

A Study of Hedges in *Pride and Prejudice*

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Human language is fuzzy, which can be reflected by hedges. Prince has divided hedges into adaptor, rounder, plausibility shields, and attribution shields. In a dialogue, hedges can protect face of the speakers and relieve some of the speaker's responsibilities as well as make linguistic expressions more implicit, polite, and flexible. Based on this classification, the paper analyzes some typical hedges and their functions used in the dialogues of the novel *Pride and Prejudice*, so as to have a deeper understanding of the major characters and the theme of the novel.

Keywords: fuzzy language, *Pride and Prejudice*, hedges

Introduction

In 1965, Zadeh, an expert in cybernetics at the University of California, published his paper "Fuzzy Sets" in the magazine *Information and Control* and put forward the famous Fuzzy Theory, marking an epoch-making revolution in modern mathematics science. In 1979, Wu Tiejing of Beijing Normal University published the article "A Preliminary Study of Fuzzy Language" in the fourth issue of *Journal of Foreign Languages*. He introduces the fuzzy theory, unveiling the study of fuzzy linguistics in China. The term "hedges" first appeared in Lakoff's pioneering monograph: *A Study in Meaning Criteria and the Logic of Fuzziness* (Lakoff, 1973). He points out that hedges are the words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy. As an indispensable part of fuzzy linguistics, hedges are the most common and typical fuzzy language. This paper attempts to explore the types and functions of hedges used in dialogues in the novel of *Pride and Prejudice*.

Classification of Hedges

Since Zadeh put forward linguistic hedges in 1971, many scholars began to study hedges and dive deep into it. The past over 40 years witnessed various views on hedges from different ages and schools. In the process of the studies, hedges are grouped into different categories. The following are three classifications.

First, in 1971, Zadeh divides linguistic hedges into two categories based on its function. One kind of function is to directly modify fuzzy words. For example, "very", "more or less", "slightly", and "highly" are all hedges which can modify fuzzy words. The other kind of function is to explain in which way they act on fuzzy words, for example, "Strictly speaking, he is a racist/A whale is technically a mammal".

Second, in 1972, Zadeh reclassifies hedges into four categories. The first category is some adjectives and adverbs, such as "maybe", "often", "some", "somewhere", "recently", "somewhat", "usually", "always", "very", "almost", etc. Take a sentence for example: "We've seldom met him recently". The second category is suffixes, like "-ish" and "-ly", for example, "greenish", "sweetish", "childish", "friendly", "manly", etc.

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Another instance: “Sarah has reddish hair”. The third category is those words that indicate the speaker is hesitant or uncertain about something, acting as adverbial of manner or degree, for instance, “as if”, “as though”, “so...that”, “so...as to”, etc. Take a sentence for example: “His works was so great as to make him internationally famous”. The fourth category is the sentence structures used by the speaker in order to appear more polite when expressing opinions, such as “I think”, “I guess”, “I wonder”, “I believe”, “it seems to me”, “as far as I can tell”, “if I understand it right”, etc. for example, “I believe what he said is true” (Feng, 2006).

Third, in 1982, Prince and his colleges Frader and Bosk divide hedges into two categories based on whether the truth value conditions of a proposition has changed: approximator and shield. Approximator can be further divided into adaptor and rounder. Adaptors are hedges that modify the meaning of the original discourse to some extent according to the actual situation. Adaptors ensure statements which are close to the fact to be expressed more in line with the fact and avoid arbitrariness, for example, “kind of”, “sort of”, “a little bit”, “some,” “somewhat”, “very”, “almost” “in a sense”, etc. Rounders refer to hedges that limit the topic to a certain extent, frequently used in measuring things, for example, “about”, “approximately”, “essentially”, “in most respects”, “loosely/strictly speaking”, “roughly”, “around”, “or so”, “at least”, “less than”, “more than”, etc.

Shield can be further divided into plausibility shields and attribution shields. Plausibility shields do not change truth value conditions of a proposition and they tend to soften the manner of speaking. It directly expresses the speaker’s own speculation, for example, “I think”, “I guess”, “I wonder”, “I suspect”, “hard to say”, “as far as I can tell”, “probably”, “seem”, etc. Attribution shields indicate that the speaker merely cites the others’ views instead of expressing his or her own opinions or speculations, for example, “sb. says that...”, “according to sb.”, “the probability would be...”, “it is said that...”, “it is assumed that...”, etc. (Dong, 2003).

Prince’s theory is relatively comprehensive at that time. His classification has provided a theoretical basis and a clear framework for later scholars to study hedges. Therefore, the authors choose to analyze the hedges in dialogues in the novel of *Pride and Prejudice* based on his classification of hedges.

Analysis of Hedges in *Pride and Prejudice*

The novel of *Pride and Prejudice* is the representative work of Jane Austen (1775-1817). Hedges play an essential role in the dialogues of *Pride and Prejudice*, which have different functions and serve the theme in various ways. Although *Pride and Prejudice* is a literary work with artistic means, it is composed of various social strata in Britain at the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th century. Daily life as the theme truly reflects the life and human relationships of British townships in a conservative and closed society. Therefore, the analysis of functions of the hedges in *Pride and Prejudice* cannot only further explore the pragmatic functions of hedges in literary works, but also help readers understand the characters and society at that time from another perspective.

In the following sections, the authors will analyze the hedges in *Pride and Prejudice* based on the classification proposed by Prince.

Analysis of Adaptors

Adaptors are hedges that modify the meaning of the original discourse to some extent according to the actual situation. Adaptors are frequently used in *Pride and Prejudice* in order to depict the characters more vividly. For example:

(1) Oh!—you mean Jane, I suppose—because he danced with her twice. To be sure that did seem as if he admired her—indeed I rather believe he did—I heard something about it—but I hardly know what—something about Mr. Robinson.

Upon my word!—Well, that was very decided indeed—that does seem as if—but, however, it may all come to nothing, you know. (Austen, 2008, p. 22)

When Miss Lucas mentions that Mr. Bennet seems to prefer Jane, Mrs. Bennet shows feigned modesty, but the adaptor “rather” emphasizes her proudness. Then, she uses the adaptor “something” to pretend to know little about what Robinson said. Thus, she can enjoy the compliments—the prettiest woman is the eldest Miss Bennet again. The two adaptors “very” and “may” present Mrs. Bennet’s hypocrisy of both arrogance and modesty. These adaptors are the evidence that although Mrs. Bennet is not sure whether Mr. Binley really falls in love with Jane, she is anxious to show off and simultaneously shows feigned modesty. It reveals a common phenomenon that middle bourgeoisie was full of vanity at that time. Consider another example:

(2) I have a warm, unguarded temper, and I may perhaps have sometimes spoken my opinion of him, and to him, too freely. (Austen, 2008, p. 103)

Wickham had cheated Elizabeth the “relationship” between Darcy and him and fabricated the so-called shameful behavior conducted by Darcy. Wickham used several hedges: “may”, “perhaps”, “sometimes”, and “too” to show that his behavior of speaking his opinion of Darcy was unintentional and he was innocent. The cunning and shameless of image of Wickham fleshed. For instance:

(3) Thank God! I have not that pain. A little time therefore—I shall certainly try to get the better. (Austen, 2008, p. 176)

When Jane received the letter from Miss Bingley, which described that Mr. Bingley had been partial to Miss Darcy, she was painful and concealed her love for Bingley. These three adaptors show that actually Jane also did not know how much time she needed to recover from the wounded and what she would become in the future life. Jane shows her determination by using the word “certainly”. She is such a nice and considerate girl that she would like to ease Elizabeth and encourage herself. These three adaptors manifest that although Jane is in an overwhelming situation, she still tries to be positive and accept it. It also implies that most women in the beginning of the 19th century could only be chosen in terms of marriage. Most of them lacked the right of choosing and what they could do is to accept. Such revelation contributes to the theme of the novel.

Analysis of Rounders

Rounders limit the topic to a certain extent and render the speaker’s speculation less absolute. The authors will take rounders in *Pride and Prejudice* for examples to indicate the functions. For instance:

(4) It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. (Austen, 2008, p. 2)

Although the hedge universally seems to limit the range of this truth recognized, the range of the truth recognized is not clear for the readers. The sentence “However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families” points out the range is surrounding families, narrowing down to a few middle class families in English towns, which is a sharp contrast to the hedge universally. The use of the hedge satirizes not only Mr. Bennet’s behavior of marrying daughters into a wealthy family at all costs but also the atmosphere of the whole society at the end of 18th century. Let us consider another instance:

(5) “I have no reason, I assure you,” said he, “to be dissatisfied with my reception. Mr. Darcy seemed much pleased with the attention. He answered me with the utmost civility, and even paid me the compliment of saying that he was so well convinced of Lady Catherine’s discernment as to be certain she could never bestow a favor unworthily. It was really a very handsome thought. Upon the whole, I am much pleased with him.” (Austen, 2008, p. 127)

Collins says that he is satisfied with Mr. Darcy’s reception. He claims that Darcy answered him with the utmost civility and even paid him compliments. However, Elizabeth, as a spectator, witnesses that during their conversation, “Darcy was eyeing Collins with unrestrained wonder”, “replied with an air of distant civility”, and “made him a slight bow”. These sharp differences indicate that one of them has lied, and it is probable that Mr. Collins has. In order to show his former opinion is right and preserve his façade, he pretends to be treated warmly by Mr. Darcy and uses the Rounder “upon the whole” to show he is also satisfied with Mr. Darcy because He cannot point out specific satisfying points. Therefore, the hedge used here helps him to disguise his thought and it also reflects the vanity and hypocrisy of Mr. Collins. Another example:

(6) A great deal more passed at the other table, Lady Catherine was generally speaking—stating the mistakes of the three others, or relating some anecdote of herself. (Austen, 2008, p. 216)

The rounder “generally speaking” here limits the range or the frequency of Lady Catherine’s actions. It indicates that Lady Catherine is either criticizing others or showing off her own achievements almost all the time. The proudness permeates the whole process of playing quadrille with the help of the flattery from Mr. Collins. It is also an epitome of the society that wealthy people always have a bigger voice in any discourses. Arrogance and conceitedness are common to the whole London in the late eighteenth century. This revelation is helpful to deepen the theme of the novel.

Analysis of Plausibility Shields

Plausibility shields indicate the speaker directly expresses his own speculation instead of expounding truth. Plausibility shields soften the manner of speaking. The authors will take three character’s remarks in *Pride and Prejudice* to analyze the function of plausibility shields specifically. For example:

(7) “I admire the activity of your benevolence,” observed Mary, “but every impulse of feeling should be guided by reason; and, in my opinion, exertion should always be in proportion to what is required.” (Austen, 2008, p. 40)

Mary, a plain girl with neither talent nor taste, always seeks for sense of existence and shows off her knowledge. When Elizabeth hears Jane’s illness, she feels so anxious that she wants to walk three miles to see Jane. At this time, Mary expresses that every impulse of feeling should be guided by reason and she uses the plausibility shields “in my opinion” to indicate that the following is her own thought. She intends to express her opinion on Elizabeth’s action to show off her reason and thoughtfulness. But after she expresses her view, no one agrees at all. Mary’s behavior reflects her anxiety to become the focus. However, a sad consensus exists in that society that only woman with beautiful appearance and good manner can be paid more attention to. For example:

(8) “You observed it, Mr. Darcy, I am sure,” said Miss Bingley, “and I am inclined to think that you would not wish to see your sister make such an exhibition.”

I have an excessive regard for Jane Bennet, she is really a very sweet girl, and I wish with all my heart she were well settled. But with such a father and mother, and such low connections, I am afraid there is no chance of it. (Austen, 2008, p. 44)

As soon as Elizabeth is out of the room and returns to look after Jane, Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst begin to deride Elizabeth's muddy petticoat, untidy, and blowsy hair. When Mr. Bingley says that Elizabeth's dirty petticoat escapes his notice, Miss Bingley turns to Mr. Darcy to seek support and consensus. The plausibility shield "I am sure" shows that although she has no proof, Miss Bingley keeps an uncompromising attitude that Darcy must have observed it. Then, by contrast, when it comes to Darcy's sister, she uses hedges because she knows that he regards his sister as important. The plausibility shield "I am inclined to think" shows that Miss Bingley is not quite certain about Mr. Darcy's thought. Thus, in case of any offense, she takes advantage of this plausibility shield.

Mrs. Hurst judges Jane's family background with contempt and relates it to Jane's marriage. The plausibility shield "I am afraid" not only shows her regret but also implies that she deems Jane is not qualified to marry Bingley in a relatively polite way. All these plausibility shields help to embody that Miss Bingley and Mrs. Hurst disdain people who are under their status, which is a common marriage concept prevalent in the 18th century. For example:

(9) She is a very fine-looking woman! And her calling here was prodigiously civil! For she only came, I suppose, to tell us the Collinses were well. She is on her road somewhere, I dare say, and so, passing through Meryton, thought she might as well call on you. I suppose she had nothing particular to say to you, Lizzy? (Austen, 2008, p. 462)

Mrs. Bennet admires and respects Lady Catherine because of her wealth and status. When Elizabeth tells Mrs. Bennet that Lady Catherine would go without sending compliments to her, she makes no complaints at all. These plausibility shields "I suppose", "somewhere", and "I dare say" show that Mrs. Bennet is not sure why Lady Catherine does not come in again, so she uses these hedges to make a speculation and console herself that it is for some other reason. Although Lady Catherine's behavior is insolent and disagreeable, Mrs. Bennet still makes excuses for her and praises her with great compliments. It reflects that Mrs. Bennet as well as the whole society at that time is snobbish. Such revelations can help to express the theme of the novel from different perspectives.

Analysis of Attribution Shields

Attribution shields can restore the speaker's reputation. In *Pride and Prejudice*, attribution shields play the role of coordinating communication conflicts and making expression more euphemistic, implicit, and polite. We will illustrate the function of attribution shields by using the following example.

(10) And what am I to do on the occasion?—It seems a hopeless business. (Austen, 2008, p. 145)

When Mrs. Bennet persuades Mr. Bennet to make Elizabeth marry Mr. Collins, Mr. Bennet answers with an attribution shield "It seems" in order to put forward his opinion indirectly. If he does not use any hedges or uses the plausibility shield "I think", then Mrs. Bennet must quarrel with him immediately. The hedge "It seems" indicates that this hopeless occasion is decided by Elizabeth and Mr. Collins instead of him. It reflects Mr. Bennet's wisdom and his relatively open-minded attitude towards marriage. For example:

(11) I must confess that he did not speak so well of Wickham as he formerly did. He believed him to be imprudent and extravagant. And since this sad affair has taken place, it is said that he left Meryton greatly in debt; but I hope this may be false. (Austen, 2008, p. 372)

After Lydia and Wickham go off, sorts of Wickham's wickedness are gradually exposed. The attribution shield "it is said that" indicates that Jane does not know whether the following sentence is true or not. It is also

reflected that Jane does not believe what others said yet, corresponding to the following sentence “I hope this may be false”. For instance:

(12) I was told that not only your sister was on the point of being most advantageously married, but that you, that Miss Elizabeth Bennet, would, in all likelihood, be soon afterwards united to my nephew, my own nephew, Mr. Darcy. (Austen, 2008, p. 455)

Lady Catherine demands Elizabeth angrily when she hears a report of a most alarming nature. At the beginning of their conversation, Lady Catherine keeps a relatively calm attitude. She uses an attribution shield “I was told that” to query Elizabeth. The hedge indicates that she is uncertain about what she heard. She creates such an advantageous position in their communication that even if what she heard is false, she can still restore her reputation. This usage reflects that Lady Catherine is very sophisticated and sly. Hedges can help depict the personalities of the characters of the novel, and they can also contribute to express the theme of the novel from inner perspectives. The images are portrayed by their own words and the theme is conveyed by what the characters say and do rather than the writer, which is more effective.

Conclusion

Language is characterized with fuzziness. Fuzzy constructions, for example, hedges, are common practice in communication. Hedges are also widely used in literary works, in particular, in the dialogues of a novel. So, the authors analyze the hedges used in *Pride and Prejudice* based on the classification proposed by Prince, namely, adapters, rounders, plausibility shields, and attribution shields. It is concluded that the hedges in dialogues can help depict the personalities of the characters and express the theme from inner perspectives. The inner perspectives are more effective than other outer perspectives.

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