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SUMMARY OF THE DOCTORAL THESIS

**WOMEN AND MEN’S DISCOURSE AS SOCIAL INTERACTION
-THE HEDGING PHENOMENON IN A RESEARCH ON NATIVE
SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH**

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KEY WORDS: *hedge*, feminine, masculine, Pragmatics, language, communication, social group, discourse, sociopsychology, focus group, social interaction, analysis.

SUMMARY

The novelty of the examined theme derives from the necessity of thoroughly knowing and understanding the language speakers use. Language continues to be a path towards knowledge. In the so complex sphere of language, a plural reading is compulsory; it generates a change and enlivens the various levels of language, giving them contemporary meanings and valences.

There are no specialized studies that can deal with the problematic of gender differences seen as social interaction; hence the theme of our thesis is new, both regarding the research and the practical applied character. Linguistic dissimilarities are rather significant if we bear in mind a talking between women and men.

The term which defines probability, tentativeness, uncertainty, possibility is called *hedge*. We shall call it so through our entire thesis.

In this paper the starting point of our research are the following hypotheses:

- the way in which women communicate is different from that of men;
- women have the tendency to use a hypercorrect grammar;
- women and men differ in their use of hedges;
- hedges must not be analysed alone because there is a bond between them and the prosodic and kinesic elements;
- hedge has an ambivalent effect: it can be both positive and negative;
- when trying to understand hedging as a phenomenon in oral discourse, we must analyse it by association with context.

In our research, we used the following methods of investigation: descriptive, statistic, pragmatic, structural, distributive-positional and others.

Hedges are the encapsulation of ambiguity, tentativeness, possibility, doubt, scepticism and mitigation.

The subject of hedges is not new in linguistics. There have been studies which focus on hedges in different subject fields, mainly in scientific discourses, formal conversations but also on everyday conversation.

The novelty brought by our research resides in the fact that few researchers dealt with everyday conversation, taking into account few main characteristics of the focus group: education, age and gender.

In our opinion, what is essential to this study is the fact that if we use the hedging devices in a particular kind of text, we should do it taking into consideration the characteristics of that specific communication situation and not those of another type of discourse.

In order to provide others with a clearer image of hedges and the hedging phenomenon, it is our duty to offer a closer account of the concepts we have dealt with and to introduce studies that were relevant for the topic investigated.

Chapter I presents communication, by enumerating in eight subchapters, belonging to subchapter 1.2, the theories that sit at the bottom of this term and which we chose to present diachronically: the mathematical theory with its two exponents: Shannon and Weaver who believed in the act of communication, the most important role is played by *message*; the cybernetic theory which, through its exponent, Wiener, considered *feedback* the most relevant element in the act of communication; the Palo Alto School with its manifesto in which the innovation consisted in the fact that, for them, the addressee's role started to be as significant as the addresser's; the Structural theories which, according to Saussure, believe that words function as signals introduced to transmit something to someone. In dealing with the sign, Saussure sees a dichotomy between what we can hear, see, read - the *signifiant*, and it is reunited with the *significate* - the content which is in our mind. The bond between the two is made throughout convention and not through a necessary connection or resemblance. The convention is an agreement between groups of individuals. In order to indicate the same *significate* there can be various *signifiants* due to several conventions. That is why we can state the fact that the linguistic signs are arbitrary. The Pragmatic theory believes in the relation between signs and users of language. The user is seen as adaptable; he is able to bend depending on the situation he is required to take part in. Roman Jakobson's Functions of Communication: referential- making reference to context, emotive- making reference to addresser, conative- making reference to addressee, phatic- making reference to contact, metalingual- making reference to code and poetic which makes reference to message. John Austin underlined the importance of the performative act in communication, which is to do things, not only state them, in order to get a reaction from the other. We also brought into discussion verbal communication (1.4.1). In a conversation, we must draw the attention of our interlocutor(s) and we must try, as much as we can, to make the information accessible and

comprehensible. Toxic language (1.4.1.1) refers to the abuses we make in language and how they can destroy our relationships with the others but this subchapter wants to offer solutions to avoid this type of language. Later on, we did not want to omit information about nonverbal communication, offering information about the studies of Eckman and Friesen who identified six types of nonverbal ways of communicating: emblems, illustrators, affect displays, regulators, and adaptors. We also made a summary of Hall's approach on the distance between people, which was studied in his 1990 book, *The Hidden Dimension*. (1.4.2) This first chapter ended with the presentation of the barriers in communication, in subchapter 1.5.

Chapter II and its eight subchapters offer an insight of Discourse Analysis with the most common used terms and the relationship it has with Pragmatics (2.6). We talked about the importance of the text, participants, message and cohesion and context. The last element completes a circle in which the key element is understanding (2.3). Other two terms that must be associated with Discourse Analysis would be conversational implicature (2.4.1) and conventional implicature (2.4.2). I did not want to omit in this chapter some facts about Critical Discourse Analysis (2.8), which insists on the existence of a dialectical relationship between society and language, as Norman Fairclough stated. The same author viewed discourse as context or social dimension because it refers to socially accepted rules for how a text is produced and interpreted (2.8.1), interaction and it consists of process of production and process of interpretation (2.8.2) and text which is both a product and a base. It is a base of the process of production, and a resource to the process of interpretation (2.8.3).

Chapter III and its eleven subchapters then proceeds with facts about gender and stereotype, explaining the relationship between language and gender. One of the "pillars" of our thesis was Robin Lakoff's book *Language and Woman Place* but we chose to present even the critiques brought to it by other authors (3.3). Gender must be observed from all angles, including the sociological one, which we dwelled upon in the fourth subchapter. Next, in subchapter 3.5 we made a glossary in which we explained the term *gender* and what it operates with. In today's society, we want to eliminate stereotypes but we cannot do this, unless we understand the phenomenon. We tried to make it as accessible as possible through the studies of Bell and Smith who insisted on the differences in communication between the two genders; Maccoby and Jacklin tried to find an explanation for the differences when they dealt with the early ages of both girls and boys; Bjorkqvist, a Finnish researcher, wrote about indirect aggression women use; it is a verbal type, in fact, because they do not have the physical force to be strictly speaking aggressive (3.6). In trying to understand both genders, we should not omit the role of social groups and the way they coagulate. We even have a

subchapter called *Gender Roles* which explains the differences that exist for girls and boys in all parts of society. The next subchapter tries to find an answer to the differences that exist. This Chapter could not have been complete without discussing the matter of politeness in subchapter 3.11, which is crucial, in our opinion. It is what differentiates us from the other species and it offers us a sense of normality.

A qualitative and quantitative analysis of hedges will be presented in chapter IV. They are devices that express possibility and the impossibility to be categorical in different situations. We briefly presented the ideas of the scholars who dealt with this subject, beginning from George Lakoff, in 1972, who was the first to name these devices *hedges*, who drew up a list of some hedges and most important, he stated that the interpretation of hedges depended on the context! Other authors who were interested in this subject were: Brown and Levinson, who studied the phenomenon of hedging in relation to politeness; Key Hyland who was interested in hedging of research articles; Prince, Frader and Bosk divided hedges into several classes; also Hubler made a distinction between understatements and hedges; Markannen and Schroeder believed that identifying hedges was difficult; Claudia Caffi in 2001 introduced the term *mitigation* to attenuate unwanted effects. All those researchers agreed upon the fact that a list of hedges would be impossible to do because they depend upon the context, which is changing all the time.

The first subchapter refers to hedges in relation to *vagueness*, which reduces precision to accommodate the hearer; *evasion* happens when the expectations of the listener fail to meet those of the speaker, *equivocation* refers to those situations in which the speaker wants to mislead the interlocutor and *politeness* which refers to showing respect towards the other. They each have the role to facilitate and to ease communication. In the second subchapter we chose to talk about the functions of hedging, that of being an integrator in the society, expressing the impossibility to quantify a word in a precise manner; in the third, we dealt with the connexion between Paul Grice's Maxims of Conversation and hedges. The last subchapter offers an insight on the interchangeable role of hedges between the two sexes.

The fifth chapter called *Discourse analysis. A linguistic, pragmatic and semantic approach* offers an overview of the results of our corpus, which is a recorded video with native speakers of English.

Before getting into a detailed analysis of the hedges the subjects used, we presented a few aspects about focus groups, the importance of them, the techniques and typographic symbols we used to transcript the video. When we think about a focus group, we think about gathering

qualitative information from the people's ideas, so we can better understand their opinions about a product, a matter or an idea.

The next chapter is the appendix. The debates of the subjects were guided by some questions and ideas –which are to be seen in the appendix of the thesis-, without revealing them the true purpose of the research. We inserted even the Informed Consent Form, which is compulsory whenever data is to be used not only for a personal purpose and the DVD with the video recordings. Another part the appendix has is the transcription of the subjects' audio recording. Our thesis ends with the list of bibliography which is divided into written sources, dictionaries and online sources.

In our researches, based on linguistic, pragmatic, sociologic, semantic, stylistic criteria, the analysis of hedges that were brought to light from the video recordings, leads us to the following conclusions:

1. The hedging phenomenon involves a series of classifications and definitions;
2. The hedges that were used in these recordings had a large spectrum: adverbs, adjectives, idioms, verbs, nouns, indefinite pronouns and discourse markers; thus, reflecting the popularity of these structures.
3. Hedges are different according to the level of technology the people have access to. In our century, teenagers are addicted to their gadgets and their socializing applications on the internet; these offer them an easier way to communicate and to learn new ways of expressing themselves, increasing even their level of (self)education.
4. According to our research, women use more hedges, per total, independent of the video they were in. Women had a total of 142 hedges, while men used only 111. This aspect confirms Lakoff's theory in which she enunciates that women use hedges more often.
5. We established a Top 5 for both video recordings, in which we noticed that the difference in the frequency of hedges was more than visible: if the teenagers' top offered *like* as the winning hedge with fifty uses, number one in the grownups' top was *I (don't) think* with ten uses, reflecting a stunning difference due to the causes mentioned before: education, sex, social and cultural difference.
6. Hedging is a phenomenon that is mostly seen among teenagers. Our research makes no exception to this rule.
7. Researchers believe that using *like* means that someone follows a modern trend. Teenagers confirm this rule, while grownups avoided using it.

8. There is one word that teenagers probably considered obsolete: *generally* and they never used it.
9. Out of a total of 47 hedges that were used in the recordings, teenagers were the ones who “missed” only two of them, while the grownups “missed” twenty-nine of them.

We, as human beings, seen as social beings, too, try to modulate our everyday speech in order to assure our integration in society and others’ acceptance towards us.

It would be abnormal to consider hedges as devices that convey vagueness or fuzziness, nowadays. They are strategies typical of modern science: scepticism, doubt or uncertainty and they mirror the speaker’s true state of knowledge. Whoever uses hedges is seen as humble and disciplined in relation to the other people involved in the act of communication; using hedges is an act of diplomacy, regardless you are a female or a male.

Hedges are interventions uses to sustain ideas, to persuade the listeners. Using them is a matter of choice. The speakers use them because they want to be more explicit. This theme was not new to us, but our first research was on non-native speakers of English

We decided to do the research on native speakers of Romanian because, first of all, it was accessible. The theoretical approach was mainly taken from foreign researchers and we tried to combine and to determine the generality of some theories. It was a challenge because, usually, hedges are not very common strategies for non-native speakers of English. In the presented case, both girls and boys used them in a considerable proportion, though.

According to Robin Lakoff (2004), both hedging and boosting modifiers show a woman’s lack of power in a mixed-sex interaction.

Could our thesis be useful? We think it could because it might be the base for a practical course in the English Department of faculties of Letters. Studying several types of discourses would first enrich the students’ vocabulary and it would make them conscious of the complexity of the English language. Another aspect that is helpful for the students’ evolution in society, this time, would be the fact that a practical course on hedges could be a guide towards good manners, it could help them refuse politely and avoid being too strict and intolerant about their opinions; it could be a politeness strategy for a healthier and civilized society. Last, but not least, it could be a guiding point for linguistic research which can take into consideration hedges compared to boosters, for a more complex view.

The pioneer in the field of hedges- and hedging as a phenomenon- was George Lakoff (1972). He enumerated only a limited set of items, though. The ones who expanded their work on this subject were: Weinreich (Fraser, 2010: 16), R. Lakoff (1973/2004) Hubler (1983), Coates (1987), Brown and Levinson (1987), Hyland (1996), Markannen-Schrodde (1997),

Caffi (2007), Prince, Frader and Bosk (2010), Clemen (2010). It represented an evidence that the concept of hedging has widened but still remains an “opera aperta” because it is considered a never-ending list, in which new words could be added with every research.

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