Age-Related Examination of Hedging in an All-Female Corpus of Irish English

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Abstract

Due to the diversity in research surrounding hedges, there is much variation in terms of how they are defined and labelled (G. Lakoff, 1972; R. Lakoff, 1972; Rosch, 1975; Prince, Bosch and Frader, 1982; Hübler, 1983). In this study, hedging is defined as an interactional strategy that weakens or reduces the force of an utterance (Holmes, 1995). This paper is based on an examination of a 45,000 word (approx) spoken corpus of Irish English comprising three all-female age-differentiated sub-corpora spanning the following age groups: 20s, 40s, and 70s/80s. The examination is carried out by using quantitative and qualitative corpus-based tools and methodologies such as relative frequency lists, concordances and as well as details of formulaic strings including significant clusters. The study examines age-related variation in the use of hedging and concludes that although all three age groups fit in the category of adulthood, there is much variation in the way they use hedges. This, we found, seems to be primarily due to the influence of their particular life-stage, as well as the relationships and conversation types common to them. In order to highlight this, we will make reference to hedging items functioning at three levels of language (O'Keeffe, McCarthy and Carter, forthcoming): the level of lexis, for example, nouns such as 'there is a *possibility* that' and adverbs such as *really*, *maybe*, *quite*; the level of syntax, modal verbs, for example, *might*, *may*; and the level of discourse with features of 'onlineness' adjustments such as repetitions and false starts, for example, 'And *will you would you* like to go *sort of* on a sun and sea holiday with him this year?'. The study highlights the importance of corpus linguistics as an extremely effective tool in facilitating such analyses which, consequently, allow us to build on research in conversation analysis, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics and variational pragmatics.

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