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A Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Study of Hedges in English and Vietnamese Film Dialogues and Pedagogical Implications for English Language Teaching

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ABSTRACT: *This paper investigates the pragmatic features of hedges in English and Vietnamese film dialogues and suggests pedagogical implications for English Language Teaching. Using a qualitative-descriptive method supported by quantitative data, 700 utterances were collected from the English television series House of Cards and the Vietnamese series Chủ Tịch Tỉnh. The findings reveal that both English and Vietnamese speakers frequently use hedges to observe the Cooperative Principle and mitigate Face-Threatening Acts, primarily utilizing quality and quantity hedges as indirect politeness strategies while using relevance and manner hedges to organize discourse. However, cultural differences—including low- versus high-context communication, power distance, and individualism versus collectivism—lead to distinct preferences: English speakers favor hedges that add details and praise the hearer's actions to respect personal autonomy, whereas Vietnamese speakers rely on permission-seeking relevance hedges and moral praise to show deference and maintain harmony. Based on these results, five context-based classroom activities are proposed to help English foreign language learners develop cross-cultural pragmatic awareness.*

Keywords: *Hedges, Pragmatics, Contrastive Analysis, Film Dialogues, Politeness Theory, Pedagogical Implications.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

It has been widely accepted that communicative competence plays an important role in daily conversation. In order to be a successful communicator, a speaker (S) must be aware of not only what to say but also how to say it appropriately. Therefore, in a conversation, besides the informative content of an utterance, speakers (Ss) often use devices to attenuate or reinforce the illocutionary force of the speech act. One of the devices is hedges which are used to avoid misunderstanding or negative reaction to S's speech and contribute to the flexibility and continuation of a conversation as well as achieve communicative aims. Despite many investigations into hedges, there have been few comparative studies on how cultural dimensions such as low- versus high-context communication, power distance, and individualism versus collectivism affect the use of hedges in English and Vietnamese film dialogues. In addition, in English as a Foreign Language contexts, Vietnamese learners often know grammatical structures well, but they are not aware of the motivations for using hedges. Therefore, this study aims to:

- Investigate and compare the pragmatic features of hedges in English and Vietnamese film dialogues in relation to the Cooperative Principle (CP), politeness, and cultural differences.
- Suggest practical classroom activities to help teachers guide Vietnamese students in learning and using hedges properly.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Lakoff (1975), the pioneer in studying hedges, defines hedges as lexical units used to "*fuzz things up, or to un-fuzz them*". Extending this to pragmatics, Brown and Levinson (1987) view hedges as politeness strategies in Face-Threatening Acts (FTAs) mainly within Negative Politeness to minimize imposition on the hearer (H), or Positive Politeness to claim common ground. Leech (1983) also indicates that the Politeness Principle (PP) "*rescues the CP from serious trouble*", explaining why Ss often violate conversational maxims to maintain harmony.

Cross-cultural studies also show that cultural norms influence the use of hedges. Hall (1976) distinguishes between low-context cultures, which value brevity and personal freedom, and high-context cultures, which prefer detailed context and harmony. Similarly, Hofstede (1980, 2001) and Gu (1990) point out how power

distance, collectivism, and Confucian moral values affect face-saving strategies, while Zhang (2020) and Liu (2021) confirm that hedges help reduce responsibility and maintain face across cultures.

In this study, hedges are defined as linguistic devices used to prevent misunderstandings or unexpected reactions caused by violating the maxims of the CP or politeness. Based on Grice (1975), Yule (1996), and Brown and Levinson (1987), hedges are divided into two groups:

- Hedges addressed to the CP: Including quality hedges (stressing or reducing S's commitment to the truth), quantity hedges (marking old, insufficient, or excessive information), relevance hedges (marking topic change or relevance), and manner hedges (ensuring clarity and brevity).
- Hedges addressed to Politeness: Including maxim hedges used for politeness (softening criticism, advice, and disagreement, or seeking agreement) and politeness hedges (expressing esteem, defusing negative reactions, introducing sensitive topics, explaining, and apologizing).

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Classification and lexical realization of hedges in English and Vietnamese film dialogues

Based on the theoretical framework, the hedges found in both English and Vietnamese data and their pragmatic functions are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Classification and lexical realization of hedges in English and Vietnamese film dialogues

Category		Pragmatic Function	English Hedges	Vietnamese Hedges
1. Hedges addressed to the CP	**a. Quality hedges**	Stressing S's commitment to the truth of the utterance	*must, certainly, definitely, actually, really, absolutely, I'm sure, I'm certain, I do believe, the truth is, according to*	*chắc hẳn, chắc chắn, hoàn toàn, A chắc (là), A đảm bảo (là), A tin (là)*
		Reducing S's full responsibility for the truth of the utterance	*X said (that), I hear/heard (from X)(that), the rumor is, probably, maybe, perhaps, can, could, may, might, would, seem, I think/ don't think/ believe/ assume/ suppose (that), to my understanding, to the best of my knowledge*	*X nói/bảo (rằng), Nghe đâu/nói, Có người thì thầm rằng, có thể, có lẽ, hình như, dường như, (cá nhân) A nghĩ/thấy (là), A đoán (là), A không nghĩ (là), quan điểm của A là, theo A/nhận định của A (thì)*
	b. Quantity hedges	Marking giving old information	*as you (probably) know, you know, you see, as many of you may be aware, I said, Like I said*	*như B đã rõ/biết, B còn lạ gì, A đã nói (rồi), A đã nói với B bao nhiêu lần rồi*
		Marking giving less information than expected	*the gist of it is, to some extent, suffice it to say that, I can't tell you any more than that, I won't go into too many specifics other than to say, I couldn't possibly comment*	*đại khái là, nhìn chung, đứng về mặt luật pháp, A không biết gì hơn, A không thể nói gì nhiều*
		Marking giving more information than expected	*let me further say that*	
	c. Relevance hedges	Marking topic change	*now, by the way, anyway*	*à, này, à mà này, bây giờ A muốn B chuyển qua, nhân đây, nhân tiện, à quên, ôi thôi chết rồi, nói chuyện khác nhé*
		Marking the relevance of the purpose of speech act		*Nếu B cho phép/đồng ý/muốn, B đã hỏi thì A cũng xin nói/chẳng giấu*

	d. Manner hedges	Stressing the observation of the maxim of manner	*the gist of it is that*	*tóm lại*
		Noticing the violation of the maxim of manner	*it's difficult to summarize*	*Em không nhớ rõ lắm*
		Checking whether the maxim of manner has been met	*got it?, OK?, do you understand?, do you know what I mean?, see what I'm saying?*	*rõ không?, hiểu không?*
2. Hedges addressed to politeness	**a. Maxim hedges addressed to politeness**	Redressing criticism, advice	*I think, maybe, perhaps*	*Mọi người bảo, Theo A*
		Softening disagreement	*to a certain extent*	*Đại loại là*
		Enhancing positive face and seeking agreement	*You know, you see*	*B thấy đấy, B biết đấy*
	b. Politeness hedges	Expressing esteem	*I respect your opinion and I appreciate you sharing it with me, we value your input, I think it's a good idea*	*B là đứa ngoan hiền lại có học thức*
		'Defuse' factors	*no offense, I didn't mean to pry, it may come across as an indelicate*	*A nói điều này ra chắc con sẽ buồn và giận A, Có thể B cho A là lắm lời*
		'Introductory' factors	*forgive me if this isn't the case*	*Em nói chị điều này chị đừng giận nhé, Tôi hỏi/nói (điều này) khí không phải*
		Explanation	*I don't want to have to say this, but maybe for our final goal you need to hear it, I can think of nobody else who could*	*Chỗ chị em quen biết đã lâu tôi mới nói*
		Apology	*I'm sorry, Linda, excuse me for just a moment*	*Mẹ xin lỗi vì đã tò mò chuyện này nhé*

2. Pragmatic features of hedges

2.1. Quality hedges

- Hedges stressing S's commitment to the truth of the utterance: The hedges show S's subjective belief in the reliability of the information or indicate that the information in the statement is based on the evidence, and thus reinforcing the truth-value of the utterance.

  (1) ***The truth*** is that he won the battle. [12, episode 4, 00:41:30]

- Hedges reducing S's full responsibility for the truth of the utterance: When lacking sufficient evidence or making predictions, Ss use the hedges to mark information only as a personal opinion or as secondhand information.

  (2) ***Nghe nói*** ông ấy vừa mất trong một tai nạn máy bay. (***I heard that*** he just died in a plane crash.) [14, episode 4, 07:19]

2.2. Quantity hedges

- Hedges marking giving old information: Although repeating known information seems redundant, Ss use these hedges to emphasize the validity of the known information or connect the old information with the new one to convey S's intent to H. The old information is considered as the foundation, the condition for the S to provide new information or the explanation for a certain speech act.

(3) We'd like you to run for Peter's seat. ***As you probably know***, the election's been set for the first week of February. [12, episode 12, 00:01:00]

- Hedges marking giving less information than expected: These hedges indicate Ss cannot provide sufficient information due to subjective or objective causes.

(4) ***Tôi không biết gì hơn*** tên cô ấy là Mộng Quỳnh, thỉnh thoảng có đi với khách sang đây hát.
(***All I know is that*** her name is Mong Quynh, and she sometimes accompanies guests here to sing.)
[14, episode 14, 00:06:00]

- Hedges marking giving more information than expected: When needing to provide details to clarify a point, Ss use these hedges to signal an intended maxim violation and avoid potential addressee misunderstanding or uncooperative attitudes.

(5) Reporter: Did you author the editorial relating to the Israeli presence in the Gaza Strip and West Bank five years ago?

Kern: Let me … let me, once and for all, say this definitively: I didn't author that editorial. Not a single sentence, word, comma, or period. […] ***Let me further say that*** I'm a strong supporter of the state of Israel as the most stable country in the region and our strongest ally in any peace process. [12, episode 2, 00:34:50]

2.3. Relevance hedges

- Hedges marking topic change: They signal an abrupt topic shift (or a return to the main topic after a digression) and, thus prevent the statement from seeming unexpected and completely unrelated to what is being said.

(6) Mai: Mẹ không đồng ý bán mấy cái lô đất của mẹ đâu.
Duyên: Đất của mẹ thì mẹ cứ giữ con có đòi bán đâu […] Mà thôi mẹ để con tính toán nốt đã. À, mẹ nhớ cho cháu uống thuốc hộ con nhé.
(Mai: I'm not agreeing to sell any of my plots of land.
Duyên: It's your land, so keep it—I'm not asking you to sell it […] ***Anyway***, let me finish running the numbers first. ***Oh***, and please remember to give the child their medicine for me.)
[14, episode 5, 00:43:13]

- Hedges marking the relevance of the purpose of speech act: These hedges are employed to stress that the purpose of an upcoming speech act is indeed relevant by indicating the conditions, purposes or reasons for the utterance.

(7) Anh ***đã hỏi thì em cũng chẳng dám giấu*** con Duyên nó có thai rồi anh ạ.
(***Since you've asked, I don't dare hide it from you***—Duyên is pregnant.)
[14, episode 36, 00:21:22]

2.4. Manner hedges

- Hedges stressing observation and noticing violation of manner: These hedges consist of summarizing markers to show the Ss' awareness of the expectation for conciseness or ambiguity markers to warn H that an upcoming utterance may lack precision or conciseness.

(8) Of course, I'm getting this secondhand from Peter, but ***the gist of it is that***... that you lack entirely in leadership, and that you have no sense of respect. [12, episode 11, 00:09:50]

- Hedges checking whether the maxim of manner has been met: The hedges are used when S wants to check whether the utterance is clear enough for H to understand. H's response, therefore, will help him/her adjust the way to deliver the utterance.

(9) And you guys gotta brush your teeth and then check the rooms again, and then it's time for bed. ***Got it***, pumpkins? [12, episode 5, 00:21:50]

2.5. Maxim hedges addressed to politeness

In many cases, quality and quantity hedges serve straightforward politeness functions. Quality hedges weaken S's commitment to soften inherently FTAs like criticism or advice by framing them merely as the S's opinion or a third-party perspective. They also mitigate disagreements by partly satisfying the H's desire to be "right" or seek agreement by enhancing the H's positive face and mitigate by claiming common ground with the H between Ss and Hs.

(10) ***Mọi người bảo*** con cũng quá đáng lắm cơ. (***People say*** you're being unreasonable.)
[14, episode 29, 00:34:11]

(11) ***To a certain extent***, it was not right and inappropriate to bring a child in knowing that.
[12, episode 11, 00:40:05]

2.6. Politeness hedges

Beyond maxim hedges, certain hedges directly signal potential violations of face wants and serve distinct functions:

- Expressing esteem: S appeals to H's positive face by showing appreciation or highlighting H's good points before performing FTAs such as refusals or advice.

(12) ***We value your input***, Mr. Vice President, but right now, we can't. [12, episode 7, 00:12:48]

- 'Defuse' factors: They are considered as a way to 'defuse' Hs' potential negative reactions and prevent them from happening. Clearly, the hedges are addressed to H's positive face.

(13) Look, ***no offense***, Zoe, but I don't have time to be anyone's training wheels. [12, episode 1, 00:17:32]

- 'Introductory' factors: These hedges prepare H psychologically for an upcoming face-threatening utterance, minimizing surprise or shock.

(14) Sir, ***forgive me if this isn't the case***, but you seem a bit hesitant. And the way you're handling this is...is cruel. [13, episode 2, 00:34:10]

- Explanation and apology: Ss either justify an face threatening act by citing close interpersonal ties, or use apology-like expressions to minimize disagreement, indicate reluctance, and soften overwhelming requests or intrusive questions.

(15) Mẹ xin lỗi vì đã tò mò chuyện này nhé. Quan hệ giữa con với Tuấn … nghĩa là mẹ muốn biết hai đứa vẫn chưa đi quá giới hạn trước hôn nhân chứ?
(***I'm sorry for prying***, sweetie. Your relationship with Tuan… I mean, I just want to know you two haven't crossed the line before marriage, right?) [14, episode 31, 00:30:36]

IV. Discussion

From the results above, it can be seen that there are both similarities and differences in the use of hedges between English Ss and Vietnamese ones in film dialogues:

- Both English and Vietnamese Ss frequently use hedges to adhere to the CP and mitigate FTAs. Quality hedges and quantity hedges are employed across both languages as indirect politeness strategies, whereas relevance hedges and manner hedges are rarely used for this purpose. This finding is consistent with Leech (1983, p.80), who indicated that the PP acts as a necessary complement "which rescues the CP from serious trouble." When these two principles conflict, Ss often sacrifice the maxims of quality and quantity to maintain politeness and mitigate FTAs. Meanwhile, relevance hedges and manner hedges are mainly served to organize the discourse rather than redress face threats (Brown & Levinson, 1987, pp.168-171).
- English Ss use hedges to mark giving more information than expected, whereas such hedges rarely occur in the Vietnamese data. Based on Hall's (1976) theory of low-context and high-context cultures, English Ss value brevity, while Vietnamese ones view detailed explanation as a sign of sincerity. Conversely, Vietnamese Ss use more explicit relevance hedges to indicate the conditions or reasons for their utterance and show respect to the H. This can be explained by the high power distance and social hierarchy in Vietnamese culture (Hofstede, 1980), where Ss often use conditional or permission-seeking hedges to show deference, minimize imposition, and justify the relevance of their speech acts before speaking.
- To soften FTAs with expressions of esteem, English Ss tend to value the H's actions or views, while Vietnamese Ss favor praising personal traits or moral character to satisfy positive face and maintain harmony. According to Brown & Levinson (1987), every individual possesses a positive face. When performing FTAs, Ss use positive politeness strategies to soften the message. However, the specific focus of such praise is governed by the cultural norms of each speech community. In individualistic, low-context English-speaking cultures (Hofstede, 2001; Hall, 1976), Ss typically praise specific actions or opinions to respect personal autonomy. Conversely, in Vietnam's collectivist, high-context, and Confucian-influenced culture (Gu, 1990), Ss compliment intrinsic moral character to foster solidarity, affirm moral standing, and soften upcoming FTAs.

V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

In terms of pragmatic features, it can be seen that both English Ss and Vietnamese Ss frequently use hedges to observe the CP and maintain politeness in conversation, particularly using quality hedges and quantity hedges as indirect politeness strategies while using relevance hedges and manner hedges chiefly to organize discourse. Cultural differences—such as low- versus high-context communication, power distance, and individualism versus collectivism—create distinct hedging preferences. English Ss prefer hedges that add details and praise the H's actions to respect personal freedom, whereas Vietnamese Ss use relevance hedges to ask permission and praise personal character to show respect and keep harmony.

The result from the data analysis shows that linguistic competence alone is not enough for learners of a language to communicate successfully in the target language. Teaching hedges, accordingly, plays a very important part in language learning and teaching. Until now, English language learners have been provided with language materials to use in communicative situations with language functions. They may know which proper patterns should be used in interaction but may not know why they should use them. In other words, they are not

aware of the motivations for using these language patterns. Therefore, when teaching hedges, first and foremost, teachers should make students aware of the importance of hedges in languages and the motivations of using hedges. Also, teaching hedges should be context-based, so dialogues or conversations are where this can be done properly. Below are five classroom activities designed to help teachers guide Vietnamese students in learning English hedges:

- **Activity 1 (Identification)**: The teacher provides students with a dialogue containing hedges and asks them to identify all the hedges used in the conversation, then discuss their pragmatic functions and naturalness. Do they sound natural and meaningful, or are they distracting or unnecessary?
- **Activity 2 (Comparison):** The teacher re-words the dialogue by taking out all the hedges, then asks students to compare the re-worded version to the original one to realize the importance of hedges in softening utterances.
- **Activity 3 (Translation):** Students work in groups to translate the hedges in the dialogue into Vietnamese and discuss whether they sound natural, thereby raising awareness of cross-cultural similarities and differences.
- **Activity 4 (Gap-filling):** The teacher provides students with a list of hedges and asks them to insert the appropriate ones into the gaps in a conversation to practice proper placement.
- **Activity 5 (Role-play):** The teacher gives a communicative situation requiring hedges and asks students to create and perform a conversation to practice using hedges in real-life contexts.

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