

Lexical Hedging in Uzbek and English Academic Discourse: A Comparative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This article examines lexical hedging strategies in English and Uzbek academic discourse, focusing on their structural, semantic, and pragmatic functions. Drawing on a corpus of four academic texts two English-language articles on hedging in academic writing and two Uzbek-language articles from the journal Philology Matters this study identifies patterns of modal verbs, adverbs, approximators, and epistemic markers as primary lexical hedging devices. The analysis reveals that both English and Uzbek academic writers employ hedging to mitigate categorical claims and manage face-threatening acts; however, they differ significantly in the frequency, preferred categories, and pragmatic functions of hedges. English academic texts tend toward conventional hedging clichés such as modal auxiliary verbs and epistemic adverbs, while Uzbek academic discourse demonstrates a preference for approximators, discourse particles, and evaluative parenthetical constructions. The findings contribute to the growing body of cross-cultural academic discourse analysis and offer implications for the teaching of academic writing in Uzbekistan.

Keywords: Hedging, academic discourse, lexical hedges, epistemic modality, Uzbek, English, cross-cultural pragmatics, metadiscourse

1. INTRODUCTION

Academic discourse has become a central focus of applied linguistics in recent decades, particularly as scholars have sought

to understand how knowledge is constructed, negotiated, and communicated across disciplinary and cultural contexts. Among the rhetorical and metadiscursive strategies that characterize academic writing, hedging occupies a position of especial importance. First systematically theorized by Lakoff (1973), hedging refers to linguistic devices that reduce the categorical force of a proposition, express epistemic uncertainty, and safeguard the communicative “face” of both writer and reader.

The relevance of hedging to academic writing cannot be overstated. As Hyland (1998) argues, the appropriate deployment of hedging is critical for effective scientific academic writing, as it allows authors to present claims as probabilistic rather than absolute, to attribute responsibility for statements, and to invite engagement from the scholarly community. Hedging is thus not a sign of vagueness or weakness but rather a sophisticated pragmatic competence that marks membership in a given academic discourse community.

While hedging in English academic texts has been extensively studied, research on hedging in non-Western or non-European academic traditions remains comparatively sparse. Uzbek academic discourse, in particular, has received virtually no systematic attention in the international hedging literature, despite the fact that Uzbek-medium scholarship is substantial and growing. This lacuna is especially significant given that Uzbek academia is navigating a complex linguistic landscape in which local conventions interact with internationally dominant English-language norms.

The present study addresses this gap through a comparative analysis of lexical hedging in English and Uzbek academic texts. Specifically, it draws on two theoretical and empirical sources on hedging in academic discourse – Boginskaya (2023) and Nikolaeva (2023) – and two Uzbek-language academic articles published in the journal *Philology Matters* (Saidova 2024; Rakhmatullaeva 2024) as primary data for analysis. The goal is to identify the principal lexical hedging devices employed in each language, compare their functional roles, and reflect on the implications of cultural and linguistic difference for academic writing pedagogy.

The article proceeds according to the IMRAD structure. Following this Introduction, the Methods section describes the corpus and analytical framework. The Results section presents findings for both English and Uzbek texts. The Discussion section interprets these findings in light of existing cross-cultural research. The article concludes with implications for pedagogy and directions for future research.

2. METHODS

2.1. *Corpus*

The analytical corpus for this study consists of four academic texts. Two of these are published English-language research articles on hedging in academic discourse: Boginskaya's (2023) 'Russian Lexical and Syntactic Hedges in Dissertation Reviews,' and Nikolaeva's (2023) 'Comparative Analysis of Hedging Intercultural Features in English Academic Discourse.' These two articles serve a dual purpose: they are both theoretical-empirical sources that inform the analytical framework and, in their own use of academic language, illustrative examples of English hedging practice.

The two Uzbek-language texts used for primary discourse analysis are Saidova's (2024) 'The Effectiveness and Importance of VR Technologies in Journalistic Activities and Educational Processes,' and Rakhmatullaeva's (2024) 'The Evolution and Characteristics of Antiutopian Literature: A Comprehensive Analysis.' Both Uzbek texts represent contemporary academic writing produced by scholars affiliated with Uzbekistan State World Languages University, and both are published in a peer-reviewed international philology journal, which makes them representative of current standards in Uzbek academic discourse.

2.2. *Analytical framework*

The study employs a qualitative-interpretive methodology informed by Hinkel's (2005) classification of indirect speech and hedging devices, as adapted by Nikolaeva (2023: 163), and supplemented by Hyland's (1998) account of hedging functions in scientific writing. Hinkel's taxonomy distinguishes thirteen

categories of hedging and indirect speech devices organized under three macro-categories: (1) rhetorical devices (rhetorical and tag questions, disclaimers and denials, vagueness and ambiguity markers); (2) lexical and referential markers (lexical hedges, point-of-view distancing, downtoners, diminutives, discourse particles, demonstratives, indefinite pronouns, understatement adverbs); and (3) syntactic markers (passive voice, conditional clauses).

For this study, the focus is specifically on the lexical dimension of hedging, as defined by categories 2a through 2h in Hinkel's taxonomy. The decision to concentrate on lexical rather than syntactic hedges reflects the comparative visibility of lexical choices across typologically different languages. Lexical hedges are more directly contrastable across Uzbek and English because they involve specific vocabulary items whose meanings can be closely analyzed regardless of structural differences between the two languages.

Each of the four texts was read in full. Lexical hedges were identified by the criterion of epistemic mitigation: any lexical item that reduces the categorical nature of a proposition, expresses uncertainty, limits the scope of a claim, or signals that the author is offering one possible perspective rather than stating an absolute fact was classified as a hedge. Identified items were grouped according to Hinkel's lexical sub-categories, and their communicative functions were interpreted using Boginskaya's (2023: 22) three-fold classification of hedging functions: focus-shifting, modal criticism mitigation, and deintensification.

3. RESULTS

3.1. *Lexical hedging in English academic texts*

The English source texts – Boginskaya (2023) and Nikolaeva (2023) – exhibit a rich and varied use of lexical hedges consistent with established norms of international academic writing. The following categories are the most prominent.

Modal epistemic verbs constitute the most frequent category of lexical hedges in both texts. In Boginskaya (2023), verbs such as *seem*, *appear*, *consider*, and *believe* function as epistemic

hedges that locate the propositional content within the subjective perspective of the author. The author explicitly identifies this strategy: “Verbs of epistemic modality mark the position of the opponent, help producing critical statements in the alternative modus” (Boginskaya 2023: 25). Examples include constructions such as “It seems that” and “We believe that”, which signal that the statement represents an interpretive inference rather than an established fact.

Nikolaeva’s (2023) text also relies heavily on modal epistemic constructions, particularly in presenting comparative findings. Phrases such as “can be seen,” “appears to indicate,” and “may suggest” recur throughout the discussion sections, ensuring that cross-cultural comparisons are framed as analytical observations rather than categorical verdicts. Nikolaeva (2023: 169) uses active hedging when attributing cultural tendencies: “it can be argued that Anglo-Saxon authors prefer to present their research findings more directly.”

Lexical hedges proper – adverbs and adjectives expressing probability, approximation, or limitation – form a second major category. Boginskaya (2023: 24) identifies adverbs of degree and measure (“slightly,” “somewhat,” “not entirely”) as highly productive means of deintensification: “The fragment is a vivid example of the adverb of measure and degree which mitigates the negative evaluation.” In Nikolaeva (2023), adverbs such as “generally,” “typically,” “predominantly,” “often,” and “largely” serve to qualify statistical findings and prevent overgeneralization, a common function of hedges in empirical academic writing.

Point-of-view distancing markers constitute a third prominent category. Both texts employ first-person epistemic verbs (“I suggest,” “we propose,” “in our view”) to signal that claims are attributed to the authors’ own analytical perspective. Boginskaya (2023: 26) notes the function of such constructions in reducing illocutionary force: “Pointing out one’s own point of view deprives categoricalness.” Nikolaeva (2023: 163) similarly positions her comparative analysis through hedged attribution: “We agree with the view that hedging is probably not one of the most important elements in Russian-language culture.”

Vagueness and approximation markers such as “certain,” “some,” “various,” and “a number of” appear regularly in both English texts as a means of acknowledging the non-exhaustive nature of the data or analysis. These devices correspond to Hinkel’s (2005) “vagueness and ambiguity markers” category and perform the function of limiting the scope of a claim without undermining its validity.

3.2. *Lexical hedging in Uzbek academic texts*

The analysis of the two Uzbek-language academic texts – Saidova (2024) and Rakhmatullaeva (2024) – reveals a distinctive pattern of lexical hedging that both resembles and diverges from the English model. Several categories of hedges are identifiable, though their distribution and preferred forms differ from those in the English texts.

Modal constructions expressing epistemic possibility and necessity are present in both Uzbek texts, though they are deployed somewhat differently from English modal verbs. In Uzbek, modality is encoded through a combination of modal words, verbal suffixes, and auxiliary constructions. In Saidova (2024), modal expressions such as *mumkin* (“it is possible”), *mumkinbo‘ladi* (“may become”), and *ehtimol* (“perhaps/probably”) appear regularly to hedge claims about the future development of VR technologies. For example, the claim about future applications of VR in education is hedged with *kutilmoqda* (“is expected/anticipated”), which expresses a soft epistemic stance (Saidova 2024: 383). This parallels the use of English modal auxiliary verbs but is achieved through morphological rather than purely lexical means.

Approximation and vagueness markers are conspicuously common in both Uzbek texts. Rakhmatullaeva (2024) repeatedly uses expressions such as *ko‘pincha* (often/frequently), *ba‘zan* (sometimes), *odatda* (usually), *asosan* (mainly/basically), and *ko‘pchilik* (many/most) to limit the scope of generalizations about literary genre theory. These markers are analogous to Hinkel’s vagueness and ambiguity markers and serve a deintensifying function similar to what Boginskaya (2023: 22)

describes as “semantic restriction of negative evaluation, pointing out the irregularity or incompleteness of the feature.”

Saidova’s (2024) article on VR journalism makes extensive use of approximators to hedge quantitative and technical claims. Expressions equivalent to “approximately,” “around,” “in many cases,” and “in some instances” frame empirical observations about VR effectiveness without committing to precise measurement. For example, discussions of VR’s educational benefits are consistently qualified: *VR yordamidao’tkazilganta’limjarayonian’anaviyta’limgako’ra 10 foiz samara beradi* (education conducted through VR gives approximately 10 percent more effectiveness than traditional education), where the numeric figure itself is presented as an approximate benchmark rather than a rigorously validated statistic (Saidova 2024: 393).

Point-of-view distancing through evaluative parenthetical phrases represents a particularly characteristic feature of Uzbek academic hedging in these texts. Rakhmatullaeva (2024: 228) frequently employs constructions such as “asliniolganda” (in essence/to be honest), *boshqachaqilibaytganda* (in other words), and *ehtimol* to signal that the following proposition represents the author’s interpretive judgment rather than established consensus. These constructions function as discursive “safety valves” that prevent readers from holding the author to categorical claims, a function directly comparable to English introductory constructions such as “in our opinion” or “it seems that.”

A further distinctive feature of the Uzbek texts is the use of attributive hedging through citation and reference. Both Saidova (2024) and Rakhmatullaeva (2024) anchor potentially contestable claims in external authority: *tadqiqotchilarningfikricha* (according to researchers), *olimlarta’kidlaydilar* (scholars emphasize), or *tadqiqotnatijalarigako’ra* (according to research findings). This pattern mirrors Nikolaeva’s (2023: 163) observation that attributive hedging allows authors to present findings “based on logical reasoning rather than certain knowledge.”

4. DISCUSSION

The comparative analysis of lexical hedging in English and Uzbek academic texts reveals both shared pragmatic functions and significant differences in preferred hedging strategies. Both traditions deploy hedges to mitigate categorical claims, protect epistemic face, and signal membership in a community of cautious, reflective scholarly inquiry. This confirms the position advanced by Hyland (1998) that hedging is a “universal discursive marker” of academic text (as cited in Nikolaeva 2023: 163). However, the specific forms and frequencies of lexical hedges differ substantially, which has important implications for cross-cultural academic communication.

The first notable difference concerns the relationship between hedging and sentence structure. English academic hedging relies heavily on pre-verbal modal auxiliary verbs (may, might, could, should) and sentence-initial epistemic adverbs (arguably, apparently, presumably) that are structurally prominent. Uzbek, by contrast, encodes modality primarily through verbal suffixes and post-verbal or sentence-final modal particles, making hedges less immediately visible to readers accustomed to English academic conventions. This structural difference has significant implications for non-native speakers of English who draw on Uzbek rhetorical norms when writing in English: their hedges may be present in meaning but structurally misplaced or stylistically inconspicuous, creating the impression of over-confident or culturally inappropriate writing.

Second, the analysis suggests that Uzbek academic writers in the present corpus show a stronger preference than their English counterparts for approximation markers and vagueness expressions of the “many/some/often” type, rather than for epistemic modal verbs of the “may/might/seem” type. This finding partially aligns with Nikolaeva’s (2023: 164) observation that researchers from collectivist cultures tend toward a more indirect argumentation style involving greater use of hedging. The Uzbek pattern appears to hedge at the level of quantification and scope (how many, how often) more than at the level of

epistemic commitment (how certain), suggesting that the locus of uncertainty is differently positioned in Uzbek academic rhetoric.

Third, both Uzbek texts demonstrate what might be termed 'attribution hedging' – the consistent practice of anchoring claims in external scholarly authority as a hedge against personal accountability. This pattern is consistent with Nikolaeva's (2023: 165) finding that Chinese and Turkish academic authors frequently use passive voice and demonstratives to distance their own position from the propositional content. In Uzbek, this distancing is achieved lexically through attributive phrases such as *tadqiqotchilarning fikricha* (in researchers' view) rather than through grammatical passivization. Boginskaya (2023: 26) identifies a structurally similar phenomenon in Russian academic reviews, where introductory constructions such as "In our opinion" or "It seems to us" shift the communicative focus from the evaluated text to the reviewer's subjective stance, thereby softening criticism and protecting the addressee's face.

The pragmatic functions of hedging also differ across the two traditions, though with overlap. In the English texts, hedges perform three core functions identified by Boginskaya (2023: 29): focus-shifting, modal criticism mitigation, and deintensification. The Uzbek texts exhibit these same functions but seem to weight deintensification particularly highly: hedges are consistently used to prevent any single claim from appearing as a definitive, incontestable statement of fact. This may reflect broader Uzbek cultural norms of courtesy and epistemic humility, or it may reflect the genre conventions of the particular journal and field represented in the corpus.

A significant convergence between the two traditions is the use of hedging to manage face-threatening acts in evaluative contexts. Boginskaya (2023: 23) notes that in Russian academic reviews, hedges reduce "the undesirable effects of the speaker's communicative behavior" and ensure "a sense of psychological comfort." The Uzbek texts, while not evaluative reviews, display comparable face-management strategies: when presenting claims that could be challenged by reviewers or readers, both Saidova (2024) and Rakhmatullaeva (2024) consistently hedge to signal openness to alternative interpretations. This suggests that the

face-management function of hedging, described by Brown & Levinson (1987) as a politeness universal, does indeed operate across both English and Uzbek academic writing, albeit through culturally specific linguistic forms.

These findings have direct pedagogical implications. Uzbek students learning to write academic English must not only acquire English hedging vocabulary but also recalibrate the structural positions and frequency norms for hedging devices. Over-hedging, as demonstrated in some of the Turkish academic texts analyzed by Nikolaeva (2023: 169), can create an impression of “uncertainty or authorial hesitation” that undermines scholarly authority. Under-hedging, conversely, may appear culturally inappropriate or aggressive. The integration of explicit hedging instruction into Uzbek university academic writing curricula, with attention to cross-linguistic and cross-cultural differences, would be a valuable pedagogical intervention.

5. CONCLUSION

This article has conducted a comparative analysis of lexical hedging in English and Uzbek academic discourse, using four published academic texts as corpus material. The analysis has demonstrated that lexical hedging is a central feature of both traditions, serving the shared pragmatic functions of epistemic mitigation, face management, and the construction of scholarly ethos. However, significant differences exist in the preferred forms of hedging: English academic writers make extensive use of modal auxiliary verbs and epistemic adverbs, while Uzbek academic writers show a stronger orientation toward approximation markers, attributive hedging through citation, and evaluative parenthetical expressions.

These differences reflect both the structural properties of the two languages – particularly the different ways in which modality is encoded – and broader cultural and rhetorical norms that shape academic discourse in each tradition. The findings align with cross-cultural research by Nikolaeva (2023) and Boginskaya (2023) indicating that academic discourse, even

when it aspires to universality, is shaped by culturally specific conventions of argumentation, politeness, and epistemic positioning.

The present study is limited by its small corpus size. Four texts do not constitute a representative sample of either English or Uzbek academic writing across disciplines, and the findings should therefore be understood as suggestive rather than definitive. Future research should extend the corpus to include texts from multiple disciplines and publication venues, employ quantitative frequency analysis alongside qualitative interpretation, and include elicitation data from Uzbek academic writers themselves regarding their awareness and intentional use of hedging strategies.

The practical implications of this research point toward the need for more systematic instruction in academic hedging in Uzbek higher education, particularly for scholars who write or intend to write in English. Understanding how hedging works in one's native academic tradition – and how it differs from target-language norms – is a crucial component of developing academic writing competence in an internationalized scholarly environment.

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