

Hedging in Newspaper Headlines Written by Indonesian and American Writers

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ABSTRACT

This study is an attempt to examine the forms and functions of hedging expressions used in headlines from two newspapers, *The Jakarta Post* and *The New York Times*. The headlines that are used as the object of study are limited to the headlines containing news about the COVID-19 pandemic. This study also compares the forms and frequency of hedging expressions used in the two newspapers. The data were quantitatively analyzed with the help of the concordance software *Wordsmith Tools Version 4.0* (Scott, 2004). A qualitative analysis method was also conducted to classify the forms and functions of hedging expressions. A taxonomy proposed by Salager-Meyer (1997) was employed to analyze the forms of hedging expressions and Hyland's (1996b) taxonomy was applied to identify the functions of hedging expressions in newspaper headlines. The results show that both groups of writers do not seem to show any significant difference in the use of hedging expressions in terms of both their forms and their functions.

Keywords: *headlines, hedges, hedging, newspapers.*

INTRODUCTION

News reports contain limitations from the journalistic ethics code and the interests of the writers (Pitaya, 1998). According to Atmadi (1985), the world press is seen as two different institutions, ideal and economic. As an ideal institution, the press is obliged to present the truth to the public. The International Federation of Journalists mentioned that the public reserves the right to get true information (Tijani-Adenle, 2020). The journalistic ethic code is created to balance the freedom of expression that journalists have and the boundaries that are made to protect the interests of the press and the public (Pitaya, 1998). Besides, the press is also an economic institution in which companies make

profits from what they publish. Thus, journalists should have an interest in writing such a favorable news report to gain a greater profit. Those limitations and interests accordingly force writers to imply effective strategies in creating such credible and attractive news reports. Hyland (1998) suggested metadiscourse as an important aspect of writing to display an appropriate manner toward their readers.

Metadiscourse refers to some aspects that help in the organization of the text as well as the interactions between the content and the reader (Hyland, 1998). Any type of metadiscourse can help writers to organize the text as well as interact with the readers (Kopple, 1985). One main category of metadiscourse is hedges (Hyland, 2004). Since it was

first introduced by Lakoff (1972) through the concept of fuzziness in 1972, hedges soon became new interests in linguistic studies (Markkanen & Schroder, 1997). A recent study considered hedges as a rhetorical strategy through linguistic devices that signal a lack of commitment to the truth value of the proposition (Fraser, 2010).

Since hedges are used to show a lack of certainty in one's argument, the use of hedges is largely believed to refer to doubt and empowering language. Fraser (2010) argued that the absence of commitment to the truth value does not merely mean negative, there are many circumstances where the use of hedges becomes necessary. The most common circumstance that may happen in the journalistic text is one in which the ideals contradict the interests. Another circumstance occurs when the writer happens to present bad news. As Fraser (2010) argued hedge is a negotiation language, hedges can cover statements that potentially lead to a negative reaction. Moreover, hedges also deal with politeness phenomena. Presenting bad news without a hedging strategy might be too rude for the readers and therefore the news will likely be rejected (Riekkinen, 2009). This becomes clear how hedges can be critical in writing news reports.

Despite the importance of hedges as a strategy in written communication, the pragmatic competence that underlies hedges seems not to get sufficient concern as it is supposed to in the teaching of English as a second language (Fraser, 2010). According to Salager-Meyer (1997), most foreign learners' English books do not present adequate explanations about the pragmatic area represented by hedges. The lack of hedges understanding may cause communication errors. Inadequate competence in recognizing hedges devices in written or spoken communication may make one fail to interpret the intended meaning of the writer or speaker. Whereas, the failure of using hedges devices as a communicative strategy can lead one to be considered impolite and arrogant. Therefore, this research tried to identify the use of hedging expressions by non-native English writers, i.e., Indonesians, and native English writers, i.e., Americans. This research addresses the following research questions:

- 1) What hedging expressions are used in the headlines published by *The Jakarta Post* and *The New York Times*?
- 2) What are the functions that hedging expressions serve in the headlines?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The use of hedging expressions as a communication strategy has been widely studied by a number of linguists. Among the most popular studies on hedging are done in scientific research articles (Hyland, 1994, 1995, 1996a, 1996b; Salager-Meyer, 1997, 1994). In general, these studies examined the functions and frequency of hedge expressions found in scientific articles. Besides being the most popular, studies on hedging in scientific articles also produced several classifications related to the hedging expressions used (e.g. Hyland, 1996b and Salager-Meyer, 1997). In addition, studies designed to identify hedging in research articles have been largely examined in many aspects: from different disciplinary fields (Sanjaya, 2013), different language (Bonyadi et al., 2012) (Samaie et al., 2014), different writers (Atai & Sadr, 2006) (Chen & Zhang, 2017), different genders (Schmied, 2010), and different communities (Jensen, 2008).

Studies on the use of hedging across newspaper sections have also been conducted identifying hedging expressions in editorials (Zarza, 2018), (Kuhi & Mojood, 2014), editorials and news stories (Nugroho, 2014), news articles and their comments threads (Florea, 2017), and economic news articles (Al-Ghoweri & Kayed, 2019). Almost all of these studies compared the use of hedging by native and non-native English writers excluding the study conducted by (Florea, 2017) who compared the use of hedging in news articles and their comments threads. In general, these studies intended to assert that hedging in newspaper discourse is not less important than hedging in scientific research articles. However, almost no study designed to identify the use of hedging in newspaper headlines. Therefore, this study is an attempt to fill the gaps in hedging studies specifically in the use of hedging

between Indonesian and American writers in writing newspaper headlines.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Metadiscourse provides an attempt to accomplish the interpersonal element by embodying writer-reader interaction and to fulfill the textual element by creating coherence and cohesive text. Hyland, (2004) considered the features of metadiscourse as communicative tools that help writers build both their position toward the readers and their relationship with the readers. These features enable writers to be aware of every possible reaction from their readers toward their text when they build their statements. Therefore, metadiscourse has a significant role in the construction of a meaningful and appropriate text (Hyland & Tse, 2004). Hyland & Tse (2004) classified metadiscourse into two categories, each of which has five subcategories. The interactive category focuses on the establishment of discourse. The other category, the interactional category, concerns writer-reader communication. Hedges belong to this category.

A hedge is a product of mental attitude that comes into linguistic form (e.g. adverbs, verbs, adjectives, etc.) for its realization (Salager-Meyer, 1997). The term hedging is used here to refer to the realization of hedges as an interactional and communicative strategy (Markkanen & Schroder, 1997). In addition, hedging becomes one rhetorical strategy using linguistic elements to modify either the commitment to an expression or the commitment to a speech act (Fraser, 2010). Salager-Meyer (1997) in her study on hedges in written scientific discourse viewed hedging as three different rhetorical strategies. One is hedging as a strategy to build a distance between the writer and the statement. Hedging allows writers to avoid giving an absolute statement that has the error's possibility. The second strategy sees hedging to depict the certainty of the writer's knowledge. (Hyland, 1996b) mentioned that hedging enables writers "to convey their attitude to the truth". The third is hedging as a strategy to build both interaction and negotiation between the writer and the reader. Hedging opens a dialogue between the speakers and their readers and

leaves the readers to choose their best interpretations (Hyland, 1996b).

Along with the development of the concept of hedge expressions, linguists began to develop a classification of hedge expressions including Hyland (1994, 1996b) and Salager-Meyer (1997). Both are known to have developed more than one type of classification. According to Chen & Zhang (2017), Hyland's (1996b) taxonomy is one of the best-known and most widely applied to research on hedges. However, Salager-Meyer (1997) issued a more extensive classification. She classified hedging expressions into seven categories: *modal auxiliary verbs, modal lexical verbs, adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrases, approximators of degree, quantity, time and frequency, introductory phrases, and if-clauses*.

The study of hedges has been widely conducted but it still leaves many areas unexplored including the effects of hedging (Crismore & Kopple, 1997). In accordance with this concern, Hyland (1996b) proposed two major functions of hedging in academic writing. The first function is *content-motivated hedges* which help the writer to present a statement as accurately as possible. The other function is called *reader-motivated hedges* which concern with the relationship between the writer and the readers.

METHODS

The corpus used for this study was obtained from 30 news headlines from two different newspapers: 15 headlines published by *The Jakarta Post* (TJP) and another 15 headlines by *The New York Times* (NYT). All the selected articles were taken from the January to March 2021 editions of the two newspapers. A total of 15 headlines from each newspaper were considered sufficient to represent news published in newspapers containing information about COVID-19. According to the Merriam-Webster online dictionary, the term *headline* means the main news articles on the first page of a newspaper (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). In total, the 15 headlines from *The Jakarta Post* consisted of 13,421 words while those from *The New York Times* consisted of 30,082 words.

In collecting the data for this research, which are in the form of sentences containing hedging expressions and hedging functions in the headlines, computer-aided scanning for the data was conducted using a software called *WordSmith Tools Version 4* (Scott, 2004). After inputting the word list on the concordance list according to the forms of hedging expressions, it is needed to double-check the data, as some data might not present the hedging expression intended, such as in the use of modal auxiliary 'may', some sentences display *mey* which refers to the name of a month meaning, hence these irrelevant data were first eliminated and were not counted to be the data.

In conducting the quantitative analysis, the two headlines were separately examined to look for the occurrences of hedging expressions. Having obtained the data from *WordSmith Tools* (Scott, 2004), the analysis of the data was first done by listing down the raw frequencies of hedging expressions in each newspaper. Then, data normalization was conducted; the occurrences were counted per-10,000 words for both *The Jakarta Post* and *The New York Times*. This way, the frequencies in both can be treated equally and are no longer affected by the difference in number of texts and words, as the number represented occurrences per 10,000 words. After finishing the normalization of the result, the next step was determining whether the hedging expressions found in these two newspapers have a significant difference by using the Chi-square test with a significant level, or p-value, set at $p < 0.05$ (Gomez, 2002). Chi-square values were calculated using the statistical software *Minitab Version 18* (Minitab, 2017).

A qualitative analysis was also conducted to classify the form and function of the expressions found in the headlines. In assisting the classification, *WordSmith Tools Version 4.0* (Scott, 2004) provides a feature that helps locate hedging expressions in the original text by double-clicking the expression. This is important to get the full interpretation of the text since the value of hedging depends on their communicative context rather than the literal meaning alone (Fraser, 2010).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Forms of Hedging

The first analysis is done quantitatively. The result in Table 1 shows that the raw frequencies of hedging expressions in *The New York Times* are more than the expressions found in *The Jakarta Post*. This is due to *The New York Times* having more words compared to *The Jakarta Post*. After data normalization, it shows that in every 10,000 words of headlines, *The Jakarta Post* uses 113 hedging expressions while *The New York Times* only uses 109 hedging expressions. To see whether this difference is significant, a chi-square test is done and the result shows that there is no significant difference between the frequency of hedging expressions in *The Jakarta Post* and *The New York Times* ($df=1$, $\chi^2 = 0.22$, $p = 0.639$).

Table 1. Frequency of hedging expressions in *The Jakarta Post* and *The New York Times*

No	Newspaper	Raw	Normal
1	The Jakarta Post	155	113
2	New York Times	325	109
Total		480	222

As the result of the overall use of hedges in *The Jakarta Post* and *New York Times* shows no significant difference, the analysis began to specify the comparison in the use of hedging expressions forms in the headlines. The result in Table 2 shows the frequency of each hedging expression form. This table is arranged by placing the categories that appear the most in the headlines, starting from modal auxiliary verbs with the most frequency, 131 instances per 10,000 words, to modal lexical verbs which only have 4 expressions per 10,000 words.

Table 2 below also shows that both authors tend to use hedging expressions in the same way. This can be seen from the order of the most used expression categories, both of which only differ in the use of introductory phrases and if clauses. American writers use if clauses more than

introductory phrases, while Indonesian writers use 12 instances per 10,000 words of introductory phrases and only 1 instance per 10,000 words for *if*-clauses.

Table 2. Frequencies of hedging expression in the headlines

Hedging Expressions	TJP		NYT	
	Raw	Normal	Raw	Normal
Modal auxiliary verbs	91	67	193	64
Approximators of degree, quantity, frequency and time	26	19	50	17
Adjectival, nominal and adverbial modal phrases	18	13	35	12
Introductory phrases	16	12	17	6
<i>If</i> -clauses	2	1	21	7
Modal lexical verbs	2	1	9	3
Total	155	113	325	109

In order to determine the significance of the difference between the frequencies of each category, a Chi-squared test was also conducted. However, the last two categories, *if* clauses and modal lexical verbs, were not included in the test due to the small number of the utterances. The results of the test show that there is no significant difference between the two writers ($df=3, \chi^2 = 1.53, p = 0.673$). This insignificant difference result indicates that the two groups of writer have a relatively similar style in employing hedging expressions in newspaper writing.

Modal Auxiliary Verbs

The next analysis is the qualitative analysis to show each form of hedging expressions found in the headlines. Modal auxiliary verbs were applied most frequently by both groups of writers in their headlines. Moreover, the frequency of the

expressions found in each newspaper did not differ too much. Headlines in *The Jakarta Post* contained 67 instances of hedging expressions per 10,000 words while those in *The New York Times* contained 64 instances of hedging expressions per 10,000 words. From the analysis, it was found that there were at least two points that make these forms can be used to express hedging expression. The first point is modal auxiliary verbs could tone down a statement making it more polite. The other point is modal auxiliary verbs also indicate the lack of the writer's commitment to the truth of the proposition. Below is an example illustrating the use of the modal auxiliary *would* as a hedging expression.

- (1) From the outset of the pandemic, China has pledged that Chinese vaccines would become "global public goods", aligning itself with a broader global movement to ensure equal access to coronavirus vaccines and breakthroughs. (TJP15)

Approximators

The findings as presented in Table 2 show that approximators are the second most frequent hedging expressions used in headlines, with a total of 76 instances throughout the entire headlines or 36 instances per 10,000 words. In terms of frequency, *The Jakarta Post* writers are found using hedging expressions slightly more frequently with 19 instances per 10,000 words than *The New York Times* writers who employed 17 instances of approximators per 10,000 words. However, in terms of the variety of the instances, both writers seem to employ the same amount of word variation in writing headlines. These findings show that approximators serve as hedging strategies mostly to hedge numerical measurement. This strategy perhaps not only indicates that the writer is unable to present the accurate number but also indicates that the writer is being cautious by presenting information as accurately as required. The example below illustrates the use of *about* as an approximator expressing hedging.

- (2) The figure is about 30 to 60 percent higher than 2020's projection of Rp 100 trillion. (TJP11)

Adjectival, Adverbial, and Nominal Modal Phrases

The next form of hedging expression is adjectival, adverbial, and nominal modal phrases. Even though the *New York Times* writers employed more hedging expressions in their headlines, the normalization of these two newspapers indicates that per 10,000 words, these writers almost have the same frequency of hedging expressions in this category. On the other hand, in terms of word variation, *The New York Times* writers seem to employ more varied words than *The Jakarta Post* writers, with 12 words variation while *The Jakarta Post* only employed 8 different words. The main point of this form as a hedging expression is to reduce the strength of a statement making it more vague. Below is an example.

- (3) Such cells have also been used in cancer therapies. (TJP15)

Introductory Phrases

The only introductory phrase that serves as an expression of hedging in the headlines is *according to*. A total of 18 instances were found, *The Jakarta Post* writers applied this word twice as much, 12 instances per 10,000 words, as *The New York Times* writers with only 6 instances per 10,000 words. The use of introductory phrases as hedging expressions, specifically *according to*, often helps writers to avoid the responsibility of their statements, attributing it to someone or something other than themselves (Fraser, 2010, p. 20). Here is an example.

- (4) According to the BNPB, the government has provided 1,000 reusable masks, 48 tents and 200 blankets to the evacuees, among other provisions. (TJP07)

If-clauses

In the headlines, *if*-clauses that serve as hedging expressions occur 8 times per 10,000 words. These expressions were used 7 times in *The New York Times* and 1 time in *The Jakarta Post*. The use of an *if*-clause in a sentence could indicate that the writer is not fully committed to the truth of the statement and also could reduce the strength of the statement. The *if-clause* in the example below is used as a hedging expression.

- (5) If these concerns are not well addressed, this “wait and see” cohort could potentially hinder the achievement of the required vaccination coverage. (TJP09)

modal lexical verbs

The results of the research show that there is a small number of modal lexical verbs as hedging expressions in newspaper writing. This is contrary to the results reported by Hyland (1996b) which shows that this category is the most widely used in scientific writing. Contrary to the importance of using lexical verbs as a hedging expression in academic writing, newspaper writers do not need to gain ratification from readers. They are not inviting the readers to have a discussion like the researchers did by using lexical verbs. In addition, this study also only found 10 hedging expressions in the form of lexical verbs, the least common hedging expressions used in headlines. The modal verb *seem* in the example below is used as a hedging expression.

- (6) Some of the variants carry mutations that seem to blunt the body's immune response. (NYT13)

The Functions of Hedging

The next analysis is the quantitative analysis to find the frequency of hedging functions in the headlines. The functions are divided into two categories in accordance with Hyland's (1996b) classification. The first function, i.e., the function of content-motivated hedges, helps writers get approval from readers regarding the truth of the statements or arguments they convey. This function is then subdivided into two, accuracy-based hedges and writer-based hedges. The other function is reader-motivated hedges. This function helps the writer to build communication with the reader. The author disguises the statement to let the reader conclude the meaning of the statement.

Table 3 below shows that only content-motivated hedges were used in the headlines. There was no hedging expression functioning as a reader-motivated hedge in both newspapers. In order to see the significant difference between the two groups of writers, a chi-square test was also done by excluding the instance of reader-motivated hedges due to their

frequency. The results indicate that the use of hedging functions by Indonesian and American writers does not show any significant difference ($df=1, \chi^2 = 0.948, p = 0.330$).

Table 3. Frequency of hedging functions in the headlines

Functions	TJP		NYT	
	Raw	Normal	Raw	Normal
Content-Motivated hedges	155	115	325	107
Reader-motivated hedges	0	0	0	0
Total	155	115	325	107

The main point of hedges is to make a statement vague. This point makes hedging a choice of certain communication strategies. Hedging in this point enables writers to give claims as accurately as they can as well as avoiding some possible rejections. There are two categories of hedging strategies based on how the writers present claims.

Accuracy-based hedges focus on presenting plausible reasons to support the statement rather than reliable facts that may not fully support the statement. By doing this, writers could convince readers that what they say is true as far as can be determined (Hyland, 1996b). There are four categories of Salager-Meyer's (1997) hedging expressions that serve accuracy-based functions of hedges in the headlines: a) modal auxiliary verbs, b) adjectival, nominal, and adverbial phrases, c) approximators of degree, time, frequency, and quantity, and d) *if*-clauses. Below is an example of the use of *likely* as a hedge serving the accuracy-based function.

- (7) In one study, researchers found that people with diabetes, obesity, hypertension or chronic kidney disease were three times as likely to be hospitalized with Covid-19, regardless of age. (NYT14)

The second category of content-motivated hedges is a function that was seen from the writer's position, writer-based hedges. The main focus of this strategy is to protect writers from any possible rejection by omitting/reducing the writer's appearance in the text. In an attempt to keep the reader's belief in the truth of the statement

conveyed, writers assert responsibility to something or someone else. There are two hedging taxonomies proposed by Salager-Meyer (1997), modal lexical verbs and introductory phrases. Below are two examples.

- (8) A report recently published by the Economist Intelligence Unit predicted that the COVID-19 vaccination drive in middle-income countries would likely stretch into late 2022 or early 2023, while the same program could go on until 2024 in poorer countries. (TJP06)
- (9) According to an analysis by The New York Times, the vaccination rate for Black Americans is half that of white people, and the gap for Hispanic people is even larger. (NYT15)

The category of reader-motivated hedges reveals the writer's commitment to the truth of the statement. This function helps the writer to be modest in presenting their statements. However, this function seems irrelevant in the writing of headline news articles. As there are no instances of hedging expressions reflecting this function are discovered in the headlines. It might indicate that hedging expressions that function as reader-motivated hedges are not commonly used in newspaper writing.

CONCLUSION

This study aims to determine the use of hedging expressions in newspaper headlines by two different groups of writers, American and Indonesian. The main focuses of this exploration are the differences in the type of hedging expressions used by those writers and the functions that the hedging expressions serve in the headlines. The data were obtained from 30 headline articles published by *The Jakarta Post* and *The New York Times* through their online websites. These two newspapers were selected due to their popularity and readership in their respective countries.

As for the first objective, the study has identified 480 instances of hedging expressions in the headlines or 222 instances per 10,000 words. The results have shown that the most frequently employed type of hedging expression is modal

auxiliary verbs with 131 instances per 10.000 words. In the second position, approximators of degree, time, quantity, and frequency occur 36 instances per 10,000 words, followed by adjectival, nominal, and adverbial phrases with 25 instances. The hedging expressed in the if clauses form occurs in 18 instances and in the introductory phrases form occurs in 8 instances per 10,000 words. The least employed type of hedging expression in this study is modal lexical verbs with a total of 4 utterances per 10,000 words. However, when the comparisons were carried out, *The Jakarta Post* writers were found to use hedging expressions slightly more frequently than their writer counterparts. The findings of the present study show that there is no significant difference in the use of hedging expressions by the two groups of writers.

Regarding the function of each hedging expression served in the headlines, accuracy-based hedges are found to be the most common strategy used by the two groups of writers in writing a headline. This function occurs at 200 instances per 10,000 words. Writer-based hedges are in the second position with 22 instances per 10,000 words. The reader-motivated function of hedging proposed by Hyland (1996) was not found in the headlines. In terms of the frequency of the strategies used in the headlines, the strategies used by Indonesian and American writers do not seem to show any difference. Yet the former group employed slightly more frequency of the expressions in their headlines than the latter group.

The present study is limited in several ways. These are the vagueness concept of hedging and the inclusivity of the data. Determining whether a linguistic feature is a hedging expression or not until classifying the types and functions all were done based on my personal thought. Since there are no clear cut hedging definitions, classifications, and functions, the conclusion drawn from this study might be different from the one conducted by other researchers. The other limitation was the small size of the data might not well represent the use of hedging expressions and the inclusion of the newspaper which only consists of two newspapers. Quite different findings might be obtained by a larger size of data. For instance, Sanjaya (2013) analyzed 104 articles that produced a corpus of 407.848 words. Therefore, this study that only conducted 30

headlines with a total of 43.505 words is quite a small size compared to the one conducted by Sanjaya (2013).

Despite its limitations, this study has succeeded in identifying hedging expressions that were used in the headlines of two leading newspapers and also shows the author's tendency to use hedging expressions as a strategy in newspaper writing. For future studies, it is suggested to use a larger sample of data to provide further evidence of whether the size of the data affects the findings of the research.

This research is a stepstone for further research regarding hedging in newspaper articles. As Nugroho (2014) stated, newspaper discourse is not less important than academic research articles in convincing the readers, thus there are a lot of aspects of hedging in newspapers that have not been studied. In addition, for further research, a larger data set is suggested as this research only used a relatively small number of data. A larger data set might bring different results.

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