



## **A Pragmatic Study of Hedging Devices in the Research Articles of English as a Foreign Language by Libyan Professors**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Many studies have analysed the language of hedging in various corpora and types of discourse. Hedging in EFL research of Libyan authors has not been investigated yet. Hedging in language refers to caution, and it is a tool used by writers to warn against allegations, and to acknowledge a degree of uncertainty in their writing. This research explores the usage and function of hedging devices in English research papers of Libyan authors. Meyer's (1997) and Hyland's (1998) views of hedging are utilized in the study. Ten research papers on EFL and Linguistics are randomly selected from six Libyan journals of Human Science field to be analysed. The analysis covers the discussion and conclusion sections of the articles, and the data have been qualitatively analysed. The findings show that hedging devices are used variously and for specific purposes in the research articles. It is found that, the articles carry 320 expressions of hedging distributed on the discussion and conclusion. The discussion records (81%) while the conclusion rates only 19%. The variety of the linguistic choices of hedging are most frequently used in the discussion sections. Furthermore, the three functions of hedging are distinctively achieved.

**Key words:** Hedging Devices, Function of Hedging, Libyan EFL Articles

### **Introduction**

Scientific knowledge and the findings of new experiments and research are presented through scientific articles, which can be added to the knowledge of discipline. To avoid being exposed to criticism from discipline colleagues, and the anticipated readers' opposition, writers resort to using hedging devices in their writings. Language of Hedging as a substantial means of writing is widely and commonly applied in research papers and articles for the purpose of presenting new claims for ratification to make them adequate sources of new knowledge (Hyland, 1998). Academic writings in most cases have information

and data conveyed by the writer, which are not necessarily accurate. In the same time, the writer may not be sure of the thoughts and claims he is providing, or maybe there is not enough or strong evidence of his/her statements. Therefore, the language of caution (hedging language) is used in academic prose to lessen uncertainty. Hyland (1998) considers hedges as linguistic features intensively applied in academic writing, and they appear as significant characteristics in such writing when the writer seeks to avoid being misunderstood.

Crismore and Farsworth (1990) consider hedging as a significant sign of scientific research expressing caution of what is stated. Its analysis therefore has crucial implications in linguistic studies.

### **Aim of the study**

The present study aims to find out what hedging devices the Libyan authors use in their research articles on English as a foreign language. Besides, it aims to find out the purpose behind the usage of the hedges.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are the hedging devices the Libyan authors apply in their writings of research articles on English as a foreign language?
2. What is the purpose of using hedging in the research articles?

### **Study Limitations**

The study is limited to the investigation of the hedges in Libyan research articles and, thus the results cover Libyan research works and cannot be pertained to any other genres. It has been decided to select just the discussion and conclusion parts of the research papers to be analysed since these sections contain the authors' views of their findings. In consideration to this, Demirel (2019) declares "researchers should use an objective language when they are writing about the findings of their research in the form of an academic research article since they should persuade their reader without making unsupported claims" (p: 349).

### **Significance of the Study**

Answering the research questions in relation to the usage of hedging in Libyan research articles in which English is a foreign language will result in understanding how and why the Libyan researchers employ the hedging language in their works.

### **Literature Review:**

The term 'hedge' has been introduced mainly by Lakoff (1972), explaining, "hedges are the words which are employed to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy, and they have the function of providing vagueness of statements" (p. 471). In other words, hedges are employed since the writer is responsible for creating and maintaining the balance between representing the facts and providing claims (Salager-Meyer, 1994).

(Halliday, 2014) views hedging as a part of epistemic modality which he defines as the "area of meaning that lies between yes and no" such as the case of using grammatical lexical expressions, judgments, doubts, probability and possibility. However, Schroder and Zimmer (1997:249) suggest a distinction between the linguistic terms *hedging and hedge*. They refer to the term "hedging as the act or strategy of employing linguistic devices as hedges in specific context for certain communicative goals, such as vagueness, mitigation, politeness, etc.", whereas Hedge as "one or more lexico-syntactical elements which are used to modify a proposition. Therefore, hedges are the linguistic choices that determine hedging in different discourses.

Some of the contributors to the analysis of hedging language, such as Henkel (2004) refer to hedging as the representation of linguistic devices in discourse to show hesitation or uncertainty, politeness and indirectness, and deferring to the readers point of view. Namasaraev (1997) suggests four strategies of hedging in language: indetermination, subjectivisation, limitations and depersonalization.

In respect to the concepts of Hedging types, extensive research has been conducted to discuss the hedging usage in research papers and literary articles. An analysis of the hedging language in Iraqi research articles by Wudaa (2011) explored the hedging strategies by the students who were enrolled in experimental group. A study by Nasiri (2012) states "the non-native authors, i.e. Iranians, could use hedges like their native counterparts, and this shows that the hedging devices are teachable and can be used by non-natives like natives" (p.124). Caballero (2013) had a study on the "Utilization of Hedging Devices in Research papers Introduction Section by Selected EFL Learners in the Field of Education" and found that...

The research entitled "A Study of Hedging Expressions in Rowling's Novel Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone and Its Implication to Teaching and Learning Cross Cultural Understanding" by Lingga (2018) explored the types and meaning of hedging in various contexts of the characters. The study

by Demeril (2019) indicated that the Turkish researchers' awareness of academic writing conventions with regard to the use of hedging is high.

Recently, many works have been devoted to hedging in academic compositions and in different types of discourse such as Livytska (2019), Taqi (2021), Argina and Ijabah (2022), Adrian (2023), Al-Kahfi (2023) Hassan (2024), Farghal and Almahameed (2024).

In the light of literature, no studies have been conducted to study hedges in Libyan writings, therefore, the current research concentrates on finding out and analysing the hedging devices (types and function) in the discussion and conclusion sections in Libyan professors' research papers concerning English Language studies at Libyan Universities. The analysis depends on the types and functions of Hedging presented by Salager-Meyer (1997) and Hyland (1998).

### Theoretical Framework

Salager- Meyer (1997) classifies the lexical items and expressions of hedging as in the following table:

Type of word used for hedging	Examples
Modal auxiliary verb,	Can, could, shall, should, may, might
Modal Lexical verb	Suggest, estimate, argue, resume
Adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrase	likely, unlikely, probable, possibly, possible
Approximators of Degree, Quantity, Frequency, and Time	Usually, often, very, quite, rather, highly
Introductory Phrase	Reflects the author's personal doubt such as: I feel. The authors believe
If Clause	If or unless
Compound Hedge	it seems reasonable

**Table (1): Salager- Meyer's (1997) Classification and Examples of Hedging Devices**

Furthermore, Hyland (1998) proposes that Hedging functions are classified into three categories: accuracy-oriented hedges in which the writers use markers in the extent to which the reported phenomenon is described accurately. Writer oriented hedges as the strategy the writer uses to reduce their appearance in the work. Reader-oriented hedges by which the writer attempts to make the reader involved in the text, and giving them opportunity to give judgments towards the truth-value of propositions. This classification can be realized through the variety of lexico-grammatical forms, such as lexical verbs, modal verbs, adjectives, adverbs, nouns and other linguistic expressions

(Hyland 1998). The realization of these forms will lead to understanding the function of hedging in various discourse (Lateef and Hussain, 2023).

## **Methodology**

### **Data Collection**

The data of the study have been collected from ten different articles written by Libyan researchers and professors majoring in teaching English as a foreign language at Libyan Universities. The articles have been chosen randomly from various journals.

### **Procedure of the Study**

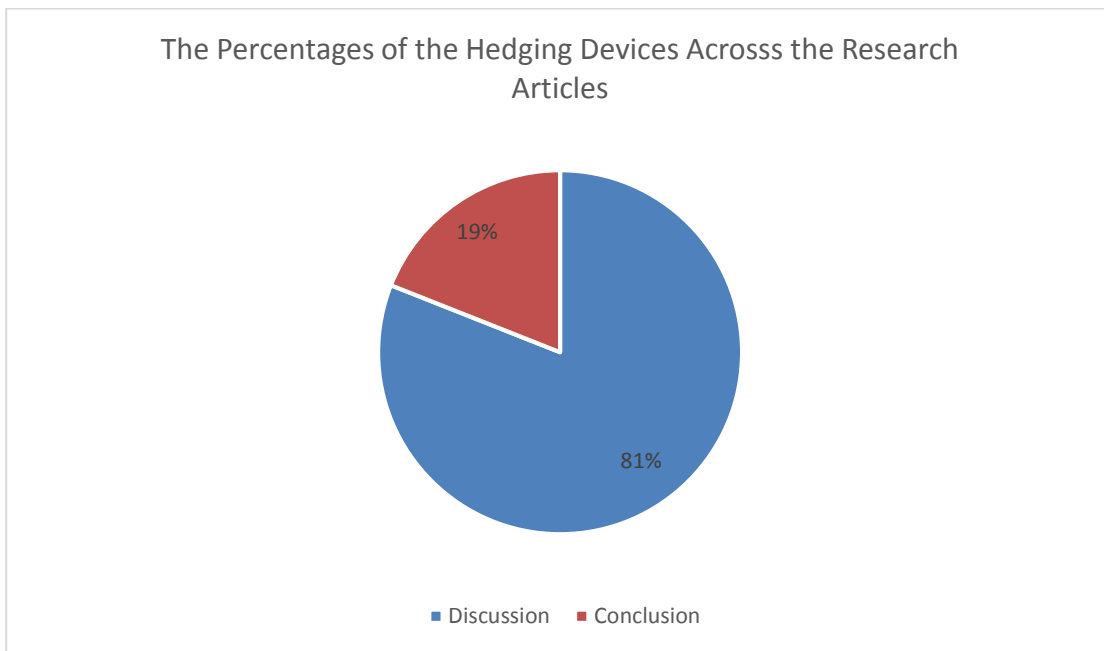
The following procedures have been applied to analyse the data:

1. Searching for the journal articles online. Specifically the articles on English language learning and linguistics written by Libyan professors of English as a foreign language and applied linguistics.
2. The selection focuses on the sections of discussion and conclusion of the articles since they are the research parts involving the researchers' debates.
3. The words and expressions of hedging have been extracted from the sections chosen.
4. The data collected have been qualitatively analysed and classified based on Salager- Meyer's (1997) and Hylands' (1998) classification.
5. The percentages and frequency of hedging devices found in the articles have been manually counted. In addition, the data are described qualitatively.

## **Results of Analysis**

### **Analysing Hedging Types Found in the Data**

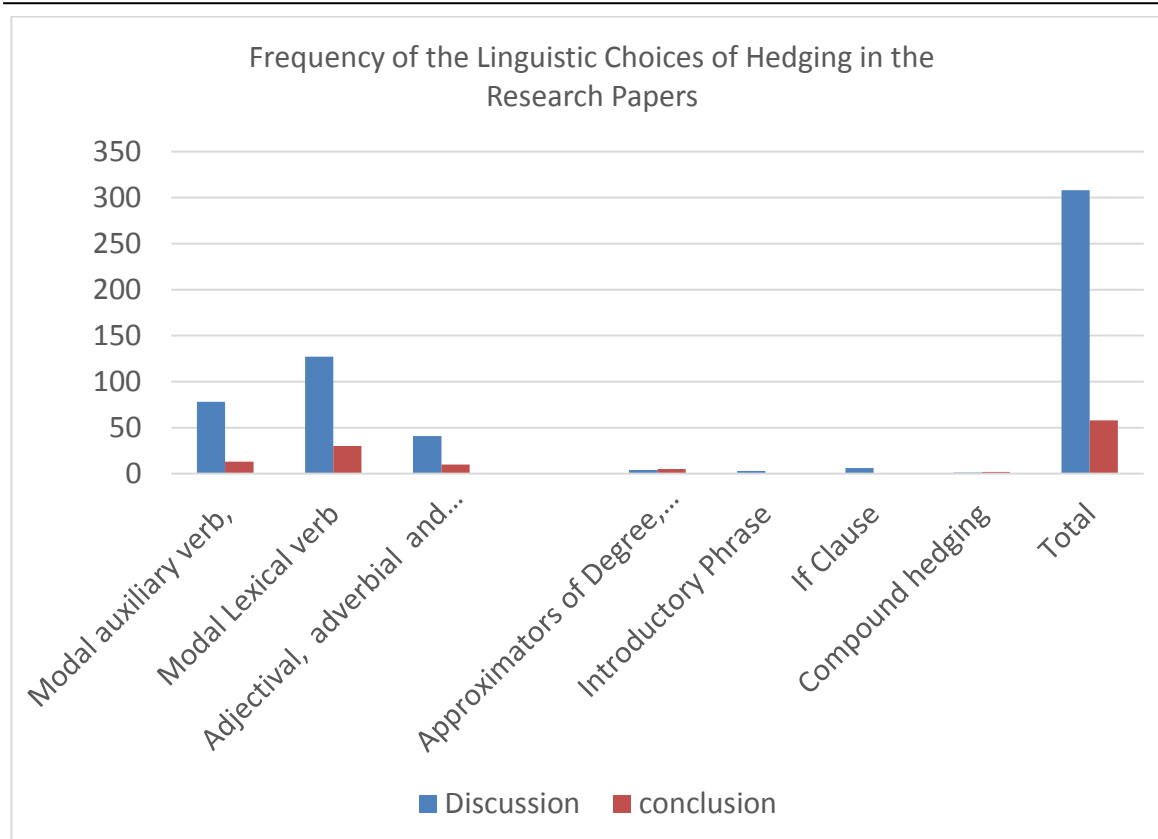
In the light of Salager-Meyer's (1997) classification of hedging devices, it is found that the total number of the words and expressions of hedging across the ten research papers is **320** distributed on the discussion and conclusion sections. The discussion has **260** choices while the conclusion has only **60** expressions as shown in the following diagram. The frequency of the hedges appears much higher in the discussion in comparison with their occurrence in the conclusion.



The following table displays the types of hedging and their distribution in the discussion and conclusion sections.

Type of Hedging	Discussion	Conclusion
Modal auxiliary verb,	78	13
Modal Lexical verb	127	30
Adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrase	41	10
Approximators of Degree, Quantity, Frequency, and Time	04	05
Introductory Phrase	03	0
If Clause	06	0
Compound hedging	01	02
Total	260	60

**Table (2): The Types of Hedging in the Data**



From the table and the diagram above, the analysis reveals that the types of hedging used in each of the discussion and conclusion sections of the ten articles show a significant difference of distribution. Modal lexical verb is the prominent type used in both sections with 127 and 30 occurrences respectively whereas Modal auxiliary verb records 78 and 13 frequencies respectively. Adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrase has 41 and 10 frequencies in each section respectively. This result signals a big difference of the distribution of these types between the two sections. Besides, the frequency of approximators of (degree, quantity, frequency, and time) type in both sections is small with close rates, 04 and 05 respectively. On the other hand, the introductory phrase, if clause and compound hedges have the least usage in the discussion sections. Only three occurrences are recorded for the introductory phrase. If clause has six frequencies, and compound hedging is detected once. However, zero occurrence is recorded for both introductory phrase and if clause in the conclusion, while the compound hedging records two. Therefore, the discussion sections of the ten articles are more hedged compared to the conclusion sections. They are more cautious and have strong implications.

It has also seen that the usage of lexical verbs as a strategy of hedging in qualitative research papers is higher than in quantitative research papers. The quantitative research papers depend mostly on the auxiliary verbs. This means that the difference of the appearance of the same type of hedging across the articles can be attributed to the difference of the research procedures of analysis. Moreover, it depends on the researchers' different abilities and skills in writing research papers. This may be because in qualitative research it is common that researchers tend to use descriptive methods of analysis and presenting claims, whereas in quantitative studies, they present measurements, deductions and probabilities.

### **Analysing Hedging Functions Found in the Data**

Table (3) below presents a sample of applied hedging devices functions and their forms in the discussion sections.

Function of Hedging	The hedging type employed	Expressions
Accuracy Oriented Hedges	(1) Auxiliary verbs (2) Adjectival, adverbial modals (3) Approximators (4) If clause	(1) Should, can, might, must, ought to, have to. (2) possible, maybe, likely, certain (3) at all, mostly, majority, rarely, many times, frequently, highly. (4) If they have biases to one of the parties..... If the leaders of Palestine continue in working..
Writer Oriented hedges	(1) Lexical verbs (2) Compound hedges	(1) state, report, point out, indicate, reconfirm, reveal, provide, identify, intend. It means that... (2) It looks like...,
Reader Oriented hedges	Introductory phrase	we mean, we refer to ...

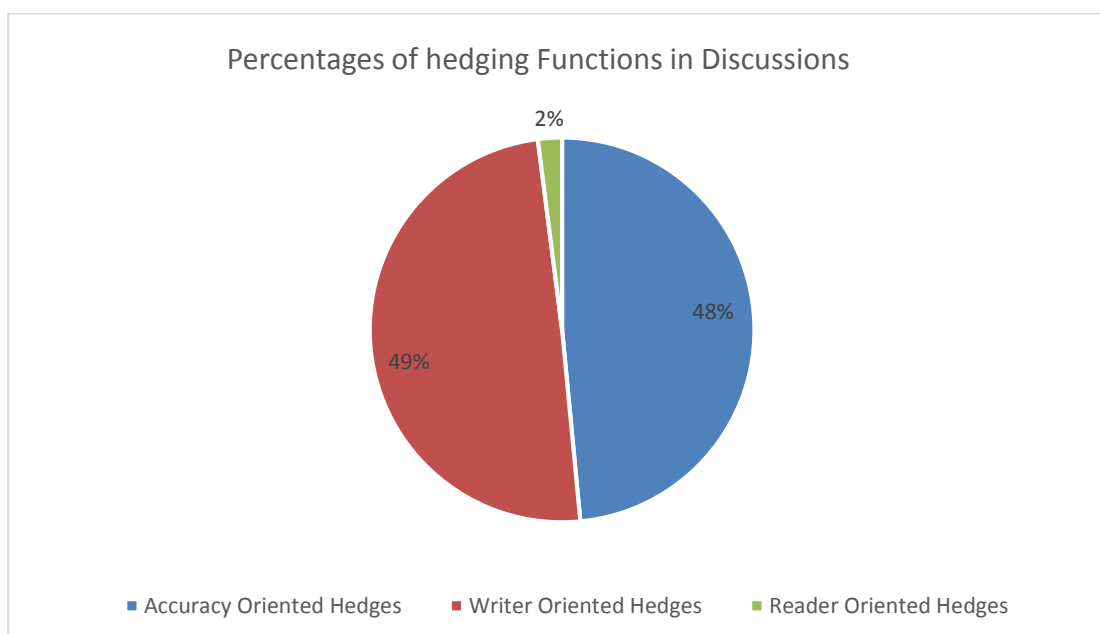


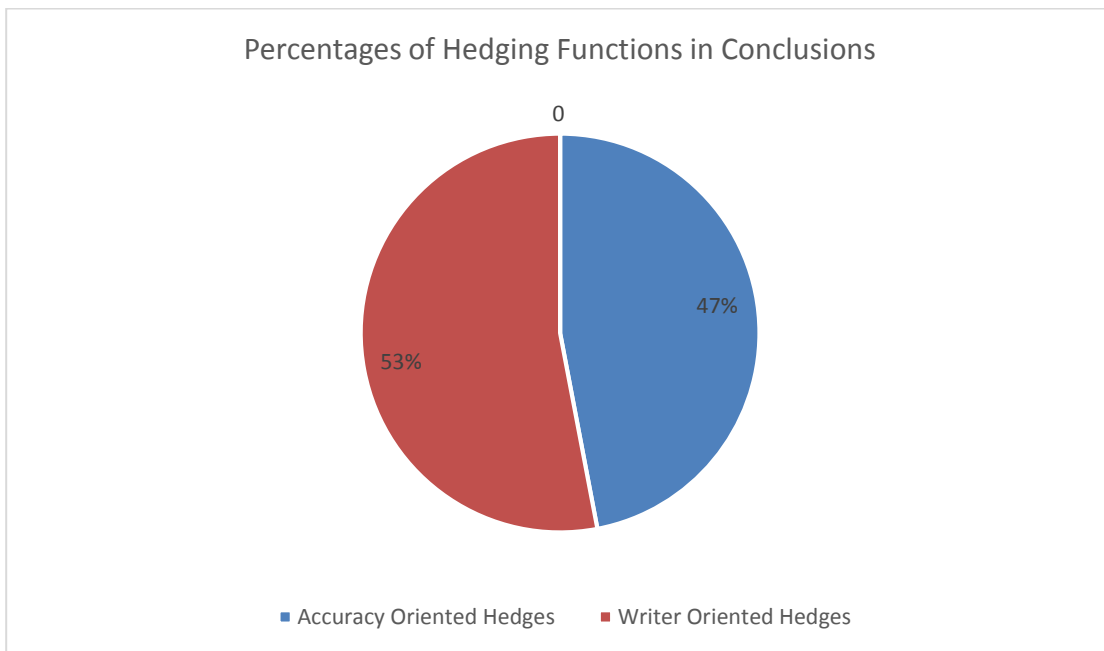
Table (4) shows a sample of applied hedging devices functions and their forms in the conclusion sections.

Function of Hedging	The hedging type employed	Expressions
Accuracy Oriented Hedges	(1) Modal verbs (2) Adjectival, adverbial modals (3) Approximators	(1) should, may, could, must, will. (2) probably, may be. (3) more, some, completely, not all.
Writer Oriented Hedges	(1) Lexical verbs (passive voice) (2) Compound hedges	(1). It was expected, concluded, suggest. See. Proved. To show. revealed. have a tendency to. (2) the study approximately indicates, to some extent.
Reader Oriented	Non	Non

From the tables, the discussions have the three functions of hedging, while in the conclusion sections the functions of hedging achieved are accuracy and writer oriented hedging.

The authors employ different Types of hedging to carry out specific functions. The percentage of the choices in the three functions of hedging in discussion and conclusion are shown in the following diagrams:





### Writer Oriented Hedges

The results indicate that this function is the most prominent function found in the discussion and conclusion sections (49%, 53%) respectively. This result is in accordance with the findings presented by Wang and Tatiana (2016:48), "The writer-oriented function was the most important in the corpus of EFL articles". According to Hyland (1998) writer-oriented hedges function to minimize "writer's personal presence and allow them to maintain a distance from the propositions, thus reducing the probability of reputation" (p. 171). The Libyan writers use many of the lexical verbs as the prominent device applied across the ten articles. They use this type of hedging in different forms, in accompany with impersonal subjects and in passive forms such as "**the study revealed that..., It is stated that**". Besides, this category of hedging appears with hedging adjectives or adverbs making compound hedging as in the examples (**it looks like, The study approximately indicates**). The writers use variety of lexical verbs expressing speculation such as (**argue, believe, suggest**), and others involving deduction like (**e.g. concluded, refer to**).

It seems that the application of this type of hedging returns to the writers desire to create a distance between them and the propositions they present, since they avoid referring to themselves. They want to protect themselves from others' criticism and reactions.

Hyland (1998: 170) explains that writer oriented hedging works in terms of the writer's intention to withdraw his/her complete commitment of the assumptions he/she conveys in writing, and thus responsibility is altered to sources away from the writer.

### **Accuracy Oriented Hedges**

This function is the second one found in both sections (48%, 47%). This result confirms what Wilamowa (2005) states accuracy-oriented hedges are employed more than reader-oriented hedges in writing. In the discussion, It is identified through the modal auxiliary verbs, approximators, adjectival and adverbial expressions, and if clause, while in the conclusion, it is described through the modal auxiliary verbs, approximators, and, Adjectival and adverbial expressions.

It can be seen that the (if clause) is used to express this function in the discussion sections only. Hyland (1998:146) explains that by the expressions of (If clauses) “the condition is open and proposition is unresolved, thereby hedging the accuracy of the theoretical or descriptive claims”. This suggests that Libyan writers work to show the propositions of discussions in their writings as accurate as possible more than in conclusion. Researchers try to weaken the explicitness of their claims by using the auxiliary verbs such as (**can, should, have to.**), and they support the low Vagueness in their words by the adjectives and adverbs of possibility, probability and certainty (**possibly, likely, certain, sure**). In other words, they use modal verbs, adjectives and adverbs to show reliability of what they state, whereas they use the forms of approximators such as (**mostly, completely**), and if clause to express their precision. These types of hedging reflect a subjective assessment performed by the writer of the information he/she proposes to make his statements potential and reliable. The function behind the accuracy oriented hedging is to show the extent to which the information in claims are expressed truly and accurately as can be.

### **Reader Oriented Hedges**

The findings of the analysis indicate that this type seems to have unpopular usage among the Libyan writers. It rates only 2% in the discussion with no occurrence in the conclusion.

This function concerns the relationship between the writer and audience (readers of the articles) thorough the language of interaction. As Hyland (1998) argues that the reader oriented hedges work to drag the reader into the text, indicating that the readers' viewpoints are taken into consideration, and to convey the idea that the readers share in developing the discussion. It can

be realised through "personal attribution, i.e. clauses with personal pronouns as subjects with modal verbs. Two instances in the form of introductory phrases of hedging are depicted in the articles expressing this function (**We mean, We refer to**).

In these two phrases, the authors include the readers as a part of the discussion by the personal attributions (**we**). Through this application, they are signaling intimacy. Therefore, claims and texts become more convincing. Through this strategy, the reader might become close to the authors thoughts, and therefore they can accept their views.

Hyland (1998:182) argues that "the personal commitment of the proposition is deemed to be as subjective view, with reference to the audience's views". Moreover, Malášková (2014:33), consider hedges as the means by which writers communicate with the readers in the text, since hedges help in creating space to discuss and evaluate the issues in the text". In these two extracts, the writers are balanced in referring to the sources of their claims. Thus, they could attribute the responsibility to the audience and themselves.

This function can be summed up that using hedges allows the writer not only to invest a certain degree of commitment into the truth value of the proposition, but also to establish and maintain contact with the readers.

No instances are found of the hedging forms regarding reader oriented hedges in the sections of conclusion. However, the study by Ijmir (1986: 15) reports that "the focus in the communication situation is on the relationship between speaker and hearer". In contrast to this deduction, it seems that in written discourse, the language user (writer) is unlike the language user (speaker) in spoken discourse in practicing the hedging devices in which the listener is taken into consideration.

The limited usage of the reader oriented hedges strategies in the articles signifies that the authors do not give interest to this type of function with regard to reader.

## **Discussion of Results**

Finally, from the findings above, it has been assumed that the Libyan research papers and articles of linguistics and English studies utilize the hedging devices variously in the parts of discussion and conclusion. The researchers tend to apply the choices of modal lexical verbs mostly, followed by modal auxiliary verbs, and Adjectival and adverbial phrases more than the other types. This

study confirms what Hyland (1998: p. 119) states, "epistemic lexical verbs are considered the most frequent means of expressing mitigation".

The intensive usage of modal lexical forms in the writing refers to the authors' refinement to cover different debates of analysis. In other words, writers aim to show their speculation and opinions in indirect way to avoid being criticized, and this is the writer oriented hedging function.

The researchers express their possibility, assumption, and doubt regarding the points and issues analysed through the modal auxiliary verbs type, Adjectival and adverbial phrase, and approximators to express accuracy oriented function.

Furthermore, the function of reader oriented hedging is conveyed through just two introductory phrases as a type of hedging in the discussion, while it does not work in conclusions. This result is in line with Al-Kahfi, Junaidi and Apgrianto( 2023 ) findings " reader-oriented hedge is generally avoided in the finding and discussion sections of undergraduate theses, which encompass academic writing" (p. 10).

This distinction of using hedging types and function between discussion and conclusion is due to the great importance of discussion section, since it is broad and carries the interpretations of results, the authors' claims, criticism and opinions, and other's reviews. To make their words reliable and adequate, they hardly attempt to be hedged. On the other hand, the conclusions in Libyan English research papers contain general background of the results expressed through the modal lexical terms, and recommendations and predications proposed through the application of the modal auxiliary verbs, adjectives and adverbs, with a little usage of approximators and compound hedging. They attempt to suggest implications more than giving opinions and debates of other's views and criticism. This result is in line with Hassani & Farahani's (2014) finding that the discussion section includes more hedges than other sections.

## CONCLUSIONS

Obviously, the study performed has given an answer to the questions of the research, and achieved its aims. Referring to the analysis of research articles underpinned the Salager-Meyer (1997) model and Hyland's (1998) exploration of hedging language; firstly, it is found that all the hedging types are used in discussion sections of English articles performed by Libyans, which are distributed at different rates, while the sections of conclusion use just five types with low occurrences. These findings reveal that the Libyan authors have

tendency to be more hedged in the discussion compared with the conclusion which is given little interest.

The results have pointed out that the high occurrence of hedges in the discussion sections goes back to the researchers' consideration of this part as the prominent part in the articles. The variety of using hedging choices make them exonerated from claim. Libyan researchers follow a formal strategy of presenting their propositions and results in the part of discussion with a very little focus on the section of conclusion.

For the hedging functions, they could achieve mitigation of subjectivity involvement through the writer-oriented hedges, objectivity and cognition through the accuracy-oriented hedges and these are essential and conventional aspects in research papers writing. Besides, there are weakness and inaction in the role of reader- oriented hedges, so the researches may lack flexibility.

### **Implication of the Study**

The present study may benefit students and researchers of English language who are in the process of writing research papers, and it will help students and learners understand the application of hedging in writing research papers as part of the conventional style of writing.

### **Recommendation for further studies**

The study implicates further application of hedging devices in other EFL contexts. More investigations can be applied on different genres of English language and linguistics.

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## دراسة عملية لأدوات التحوط في المقالات البحثية للغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية لأساتذة ليبين

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### المستخلص

التحوط في اللغة يشير إلى الحذر، وهو أداة يستخدمها الكتاب للتحذير من الادعاءات، والاعتراف بدرجة من عدم اليقين في البحوث العلمية. أجريت العديد من الدراسات اللغوية حول لغة التحوط في مختلف النصوص والخطابات الإنجليزية. وبالرغم من ذلك فإن أساليب التحوط في أبحاث اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية للمؤلفين الليبيين لازالت تفتقر الدراسة والتحليل. انجزت هذه الدراسة للنظر في أنواع التحوط ووظائفها في الأوراق البحثية الإنجليزية لمؤلفين ليبين. لغرض الدراسة، تم اختيار عشرة أوراق بحثية حول اللغة الإنجليزية كلغة أجنبية واللغويات بشكل عشوائي لكتاب ليبين من ست مجلات ليبية في مجال العلوم الإنسانية. وتم تحليل النصوص بطريقة التحليل الوصفي النوعي اعتماداً على نظرية اللغوي ميير (1997) وهايلاند (1998). وقد ساهم التحليل في التعمق في بنية ووظيفة التحوط في أجزاء المناقشة والخاتمة للأوراق البحثية، مما أدى إلى إدراك التمييز الكبير بينهما في الورقة البحثية. أظهرت النتائج أن أدوات التحوط تستخدم بشكل مختلف ولأغراض محددة في المقالات البحثية. وتبين أن المقالات تحمل عبارات التحوط 320 مرة موزعة على المناقشة والخاتمة. المناقشة (81%) والخاتمة 19% فقط. ولوحظ أنه تم استخدام مجموعة متنوعة من الخيارات اللغوية للتحوط بشكل متكرر في قسم المناقشة. علاوة على ذلك، تم تحقيق الوظائف الثلاث للتحوط بشكل مميز حسب نظريات التحوط في اللغة.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** أساليب التحوط، وظائف التحوط، البحوث اللببية في مجال اللغة الإنجليزية واللغويات.