

HEDGES USED BY MALE AND FEMALE SPEAKERS IN 'THE MALAYSIAN STUDENT PODCAST'

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Abstract. Hedges are a salient feature in spoken discourse, enabling speakers to express uncertainty, mitigate claims, and manage interpersonal relations. The study is driven by the lack of research on students' use of hedges in a podcast, which is regarded as a platform on the rise as a new, well-accepted, and highly preferred medium for sharing information across a wide range of ages. Past study revised version of Salager-Meyer Taxonomy of Hedges was employed to analyse the types and functions of hedges employed by male and female Malaysian students in 'The Malaysian Student Podcast'. The findings revealed that while both male and female speakers predominantly used Approximators, they differed in their use of other hedge types, with males favouring Modal Auxiliary Verbs and females relying more on Introductory Phrases. These differences suggest gendered patterns in expressing epistemic stance and managing interpersonal engagement in podcast discourse. Future research could explore hedging practices across a wider range of discourse contexts and participant profiles to further understand variation in spoken interaction.

Keywords: *hedges, gender, podcasts, spoken discourse*

Introduction

Spoken discourse is characterised by a certain level of epistemic flexibility, allowing speakers to strategically adjust the strength of their claims in interaction. This flexibility is largely realized through the employment of hedges, which Lakoff (1972, as cited in Harutyunyan, 2013) defined as linguistic markers that modify the “fuzziness” of a proposition. As a powerful tool in spoken discourse, hedges allow speakers to negotiate certainty, influence receiver interpretation, and manage interpersonal face-saving (Aksiutina, 2021). While the importance of hedges is well-recognized, it is important to understand the appropriate ways of employing them, as they allow speakers to reduce responsibility toward the truth of a statement and gain audience acceptance (Rezanejad et al., 2015). Despite the extensive literature on hedging in professional and academic settings (Vlasyan, 2019; Granqvist, 2013), there exists a gap regarding contemporary digital spoken genres. With the emergence of digital spoken platforms such as podcasts, new forms of semi-formal interaction have become increasingly accessible, which in turn provides a rich context for examining how speakers negotiate meaning and interpersonal relations. However, studies on hedging in podcast discourse, particularly among student speakers, remain limited. Since podcasts are seen as a unique context for examining how speakers communicate, it is interesting to explore how hedges are used to achieve specific communicative functions.

Therefore, this study investigates the use of hedges among male and female students in an English podcast series, namely 'The Malaysian Student Podcast', whose discussions are centred on personal and intellectual topics relatable to students of the same age group. By analysing the types and functions of hedges employed in this

context, the study aims to explore how gendered patterns of hedging are realised in contemporary digital spoken discourse. More specifically, the present study was guided by the following research questions: (1) What are the types and functions of hedges employed by the male and female speakers in 'The Malaysian Student Podcast'? (2) How do these patterns reflect gendered communicative strategies?

Literature review

Hedges as a linguistic tool in spoken discourses

According to Wang (2010), the use of hedges is feasible in verbal communication as it satisfies human communicative needs and encourages speakers to make continuous choices in expressing themselves with certainty. Hedges are language features that speakers use to make choices about how strongly or cautiously they express their ideas, depending on the context and what they want to achieve. Beyond simple word choice, hedging also functions as a linguistic device to mitigate the impact of an utterance and facilitate speakers in articulating their thoughts verbally (Granqvist, 2013). This role is particularly dominant in spoken dialogues as presented Vlasyan's (2019) analysis of the British National Corpus (BNC), whereby hedges are utilised as a linguistic tool to modify and mitigate a proposition, for example, plausibility shields such as, 'I think', 'you know', and 'I mean' dominate daily verbal interactions, whereas attribution shields remains the least frequent type used by speakers. Interestingly, the use of hedges has been associated with speaker liability and 'face-saving' strategies. By employing hedges as 'downtoners', speakers can reduce the directness of their statements, thereby lessening their individual responsibility for a proposition's absolute validity (Aksiutina, 2021). This reduction in authoritarian tone is important to contribute to the harmonisation of verbal engagements, as it fosters opinion acceptance and reduces misunderstanding (Vlasyan, 2019; Granqvist, 2013). This means that hedges serve a dual purpose: to provide the speaker with a degree of certainty while simultaneously establishing the politeness and flexibility needed for a smooth delivery of the message. More importantly, hedges are a significant linguistic tool in spoken discourses due to their numerous practicalities. According to Wang (2010), hedges benefit speakers in communication as they encourage the expression of intentions with a good degree of certainty. The integration of hedges in spoken discourse also allows speakers to tone down their utterances to avoid misunderstandings or arguments coming from their subconscious and intended directness, while communicating with other speakers (Granqvist, 2013). Aksiutina (2021) also reported the practicality of hedges through the centralisation of 'downtoners' in reducing the directness of a statement made. Finally, the use of hedges concerns the need to establish a harmonious communication (Aksiutina, 2021; Vlasyan, 2019).

Gender-based variation in hedges

The use of hedges is also notable in gender comparative studies, though empirical findings remain significantly divided. A study on Iranian EFL learners by Namaziandost and Shafiee (2018) suggests a higher frequency of hedging among female students in academic spoken discourse. Through semi-structured interviews with 40 students majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL), it was observed that female participants produced nearly double the volume of hedges compared to their male participants, specifically 227 words versus 124 words. The differences in the

frequency of hedges use indicate their prominence in female speech, reflecting a higher level of verbal expressiveness. However, previous studies have also revealed that gender differences in hedging are not always consistent. For example, Azizah (2021) presented contradicting results in an analysis of masculine and feminine language, discovering that males actually employed hedges more frequently than females. This shift suggests that gender-based language features are not necessarily fixed based on a certain gender, but are mediated by external factors, such as communicative strategies, non-verbal cues, and the surrounding cultural environment. Hedges are contextually flexible, as evidenced in their use in written discourse. Ajmal et al. (2023) examined eight written works produced by native English writers and found that male writers employed more frequent use of hedges than female writers, where the former recorded the use of 3995 hedges while the latter used 3757 hedges in their written works. Collectively, these studies suggest that hedges are not bound to a specific gender but rather serve as versatile linguistic resources that adapt to the pragmatic demands of the specific discourse setting.

Functions of hedges in student spoken genres

In student-led communication, hedges are more than just linguistic devices. They are also tools that serve specific functions. Dousti and Rasekh (2015) found that university students use hedges in interpersonal interactions to navigate difficult situations. For example, female students used them to express opposition or disagreement without being too direct. Similarly, research on Arab EFL students in Malaysia showed that hedges help students build a good relationship with their supervisors by showing politeness and commitment (Ahmed and Maros, 2017). A more recent study by Rahmatillah et al. (2022) categorised hedges based on their functions, namely, to give personal evaluations, to express uncertainty, to handle personal needs in a specific situation, and to get attention from others. For instance, students use phrases like 'I think' to offer a suggestion and 'suggest please' to appear polite when asking for input. While these studies show how students use hedges in general spoken interactions, there is still more to explore regarding how these functions appear in specific digital formats like podcasts.

Materials and Methods

A qualitative research design was adopted due to its suitability in examining hedges in spoken discourse. In line with this design, qualitative content analysis was employed to enable systematic identification and interpretation of linguistic features within discourse, making it suitable for analysing patterns and functions of hedges, as well as gender-based variation, in students' podcast interactions. The study used a purposive sampling to select the data based on predetermined criteria, including the sample's type, duration, number of speakers, and the type of language used. Podcast episodes that did not meet the criteria were excluded to maintain the validity and focus of the analysis. The selected podcast episode was then transcribed and cleaned to remove fillers and repetitions. *Table 1* presents specific information related to the data. To analyse the data, the coding scheme was primarily based on Somsakoon et al.'s (2023) revised version of Salager-Meyer Taxonomy of Hedges. In addition, selected categories and examples of hedges from Salager-Meyer earlier framework were also incorporated,

drawing on adaptations from previous studies. Descriptions for each category were informed by Al-Kahfi et al.'s (2023) study on hedging devices.

Table 1. *Specifications of the selected sample.*

Specifications	Details
Source	Spotify (The Malaysian Student Podcast) [refer to Podcast Apps]
Episode title	Private School vs Government School
Season and Episode	Season 1, Episode 2
Duration	56 minutes 54 seconds

Results and Discussion

Overview of hedges in 'The Malaysian Student Podcast' selected episode

The analysis first examined the frequency, examples, and the reasons that led to the use of hedges by the male and female speakers in the podcast. A total of 270 hedges were identified, with male and female speakers contributing 139 and 133 instances, respectively. As shown in Table 2, the Approximators (A) is the type of hedges employed the most by the speakers (n=123), followed by Modal Auxiliary Verbs (MAV) with a total frequency of 75 and Introductory Phrases (IP) (n=59). There is a notable gap observed for Emotionally charged Intensifiers (EC) (n=6), and Compound Hedges (CH) with 5 occurrences. Meanwhile, Probability Adjectives, Nouns and Adverbs (PNA) were the least frequent (n=4). No instances of Modal Lexical Verbs (MLV) or 'If' Clauses (IC) identified in the dataset.

Table 2. *Overview of hedges identified.*

Types of hedges	Examples of hedges identified	Frequency		TF	Rank	
		M	F		M	F
Modal Auxiliary Verbs (MAV)	may, might, would, will	41	34	75	2	3
Modal Lexical Verbs (MLV)	-	0	0	0	7	6
Adjectival, Adverbial and Nominal Phrases						
Probability Adjectives, Nouns & Adverbs (PNA)	certain, possible	4	0	4	4	6
Approximators (A)	quite, almost, about, a lot of, some, much, most, kind of, something, anything, any, somewhere, pretty, mostly, sometimes, anytime, someone, somebody, wherever	70	53	123	1	1
Introductory Phrases (IP)	I think, I prefer, I personally think, I guess, we think, I agree	19	40	59	3	2
'If' clauses (IC)	-	0	0	0	7	6
Compound Hedges (CH)	I think some, quite a lot of, pretty much like	3	2	5	5	5
Emotionally-charged Intensifiers (EC)	surprisingly, ultimately, especially	2	4	6	6	4

Note: M=Male; F=Female; TF=Total Frequency.

Types and functions of hedges employed by the male and female speakers in 'The Malaysian Student Podcast'

The distribution of the hedge types across male and female speakers is presented in Table 2, with frequencies and rankings reported for each group. Overall, Approximators (A) (e.g. 'quite', 'some', 'kind of') were identified as the most frequently used hedge type for both male and female speakers, which indicates a shared tendency to express

imprecisions and generalisations in podcast discourse. Male speakers most frequently used Modal Auxiliary Verbs (MAV) (e.g. 'can', 'will', 'would', 'may') following Approximators (A), whereas female speakers showed a greater reliance on Introductory Phrases (IP) (e.g. 'I (personally) think'). This pattern appeared as the third rank, with male speakers using Introductory Phrases and female speakers using Modal Auxiliary Verbs. Next, male speakers were found to use Probability Adjectives, Nouns, and Adverbs (PNA) (e.g. 'certain', 'possible'), while female speakers used Emotionally-charged Intensifiers (EC) (e.g. 'especially', 'surprisingly', 'ultimately') more frequently. Compound Hedges (CH) (e.g. 'quite a lot of', 'pretty much') were used by both groups at similarly low frequencies, while Emotionally charged Intensifiers (EC) were the least used by male speakers and absent or very minimal in other categories among female speakers.

In terms of overall frequency, male speakers produce slightly more hedges than female speakers, particularly in the use of Modal Auxiliary Verbs, Approximators, and Compound Hedges. As opposed to that, female speakers showed higher frequencies in Introductory Phrases and Emotionally-charged Intensifiers. Despite these differences, both genders demonstrated similar patterns in the use of certain lexical items, such as 'about' and 'quite', which are Approximators, and 'especially' (Emotionally charged Intensifiers). The findings also revealed that the functions of hedges are based on the different hedge types, as they serve distinct communicative purposes. The frequent use of Modal Auxiliary Verbs by male speakers reflects their roles in expressing possibility and modulating certainty, as seen in the excerpt below:

Excerpt 1: *They would think 'my father he didn't study before and he is very rich', so there were this kind of mindset.*

Here, the modal auxiliary verb 'would' is used to present the statement as an assumed way of thinking, rather than an absolute fact, which allows the speaker to express interpretation cautiously. In doing so, the speaker delivers a stance by expressing an opinion or generalisation about students' mindsets while softening direct commitment to the claim. This finding is aligned with studies associating modal use with stance expression (Moafian et al., 2018). Meanwhile, the frequent use of Introductory Phrases among female speakers indicates their function as markers of personal stance. A female speaker mentioned:

Excerpt 2: *...and then I think it's kind of interesting because the students of the third class and the fourth class are actually complaining about that.*

In this excerpt, the female speaker used the Introductory Phrase 'I think', which functions as a marker of personal stance, signalling that the speaker is presenting a subjective opinion, rather than an objective fact. Additionally, the Approximator 'kind of' was used in the same excerpt to soften the claim while maintaining engagement, which allows the speaker to elaborate on her perspective in a less assertive manner. The strategic use of 'I think' to introduce a personal stance, confirming that this was a personal opinion, and the utterance was completed by mentioning the reasons. This resonates with the findings of Rahmatillah et al. (2022) in their study of hedges used in an EFL speaking class, whereby 'I think' was commonly used by the students as Introductory Phrase. Finally, the shared use of Approximators by both male and female

speakers highlights their role in softening claims and facilitating flexible communication (Du, 2021), particularly in podcast discourse, as illustrated in Excerpt 3 below:

Excerpt 3: ..., *so for my school our school atmosphere is quite disciplined, everyone is very studious and we actually study very hard to get good marks.*

In this excerpt, the approximator 'quite' reduces the degree of certainty and intensity in the speaker's evaluation of the school environment. Rather than mentioning the atmosphere as absolutely disciplined, the speaker moderates the claim to sound more conversational. This reflects the function of Approximators to express opinion cautiously in a public conversational space like podcasts. According to Du (2021), hedges are adopted by both male and female speakers to facilitate interpersonal interaction. This explains that depending on the context, certain types of hedges appear as a common resource for speakers of both genders.

Gendered communicative strategies of hedge in 'The Malaysian Student Podcast'

The patterns observed in the use of hedges suggest distinct yet overlapping communicative strategies employed by male and female speakers in the podcast discourse. While both groups used Approximators the most, this shared preference indicates a common orientation towards softening claims and maintaining flexibility in their conversation, while reflecting the semi-formal nature of podcast interactions. For example, when the speaker said "...in government school the ratio between three different races is quite balanced if compared to private school, I think." This example illustrates the attempt of the speaker to avoid from being overly assertive or giving definitive claims. However, differences in the distribution of other types of hedges reveal how speakers construct stance and manage interaction. Male speakers were found to rely more on Modal Auxiliary Verbs (e.g. 'can', 'will', 'may'), indicating the tendency to present statements in terms of possibility and conditionality. In the podcast, one male speaker mentioned, "...same thing as Junjie said, he feared that disciplinary problems may be higher in government schools, not because they're not dealing with it, it's just that the number of people-- number of students are very high...". In this excerpt, the speaker used 'may' to avoid sounding overly certain about disciplinary problems in government schools. This conditional framing softens the assertion and reflects caution in expressing evaluation or judgement, which Juwantino et al. (2024) mentioned as helping speakers to show that they are merely giving an opinion rather than a definitive assertion.

In contrast, female speakers frequently use Introductory Phrases (e.g. 'I think', 'I guess'), which reflect an explicit mode of expression, and in turn, contribute to interpersonal engagement. For example, when the female speaker said "*I think this is one of the criteria for the future leader, you need to adapt, especially now is the period of lockdown and virus, so adapting to online classes is also quite hard...*", the proposition was mentioned in a subjective stance, which functions to invite alignment and signal involvement in the interaction. This finding is consistent with Mauliana et al. (2025), who noted that the use of 'I think' indicates that the perspective is personal and subjective, rather than definitive. It also helps speakers avoid overgeneralisation and maintain humility and openness when they communicate (Liu, 2020). These patterns can be interpreted as reflecting different communicative orientations rather than fixed

gender traits. According to Du (2021), hedges are a valuable resource for speakers to assist interpersonal interactions, which should be adopted by both females and males. In the present study, this is evidenced by the shared use of Approximators across both groups, which suggests that certain hedging strategies transcend gender and functions as a generic way of communicating, given the interactive and public nature of podcast communication. In addition, contextual factors such as the speakers' shared background as Malaysian ESL speakers, as well as the podcast setting likely influence these patterns. Hedges are used by the speakers of both genders to reflect their sensitivity to the contexts of speech, whereby there is a need to balance clarity, politeness, and confidence in a public yet conversational space such as podcasts. Hence, the findings suggest that gendered differences in hedge use are best understood as context-dependent communication strategies, shaped by the goals of the interactions. This finding resonates with Bernaisch (2021), who notes that a speaker's linguistic choices are influenced by the environment where certain communication styles are normalised.

Conclusion

The findings highlight the importance of hedges in facilitating interpersonal communication among male and female Malaysian student podcasters, which in turn, provide insights for Malaysian students in language and communication studies through illustrations of hedges use, as well as their functions. The findings also suggest that hedges serve as a key resource for expressing stance and managing interactions. This information may assist educators and material developers as an empirical reference to understanding students' pragmatic competence and guiding them in using hedges in speech. It is recommended that future studies expand the analysis of hedges in informal spoken discourse across broader datasets and interactional contexts. Future studies could also examine the influence of culture and other sociolinguistic variables, such as speakers' social backgrounds, to increase understanding of pragmatic variation among young speakers.

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Conflict of interest

No potential conflicts of interest have been reported by the authors with regard to the research, writing, or publication of this paper.

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