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СРАВНИТЕЛЬНОЕ ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ ХЕДЖЕЙ В АНГЛОЯЗЫЧНЫХ НАУЧНЫХ ТЕКСТАХ РОССИЙСКИХ АСПИРАНТОВ

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Целью исследования является анализ использования маркеров хеджирования в научных текстах, написанных российскими аспирантами, обучающимися по специальностям гуманитарного и технического направлений подготовки. В процессе исследования хеджей были использованы методы количественного, контекстуального и контрастивного анализа. Материалом послужили 40 проектов научных исследований, написанных аспирантами в рамках экзаменационного задания. Анализ показал, что проекты аспирантов гуманитарных специальностей содержали значительное большее количество маркеров хеджирования, чем тексты аспирантов технических специальностей, которые избегали смягчения категоричности высказываний. Был сделан вывод о том, что низкая частотность хеджей, являющихся важными компонентами академического дискурса, связана как с дисциплинарными особенностями письма, так и с невысоким уровнем владения английским языком.

Ключевые слова: проект научного исследования, английский язык для академических целей, академический дискурс, метадискурс, хеджирование.

Introduction

A large number of studies have already explored the employment of metadiscourse strategies such as hedging, boosting, or engagement in different academic genres articles [1–5]. However, studies on metadiscourse features of research proposals as an emerging academic genre remain scarce and are dominated by investigations of rhetorical moves [6–11]. The present comparative study of academic texts written by Russian postgraduate students majoring in humanities and engineering could complement the existing scarce body of research into this genre and contribute to the practice in EAP teaching to postgraduate students.

In order to obtain relevant information on hedging in research proposals written by postgraduate students, this study solves the following tasks:

(1) identifies the frequency of occurrence of hedging devices in research proposals written by humanities and engineering students?

(2) identifies reasons for the uneven distribution of hedging devices in the two disciplines?

(3) provides pedagogical implications to improve academic writing skills in Russian postgraduate students?

In order to investigate hedging in research proposals written by postgraduate students thus solving the tasks set in the study, a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods was adopted. Specifically, frequencies were used to determine in which subcorpus hedging devices were used more often. Contextual analysis was adopted as the qualitative research method to elaborate on the results from the quantitative analysis. This study also employed a comparative qualitative approach as it sought to compare the realization of hedging in research proposals in two disciplines. The analysis process went through several steps. First, hedging markers were identified manually in 40 research proposals. Second, the markers found in the corpus were manually analyzed in context. It is worth mentioning that for the analysis the sociopragmatic context in which hedges occur should be taken into account, as it is impossible to attribute the hedging function to an item without considering the context.

The genre of research proposal was selected for the present study as a valuable tool in assessing student's academic progress in both professional knowledge and EFL proficiency, which is important in the context of postgraduate studies. An analysis of research proposals written by postgraduates as an examination task will shed some light on the degree of their familiarity with the academic writing conventions.

The current study was conducted on a corpus of 40 research proposals written by humanities and engineering postgraduate students of a Russian university in 2017-2023. 40 research proposals were divided into two subcorpora. The number of tokens in each subcorpus was 46,086 and 49,425, which makes 95,511 tokens altogether. The examples quoted in this paper are coded by indicating

Table

Raw and normalized frequencies of metadiscourse markers in the corpus

Hedges	Sub-corpus 1		Sub-corpus 2	
	Raw frequency	Normalized frequency	Raw frequency	Normalized frequency
Plausibility markers	123	2.7	51	1.04
Downtoners	57	1.2	35	0.7
Rounders	8	0.2	19	0.4
Total	188	4.1	105	5

the number of the subcorpus: S1 - for the humanities subcorpus and S2 – for the engineering subcorpus.

Since the sizes of the two sub-corpora were not equal (most humanities proposals were longer than engineering ones), the raw frequencies of occurrence of hedging markers and normalized frequencies of the number of occurrences per 1000 words were determined.

Theoretical framework

As a product of social interaction, academic texts contain various metadiscourse features which have been described by Hyland (2005) as self-reflective expressions used to negotiate interactional meanings, express viewpoints and engage with readers [12]. These linguistic devices relate a text to its context by helping the reader to link, organize, and interpret the content in a way chosen by the author [13].

Hyland distinguished between two types of metadiscourse – interactive and interactional. While the interactive metadiscourse helps organize a text coherently by linking sentences to each other so that the reader can understand it better, interactional metadiscourse is employed to interact with the reader, explicitly convey views and attitudes, and involve the audience by allowing them to respond to the unfolding text and anticipating their objections [12]. Interactional metadiscourse involves five elements - hedging, boosting, attitude stance, self-mention, and engagement – which help realize the rational, credible, and affective appeals contributing to the persuasiveness of a text [14].

As far as the focus of the current study is hedging, consider this category more closely. The concept of hedging as a linguistic term was coined by Lakoff who was interested in the communicative value of hedging markers and dealt with the logical properties of words and phrases such as rather, largely, sort of, very which are used to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy [15]. Over the years, however, researchers have viewed hedging from different angles using Lakoff's concept of fuzziness as a starting point. Brown and Levinson, for example, defined hedges as "elements that modify the degree of membership of predicate or a noun phrase in a set" and are used to achieve linguistic vagueness [16, p. 145]. Crismore and Vande Kopple adopted a different approach and defined hedges as elements that "signal a tentative or cautious assessment of the truth of referential information", allowing authors to reduce their responsibility toward the information presented [17, p. 185]. In line with Crismore and Vande Kopple, Markkanen and Schroder claimed that "hedges can offer a possibility for textual manipulation in the sense that the reader is left in the dark regarding the truth value of what is being expressed and who is responsible for it [18, p. 5]. Hyland also described hedging as tentative language commonly used to moderate the degree of authorial confidence or commitment in presenting claims, facts or opinions and invite the readers to get involved in open discussion about the nature of propositions [12]. The current study has adopted Hyland's definition of hedging as a linguistic phenomenon contributing to the interactional function of language, employed to moderate the degree of author's commitment to the proposition [ibid.].

For the purpose of the present study, Hyland and Zou's taxonomy of hedging markers was taken as the methodological basis [19]. Hyland and Zou distinguished between three types of hedging:

(1) Plausibility markers are used to signal that a claim is based on assumptions rather than evidence (*may, could, suggest).* These markers show the writer's commitment to the truth of the proposition and make claims less categorical in order to help the writer disclaim responsibility for the information conveyed in the utterance.

(2) Downtoners are employed to mitigate claim intensity (*barely, quite, rather*);

(3) Rounders or appromixators of degree are used to indicate an approximation (*about, around, approximately, nearly).* This type of hedging modifies the propositional content presented in figures, statistics, and measurements and helps avoid providing precise information when it is of no importance to the writer.

Findings

This section overviews hedging markers employed in the corpus. Table demonstrates that the

raw and normalized frequencies of hedges used by humanities and engineering students were different.

The normalized frequencies show that in the humanities subcorpus, the number of hedges is about twice more than in the engineering one, and the markers are unevenly distributed in three categories.

Even though engineering students tended to deploy the modal verbs for hedging effectively, they seemed to underuse other lexical units in comparison with their counterparts from humanities. This might be due to the fact that hedging might weaken the knowledge claim and reduce the degree of reliability for the authorial statement, which is typical of humanities, where authors need more space for their interpretation [2], and their studies are less rooted in empirical research. As Takimoto put it, social sciences are more interpretative and less abstract in producing knowledge, which requires more hedges and favors subjectivity. In humanities, results are provisional, they are not usually reliant on facts or measures [20]. Consequently, authors tend to make their claims tentatively in order to convince readers who can approve or refuse them based on their judgments of the credibility of the research results presented by the author. In contrast, hard sciences, including engineering, are usually more fact-oriented and impersonal, which makes authors avoid hedging and produce objective statements.

Table also shows that the subcorpora do not have a balance between all types of hedging. In both sub-corpora, the most frequent hedging devices are plausibility markers accounting for 2.7 and 1.04 in every 1000 words, respectively. In engineering, rounders are more frequent than in the humanities sub-corpus (0.4 vs 02 in 1000 words). The analysis also showed that there are more downtoners in the humanities proposals, while the engineering proposal writers seem to be less concerned with protecting themselves against inaccuracy of research results.

The results indicate that engineering students underuse hedging devices used make claims less categorical. The low employment of these interactional markers might be either to their compliance with discipline-specific writing norms or poorly developed academic writing skills. As Hyland suggested, non-native English speakers tend to use boosters, while native English speakers prefer to soften the illocutionary force of a proposition [14]. I can assume that the level of language proficiency has a primary impact on the choice of metadiscourse patterns. The ways of producing new knowledge in the engineering sciences influence the level of written language proficiency, including the academic style. Representatives of the hard sciences rely on the word to a lesser extent mainly exploiting quantitative indicators. Hedging is considered to be a sign of highly developed language proficiency. One more reason for the underuse of hedges is Russian academic writing style described as categorical. Mitigating tools are rarely used in Russian-language academic discourse being replaced by means of imperative modality, which adds a categorical tone to the statements [21].

Consider the pragmatic functions of the three categories of hedging – plausibility markers, downtoners and rounders – and illustrate them with examples from the corpus.

Plausibility markers

As can be seen from Table, plausibility hedges prevail in both sub-corpora. They are used to recognize the limitations of claims and show authors' reservations of the accuracy of statements by moderating the way of expressing ideas. Here is an example of the plausibility hedges that indicate that the claims are based on assumptions rather than facts.

*Therefore, an analysis of this issue **seems** to be a worthwhile pursuit as it **might** provide policy-makers with a practical approach to foreign policy in Europe.* (SC1)

*The models of thermal power plants presented in the work **can** be used for the analysis of energy safety and reliability of fuel supply and power supply.* (SC2)

In the examples, plausibility markers are used to protect the writers against inaccuracy of research results by mitigating the intensity of the claims.

Downtoners

The frequency of downtoners in the corpus was not significant compared to the plausibility markers. In the following examples, the downtoners *typically* and *usually* mitigate the intensity of the claims:

*Hiring decisions are **typically** made by committee members having different capacities to estimate the performance of candidates.* (SC1)

*However, these reagents **usually** require an additional synthetic stage.* (SC2)

In the examples, the downtoners convey a certain qualification with regard to the degree of accuracy of the claims, demonstrating that the statements might be inaccurate.

Rounders

One more category of hedging – rounders indicating an approximation – was rather scarce in the humanities texts as compared to other types of hedging. This low frequency can be explained by the fact that results of the numerical assessment are usually described in hard sciences. In humanities texts, rounders accompanied by figures occur less frequently due to the absence of statistics in this field of knowledge. In the engineering subcorpus, these devices were more frequent which is evident from the nature of engineering research. Here are

examples of rounders which contribute to a compromise between the need for accuracy with numerical data and careful argumentation. The higher frequency of this type of hedging in the engineering sub-corpus seems to meet the discipline-specific nature of information with a large number of numerical data.

*The analysis revealed that the frequency of nouns was **about** twice more than that of verbs. (SC1)*

*It was shown that **about** 60% of the total composition is formed by aluminum oxide and silicon oxide* (SC2)

By making the number a little fuzzy, the adverb *about* employed as a rounder expresses approximation, thereby making the claims less persuasive.

Implications

Despite the fact that humanities students used more hedging devices to mitigate their claims, in total, the frequency of hedging devices per 1000 words in both subcorpora was significantly lower than in academic texts written by establishing scholars. In Takimoto's study, for example, the normalized frequency of hedges in humanities articles was 23–40 items per 1000 words. The frequency of hedges in engineering articles was also significantly higher – 13–17 items per 1000 words [20].

The findings of the current study suggest that it is necessary to teach hedging to postgraduate students and raise their awareness of writing patterns used in academic discourse. This supports the findings of previous studies which indicate that teaching of hedging can help raise academic writers' awareness of metadiscourse [12; 14; 22]. The need for teaching hedging and other categories of metadiscourse to non-native writers was emphasized in a large number of studies which revealed that students find it difficult to give a credible representation of themselves through the use of metadiscourse devices [5; 23–26]. As Vande Kopple suggests, meanings conveyed by metadiscourse can be nuanced and writers must carefully examine linguistic elements, meanings, and probable effects of those meanings within a particular context [27]. Metadiscourse conventions are not always easily understood by EAP learners due to a lack of explicit practice. These points make metadiscourse deserving a prominent place in EAP. It is necessary to help students to understand both genre-specific and disciplinary metadiscourse variations through a systemic instruction.

Firstly, when teaching hedging, teachers should use common hedging devices (e.g., those from Hyland's list [12]). Secondly, more examples of how to use hedging markers should be introduced by teachers. They should be taken from academic prose by native academic writers in the field. Thirdly, it seems that explicit teaching of hedging in different academic genres can help raise awareness of their interactional aspect among students and increase their ability to make their claims more tentative and accurate.

The following exercises can be used to develop hedging competence in postgraduate students.

(1) Underline and name the type of hedging used in the following claim.

This suggests that prices are at least one of several effective means of incentivizing gas savings.

(2) Identify the purpose of using the hedges in the following claim.

*The estimates **can** be interpreted as a change in natural gas consumption of these consumer groups compared to the counterfactual baseline consumption, that is, what would have been expected without a crisis response.*

(3) Produce the less persuasive argument using the hedge.

Here, we experimentally demonstrate an implementation of a native two-qudit entangling gate up to dimension 5 in a trapped-ion system.

(4) Reduce the degree of commitment in the following statement using the hedging device

Mental processes are human in nature.

(5) Rewrite the following sentence using the hedge.

This case is a way of using an established method.

The findings of the current study and the exercises provided above can be used by curriculum designers to create materials for Russian postgraduate students who study English for Academic Purposes.

Conclusion

The increasing role of the English language in academic settings has brought some challenges to non-native speakers who are forced to publish their research results in English, which requires knowledge of core features of academic writing, including metadiscourse.

This study compared the use of hedging markers in English research proposals written by Russian postgraduate students majoring in humanities and engineering, thus shedding light on how they follow academic writing conventions.

The corpus-based analysis revealed substantial disciplinary variation. Humanities students took far more explicitly involved positions than those from engineering sciences. The quantitative analysis showed that in the humanities sub-corpus, the number of hedges was about two times more than in the engineering one, which might be explained by discipline-specific carefulness of humanities writers in making claims, poorly developed lan-

guage proficiency of engineering students or their desire to follow the Russian academic writing style described as categorical.

The findings of the current study did not differ from those of previous research. Varttala, for example, also revealed that social science and humanities writers used hedging markers more frequently than those in the field of engineering [28]. Disciplinary differences in the use of hedging were also emphasized by Takimoto who investigated these devices in humanities, social and natural sciences [20]. Jiang and Hyland explained disciplinary differences in the way of expressing a stance by different modes of knowledge production: while hard sciences are more likely to rely on empirical evidence, humanities and social sciences, which use more stance features, prefer an explicitly interpretive style [29]. The same results were obtained by a number of other researchers [30–35]. Despite the fact that humanities students used more hedging devices to mitigate their claims, in total, the frequency of hedging devices per 1000 words in both subcorpora was significantly lower than in academic texts written by establishing scholars, which indicates the need to teach hedging as part of the English language course.

It should be admitted that the research results presented here are limited due to a small number of research proposals collected to build the corpus. Due to this limitation, the research results can be interpreted only as trends in the two disciplines which may be confirmed or rejected by comparative research based on a larger corpus. Through a study of interactional preferences of writers from a larger number of disciplines, we will learn more about rhetorical practices and values which would help novice writers learn academic style features typically used in a disciplinary community to produce knowledge in an accepted way. This analysis was limited to written academic discourse. It will be of interest to see if disciplinary differences in hedging can also be observed in oral presentations of research results.

The findings of the current study can be employed by curriculum designers to create materials for L2 writers and EAP instructors in their teaching practice. As far as the analysis serves to illustrate the hedging preferences of the two disciplinary communities, the findings may have value to academic writing, especially for humanities and engineering authors who should know rhetorical strategies and writing conventions in the field for best practices.

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A CONTRASTIVE STUDY OF HEDGING IN ENGLISH-MEDIUM ACADEMIC TEXTS BY RUSSIAN POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS

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The current study aims to analyze the distribution of hedging markers in academic texts written by Russian postgraduate students majoring in humanities and engineering. In exploring hedging from a cross-disciplinary perspective, this study employed quantitative and qualitative methods. Data were collected from 40 research proposals written by postgraduate students as an examination task. The results revealed that research proposals written by humanities students included more hedging devices than those produced by engineering students who did not tend to mitigate their claims. The low frequency of hedges in engineering research proposals might be explained both by discipline-specific writing norms and poorly developed language proficiency of engineering students.

Keywords: research proposal, English for Academic Purposes (EAP), academic discourse, metadiscourse, hedging.

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