	149	43	109	85	683

NAs: Native Authors

IAs: Iranian Authors

Expected Values: *Italics*

Chi-square = 68.0

Critical Chi-square = 9.49

Degrees of freedom = 4

Probability = 0.95

As the above table shows, chi-square value, 68.0, is more than critical chi-square, 9.49, at four degree of freedom with the probability value of 0.95. Therefore, there is a significant difference between NAs and IAs in using different kinds of hedges in the field of psychology. This finding is consistent with the findings of Hinkel (1997) who claims that non-

native writers hedge their claims more than native ones.

Table 3. Data Contingency and Expected Contingency Table for NAs and TAs

	1	2	3	4	5	Total
NAs	161 <i>116.69</i>	44 <i>65.61</i>	12 <i>13.05</i>	23 <i>33.93</i>	15 <i>25.72</i>	255
TAs	152 <i>196.31</i>	132 <i>110.39</i>	23 <i>21.95</i>	68 <i>57.07</i>	54 <i>43.28</i>	429
	313	176	35	91	69	684

NAs: Native Authors

TAs: Turkish Authors

Expected Values: *Italics*

Chi-square = 51.0

Critical Chi-square = 9.49

Degrees of freedom = 4

Probability = 0.95

Table 3 reveals that chi-square value, 51.0, is more than critical chi-square, 9.49, at four degree of freedom with the probability value of 0.95. This means that significant difference exists in the number of used hedges between NAs and TAs when they hedge their claims in their discussion sections. Like previous comparison, it is clear that non-native writers were more interested in using hedges than native authors.

Table 4. Data Contingency and Expected Contingency Table for IAs and TAs

	1	2	3	4	5	Total
IAs	136 <i>143.83</i>	105 <i>118.36</i>	31 <i>26.97</i>	86 <i>76.91</i>	70 <i>61.93</i>	428
TAs	152 <i>144.17</i>	132 <i>118.64</i>	23 <i>27.03</i>	68 <i>77.09</i>	54 <i>62.07</i>	429
	288	237	54	154	124	857

IAs: Iranian Authors

IAs: Iranian Authors

Expected Values: *Italics*

Chi-square = 9.32

Critical Chi-square = 9.49

Degrees of freedom = 4

Probability = 0.95

Considering table 4, it is obvious that there is no significant difference between IAs and TAs in the number of hedges they used in their writings, since

the chi-square value, 9.32, is less than critical chi-square value, 9.49. Namely, non-native authors from different nations had similar attitudes in using hedges. It can be inferred that non-native writers, IAs and TAs, have not been affected by their discipline in utilizing hedges rather their language or national background has affected their style of writing.

It can be uttered that non-native authors may be influenced by their discipline in their own country; as the more hedges they use, the more acceptable their claims will be. However they should keep this matter in their minds that if they wish to be a part of global community in the field of psychology, they should use hedges in a more consistent way that native ones do.

4. Conclusion

Writing is an important language skill since it enables us to send our beliefs into the world, to be membership of a discourse community and to influence others. Writers should know the basic knowledge and skills they require to be able to have effective communication in English writing in any academic or scientific context. The beginning step is a detailed consciousness of the way various textual genres present in different cultures and disciplines.

It is usually considered that academic writing is based on facts. But, a significant characteristic of academic writing is the use of cautious language, or hedging the statements. It is necessary to know your stance on a particular subject, or the strength of the utterances you are making. As it is obvious in scientific world, no finding can be absolute, especially in humanities sciences. What is acceptable today maybe rejected in the future and vice-versa. Thus, researchers need to present their findings in a way that the other researchers access to options for their free decisions. Therefore, analyzing the role of hedges in international and global community is needed for non-native authors.

With regard to the above discussion, this study analyzed the frequency and use of hedges in psychology discipline. It was found that non-native authors, Iranian and Turkish, used more hedges when they were discussing their findings in comparison with their native colleagues. However, when the comparison considered Iranian and Turkish authors, no difference was found between these groups and this means that they have the same attitude towards using hedges in their articles. This may be due to the fact that the standard of using of hedges in the local community is more than the global one. In other words, non-native authors should use more hedges in their articles in psychology discipline if they want to have a publication in their own country; but this matter is in the opposite side of the international

norm.

There is no need to say that this study viewed researcher from two countries, i.e. Iran and Turkey, thus it is suggested that other studies include more researchers from different countries and cultures in order to generalize the finding. It is also recommended that other fields go under investigation to enrich the literature in this domain.

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7/11/2014