

УНИВЕРЗИТЕТ У БАЊОЈ ЛУЦИ  
ФИЛОЛОШКИ ФАКУЛТЕТ

# ФИЛОЛОГ

ЧАСОПИС ЗА ЈЕЗИК, КЊИЖЕВНОСТ И КУЛТУРУ



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# ON INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE: MODAL HEDGES IN HEALTH CARE PRODUCT INSTRUCTIONS IN ENGLISH AND SERBIAN

**Abstract:** *The paper investigates how modal hedges (Coates 1983) understood as expressions of procedural meaning, i.e. expressions which instruct the addressee/reader how to process the propositional content of an utterance/statement (Watts 2004) are used in product descriptions, advertisements and consumer instructions leaflets for a number of products belonging to the Consumer Health Care category for the purposes of complying with consumer protection laws on the one hand and serving as an implicit disclaimer of manufacturer's responsibility on the other. The analysis is carried out contrastively for two languages, English and Serbian. The results obtained are discussed and viewed as a matter of cultural variety and difference, especially taking into consideration the fact that consumer protection laws are equally strict in US, UK, Europe and Serbia.*

**Key words:** *consumer health care product description, epistemic modality, expressions of procedural meaning, hedges, modal verbs.*

## 1. Theoretical background

The theoretical framework underlying the research presented starts from the notion of modality understood, on the one hand, as the speaker's commitment to the truth of the proposition, and on the other, as "the structural and semantic resources available to a speaker to express judgment of the factual status and likelihood of a state of affairs" (Frawley 1992: 407). This implies the necessity of some reference point in relation to which the factuality status of the proposition is assessed. Therefore, modality can be understood as *epistemic deixis*, and the speaker's commitment to the truth of the proposition as the function of epistemic distance. The research extends into the domain of pragmatics, focusing on the notions of *hedge* and *hedging*. It has been

shown consistently in the literature that modality and hedging overlap closely, and if modality is understood as epistemic distance, then the overlapping is easy to demonstrate.

### 1.1. Hedges

The definition of 'hedge' in linguistics, discourse analysis and pragmatics has gone a long way since 1972, when G. Lakoff first defined 'hedges' as expressions featuring an ability to "to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy" (Lakoff 1972: 195). Later, following a similar line, Brown and Levinson (1987) defined 'hedge' as

"a particle, word or phrase that modifies the degree of membership of a predicate or a noun phrase in a set; it says of the membership that it is partial, or true only in certain respects, or that it is

more true and complete than perhaps might be expected.” (Brown & Levinson 1987: 145).

The definition is quite commensurate to that of Lakoff's, as it includes both *boosters* and *downtoners*. However, R.T. Lakoff in her groundbreaking *Language and Woman's Place* (1975), when depicting characteristics of women's language, defines hedges as “words that convey the sense that the speaker is uncertain about what he (or she) is saying, or cannot vouch for the accuracy of the statement” (Lakoff 2004: 79).

Hedges, therefore, encode the relation between the speaker and language (or rather, the truth of the utterance) and the relation is one of *distance*. And distance, of course, is a function of politeness, both first and second-order politeness.<sup>1</sup> Hence the above mentioned overlapping with modality. The literature on hedging offers more such views: Vande Kopple (1985) sees hedges as a subclass of what he calls *validity markers* in discourse, i.e. Expressions that modify the truth value of the proposition, since they show a lack of commitment to the truth of the propositional content, and not only as particles, words or phrases that merely ‘fuzzy’ some parts of the utterance. Practically, the definition of validity markers here corresponds to the definition of modality.

In a contrastive study, House and Kasper (1981) offered a typology of linguistic expressions that are used to signal politeness in English and German. Their typology reflects the linguistic structure of politeness and among some 11 structural categories they include hedges, which serve the purpose of avoiding to state precise propositional content; by doing so, the speaker leaves it to the addressee / hearer

<sup>1</sup> The notion of *first order politeness* refers to the ways in which laymen interpret individual behaviour within a community as polite or impolite. The *second order politeness* is a theoretical notion within the universal theory of politeness and refers to behaviour which shows or does not show consideration for others. (Watts:2004)

to read in his/her own interpretation (e.g. *kind of, sort of, somehow*, etc). House and Kasper distinguish *hedges* from *understaters* (which, in a way, diminish, or underrepresent the propositional content of the utterance, e.g. *just, simply, possibly, really*), from *downtoners* (that mitigate the perlocutionary effect of the utterance) and from *committers* (whose purpose is to lower the speaker's commitment to the propositional content of the utterance). It is exactly those four types that Holmes (1995) sees as one category in her two-category classification of linguistic expressions through which linguistic politeness is realized, namely *hedges* and *boosters*.

### 1.2. Hedges as expressions of procedural meaning (EPM)

In this paper, hedges are also seen as a *communicative strategy* or an *interactional element of metadiscourse* (Hyland 1998), whose function is to modulate the propositional content of the utterance/text to the effect of evidentiality marking, mitigation, tentativeness, indirection or vagueness, depending on the communicative function, context and utterer's /author's intent. As interactional elements, hedges may be placed into the category of *expressions of procedural meaning* (EPM), i.e. linguistic expressions which, on the one hand, signal to the addressee/reader how to draw inferences related to the interpersonal meaning (e.g. greetings, terms of address, etc.) and on the other, how to process and derive inferences from the given propositional content (Watts 2004). Though primarily referring to spoken communication, hedges are also used in written discourse and can be understood as EPMs too. Although there has been extensive research on the use of hedges in, say, written academic discourse (namely research articles), which is to a certain degree relevant to the present research, most of those papers attempt at making thorough and exhaustive taxonomies of hedges (Hyland 1995). Such an ap-

proach may be very useful when processing a specific register, but actually it does not work for all registers. So, if we take that, viewed within a broader theory of politeness, hedges are communicative strategies that address the speaker's/author's *positive face wants* (the speaker's desire to preserve a positive self-image), the need for which arises in socially and culturally marked interactions, then it is acceptable that the list of hedges is not set and given. Therefore, any signal that:

a) enables the speaker/author to avoid directness / commit herself to the truth of the propositional content, and

b) triggers inferences on the part of the addressee, listener or reader as regarding the speaker's commitment to the propositional content is an EPM that functions as a hedge.

### **1.3. Hedges in academic and academic-like writing**

The researches on hedging in academic writing<sup>2</sup> have confirmed that the motivation for this kind of strategy lies in the fact that research articles get faced with the audience/readership that is well informed about the subject matter on the one hand, and prone to scrutinizing and criticising on the other. Also, it is the audience that expects the author to comply with certain cultural patterns of behaviour that ask for modesty and humbleness. So, it is the socio-cultural context that exerts pressure on the author to use hedges in academic writing.

Quite similarly, hedges are found in the leaflets accompanying drugs and medicines (academic-like writing); there is a great similarity between the hedges used in academic writing and those used in patient instructions. A preliminary study of a smaller corpus of prescription medicines descriptions and patient instructions leaf-

lets has shown that modals *CAN* and *MAY* are the most frequent hedges used in his type of text. Also, they are predominately used in their Root Possibility meanings when occurring in statements concerning adverse reactions and unwanted side effects of certain drugs or preparations, as in

(1) Like all medicines, D\*\*\*\*\* can cause side effects, although not everybody gets them.

In case of *MAY*, it is supposed that it occurs in its 'merger' meaning (Coates: 1995) as a consequence of the weak Root/Epistemic contrast, as in:

(2) Like all medicines, D\*\*\*\*\* may cause some side effects that are usually mild to moderate.

When patient instructions leaflets in English (both from the US and EU manufacturers) are compared to their counterparts in Serbian, modals *CAN* and *MAY* clearly stand against either (1) their Serbian correspondent, modal verb *MOĆI* and/or

(2) other devices equivalently expressing Root Possibility or merger of Root/Epistemic Possibility.

The high degree of similarity (practically identical usage of modal hedges) can be attributed to the identical social context, i.e. a very high degree of standardization in regulations concerning marketing and administration of pharmaceutical products considered 'drugs'. Drug description and function claims are strictly prescribed across the global pharmaceutical market (though, of course, there may be some variation). Both in English and Serbian, *CAN* and *MAY* in these instances stand as verbal substitutes for a piece of quantitative data, i.e. the relative frequency of incidence of the effects listed/described, particularly where the incidence is low, i.e. the side effect is rare. As hedges, they function as warnings toward the consumer, and protectors of manufacturer's positive face on the other. Translated to the practical, social context, they function as disclaimers of responsibility on the part of the manufacturer.

<sup>2</sup> Especially in the domain of biomedical sciences (Hyland 1998, Panocova 2008, etc.)

### 2.0. Aim of the research

The aim of the present research is threefold:

a) To identify and describe the expressions of procedural meaning (EPMs) that function as hedges in the instructions for consumer health products sold in the US, UK, European and Serbian markets;

b) To contrast the hedges in English and Serbian;

c) To check (if possible) whether the obtained patterns reveal any cultural particularities.

### 3.0. The Corpus

The corpus for the research consists of the instruction leaflets for certain categories of health care products, mostly dietary supplements<sup>3</sup> found on the global market and Serbian market in particular. As those products are not categorized as 'drugs' or 'medications', the instruction leaflets found with them do not have to follow the highly standardized form/content requirements as those for 'drugs' do. Still, the claims made in these leaflets can roughly be categorized into three categories: health claims, nutrient content claims and structure/function claims. Those claims describe the role of the product or some of its ingredients that produce an effect or a benefit on the functioning of the human system or its part/s. An example of such a claim, for example, is

'Calcium builds strong bones'

or

'Antioxidants preserve cell integrity'

<sup>3</sup> The Dietary Supplement Health and Education Act (DSHEA) of 1994 in the US defines the term 'dietary supplement' as a product taken by mouth that contains a dietary ingredient intended to supplement the diet. The dietary supplements come in the form of tablets, capsules, softgels, gelpcaps, liquids, powders or bars and the US legislation places them under the general category of 'foods', not 'drugs'.

The legal provisions have it that these claims must be qualified to assure accuracy and non-misleading presentation of facts to the consumer. The responsibility for the truthfulness of these claims lies with the manufacturer in Europe and the UK, whereas in the States it may also lie with the Food and Drugs Association, or, in the case of advertising, with the Federal Trade Commission.

It is precisely the third type of claims (the structural/function claims) that constitute the corpus for this research. The reason why this particular part of the instruction leaflet was chosen should be self-evident from the discussion above: claims of any kind inevitably have the form of assertions, i.e. propositions. On the one hand, it is the assertions from the structural/function part of the leaflet that actually sell the product. On the other, it is to be expected that the manufacturer be 'torn' between at least three aims: the desire to sell, the obligation to abide by the legal requirement to be truthful toward the customers and, finally, the desire to be as protected as possible.

### 3.4. Corpus size

Twenty five products that can be found primarily in the US, UK and European markets and twenty five products that can be found in the Serbian market were chosen to supply the linguistic data for the corpus (slimming products, such as diet pills, powders and bars, products to combat nicotine addiction, male potency products and feminine menopausal relief products). Both corpora, English and Serbian amounted to approximately 3500 words. The Serbian corpus consists of

a) Translations of the original structural/function claims found on the original product packaging;

b) Structural/function claims found on the packing of originally Serbian products of the same kind.

### 3.5. Results obtained

As for the frequency of occurrence, the English corpus showed by far higher frequency per 1000 words:

- a) English : 38 EPMS /hedges per 1000 words
- b) Serbian : 10 EPMS /hedges per 1000 words

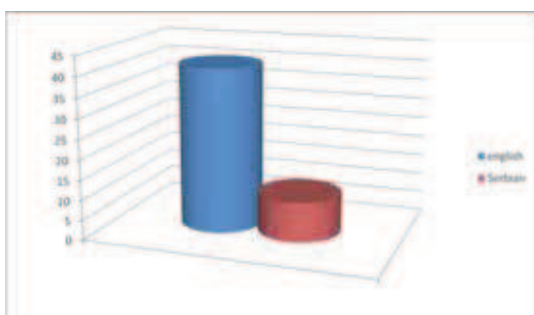


Fig.1. Occurrence of hedges in English and Serbian per 1000 wds.

In the English instruction leaflets, the occurrence of hedges per 1000 words is 3.8%, whereas in Serbian it turned out only 1%.

#### 3.5.1. What language items were found functioning as hedges in the corpus?

The range of expressions was rather limited, which is easily accountable for. The structural/function part of the instructions leaflet counts up to 150 words only; very often it is printed on the packaging itself, i.e. there is not plenty of space. So the language, which needs to get across the most important information about the product, needs to be as objective, neutral and concise as possible. At the same time it should help sell the product and be truthful to the consumer.

The EPMS found could be roughly categorized into three categories:

- a) Grammaticalized forms
- b) Lexical forms
- c) Constructions

#### 3.5.2. Hedges found in the English corpus:

a) Grammaticalized forms:

- 1) CAN, MAY, WOULD (modal v)

1a...which **may result** in body mass reduction

1b Research has also shown that Chromium **can burn** fat

1c H\*\*\*\* is a naturally made diet pill that **would only aid** in suppressing appetite

b) Lexical forms: help (v); believe (v); potential (n); possibly, usually, often (adverbs, modal, of frequency); some, about (quantifiers & approximators)

2a L\*\*\*\* pills are proven to **help** reduce body fat and weight

2b Researches **believe** Chromium helps reduce body fat

2c M\*\*\*\* has shown **potential** to reduce hot flushes

2d C\*\*\*\* can lead to weight loss and **possibly** bad cholesterol lowering

2e V\*\*\*\* **usually** works in about 30 - 40 minutes

2f **Often**, an adjustment in dose may help.

2g In **some** patients, it works in as little as 17 minutes

2h.....in **about** 30-40 minutes

c) Constructions:

if-clauses, other subordinate clauses (temporal);

3a H\*\*\*\* can play an effective part in an overall weight loss plan **if used correctly**

3b Helps whiten your teeth **while you use it**.

'Double hedge' constructions: modal + help + lexical verb

4a While H\*\*\*\* pills **may help suppress** your appetite

4b S\*\*\*\* Snack Bar **can help you maintain** your blood sugar levels during exercise.

4c C\*\*\*\* **will help you boost** your overall beauty & well being



Fig.2 Linguistic items serving as hedges in the corpus data

### 3.5.3. Hedges found in the Serbian corpus

The linguistic forms obtained from the Serbian corpus (per 1000 words) were:

- a) Grammaticalized forms
  - 1a Modal verb MOĆI  
Practically, the modal MOĆI was found only in 'double hedges'.
  - b) Lexical forms  
Lexical verb POMAGATI (imperfective form)  
Pomaže varenje proteina  
Help-3<sup>rd</sup>pers sg IMPERF digestion proteins GEN  
'X helps protein digestion'
  - c) Constructions  
Modal verb MOĆI + lexical verb POMOĆI (perfective form<sup>4</sup>) + PrepP/Noun/Gerund  
Može pomoći u prevenciji  
Can help PERF in prevention  
'X can help in prevention...'  
Modal Adj MOGUĆE + that CI  
Moguće je da ublaži tegobe  
Possible is that relieve-3<sup>rd</sup> pers sg disorders  
Prepositional Phrases which can easily be expanded into full conditional clauses

4 By choosing the perfective form of the verb in this construction, certain enhancement of hedging is achieved, as the implied meaning is that the instances of 'helping' are sporadic, not habitual (the effect is the same as with the existential quantifier 'sometimes')

Uz razuman unos hrane  
With sensible intake food-GEN  
'If you take sensible amounts of food'



Fig. 3. Linguistic items serving as hedges in corpus data

### 4.0. Discussion of results

The 'mechanisms behind' these EPMs, which enable their perception and interpretation as hedges were:

- Encoding epistemic possibility (as in 1a - may)
- Encoding root possibility (as in 1b - can)
- Encoding tentative prediction achieved by 'distancing' – using the distal form (1c - would )
- Logical 'fuzzying' of a part of the utterance (using quantifiers and approximators such as *some men*, *about 30-40 minutes* adds imprecision and vagueness to the utterance by means of implicature):  
*some men* → but not all  
*about 30-40* → but not precisely
- Lexical verb HELP that in other contexts does not behave as an EPM; it hardly can be interpreted as a hedge in the examples such as :  
e.g. I helped him up the stairs , where it rather means: 'I didn't climb the stairs for him; he did it but I provided support, conditions, etc.'

Also, in the context under investigation, the signal is interpreted as :

If something *helps* – it doesn't **do** it; it doesn't work on its own, it is some other

agent that does the job (as in 'H\*\*\*\* may help you reduce your weight', where it means 'It is not the H\*\*\*\* pill that makes you lose weight but it is your metabolism, your body, essentially **you!** So, if it doesn't work, don't blame the pill. As a customer, you have been informed properly. We have not promised/guaranteed anything.)

• Epistemic status of *believe*, whose non-factuality does not imply the truth of the ensuing propositional content, but rather creates an epistemic distance, and therefore a hedge:

'Researchers believe that Chromium burns fat' does **not** imply that 'Chromium burns fat' is true.

The inferences triggered by the EPMs in Serbian are the same; generally, it is not the inventory of linguistic means that shows contrast between the two languages, but it is the manner in which and the extent to which the speakers/authors of these texts use these means to signal procedural meaning, i.e. to hedge.

#### 4.6. Why hedge?

Such choices are not governed by legal regulations only. Actually, they seem to be the same, or at least very similar, as far as the scope of the standardized legislation reaches. Pharmaceutical giants rule the global market, and they dictate the market standards, including the linguistic standards of the patient instruction leaflets across the globe. However, the products in question, as already said above, do not belong to the category of 'drugs' and legislation does not treat them the same. That opens the doors to 'a more natural use of language', not as bound by the strict codes. It is at this point that we need to turn to cultural theories for explanation of these discrepancies, and it is at this point that the notions *innocence* and *experience*, figuring in the title, come in.

#### 4.7. The experience of the Anglo-market and the Anglo-customer

Below are two examples taken from the web site of New Zealand Commerce Commission [www.comcom.govt.nz](http://www.comcom.govt.nz):

1. „A company made claims on its website and in a newspaper advertorial that it had homeopathic cures for, or could protect against, diseases with no known cures, such as avian influenza, SARS and herpes. It also claimed that its directors had medical qualifications they did not hold. The company was convicted and fined.

2. A company claimed in a brochure and on its website that a pill was a natural alternative to breast implants and could make women's breasts larger and firmer. The Commission's investigation found that taking the tablets at the recommended dose would have no significant effect on breast shape or size and that the company's marketing material failed to substantiate its claims. The company was convicted and fined" (The Fair Trading Act: Health and Nutrition Claims: August 2010)

It is such practice that builds the experience of the participants in the market :

a) of manufacturers and traders, who extensively employ hedging in the product accompanying instructions because they are obliged by the law to provide truthful information and who are aware that assertions trigger responsibility in each and every case of the item sold.

b) the responsibility is at least shared with, if not entirely shifted onto the buyer/patient when he/she makes an informed choice on the basis of vague and mitigated assertions which do not imply that the product really and always does what it is expected to do.

However, in this respect, the Serbian market and participants show an incredible innocence:

a) The buyers make choices on the basis of claims which are, at least in most



*cases in my corpus, full claims with no hedges;*

*b) even if the products do not do what the claims say they should, I have found no such recorded cases of legal action against the manufacturer.*

*The question that starts tickling is 'Why?' How can those differences be accounted for, given the extremely high similarity in the inventories of linguistic means for expressing modal concepts and pragmatic meanings. At this point, I believe we should turn for answers to those theoretical approaches that study culture specific norms, rules and models of usage, which is the definition of ethnopragmatics (Goddard 2002: 53).*

#### **4.8. Cultural script of directness supported**

The main technique of ethnopragmatic description are the so called 'cultural scripts': they are not rules, they are assumptions about cultural norms that underlie people's thinking and behaviour within a given culture/society, formulated by means of the metalanguage of universal semantic primes. It would be very wrong to understand cultural scripts as strict rules applied in every instance of interaction. People enter interaction carrying with themselves their 'baggage' of assumptions concerning the preferred ways of interaction, but they do not always abide by them – it is rather that against the background of such shared assumptions one's (linguistic) behaviour can be interpreted, either in a positive or negative way.

Cultural scripts operate on higher and lower levels of generality: an example of a high-level cultural script in Anglo-American culture is the script stating preference for 'personal autonomy':

People think like this: when a person does something, it is good if this person can think about it like this: "I am doing this because I want to do it" (Goddard 2006: 6)

An example of a lower-level script, which is complementary to the higher-level one described above, is the Anglo-American script blocking 'imperative directives':

If I want someone to do something I can't say to this person something like this: 'I want you to do this; because of this, you have to do it' (Goddard 2002: 60)

The communicative practice of Anglo-American speakers confirms their avoidance of 'strong directives', but it also reflects another lower-level script for 'interrogative directives':

If you want to say to someone something like this: 'I want you to do this' It is good to say something like this at the same time: 'I don't know if you will do it' (Goddard 2002: 61)

Speaking of politeness norms, Anglo-American culture favours *indirectness* over *directness* just as much as it favours *distance* over *closeness*. Serbian culture, though – or, at least it has turned out so in my previous research on preferences for directness and indirectness in these two cultures, reveals a possible cultural script relating to directness of request:

If I want someone to do something It is not bad to say to this person something like this 'I want you to do something; because of this, you have to do it'

I find it quite significant for this research of hedges, as this cultural script models not only the encoding, but also the *perception* of directness and, consequently, the possible reactions, verbal or behavioural. It could be argued, therefore, that the difference in perception of directness governs the use of hedges and their interpretations and renders hedging a much less employed communicative strategy in Serbian discourse than in its English counterparts.

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**О НЕВИНОСТИ И ИСКУСТВУ: МОДАЛНЕ ОГРАДЕ  
У УПУТСТВИМА ЗА УПОТРЕБУ ДИЈЕТЕТСКИХ  
СУПЛЕМЕНАТА И ДРУГОГ НЕЛЕКА НА  
ЕНГЛЕСКОМ И СРПСКОМ**

Резиме

Рад истражује на који начин се модалне оградe (Coates 1983), схваћене као *изрази процедуралног значења* (Watts 2004), односно као изрази који упућују слушаоца/ читаоца како да процесује пропозициони садржај исказа/ реченице, користе у описима производа, рекламама и упутствима за употребу производа у категорији нелека и дијететских суплемената. Претпоставка је да се модалне оградe користе у складу са законима о заштити потрошача с једне стране, као и да, с друге, представљају имплицитно одрицање произвођача од одговорности. Приликом истраживања спроведена је контрастивна анализа података из два мања корпуса (око 3500 речи сваки), енглеског и српског. Добијени резултати разматрају се из перспективе културне различитости, узимајући притом у обзир чињеницу да су закони о заштити потрошача подједнако строги у Америци, Британији, Европи и Србији.

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