Analyzing Hedges in Verbal Communication:

An Adaptation-Based Approach

Yuling Wang

School of Foreign Languages, Henan University of Technology

195, Zhongyuan West Road, Zhengzhou, Henan, 450007, China

E-mail: wylxhbo@126.com

Abstract

Based on Adaptation Theory, the article analyzes the production process of hedges. The procedure consists of the continuous making of choices in linguistic forms and communicative strategies. These choices are made just for adaptation to the contextual correlates. Besides, the adaptation process is dynamic, intentional and bidirectional.

Keywords: Hedge, Choice-making, Adaptation, Contextual correlates

1. Introduction

Since Lakoff firstly put forward the term "hedge" in 1972, scholars have studied it in various angles such as semantics, pragmatics, and even application, etc. Approximately at the early 1980's, linguists in China have begun to investigate it from the perspective of pragmatics. The majority of the studies, however, focus on its communicative effects in different realms like media, economics, politics, and so on. Till now, there is little work concerning the production process of it. Therefore, the article is intended to make an analysis about its production process by adopting the Adaptation Theory proposed by Jef Verschueren.

Verschueren (2000, p.55) claims that "using language must consist of the continuous making of linguistic choices", and the utterer makes choices in different levels is for the adaptation to the contextual correlates till approach some satisfied communicative effects. It is no doubt that choice-making and adaptation is the key of the communication flow.

2. Use of Hedges as a Process of Making Choice

Once a communicative behavior is performed, the interlocutors can not evade from making choices. That is, all the utterances are the result of the language user's choices. Hedge, as an important type of linguistic sources or language phenomenon, what language users do during the procedure of hedges employment, obviously, is continuously making choices too. These choices are made at every possible level. To begin with, an interlocutor is required to choose which language to use among roughly 6,000 languages. So first of all, what the addresser has to choose is a specific language to formulate his or her opinions. Having chosen the specific language, he or she has to decide a specific linguistic expression from the language he or she has chosen, such as either to employ precise or fuzzy language in the current communication. But as we know, hedge, euphemism, homophony, modal verbs, etc, all of them belong to the fuzzy language. Therefore, the utterer has to select a specific type from those options. Hedge is the key member of fuzzy language. Supposing hedge is chosen at a specific moment of interaction, as hedges include various linguistic forms such as approximators and shields, he or she also has to select one to formulate his messages. By this choice-making process, the interlocutor can achieve desired communication intentions that other linguistic forms even can not satisfy at that moment. This procedure shows that the use of hedges is a process of making choices continuously. However, the choices are made at every possible level. The speakers do not only choose linguistic forms but also communicative strategies.

2.1 The Choice of Linguistic Forms

The fundamental function of language is to describe human being's cognition to the world. But the things in the world are infinite, and the majority of them are vague themselves such as tall, red, big, round, and so on. All these concepts have no clear boundary. On the contrary, the vocabulary used to denote them is relatively finite. What's more, sometimes people are not so sure about what they are expressing. So when using language to convey their cognition to the world, they have to choose fuzzy language, especially hedge. It is just because that hedge can satisfy human being's communicative needs, and it is even most appropriate at some moment of communication. As a result, it "survived", while other linguistic forms are eliminated and then they "died" for the moment. If it could not fulfill the communicative needs, it must have died early during the process of

language evolution. Therefore, the use of hedge consists of the continuous making of choices made by speakers in linguistic forms. It is also a process of "natural selection" in language system itself.

2.2 The Choice of Communicative Strategies

It's believed that any communication is a kind of activity with some degree of purpose. Motivated by the purpose, interlocutors will adopt some strategies in utterance. In order to keep a good relationship between interlocutors, and make the conversation goes on harmoniously, utterers need choose various communicative strategies to maintain the face of both sides. Brown and Levinsion (1987) define "face" as the "public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself", which consists of two related aspects: positive face and negative face. The former one means "the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others". The latter one refers to "the want of every competent adult member that his action be unimpeded by others". Being polite means the observing both the negative and positive face needs. According to them, face preservation is a key factor affecting communication. Hedge can be used as an effective strategy to maintain the social relationship and preserve the face of communicators. See the follow example which is common in daily life.

(1) Your shoes are *a little bit* dirty.

In this instance, the utterance may be a suggestion that the hearer should make his shoes clean. Thus it threatens the listener's negative face. Also, it maybe a complaint or a scold that the hearer is lazy thus threatening his positive face. To mitigate the force of face threatening acts, the addresser chose the adaptor "*a little bit*" to minimize the dispraise but maximize the praise of the opposite. In this way, he saved the addressee's face so that he is willing to accept his advice or scold. Supposing the utterer did not employ hedge but directly say "Your shoes are dirty" that would make the interpreter feel his face is losing because the force of scolding is too strong. If a statement of dispraise is less categorical, surely it's more polite. Here hedge can be employed as a device to ease the tone of criticism and reduce the force of a face threatening act.

In a word, the prevalence of hedges in communication is actually a result and reflection of both the choices of communicative strategy and linguistic form. The choice of communicative strategies, if there is any in a specific communicative behavior, usually comes before that of linguistic form. Meanwhile, the fulfillment of strategies depends on the appropriate use of linguistic forms. While the speaker made these choices is just for the purpose of adaptation to the contextual correlates.

3. Use of Hedge as Adaptation to the Contextual Correlates

Contextual correlates play a role of restriction to the conversation, and the role is realized by limiting utterance production (Hu Gengshen, 2004). That is to say, the speaker should select proper linguistic forms and strategies based on the current context to approach the communicative needs. Verschueren declares that the communicative context contains interlocutors' mental world, social world, and the physical world of the utterance. Hedge, as a linguistic phenomenon, without doubting the speakers choose it is also for the adaptation to the contextual correlates.

3.1 Adaptation to the Mental World

"Verbal interaction is no doubt communication from mind to mind (Verschueren, 2000, p.87)". Interlocutors' psychological activity, especially their communicative purpose and motivation plays a vital role in conversation. It, to a great extent, can influence and restrict the utterer's utterance building. For example:

(2) Teacher: How many students have come back to school safely?

Monitor: *More than* thirty.

Out of the consideration of safety to students, as a teacher, she actually wants to gain the precise number of students who have come back to school. But the monitor did not know the exact message at that moment. However, as a monitor, he has the responsibility to offer the information as much as possible to his teacher. Besides, he did not want to make himself involved in the troubles that the information was proved not to be true later. Therefore, he chose hedge "*more than*" as a device to tailor his reply. Thus he not only provided the utmost amount of information to his teacher, but also relieved himself from taking some unnecessary responsibilities.

3.2 Adaptation to the Social World

"Since language is developed in a social context, its use is governed by society rather than by the individual speakers (Mey, 2001, p. 43)". That is, language using must be adaptive to the social world. Social world can be perceived as various ways of thinking and behavior that are believed to be acceptable by a certain society. In some sense, it just likes a boundless net which functions as some invisible rules guiding people's communicative behavior and any violation of them will lead to failure in conversation. Therefore, language using can be

influenced greatly by these social factors like social settings, interlocutors' identity, power, gender, age, etc. Hedge, as a common phenomenon in language, is the same too. For example:

(3) --- Mrs. Wang, *could* I use your reference book after class? I want to check the answers to the exercises in unit 5.

--- Ok, of course. But you must return before Saturday.

In this conversation, the student is making a request to his teacher. In this situation, it is sure that the relationship between them is a power one in which teacher is superior to student and there is a possible deference between them. So the student tries to make the tone of his requirement less strong. The hedge "*could*" contributes a lot to his need by which he leaves enough room to his teacher. Compared with the student, the tutor speaks in a firmer voice. Apparently, it is a kind of adaptation to the power relations which exist between them.

*3.3 Adaptation to the Physical W*orld

All the communicative activities proceed in a physical world. No information can be conveyed outside it, for we always communicate at a certain time and place and the event we are talking is usually concerned with time and place too. With respect to physical world, Verschueran (2000, p.95) believes that "temporal deixis and spatial deixis are the most studied, and most visible, ways of anchoring language choices into a physical world". While choosing language, speakers must take the time and space of interaction into account. Therefore, in communication, addressers usually make linguistic choices such as hedges to adapt to the physical world. For instance:

(4) David: Excuse me. I wonder if you could tell me where the Sports Center is.

Max: Sure. Just go straight ahead until you reach the next intersection, then turn left and walk *about 200 meters*. Then you will see the university auditorium on your left. The Sports Center is *just* opposite it on your right.

"In many ways, spatial concepts are always central to human thinking (Verschueren, 2000, p.98)". People always use *on, in, under, in front of…*to indicate the relative spatial relations. It is a kind of adaptation to the space of physical world. Hedge, of course, can not directly serve this function. However, it can assist other spatial references to indicate the spatial relations indirectly, but more accurately.

"Spatial reference is usually relative to a perspective, which can be either utterer space or reference space". The latter is defined as "having a deictic centre distinct from the perspective of the utterer" (Verschueren, 2000, p.99). The above sentences exemplify such use of relative reference space, locating the university auditorium in a specific relation to the intersection, and Sports Center to the university auditorium and David. In the former one, university auditorium is regarded as a figure and the intersection as ground. In the latter, Sports Center is regarded as figure, but university auditorium as ground. Figure refers to the target object, while ground is the entity used as deictic centre for spatial placement of the figure. By these phrases of locality "*200 meters*", "*on you left/ right*", Max let David know the location of Sports Center, but hedges "*about*" and "*just*" assist them to indicate the exact position of Sports Center. Then, we can say that hedge also can indirectly function as spatial reference in verbal communication, which is used for adaptation to the space.

4. Characteristics of Adaptation Process

The addressers choose hedges frequently to adapt to the contextual correlates to reach some expectant communicative effects. The process of adaptation takes on some distinct characteristics like dynamics, intentionality and bidirectionality.

4.1 Dynamics of Adaptation

Context plays a critical part in communication. It could serve as a constraint to the utterance production. Verschueren believes that context is dynamic, but not static, and it is generated in the communication flow. Some elements of contextual correlates keep changing in communication such as the speakers and listeners, the purpose, wish and emotion of interlocutors, the time and space of an utterance, and so on. Thus generate a new context. That is, context could shift from "the immediately given context" to "the forthcoming context" (Sperson & Wilson, 2001). So the relationship between utterance and context could be viewed as a dynamic procedure in which the utterers continuously choose appropriate linguistic form and tactic to adapt to the contextual correlates. In other words, they utilize "the immediately given context" to reconstruct "the forthcoming context" which is favorable to them. It is believed that the choice of hedge in discourse is a result of adaptation to the contextual correlates. Then since the context is dynamic, the process of choosing language to adapt to it is dynamic too. For example:

Situation: Susan lost her parents on the same day in an accident. Her friends Jack and Jane are showing their

sympathy and considering giving her a hand.

(5) Jack: Susan is thinking of dropping out of school. She has *almost* no money, you know. Her parents didn't have *much* savings.

Jane: Yeah. I've been *quite* worried about her. But *simply* feeling sorry for her is not *enough*; we have to think of *some way* to help her. Have you *any* suggestions?

Jack: Well, I haven't *really* thought about it. I could *possibly* give her *some* money. I've saved *some* up from my part-time job.

Jane: Wow. You're *so* generous! But…that wouldn't be a long-term solution.

Jack: That' true… *Perhaps* we *could* help her find a part-time job.

Jane: *Good* idea! The lady who runs the shop where I work at night *could* be helpful. If Susan is interested, I can introduce her to the lady.

The first turn of the conversation is that Jack told Jane Susan might leave off her study on account of financial problems and then Jane showed her sympathy and suggested rendering some assistance to Susan. The second turn is that Jack said he could give her some money, but Jane didn't think it was a long-term solution. Subsequently, comes to the third turn Jack proposed that they could help her find a part-time job, and then Jane thought it was a good idea and she could introduce Susan to the shop she was working now. From this discourse, we can experience the dynamics of context in which the content and intention of their conversation, the problems they are facing, and the role of the participants are changing all the time. Thus Jack and Jane continuously make some choices to adapt to the dynamic context. They choose a variety of hedges such as "*almost*", "*much*", "*some*", "*enough*", "*really*", "*possibly*", "*perhaps*" and "*could*" to adapt to the dynamic context.

4.2 Intentionality of Adaptation

In verbal communication, the construction of utterance, in general, depends on the utterer's definite intention. Regarding the addresser, the communicative behavior is a process of forming some intentions firstly, then constructing the utterance at the premise of the expectant purposes until approach those intentions. Without doubting, intentionality is the focal point in the course of communication. The construction of utterance begins from the intention and ends with it too. No intention, no direction of communicative behavior (Ran Yongping, Zhang Xinhong, 2007, p.63). Grice ever defined speaker meaning as "the speaker's intention in the making of an utterance to produce an effect in the hearer by means of the hearer's recognition of the intention to produce that effect (Verschueren, 2000:47)". Speaker meaning can be simply perceived as speaker's communicative purpose, motivation or intention. Then, communication behavior also can be briefly understood as a flow in which utterer manifests and interpreter infers. In order to reach "the optimal relevance" (Sperber & Wilson, 2001) between utterer and interpreter, the speaker should make some choices in strategy and linguistic form to adapt to his or her intention. Hedges are often chosen to fulfill the goal. This can be found in the following conversation.

(6) Salesperson: I'm telling you, the jeans will look *really* great on you.

Customer: They're nice, but *I think* I'm going to look around *a little* first.

Salesperson: We *only* have *a few* pairs left.

Customer: They're just *too* expensive. If you give me a discount, *maybe* I'll be interested.

Salesperson: Since these jeans seem *exactly specially* made for you, I'll give you a five discount.

Customer: Make it ten percent, and I'll take then.

In this dialog, the customer finds a pair of jeans whose design and color are exactly to her taste. She likes it very much but thinks it's too expensive. She wants much discount for it. So, she is bargaining with the salesperson. She chooses many hedges like "*I think*", "*too*", "*maybe*" in order to reach her intention. But to the part of the salesperson, of course, he wants to sell her the jeans in a much higher price. Then he also chooses hedges such as "*really*", "*only*", "*a few*", "*exactly*" and "*specially*" to serve his intention. Finally, they may get a price acceptable to both of them.

In a word, the meaning of language is mainly originated from the speaker's intentioned conditions (Searle, 1983). No intentionality, language is only a kind of physical entity which has no meaning at all. And language performs as the carrier of meaning, which can be employed by communicator to approach some specific intentions. Hedge works well in this point. Therefore, the process of adaptation is intentional.

4.3 Bidirectionality of Adaptation

Linguists have widely accepted that context plays a role of restriction to the conversation, and the role is realized

by limiting utterance building. Influenced by the contextual correlates, language user may choose hedge to adapt to the contextual correlates. While utterance or language also plays a role of monopoly and reconstruction of context, and the role is realized by influencing and changing contextual elements. Eventually, the context also adapt to the choice of language such as hedge. That is, the process of adaptation is bidirectional.

Hedge can promote the course of adaptation between contextual correlates and utterance. For example, while welcoming President Nixon in 1972, Premier Zhou Enlai ever said the following sentence:

(7) For some reasons we all know, the communication of two peoples has been severed for more than two decades. Now we can talk friendly due to the efforts we do together.

"Some reasons we all know" refers to American attitudes towards China in the past two decades, but Premier Zhou didn't say it definitely. Because it is the first time to resume the diplomatic relations between two countries after it has been interrupted for more than two decades. And the meeting in 1972 aims at interviewing friendly and dialogue with negotiation. By using hedge at that circumstance, Premier Zhou successfully created a favorable situation in which China and U.S. can communicate harmoniously and smoothly. It is thus evident that the use of hedge in the instance is the result restricted by the contextual correlates. Reversely, the employment of hedge also reconstructed a new context which is favorable to both sides. So we can say this new context is a consequence of adaptation to the hedge chosen for the previous discourse too.

In a word, the adoption of hedges is just for the adaptation to the contextual correlates. But it is not where the story ends. The other side of the coin is that contextual correlates also get changed by, or adapted to the choice of hedges. Therefore, adaptation process is bidirectional, and the adaptive relationship between language and contextual correlates is circular rather than linear.

5. Conclusion

With the guidance of Adaptation Theory, the article investigated the production process of hedge in verbal communication. By analyzing some data, it arrives at a conclusion that the adoption of hedges consists of continuous choices both in linguistic forms and communicative strategies. And during the process of choice-making, the speaker should adapt to the contextual correlates such as mental world, social world, and physical world in order to achieve some expectant communicative intentions. In addition, the adaptation process is dynamic, intentional and bidirectional.

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