

A Corpus-based Gender Study of Hedges in Spoken British English

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Abstract

The use of hedges plays an important role in daily language use. Based on the spoken texts of British National Corpus (BNC), the study attempts to explore the similarities and differences of hedges employed by the British males and females in their talks. A comparison was made in the frequency and distribution of hedges between the males and females. Meanwhile, the frequency and distribution of hedges were put under investigation to see how the hedges vary with the speakers' social classes. The statistics observed demonstrate that generally females use hedges more frequently than males, and the higher the speakers' social classes are, the more preference they will have to use hedges. But when the 4 types of hedges are respectively studied, it is found that different genders or speakers from different social classes have different preferences in using hedges. Thus, from the study, it is known that instead of being typical female language or typical language of speakers from higher social classes, hedges have been widely used. It is because that with multiple functions, hedges are beneficial for speakers to facilitating interpersonal interaction. The study presents useful reference for the more comprehensive and systematic studies in the future.

1 Introduction

Gender and language have always been one of the most important concerns of linguists. Danish linguist Jespersen first analyzed the characteristics of women's use of language from the perspective of linguistics in *Language: It's Nature, Development and Origin*, which was published in 1922. It was not until the 1960s that the feminist movement in the West further promoted the linguists' in-depth study of gender and language. Among them, Robin Lakoff is one of the most influential representatives. In the book *Language and Women's Place* (1975), she summarized several main features of women's language, which is implicit, euphemistic, tends to cooperate, etc., and pointed out that the reason why women's language is different from men's language is determined by their different social status. Holmes (1995), a New Zealand scholar, combined Brown and Levinson's (1978) politeness theory to analyze the use of English among New Zealand white people. The results showed that women are more polite than men, and women use more positive politeness strategies in communication. Linguists have discussed the differences of gender language from different perspectives, which makes it a research hotspot. In addition, the use of hedges makes the expression of language more objective and polite, and plays an important role in daily communication. Thus, hedges have also attracted interests of researchers. Based on the spoken texts of BNC (British National Corpus), the study will investigate the use of hedges, systematically analyze the frequency and distribution of hedges in

the corpus, and summarize the similarities and differences between men and women in the use of hedges.

2 Literature Review

2.1 The definition of hedges

The term “hedges” first appeared in Lakoff’s paper *Hedges: A Study in Meaning Criteria and the Logic of Fuzzy Concepts* (1972), in which hedges were defined as words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy. Later, Brown and Levinson (1978) defined hedges as a participle, word or phrase that can partially change the truth value of a topic under certain conditions. Kasper (1979) regarded hedges as the degradation of mood markers, and pointed out that the motivation of using hedges is to be polite, for hedges can help people express themselves properly with the function of face protection and tendency change. In *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* (1985), Crystal defined hedges as a group of words expressing uncertain concepts or restrictive conditions from the perspective of pragmatics and discourse analysis. Yule said in his *Pragmatics* (1996) that hedges are prudent explanatory expressions concerning how utterances are understood, such as information conveyed through the term “as far as I know”.

In China, the study of hedges started relatively late. It is generally believed that Wu Tieping’s article *A Preliminary Study of Fuzzy Language* (1979) marks the birth of fuzzy linguistics in China, in which he pointed out that hedges can be employed to limit the degree of fuzziness of fuzzy words. After that, He Ziran (1985) discussed the topic of hedges and communication. Zhang Qiao (1998) concluded that hedges are words or phrases that reflect the degree of commitment of the speaker or the author. Zhang Jianhe (2001) viewed hedges as expressions which make utterances indefinite either in tone or in content. “An indefinite tone indicates the lack of commitment to the proposition of the utterance. An indefinite content leaves some space for the modification of the proposition.” Li Qianju (2007) defined hedges as words which modify a fuzzy word or phrase to make a statement fuzzier or less fuzzy.

2.2 The classification of hedges

Scholars in the field of linguistics have studied the classification of hedges from the perspectives of semantics and pragmatics. Some scholars also advocate the classification of hedges from the aspects of syntax and structure, but they have not reached a consensus so far. One of the most influential views is the one proposed by Prince and his colleagues (1982), who divided hedges into approximators and shields according to whether hedges can change the truth value of propositions, and each of them is also subdivided into two types.

Approximators can change the truth value of a proposition and can be further subdivided into adaptors and rounders. Adaptors can modify the original meaning of propositions to some extent, such as “sort of, kind of, somewhat, really, almost, quite, entirely, a little bit, to some extent, more or less, in a sense, somehow, etc.”. Rounders can convey a certain range to the original propositions, such as “approximately, about, something between, roughly, etc.”.

Shields do not change the truth value of a proposition, but can express the speaker’s attitude towards the proposition and can be further subdivided into plausibility shields and attribution shields. Plausibility shields can express the speaker’s direct guess or attitude towards the topic, such as “I think, probably, presumably, as far as I can tell, wonder, hard to say, I believe, I assume, I suppose, I’m afraid, etc.”. Attribution shields can indirectly express the speaker’s own attitude or evaluation of something by quoting the views of a third party, such as “according to, it is said, as is well known, it is reported, people say, they say, etc.”.

2.3 Genders

In 1975, Lakoff claimed that hedges were an important aspect of female speakers’ style, a style she described as tentative and unassertive. Channell (2000) also proposed “female language” as a pragmatic function of hedges. Many scholars have reached a consensus on the relationship between women and hedges, which is a reflection of women’s sensitive interpersonal relationship. Hedges, representing women’s politeness, modesty and gentleness, are frequently and sensitively used in talks, which is a prominent feature of female discourse. It has been generally accepted that

women use hedges more than men. However, Cameron (1985) argued that sometimes topics and setting may be more important than gender in deciding the use of hedges. Bonvillain (1993) also suggested that the politeness function of hedges may not be simply associated with gender.

From the previous studies concerning hedges and gender, we can see that the relationship between gender differences and the use of hedges is still in controversy. Thus, the present study attempts to analyze gender differences in the use of hedges systematically, combining the quantitative with qualitative research methods, to see whether the hedges are used differently by males and females and whether the differences are caused by gender or by other variables.

3 Methodology

The study is based on the spoken texts of BNC¹. In addition, it adopts Prince et al.'s classification of hedges. And on the basis of previous studies, 35 hedges are selected as the retrieval objects, 18 of which are approximators and 17 of which are shields. Among the approximators, there are 10 adaptors (always, really, very, never, a bit, kind of, rather, only, sort of, quite), and 8 rounders (roughly, about, or so, mainly, less than, more than, around, at least); among the shields, there are 12 plausibility shields (may, you know, I mean, must, perhaps, I want, should, could, can, might, I think, probably) and 5 attribution shields (it seems, according to, it appears, people say, they say).

By investigating the use of hedges in the spoken texts of BNC, the study compares the similarities and differences between different genders and social classes² in using hedges and explores the reasons. This study will answer the following three questions:

1) Is there any differences or similarities between males and females in using hedges? If so, then how? Is there any differences or similarities between different social classes in using hedges? If so, then how?

¹ BNC is a 100-million-word collection of written and spoken British English compiled in the early 1990s, and continues to be used extensively as a large and varied sample of contemporary English.

² The spoken texts of BNC contain a list of speakers' social classes, so the present study chose "social class" as one more variable, which can make the research more feasible and convincing.

2) Whether there are differences in the same gender? If so, how do they differ?

3) What are the reasons that cause the differences or similarities among males and females in using hedges?

4 Results and Analysis

4.1 The Overall frequency and distribution of hedges among two genders

In this study, the overall frequency of hedges employed by females and males has been investigated as shown in Table 1.

Genders	RF	NF	χ^2	Sig. level
Female	106,975	32509.58	20.75	<0.001
Male	155,313	31376.76		

Table 1³: Distribution of hedges among speakers' genders

As Table 1 shows, the data observed in BNC supports the view that females use more hedges than males, and there indeed exist statistically significant differences between females and males in using hedges.

In order to further explore the relationship between genders and the use of hedges, a study of the speakers' social classes has been done as shown in Table 2. In Table 2, it is found that females from AB, C1 and C2 all prefer using more hedges than males from the same social classes, but the difference between the females and males from DE is not statistically significant.

Class	Female (RF/ NF)	Male (RF/ NF)	χ^2	Sig. level	+/-
AB	15,034/ 34696.44	12,488/ 32675.45	67.74	<0.001	+
C1	15,136/ 31897.16	9,298/ 30216.86	46.91	<0.001	+
C2	14,936/ 31892.72	7,619/ 30286.53	42.82	<0.001	+
DE	6,674/ 28161.41	6,001/ 28386.27	0.92	0.337	-

³ RF refers to raw frequency; NF refers to normalized frequency per million words. If the actual significance level is smaller than 0.05 and the Chi-square (χ^2) value is higher than 3.841, then the difference between the models is statistically significant. (Lewis & Burke, 1949)

Table 2⁴: Distribution of hedges among speakers' genders and social classes

It is also found from Table 2 that speakers from different social classes have different tendency to use hedges. Among the 4 social classes, for both females and males, speakers from AB use the most hedges, speakers from DE use the least hedges, and speakers from C1 and C2 are between them.

From the above statistics, we can get two conclusions: 1) females generally use more hedges than males in their talks; 2) the higher the speakers' social classes are, the more preference they will have to use hedges.

4.2 The Frequency and distribution of each type of hedges among two genders

According to Prince et al.'s classification, 4 types of hedges have been searched in BNC. Based on the previous studies and my own investigation in BNC, 35 hedges which have high frequency both in language use and in BNC are selected as the retrieval objects. The following parts will explore the relationship between genders and the use of each type of hedges.

4.2.1 Adaptors

There are 10 adaptors that have been investigated in this study. The overall frequency of adaptors used by females and males has been studied as shown in Table 3.

Genders	RF	NF	χ^2	Sig. level
Female	34,870	10596.95	22.23	<0.001
Male	49,128	9924.97		

Table 3: Distribution of adaptors among speakers' genders

From Table 3, the data shows that females use more adaptors than males and the difference between them is statistically significant, which is in accordance with the above conclusion that females prefer using more hedges than males.

In addition, a study of the speakers' social classes has been done as shown in Table 4. In

⁴ AB refers to upper class; C1 refers to upper middle class; C2 refers to lower middle class; DE refers to lower class. "+" indicates "overuse"; "-" indicates "underuse".

Table 4, it is found that females from AB, C1 and C2 all prefer using more adaptors than males from the same social classes, but the difference between the females and males from DE is not statistically significant.

What's more, it is also found from Table 4 that speakers from different social classes have different tendency to use adaptors. For females, the higher the speakers' social classes are, the more preference they will have to use adaptors; while for males, it is speakers from AB that use the most adaptors, the next is speakers from C1, then is speakers from DE and C2 that use the least adaptors.

Class	Female (RF/ NF)	Male (RF/ NF)	χ^2	Sig. level	+/-
AB	5,319/ 12275.53	3,784/ 9901.02	257.10	<0.001	+
C1	4,841/ 10201.78	2,791/ 9070.26	67.08	<0.001	+
C2	4,333/ 9252.22	2,159/ 8582.31	25.39	<0.001	+
DE	2,109/ 8899.07	1,849/ 8746.25	1.34	0.248	+

Table 4: Distribution of adaptors among speakers' genders and social classes

In order to have a more specific analysis of the relationship between gender and adaptors, the detailed frequency of the 10 adaptors used by females and males has been explored as shown in Table 5.

Adaptors	Female (RF/ NF)	Male (RF/ NF)	χ^2	Sig. level	+/-
always	2,235/ 679.21	2,709/ 547.28	144.2	<0.001	+
really	6,946/ 2110.88	6,990/ 1412.14	138.83	<0.001	+
very	6,692/ 2033.69	12,572/ 2539.83	56.14	<0.001	-
never	2,867/ 871.28	3,013/ 608.69	46.63	<0.001	+
a bit	3,054/ 928.11	3,469/ 700.82	31.74	<0.001	+
kind of	577/ 175.35	1,448/ 292.53	29.35	<0.001	-
rather	790/ 175.35	1,782/ 292.53	23.97	<0.001	-

	240.08	360			
only	4,711/ 1431.67	6,294/ 1271.53	9.5	<0.01	+
sort of	3,519/ 1069.42	5,729/ 1157.39	3.48	0.062	-
quite	3,479/ 1057.26	5,122/ 1034.76	0.24	0.623	+

Table 5: Detailed distribution of adaptors among speakers' genders

Table 5 shows, among the 10 adaptors, there are 8 ones that exist significant differences between females and males in using them. And females prefer using 5 of them (always, really, never, a bit, only), while males prefer using 3 of them (very, kind of, rather). The result can justify the overall analysis that in talks, females tend to use more adaptors than males.

Therefore, we get two conclusions: 1) females generally use more adaptors than males in their talks; 2) the higher the speakers' social classes are, the more preference they will have to use adaptors except males from C2, who use the least adaptors as males from DE in their talks.

4.2.2 Rounders

There are 8 rounders that have been investigated in this study. The overall frequency of rounders used by females and males has been studied as shown in Table 6.

Genders	RF	NF	χ^2	Sig. level
Female	13,083	3975.91	23.91	<0.001
Male	21,894	4423.09		

Table 6: Distribution of rounders among speakers' genders

In Table 6, the data shows that males use more rounders than females and the difference between them is statistically significant, which contrasts with the conclusion that females prefer using more hedges than males.

Also, a study of the speakers' social classes has been done as shown in Table 7. In Table 7, it is found that males from AB, C2 and DE all prefer using more rounders than females from the same social classes, but the difference between the females and males from C1 is not statistically significant.

In addition, it is also found from Table 7 that speakers from different social classes have different tendency to use rounders. For both females and males, it is always speakers from C2 use the most rounders. Then, for females, it is speakers from AB that use the least rounders, and speakers from C1 and DE are between C2 and AB; for males, it is speakers from C1 that use the least rounders, and speakers from AB and DE are between C2 and C1.

Class	Female (RF/ NF)	Male (RF/ NF)	χ^2	Sig. level	+/-
AB	1,448/ 3341.79	1,503/ 3932.67	48.17	<0.001	-
C1	1,690/ 3561.46	1,097/ 3565.06	0.00	0.966	-
C2	1,832/ 3911.86	1,065/ 4233.52	12.75	<0.001	-
DE	836/ 3527.56	812/ 3840.97	13.38	<0.001	-

Table 7: Distribution of rounders among speakers' genders and social classes

To have a further more specific analysis of the relationship between gender and rounders, the detailed frequency of the 8 rounders used by females and males has been explored as shown in Table 8.

Rounders	Female (RF/ NF)	Male (RF/ NF)	χ^2	Sig. level	+/-
roughly	42/ 12.76	181/ 36.57	11.49	<0.001	-
about	10,747/ 3266	17,507/ 3536.81	10.82	<0.01	-
or so	90/ 27.35	238/ 48.08	5.7	<0.05	-
mainly	82/ 24.92	221/ 44.65	5.6	<0.05	-
less than	95/ 28.87	244/ 49.29	5.34	<0.05	-
more than	504/ 153.16	910/ 183.84	2.8	0.095	-
around	1,031/ 313.32	1,754/ 354.35	2.52	0.112	-
at least	492/ 149.52	839/ 169.5	1.25	0.263	-

Table 8: Detailed distribution of rounders among speakers' genders

As Table 8 shows, among the 8 rounders, there are 5 ones that exist significant differences between females and males in using them. And it is always males prefer using the rounders (roughly, about, or so, mainly, less than). The result can justify the overall analysis that in talks, males tend to use more rounders than females.

Thus, we get two conclusions: 1) males generally use more rounders than females in their talks; 2) speakers from C2 rather than from AB use the most rounders, and speakers from DE rank in the middle place rather than the last in using rounders.

4.2.3 Plausibility shields

There are 12 plausibility shields that have been investigated in this study. The overall frequency of plausibility shields used by females and males has been studied as shown in Table 9.

Genders	RF	NF	χ^2	Sig. level
Female	58,391	17744.96	26.98	<0.001
Male	83,100	16788.09		

Table 9: Distribution of plausibility shields among speakers' genders

From Table 9, the data shows that females use more plausibility shields than males and the difference between them is statistically significant, which supports the general conclusion that females prefer using more hedges than males.

Again, a study of the speakers' social classes has been done as shown in Table 10. In Table 10, it is found that females from C1 and C2 all prefer using more plausibility shields than males from the same social classes, but the differences between the females and males from AB and DE are not statistically significant.

What's more, it is also found from Table 10 that speakers from different social classes have different tendency to use plausibility shields. For females, it is speakers from AB and C2 that use the most plausibility shields, then is speakers from C1, and speakers from DE use the least plausibility shields; for males, speakers from AB use the most

plausibility shields, speakers from DE use the least plausibility shields, and speakers from C1 and C2 are between them.

Class	Female (RF/ NF)	Male (RF/ NF)	χ^2	Sig. level	+/-
AB	8,196/ 18915.26	7,129/ 18653.37	1.86	0.173	+
C1	8,520/ 17954.8	5,354/ 17399.56	8.88	<0.01	+
C2	8,712/ 18602.66	4,341/ 17256.05	51.49	<0.001	+
DE	3,693/ 15582.87	3,290/ 15562.55	0.01	0.908	+

Table 10: Distribution of plausibility shields among speakers' genders and social classes

In order to have a more specific analysis of the relationship between gender and plausibility shields, the detailed frequency of the 12 plausibility shields used by females and males has been explored as shown in Table 11.

Plausibility shields	Female (RF/ NF)	Male (RF/ NF)	χ^2	Sig. level	+/-
may	960/ 291.74	3,078/ 621.83	119.32	<0.001	-
you know	11,256/ 3420.68	13,200/ 2666.7	93.67	<0.001	+
I mean	7,223/ 2195.06	8,773/ 1772.35	45.13	<0.001	+
must	2,313/ 702.92	2,607/ 526.67	25.28	<0.001	+
perhaps	1,096/ 333.07	2,264/ 457.38	19.56	<0.001	-
I want	1,157/ 351.61	1,504/ 303.84	3.48	0.062	+
should	3,502/ 1064.25	5,652/ 1141.83	2.73	0.098	-
could	6,558/ 1992.97	9,456/ 1910.33	1.75	0.185	+
can	11,771/ 3577.19	18,150/ 3666.71	1.11	0.292	-
might	2,800/ 850.92	4,017/ 811.53	0.93	0.334	+
I think	7,792/ 2367.98	11,469/ 2317	0.56	0.456	+
probably	1,963/ 596.55	2,930/ 591.93	0.02	0.893	+

Table 11: Detailed distribution of plausibility shields among speakers' genders

In Table 11, among the 12 plausibility shields, there are only 5 ones that exist significant differences between females and males in using them. And females prefer using 3 of them (you know, I mean, must), while males prefer using 2 of them (may, perhaps). It is noticed that among most of the plausibility shields, there is no statistically significant difference between the two genders in using them; only among about 40 percent of the plausibility shields, it is true that females use more plausibility shields than males.

Thus, we get two conclusions: 1) for a certain amount of the plausibility shields (about 40 percent), females tend to use more plausibility shields than males in their talks; 2) the higher the speakers' social classes are, the more preference they will have to use plausibility shields except females from C2, who use the most plausibility shields in their talks.

4.2.4 Attribution shields

There are 5 attribution shields that have been investigated in this study. The overall frequency of attribution shields used by females and males has been studied as shown in Table 12.

Genders	RF	NF	χ^2	Sig. level
Female	631	191.76	5.52	<0.05
Male	1191	240.61		

Table 12: Distribution of attribution shields among speakers' genders

From Table 12, the data shows that males use more attribution shields than females and the difference between them is statistically significant, which is contrary to the general conclusion that females prefer using more hedges than males.

Moreover, a study of the speakers' social classes has also been done as shown in Table 13. In Table 13, it is found that males from C2 and DE all prefer using more attribution shields than females from the same social classes, but the differences between the females and males from AB and C1 are not statistically significant.

Besides, it is also found from Table 13 that speakers from different social classes have different tendency to use attribution shields. For females, speakers from C1 and AB use more

attribution shields, while speakers from DE and C2 use less attribution shields; for males, it is speakers from DE and C2 that use more attribution shields, while it is speakers from AB and C1 that use less attribution shields.

Class	Female (RF/ NF)	Male (RF/ NF)	χ^2	Sig. level	+/-
AB	71/ 163.86	72/ 188.39	1.71	0.191	-
C1	85/ 179.13	56/ 181.99	0.02	0.880	-
C2	59/ 125.98	54/ 214.66	23.09	<0.001	-
DE	36/ 151.9	50/ 236.51	18.43	<0.001	-

Table 13: Distribution of attribution shields among speakers' genders and social classes

To have a further more specific analysis of the relationship between gender and attribution shields, the detailed frequency of the 5 attribution shields used by females and males has been explored as shown in Table 14.

Attribution shields	Female (RF/ NF)	Male (RF/ NF)	χ^2	Sig. level	+/-
it seems	207/ 62.91	464/ 93.74	74.03	<0.001	-
according to	92/ 27.96	205/ 41.41	2.61	0.106	-
it appears	8/2.43	36/ 7.27	2.42	0.12	-
people say	40/ 12.16	77/ 15.56	0.42	0.518	-
they say	284/ 86.31	409/ 82.63	0.08	0.777	+

Table 14: Detailed distribution of attribution shields among speakers' genders

Table 14 shows, among the 5 attribution shields, there is only 1 attribution shield that exists significant difference between females and males in using it. And it is males that prefer using it (it seems). It is noticed that among most of the attribution shields, there is no statistically significant difference between the two genders in

using them; only among about 20 percent of the attribution shields, it is true that males use more attribution shields than females.

Therefore, we get two conclusions: 1) for a certain amount of the attribution shields (about 20 percent), males tend to use more attribution shields than females in their talks; 2) for females, speakers from C1 and AB use more attribution shields than speakers from DE and C2; while for males, speakers from C1 and AB use less attribution shields than speakers from DE and C2.

4.3 Genders and hedges

There has been a tendency to see hedges as an important aspect of female speakers' style and stereotypically feminine, which have been described as tentative and unassertive, ever since Lakoff's book *Language and Women's Place* (1975) was published. However, Coates (1996) pointed out that it is incorrect to link hedges with unassertiveness and females. Instead, hedges are a valuable resource for speakers to facilitate interpersonal interaction, which should be adopted by both females and males.

In this study, we found that generally females use hedges more frequently than males. But when it comes to the 4 types of hedges, it is noticed that different genders have different preferences: females prefer using more adaptors and plausibility shields than males in their talks, while males prefer using more rounders and attribution shields than females. The results prove that in real talks, hedges are not typical female language, which are employed by both females and males. In addition, it is also found that generally the higher the speakers' social classes are, the more preference they will have to use hedges. It indicates that speakers from higher social classes pay more attention to using hedges in their talks. But, in a further analysis, we found that speakers from different social classes have different preferences when they choose from the 4 types of hedges in their talks. It embodies that to varying degrees, speakers from the 4 social classes all try to use hedges to fulfil their interpersonal intention.

Coates (1996) argued that hedges play a central role in mitigating force and protecting interlocutors' feelings. She put forward: "[I]n talk, where we need to be sensitive to the face of others ... where we want to avoid taking up hard and fast decisions and want to facilitate discussion,

where we want to maintain a collaborative floor, then hedges are a vital component of talk". In checking the concordances of hedges in the corpus, it is noticed that hedges have 4 very important functions: 1) the expression of doubt; 2) sensitivity to others' feelings; 3) searching for the right word; 4) avoidance of expert status.

The first function of hedges is to signal that the speaker is not committed to what s/he is saying. In other words, when we hedge an utterance, we are saying that we lack confidence in the truth of the proposition expressed in that utterance. For example:

"He may be completely landless, or it may be that his plot isn't big enough and he has to spend part of his time, or part of his family has to spend part of their time, working for somebody else to get in some extra money or possibly renting land from somebody else." (Filename: F8R 149)

These words are from a male called Neil. He used the auxiliary verb "may" twice in this extract; both times it signals his lack of commitment to the proposition expressed in the utterance. By using hedges, Neil expressed his doubt about the real life condition of a poor peasant.

The second function of hedges is that they can be used not just to modify the force of the propositional content of an utterance, but also to take account of the feelings of the addressee. When we talk, we communicate not just propositions and attitudes to propositions, but also attitudes to addressees. (Halliday 1973) For example:

"I suppose I can understand it now, I mean it must of been a lovely place, and then to have all these new houses going up you know, but erm, I mean there was some lovely, lovely lanes" (Filename: F81 222)

These words are from a female Speaker A. Speaker A was comforting a male Speaker B, who missed his past country life. In the talk, Speaker A used the hedges "I mean" twice to show her understanding of Speaker B's homesickness and protect his feelings.

The third function of hedges is to signal that we are searching for a word, or having trouble finding the right words to say what we mean. For example:

"And she said oh the best thing to do is just sort of travel for a bit an—" (Filename: G3Y 672)

These words are from a female called Lente. She was talking with her father and tried to persuade him to support her travelling plan. So when

describing her plan, Lente was trying to find the right word by using the hedge “a bit”, which can help her to form a clearer statement.

The fourth function of hedges is to avoid the appearance of playing the expert. For example:

“Human beings it seems are not the only animals who go in for worshipping idols.” (Filename: HV9 53)

These words are from a male called David. He was introducing some animals with the humanlike actions. In his talk, David used the hedge “it seems” to avoid sounding like an expert, which can help to preserve equal status and maintain social closeness between the speaker and the audience.

No matter for females and males, hedges are a key means to modulate what is said to take account of the complex needs of speakers as social beings. Thus, in language use, where how we say is at least as important as what is said, hedges are a resource that can never be underestimated for both females and males.

5 Results and Analysis

In the study, we have explored 35 hedges in the spoken texts of BNC, 10 of which are adaptors (always, really, very, never, a bit, kind of, rather, only, sort of, quite), 8 of which are rounders (roughly, about, or so, mainly, less than, more than, around, at least), 12 of which are plausibility shields (may, you know, I mean, must, perhaps, I want, should, could, can, might, I think, probably) and 5 of which are attribution shields (it seems, according to, it appears, people say, they say). By investigating, it is found that generally females use hedges more frequently than males. But when the 4 types of hedges are respectively studied, we found that different genders have different preferences in using hedges. Thus, in real language use, hedges are employed by both females and males instead of being typical female language. In addition, it is also found that generally the higher the speakers' social classes are, the more preference they will have to use hedges. But, again, when the 4 types of hedges are respectively studied, we found that speakers from different social classes have different preferences in using hedges. Therefore, speakers from different social classes all try to use hedges to fulfil their interpersonal intention to different degrees. From the study, we should know that hedges are not typical female language or

typical language of speakers from higher social classes. With multiple functions, hedges are a valuable resource for speakers to facilitate interpersonal interaction, which have been adopted by both females and males from different social classes.

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