Hedging in a job interview setting

A corpus study of male and female use of hedges in spoken English

Essay/Degree Project in English Studies

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Abstract:

The study aimed to find out to what extent males and females used lexical hedges during job interviews. The different functions of hedges that men and women used were also examined. A taxonomy of hedges as well as a list of specific examples of hedges were derived from Hyland (1994, 1996). These were then used to find all instances of hedges used by selected job applicants in a job interview corpus by Wawra (2014). The results showed that out of the five grammatical categories of lexical hedges examined, women used more hedges than men overall. More specifically, females used hedges from the category lexical verbs more often than men, while men instead used hedges from the categories adverbs, adjectives and modal verbs more often than women. As for the functions of hedges, both genders often relied on hedges to express a lack of commitment. Men used hedges to initiate word searches to a greater extent than women. On the other hand, women used hedges to avoid the role of expert as well as to show consideration for others’ feelings more often than men.
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1 Introduction

The relation between language and gender has been a popular field of research within sociolinguistics during the last few decades. The notion that men and women communicate in different ways has been explored by researchers in both written and spoken discourse in a variety of different communication media and communities. One of the pioneers in the field was Robin Lakoff, who researched how and why women’s use of language differs from men. Among other things, she argued that women describe nuances of color more precisely and make use of weaker expletives (R. Lakoff, 1973, pp. 49-50). Another difference that Lakoff (2004) observed was that women made more frequent use of hedges. These are words signaling uncertainty or vagueness about something that is being said (pp. 78-79).

What follows are two illustrative examples of hedges as they can appear in context: That is probably the correct answer, I think.

Research has shown different connections between the use of hedges and gender. On the one hand, Lakoff (2004) claimed that females used hedges to a greater extent than males because expressions of assertiveness by a woman were considered to be inappropriate (p. 79). On the other hand, Holmes (1990) found that hedges were, in some cases, more often used by men than women (p. 202). Lastly, Coates (2003) concluded that females overall used more hedges than males. The reason for this was that females made better use of the different functions that hedges can be used for in a conversation (p. 346). Why the findings differ may be because it is not always clear what is considered a hedge, and the studies mentioned did, to some extent, study different examples of hedges in different settings.

As research has shown, it is possible to focus on studying different items functioning as hedges, which in turn may yield different results. One more systematic approach of identifying hedges is to sort items functioning as hedges into a taxonomy. Hyland (1994) did this by sorting different hedges into a taxonomy based on grammatical category. A similar taxonomy was used in Hyland (1996) to examine hedges in scientific research articles (p. 255). Different taxonomies of hedges have also been applied in research concerning gender differences in hedging in spoken English. Among these are Tajik and Ramezani (2018), who employed a version of Hyland’s taxonomy to examine gender differences in hedge use among teachers. Their results showed that females used hedges slightly more often than males (p. 318). By using a taxonomy of hedges, Tajik and Ramezani (2018) were able to examine a
larger variety of hedges in comparison with previous research which had mainly focused on a few hedges.

The reason why hedges are particularly interesting to investigate is that despite Lakoff’s (2004) claim about women being more reliant on hedges than men, other research has shown that this is not always the case (see 2.2.2). It is also of interest to research hedges in settings where there is a gap in literature. One setting where gender differences in using hedges has not yet been extensively researched is job interviews. Since it is in the interviewee’s interest to make a good impression by appearing competent during a job interview, it is likely that hedges are one of the tools used to downplay professional or personal weaknesses during job interviews.

This study aims to compare the use of hedges between men and women in a job interview setting. This will be done by utilizing a version of Hyland’s taxonomy of hedges. There are two reasons why this taxonomy was chosen. Firstly, a study examining many different hedges has not yet been conducted in this setting. Secondly, since similar taxonomies have been employed by other studies focusing on spoken English, it enables a comparison with how hedges were used in other contexts. To limit the scope of study, only lexical hedges will be examined. These are individual lexical items from different grammatical categories that can be used as hedges. The study will focus on and answer the following research questions:

- What, if any, differences are there in the number of lexical hedges used between women and men in a formal job interview setting?
- What are the functions of lexical hedges used by women and men in a formal job interview setting?
2 Background

2.1 Language and gender

One of the first researchers who explored differences in the way that males and females use language was Robin Lakoff. In her article, she analyzed her own observations of speech produced by friends and media in order to discover possible differences in how men and women use language (R. Lakoff, 1973, p. 46). For instance, R. Lakoff (1973) argues that females describe colors with much more accuracy and detail than men by using color terms such as *aquamarine* and *lavender*. The reason why men seldom employ these terms is that such decisions are considered unimportant (p. 49). Women, however, are taught to communicate colors using these terms, because “women are not expected to make decisions on important matters” (R. Lakoff, 1973, p. 49). Another difference between males and females is that women use weaker expletives than males, partly because they are expected to (R. Lakoff, 1973, p. 50). Furthermore, females are also more prone to use hedges in their language to avoid strong statements (Lakoff, 2004, pp. 78-79).

The differences in how men and women communicate can, according to R. Lakoff (1973), be traced to a social process where women, unlike men, are taught to avoid expressing assertiveness from an early age. This in turn leads to women being kept in an inferior position in society and denies them access to power, as the language they have been taught signals powerlessness (pp. 47-48). This inequality is further reinforced by the language used to talk about women which, according to R. Lakoff (1973), tends to reduce women to objects and to persons “whose social roles are derivative and dependent in relation to men” (p. 45).

Cultural and social aspects have also been pointed out as a cause of gender differences in language use. For instance, Tannen (1990) argues that males and females are essentially raised in different cultures, which make them use language differently (p. 8). This is similar to how people from different social classes or parts of a country communicate differently based on their cultural background (p. 5). The differences between the genders are that “women speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy, while men speak and hear a language of status and independence” (Tannen, 1990, p. 18). Another perspective on gender and language is that “men and women cannot be considered homogenous groups” (Tenorio, 2016, p. 2). This perspective highlights that what is considered manly or womanly language is not only influenced by gender, but also social background and cultural context.
2.2 Hedges

Although hedges can be described as words that help to communicate vagueness, a definition of hedges that is universally agreed upon does not exist. Therefore, a few different definitions and applications of hedges are presented below, followed by a summary of research concerning the relations between the use of hedges and gender.

### 2.2.1 Different definitions of hedges

Early research into hedges focused on how they could help express different degrees of truth or falseness in natural language. In his article, G. Lakoff (1973) mentions that category membership is often a fuzzy concept. For instance, it is not clear what criterion a person should meet to be considered tall or middle-aged (p. 459). Hedges are defined as words that help to communicate degrees of fuzziness in relation to category membership (G. Lakoff, 1973, p. 471). To illustrate, G. Lakoff (1973) uses the phrase *sort of* as an example of a hedge when describing how well different animals fit into the category birds:

(1) A chicken is sort of a bird. (G. Lakoff, 1973, p. 471)

In (1), the phrase *sort of* acts as a predicate modifier, which signals that the statement is not entirely true. Rather than stating that a chicken is without a doubt a bird, the hedge *sort of* signals that a chicken only partially can be considered a bird. In other words, *sort of* and other hedges modify the degree of truth in statements, making them more or less true (G. Lakoff, 1973, p. 471).

Hedges can also be used in conversation to mitigate the force of utterances. Fraser (2010) writes that the act of using hedges “attenuates either the full semantic value of a particular expression, as in *He’s sort of nice*, or the full force of a speech act, as in *I must ask you to stop doing that*” (Fraser, 2010, p. 15, emphasis in original). According to Fraser (2010), hedges may in some instances reduce the strength of the illocutionary force¹ of an utterance (p. 18). This is exemplified by use of the modal verb *should* as a hedge:

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¹ The intended meaning of the utterance.
(2) I should apologize for running over your cat. (Fraser, 2010, p. 18, emphasis in original)

Fraser (2010) states that the modal verb should in (2) modifies the speaker’s intentions with the delivery of the apology, expressed by the verb apologize. While the deliverer of the apology still apologizes to the addressee for running over the cat, the presence of should makes the apology less strong (p. 18).

In addition to mitigating the force of statements, hedges are also used to express politeness. Because hedges are words or phrases that help express a lack of commitment, they can be utilized in speech acts to convey negative politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 129). The latter term refers to speech acts that minimize the threat to the listener’s negative face, which is the desire of the listener “to have his freedom of action unhindered and his attention unimpeded” (Brown & Levinson, 1987, p. 129). By hedging requests, the addresser avoids directly imposing a want or make a commitment which would potentially threaten the addressee’s negative face (p. 146). However, it is important to note that this is not the only possible use of hedges in expressing politeness. Among other things, Brown and Levinson (1987) point out that hedges also allow speakers to express uncertainty about their own opinion, which can be used to seek agreement with the addressee’s opinion (p. 116).

### 2.2.2 Hedges and gender

The use of hedges has been identified as one of the linguistic features that sometimes differs between men and women, as seen in section 2.1. For instance, Lakoff (2004) argues that phrases such as I think and I guess are more often used as hedges by women, even when the speaker knows she is certain about what she is saying (p. 79). One reason for this, according to Lakoff (2004) is that women have been taught “that asserting themselves strongly isn’t nice or ladylike, or even feminine” (p. 79).

Other research has shown differences in how the genders use the functions of hedges. Holmes (1990) examined gender differences in the use of three different hedges, one intensifier and tag-questions. The data consisted of speech corpora from several different settings. Holmes’ (1990) study investigated the number of hedges as well as how hedges were used by males and females.
The results in Holmes (1990) indicated that women did not use any of the examined linguistic variables to a significantly greater extent than men (p. 201). As for the functions of hedges, the study found that both genders primarily used the pragmatic particle *sort of* to express imprecision (Holmes, 1990, p. 198). Furthermore, men used *you know* to express uncertainty more frequently than women (Holmes, 1990, p. 199). At the same time, women tended to use *I think* to express certainty and reassurance more often than men (Holmes, 1990, p. 200). The findings highlight one of Holmes’ (1990) initial claims about hedges and other linguistic forms; they are context-sensitive and need to be identified in the context that they are used in (p. 186).

The different functions of hedges have also been more closely examined in friendly conversations between women. Hedges, which Coates (2003) refers to as epistemic modal forms, are defined as “words and phrases, as well as certain prosodic and paralinguistic features, [that] have the effect of damping down the force of what is said” (p. 331). Coates (2003) argues that hedges carry out four major functions in speech. One of these functions is the expression of varying degrees of doubt and confidence, such as in the following example:

(3)  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anna:</th>
<th>Did he know she was going to the funeral?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Liz:</td>
<td><em>probably told him</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sue:</td>
<td><em>probably / yeah</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna:</td>
<td><em>well she probably told them/ you know what she’s like</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(7)  

The conversation in (3) is about Anna’s mother, who hitchhiked her way to a funeral. Coates (2003) argues that the friends use the hedges *probably* and *well* to express a lack of commitment to the idea that the mother told the milkman about her destination. The hedges help the friends express that they are somewhat sure, but not completely certain that the mother told the milkman where she was heading (p. 334). Coates (2003) refers to the use of hedges to express various degrees of commitment as the basic function of hedges in speech (p. 333).

Coates (2003) also discusses the other three major functions hedges can carry out in a conversation. One of these functions is to show consideration for the listener’s feelings (p.
This is achieved by including hedges when talking about something that the listener might react negatively against, as in the following example:

(4) *she looks very sort of um kind of matronly really* / (Coates, 2003, p. 335, emphasis in original)

The speaker in (4) wants to propose that the person she is talking about has a matronly appearance. However, since this can be perceived negatively, the speaker wants to lessen the impact of the statement. Coates (2003) points out that this is achieved by including hedges like the ones in (4) highlighted in bold (p. 335).

Another function of hedges is that they can act as a signal that the speaker has not yet found the right words to say next (Coates, 2003, p. 337). In other words, hedges can be used to initiate what Duran, Kurhila and Sert (2019) call a word search (p. 2). Hedges can also help the speaker avoid assuming the role of the expert on the topic currently discussed. Assuming this role is something that women avoid more often than men (Coates, 2003, p. 338).

Regarding gender differences in use of hedges, Coates (2003) found that women used more hedges than the men in the corpus data she examined (p. 346). However, Coates (2003) explains women’s more frequent utilization of hedges with women making better use of the different functions that hedges can carry out in a conversation. These different functions can in turn be utilized for different reasons. For instance, hedges can be used as a strategy to talk about sensitive subjects while at the same time showing adequate respect for those involved (p. 346).

2.3 Taxonomies of hedges

One limitation with the studies by Lakoff (2004) and Holmes (1990) is that they only examine a few phrases or words functioning as hedges. This means that many items that may function as hedges are not covered by their studies. One way to address this issue is to systematically examine a larger variety of hedges with the help of a taxonomy that sorts hedges into different categories. The following two subsections present how different taxonomies of hedges have been used in previous research.
2.3.1 Hyland’s taxonomies in academic discourse

How hedges are explained in language textbooks is one instance where a taxonomy has been applied to study the distribution of hedges. Hyland (1994) examined student textbooks in EAP\textsuperscript{2} and ESP\textsuperscript{3} courses and how they covered different forms of lexical hedges and their functions (p. 239). Within the context of academic writing, Hyland (1994) states that hedges allow the author to introduce doubt about the validity of findings, while at the same time making a claim about something significant. The readers of the text are then able to assess whether the degree of certainty about the claim is appropriate in relation to previous research (p. 241). Hyland (1994) argues that it is important that university students with English as their L2 learn proper use of hedges, since they are an important tool in successful academic writing (p. 244).

The examined items were sorted into a taxonomy made up of the five grammatical categories “modal verbs, lexical verbs, adverbs, nouns, and adjectives” (Hyland, 1994, p. 244). One of the findings that Hyland (1994) made was that hedges belonging to the category modal verbs received the most coverage in the textbooks (p. 246). The category of hedges that received the most coverage after modal verbs was lexical verbs (Hyland, 1994, p. 248). Lexical hedges that received less coverage in the textbooks belonged to the three categories adverbs, adjectives and nouns (Hyland, 1994, p. 248). While some categories of hedges were sufficiently covered in the textbooks, the lack of sufficient information on a variety of hedging devices may result in students not receiving adequate information about hedges in academic writing (p. 250).

Taxonomies of hedges have also been applied to examine how hedges from different categories are utilized in research articles. For example, Hyland (1996) examined the number of hedges in articles written within the fields of cell biology and molecular biology (p. 255). In addition to the five grammatical categories of hedges included in the taxonomy from Hyland (1994), Hyland’s (1996) updated taxonomy also covered three categories of strategic hedges, which consist of entire sentences instead of individual words or phrases. One example of such a hedge is to refer to inadequate knowledge, which means that the writer hedges a claim by mentioning that sufficient knowledge does not exist to be certain about something.

\textsuperscript{2} English for Academic Purposes.
\textsuperscript{3} English for Specific Purposes.
Results in Hyland (1996) showed that some form of hedging, either lexical or strategic, occurred 20.9 times per 1000 words in the corpus. Furthermore, most of the hedges present in the corpus were lexical hedges, as these accounted for 79 percent of the total number of hedges present in the data (p. 260).

2.3.2 Categories of hedges and gender differences

Taxonomies similar to Hyland (1994, 1996) have been employed in studies related to gender differences in spoken English. Dousti and Rasekh (2016) examined what hedges male and female ELT university students utilized in conversation about a variety of topics. All students were L2 English speakers (p. 222). Only discussion topics that had been ranked as being less gender-biased by another group of students were used in the study (Dousti & Rasekh, 2016, p. 222). In total, 90 minutes of recorded conversations were collected by Dousti and Rasekh (2016), who then sorted the different hedges in the data into a taxonomy comprised of seven categories (p. 223).

The recorded conversation data in Dousti and Rasekh (2016) showed that in relation to the total number of utterances, the female participants tended to use hedges slightly more often than the male participants (p. 224). Another finding was that the men most often used hedges belonging to the category modal lexical verbs. The women participants, on the other hand, preferred hedges belonging to the category introductory phrases (Dousti & Rasekh, 2016, p. 225). In addition to the analysis of recorded conversations, Dousti and Rasekh (2016) also interviewed some of the participants afterwards to discuss the results from the data collection (p. 226). Among other things, the female interviewees mentioned that they used hedges as a tool to display respect for the other participants and their contributions to the discussions (Dousti & Rasekh, 2016, p. 226).

A more recent study by Tajik and Ramezani (2018) employed a version of Hyland’s taxonomy of hedges in a setting where spoken English was used by instructors teaching ESP university courses. Their study sought to discover possible differences in the hedges employed by four male and female instructors (p. 310). The participants had all been awarded PhD degrees in ELT and were each teaching ESP courses at four different universities in Iran.

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4 English Language Teaching.
The participants were all L2 speakers of English (p. 320). As for teaching experience, the instructor with the shortest had close to 16 years of teaching experience, and the one with the longest had 25 years of experience (Tajik & Ramezani, 2018, p. 313). The taxonomy that Tajik and Ramezani (2018) utilized in their study included different categories of lexical hedges, as well as separate categories for sentences that as a whole functioned as hedges on their own. For instance, this could be that the speaker admitted that they possessed insufficient knowledge (p. 314).

Among the results, they found that female instructors employed more hedges overall than their male counterparts (p. 319). Furthermore, Tajik and Ramezani (2018) also discovered that most of the hedges used were from the grammatical category modal verbs regardless of gender (p. 315). The second most used category of hedges by both genders was lexical verbs, and the third most used was adverbials. Some variation in the use of individual items was also observed. For instance, the hedge *perhaps* was used three times as often by the two female participants. The male participants also employed a larger variety of adverbs as hedges (p. 319). Tajik and Ramezani (2018) also acknowledges that hedges are generally used less by L2 speakers of English. This was confirmed when they compared their data to speech data from native speakers (p. 318).

2.4 The interview setting

According to Wawra (2014), the setting of a job interview can “be classified as a subcategory of the discourse genre ‘interview’” (p. 23). Wawra (2014) argues that one main difference between interviews and regular conversations is that the former always have a specific purpose (p. 23). The specific purpose of a job interview is for an organization to put applications through a selection process that will evaluate whether they are the most suitable candidate for the job offered (p. 23). Job interviews are thus characterized by an asymmetrical power relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee, as it is the interviewer who will decide whether the interviewee will get the job or not (Wawra, 2014, p. 24). It is in the interviewer’s interest to expose possible weaknesses that may point to the interviewee being unsuitable for the position. Simultaneously, it is in the job applicant’s interest to downplay or hide such weaknesses (Wawra, 2014 p. 25). Other things that reinforce this asymmetrical power relationship, according to Wawra (2014), is that the interviewer decides the questions and overall structure of the interaction (p. 24).
As to the author’s knowledge, the availability of previous research on gender differences on hedging in job interview settings is scarce. However, there have been studies on gender and language differences in other interview settings. These studies have had mixed outcomes. For instance, a study by Vignozzi (2019) looked into how often the verb *think* was used by male and female politicians in TV interviews (p. 128). The results showed that female interviewees made greater use of the item *think* than males. Vignozzi (2019) speculated that the reason for this was because *think* often functions as a hedge (p. 129). Another study by Brownlow, Rosamond and Parker (2003) investigated gender and language use in broadcast morning news interviews (p. 123). Among other things, they found that hedges and other features signifying a powerless speech style were just as common among men and women (p. 130).
3 Method

3.1 Data

The analyzed data consist of 26 transcripts\(^5\) taken from Wawra’s (2014) corpus of job interviews conducted at the University of Passau in Germany between April 2001 and October 2004 (p. 27). The corpus is available both in printed form as well as in a digital format. To make data processing easier, the digital version of the corpus was used in this study. All persons interviewed had applied for a position as a phonetics tutor at the university (Wawra, 2014, p. 27). An examination of each transcript in Wawra (2014) revealed that those interviewed were between 19 to 23 years old. Out of the selected transcripts, fourteen featured female interviewees and twelve featured male interviewees. The interviewees were all exchange students from different countries where English is the primary language (Wawra, 2014, p. 27). To somewhat limit the varieties of English occurring in the data, only transcripts from interviewees who were students from the United Kingdom were analyzed. With that said, people within the United Kingdom speak different regional varieties of English, such as Scottish English or Welsh English. Thus, there are still different varieties of English occurring in the data.

According to Wawra (2014), every job applicant had to answer the same set of twelve interview questions. The questions were partly based on questions that Wawra (2014) had found were typically asked in a job interview setting. The questions were also specific enough to help the interviewer find the most suitable candidate based on the requirements for the job offered (p. 28). With the exception of small remarks made by the interviewer, only the interviewee’s answers were transcribed (p. 30). Furthermore, the researcher herself took on the role of interviewer and recorded the conversations after the interviewees had given their consent (Wawra, 2014, p. 9).

3.2 Method of analysis

3.2.1 Data processing

A taxonomy was derived from Hyland (1994) and a list of specific hedges were derived from Hyland (1994, 1996). The taxonomy employed in this study consists of five categories of lexical hedges. One category is modal verbs, which contains modal auxiliary verbs such as

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\(^5\) The total number of transcripts available in the corpus is 40 transcripts (Wawra, 2014, p. 27).
Another category is lexical verbs, which include main verbs such as think. The remaining categories are adverbs, adjectives and nouns, which all contain words functioning as hedges from their corresponding grammatical category. The category which contains the largest number of items is adverbs, with 26 items. The second largest category in the taxonomy is lexical verbs, which contains 13 items. The remaining categories, modal verbs, nouns and adjectives, contain eight, six and four items respectively. A table of all examined items and the grammatical category they belong to can be found in the appendix.

One possible issue with making use of Hyland’s (1994) taxonomy is that it initially was created with written academic discourse in mind. Despite that, there are studies who have made use of taxonomies originally constructed for written English when analyzing hedges in spoken English. Both Dousti and Rasekh (2016) and Tajik and Ramezani (2018) successfully utilized taxonomies of hedges similar to Hyland’s (1994) when they examined hedges in spoken English. This shows that the approach of using Hyland’s (1994) taxonomy in this study is feasible, despite the differences in settings between the studies. It is also worth noting that there are some similarities between the settings of a job interview and academic discourse. A writer of research articles seeks to be accepted by the readers and the scientific community (Hyland, 1996, p. 254). In comparison, a job applicant wants to make a good but believable impression so that the employer accepts the person into their ranks as an employee. In both settings, the person communicating seeks acceptance and inclusion, and hedges may be one tool to help achieve that goal.

The selected transcripts from the corpus were searched for occurrences of specific lexical items with AntConc, which is a computer program that allows the user to find all occurrences of the same word or phrase in a text-based corpus. Each interview transcript that was to be analyzed was individually converted into a .txt file. This step was required as AntConc can
only process text from certain file formats. Each lexical item included in the study was searched for using the built-in text search command in the program. Each hit was manually analyzed to ensure that it functioned as a hedge in that specific context. If it was deemed to function as a hedge, it was counted as an occurrence of that specific hedge in the data. The same procedure was repeated for each of the specific items in the appendix.

The total number of words in the transcribed interviews were counted, which allowed a calculation of the number of lexical hedges used per 1000 words. As for individual words, 15338 words were uttered by the female interviewees and 14217 words were used by the male interviewees. This means that the corpus is relatively small. However, since corpora based on authentic job interviews are quite rare, this corpus was still deemed as the best source of data available. Furthermore, one thing that separates a small corpus from a large corpus is that “[i]n most cases, the corpus is short enough that it can be read and studied in its entirety” (Henry & Roseberry, 2001, p. 100). The small corpus size enabled a careful analysis of each interview transcript in its entirety. This was important because the identified hedges needed to be analyzed in context.

In order to determine the correct number of words in the corpus, all contracted forms such as I’ll and I’ve were counted as two words. In addition, all notations referencing non-verbal communication or interviewer responses were omitted. These include the following:

- Brackets that signal laughter or other non-verbal cues. For example [laughter]
- Non-verbal fillers such as umm or mhm
- Silent pauses
- Short responses that the interviewer gave. For instance: /interviewer: okay, I see/

3.2.2 Identifying hedges in the data

In order for an individual item to qualify as a hedge, it had to conform to Coates’ (2003) definition, which states that hedges are words that “have the effect of damping down the force of what is said” (p. 331). As this definition of hedges had previously been applied in research on spoken English, it was a suitable definition to employ in this study. However, it is

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6 Her definition also includes phrases and some non-lexical features as hedges (see subsection 2.2.2). However, since this study only focuses on individual words, these are irrelevant.
important to note that what may be perceived as a hedge in one person’s eyes may be perceived as carrying out a different function by others (Holmes, 1995, p. 111). To make the classification process more transparent, an example of an item from Wawra (2014) that was deemed to function as a hedge is on display below:

(5) I think my knowledge of English is … pretty good. (Wawra, 2014, p. 63, emphasis added)

Rather than declaring his proficiency in English as a universal truth, the speaker in (5) instead hedges the claim by including think preceded by the pronoun I in the statement. This makes the claim sound like a subjective opinion that may not necessarily be universally true. The value of truth in the statement is reduced and think mitigates the force of what is said. This can be compared with another excerpt from Wawra (2014), which contains an item that was not classified as a hedge:

(6) I tried to umm - I tried to [3 sec.] in a way [2 sec.] kind of - not - not becoming friends with them but try to ... sort of ... try to make them think that I’m not some old teacher who just wants to ... make them learn. (Wawra, 2014, p. 80, emphasis added)

The answer in (6) is part of the interviewee’s reflections on his previous work with teaching students. Instead of modifying the full force of what is said, the item think in (6) highlights that the interviewee wanted to make the students think differently about him in comparison with previous teachers.

While each item was analyzed in its context, its specific function as a hedge was determined as well. This qualitative analysis of each lexical item served two purposes. First, it assured that each item was used as a hedge within its context and not used to convey a meaning unrelated to hedging. Second, the qualitative analysis also made it possible to identify how the hedges were used. The hedges were sorted into the following four different categories based on their function:
• Expressing a lack of commitment to what is being said
• Signaling that the speaker initiates a word search
• Showing respect and consideration for the listener’s feelings
• Avoiding taking on the role of expert

These categories were inspired by the four different functions Coates (2003) had identified that hedges were used for in conversations, as presented in 2.2.2. With that said, it is important to acknowledge differences in the settings between the friendly conversations in Coates (2003) and a job interview. For instance, Coates (2003) mentions that when conversation participants use hedges to avoid the role of expert, it serves to maintain the equal status between them (p. 338). Since job interviews are characterized by an unequal status between interviewer and interviewee, the latter is arguably interested in not upsetting that unequal status. Similar differences in setting were kept in mind while analyzing the functions of the hedges in the corpus.
4 Results

4.1 Number of hedges

The total number of hedges used in the corpus by female and male interviewees respectively are presented below:

Table 1. The total number of lexical hedges used in the corpus per 1000 words. The actual number of hedges are displayed within parentheses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Female interviewees</th>
<th>Male interviewees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adverbs</td>
<td>8.93 (137)</td>
<td>10.27 (146)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lexical verbs</td>
<td>10.95 (168)</td>
<td>6.96 (99)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Modal verbs</td>
<td>2.22 (34)</td>
<td>3.02 (43)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adjectives</td>
<td>0.0 (0)</td>
<td>0.07 (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>22.1 (339)</td>
<td>20.32 (289)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen in table 1, lexical hedges were overall used slightly more frequently by females than by males, with 22.1 hedges per 1000 words compared to 20.32 hedges per 1000 words. As for hedges from individual grammatical categories, the results are more diverse. Male interviewees tended to use adverbs and modal verbs as hedges a bit more often than females, as can be seen in table 1. The female interviewees, on the other hand, were more reliant on hedges from the category lexical verbs than males. Hedges from the noun category were not used at all, which is why the category is excluded from table 1.
As for the number of hedges used per interviewee, there exists some variation in the use of lexical hedges among women in respect to frequency:

![Figure 1. The total number of hedges per 1000 words used by female interviewees.](image)

One of the things that can be seen in figure 1 is that a couple of interviewees made use of relatively few lexical hedges in their conversations. For instance, interviewees 40f and 24f made use of around 10 lexical hedges per 1000 words. This can be compared with the most frequent user of hedges among the females in figure 1, who used over 30 hedges per 1000 words.

Regarding the male interviewees’ use of hedges, figure 2 shows that there is some individual variation between interviewees as well:

![Figure 2. The total number of hedges per 1000 words used by male interviewees.](image)
One thing that figure 2 shows is that the interviewee who used the least number of hedges used close to ten hedges per 1000 words. On the other hand, the male interviewee 18m used more than 35 hedges per 1000 words, which is the highest number among both genders in the study. Overall, the distributions in both figure 2 and 1 show that there is considerable individual variation among both genders. However, it is worth noting that eight females used more than 20 hedges per 1000 words, while the corresponding number among the males were five.

When it comes to the most popular items used as hedges, the distribution of each hedge used among the interviewees are displayed in table 2:

Table 2. Percentages of items used as hedges in comparison with the total number of hedges among female interviewees. The actual number of hedges are displayed within parentheses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Adverbs</th>
<th>Lexical verbs</th>
<th>Modal verbs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>quite</td>
<td>28.02% (95)</td>
<td></td>
<td>4.42% (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>about</td>
<td>4.72% (16)</td>
<td>guess</td>
<td>3.83% (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>probably</td>
<td>4.42% (15)</td>
<td>believe</td>
<td>1.18% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perhaps</td>
<td>1.77% (6)</td>
<td>seem</td>
<td>1.18% (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>generally</td>
<td>0.59% (2)</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.29% (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>slightly</td>
<td>0.29% (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>almost</td>
<td>0.29% (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>usually</td>
<td>0.29% (1)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total: 40.41% (137)</td>
<td>Total: 49.56% (168)</td>
<td>Total: 10.03% (34)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The distribution of individual hedges among females in table 2 shows that a few select hedging devices make up a significant percentage of the total amount of hedges. For instance, the lexical verb *think* and the adverb *quite* together make up around 71 percent of the hedges used by females in the corpus. In contrast, modal verbs are rarely used as hedges, as the most frequent hedge in that category constitutes less than five percent of the total number of hedges.

As for the different hedges used by men, the hedges and how much they were used in comparison with the total number of hedges can be seen in table 3:
Table 3. Percentages of items used as hedges in comparison with the total number of hedges among male interviewees. The actual number of hedges are displayed within parentheses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male interviewees - Distribution of different hedges</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adverbs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>probably</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perhaps</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>about</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>possibly</td>
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<tr>
<td>almost</td>
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<tr>
<td>usually</td>
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<tr>
<td>partially</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>generally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>slightly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total: 50.52% (146)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A similar pattern of a few select items comprising a large amount of the hedges used can also be observed among the male interviewees in table 3. The lexical verb think and the adverb quite together comprise around 61 percent of the items used as hedges. These two items were also the most commons hedges among women, which can be seen in table 2. It is also worth mentioning that the adjective likely was used once by one of the male interviewees.

To summarize, the results show that women overall used more hedges than men. This may be attributed to that females used lexical verbs as hedges more often than men, as this category accounted for a large number of the total hedges used. Regarding other categories in the taxonomy, men made use of hedges from the categories modal verbs, adverbs and adjectives slightly more often than females.

4.2 Functions of hedges

The overall distribution of the different functions that males and females used hedges for are on display below:
Table 4. The distribution of hedges used for different functions by females and males respectively. The actual number of hedges are displayed within parentheses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Females</th>
<th>Males</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of commitment</td>
<td>81.12% (275)</td>
<td>81.66% (236)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensitivity to others’ feelings</td>
<td>2.36% (8)</td>
<td>0% (0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiate a word search</td>
<td>7.08% (24)</td>
<td>11.42% (33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoiding the role of expert</td>
<td>9.44% (32)</td>
<td>6.92% (20)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100% (339)</td>
<td>100% (289)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As table 4 shows, one similarity between the genders is that both heavily utilized hedges that signaled a lack of commitment to what is being said. Of all the hedges used, males used hedges for this function 81.66 percent of the time, while the corresponding amount for women was a bit less at 81.12 percent. As for contrasts in how the genders used the different functions of hedges, one observation that stands out is that the male interviewees did not use hedges to show sensitivity to feelings at all. However, it is worth noting that this function was the one least employed by females, as only 2.36 percent of hedges used expressed this function. Other observable differences in table 4 is that females were more prone to use hedges to avoid the role of expert. The male interviewees, on the other hand, were more prone to use hedges to initiate word searches. This is the second most common function of hedges among males in the data, as 11.42 percent of the hedges used by males corresponded to this function.

While the numbers in table 4 show to what extent the different functions of hedges were used, they do not reveal how the hedges looked in context. In order to shed light on how the different functions of hedges manifested in the corpus, one example of each function examined is presented below. As table 4 shows, the use of hedges to communicate a lack of commitment is the most common function among both males and females in the corpus. One of many instances where hedges are used in this way can be seen in (7), which is part of the interviewee’s answer to the question “How do you feel about speaking in public?” (Wawra, 2014, p. 28):

(7) I’m quite shy and - no - I don’t have much experience, but with small groups it wouldn’t be a problem I think yeah, I think so yeah. (Wawra, 2014, pp. 42-43, emphasis added)
In (7), the interviewee is honest about the fact that she is shy, as this is obviously something that has an effect on one’s willingness to speak in public. At the same time, the speaker does not fully commit to the idea that she is shy by adding the hedge *quite* before the word *shy*. This lessens the force of the claim and makes it sound like she is not necessarily that shy, only somewhat shy. Later in (7), the interviewee states that speaking in front of a smaller group would not be a problem. This is also a claim that is hedged by the use of *think* twice. This makes it sound like the interviewee somewhat doubts her ability to speak before a smaller group of people. While saying *quite shy* initially helped the interviewee downplay a possible weakness, that weakness was later exposed again after the interviewee cast doubt on her own ability by using hedges.

The results in table 4 also showed that only the female interviewees used hedges to show consideration for the listener’s feelings. It was also a quite uncommon feature at that, but one example of this function was observed when one female interviewee responded to the question “Which qualifications will help you with your job as a tutor?” (Wawra, 2014, p. 28):

(8) Umm ... well I *guess* ... what do you mean ... by that? (Wawra, 2014, p. 90, emphasis added)

In (8), the interviewee requests a better explanation of the question she was just given, as she did not seem to grasp it at first. The item *guess* is in this case a hedge that helps reduce the force of the request, making it sound less direct. This mitigation of the request is further reinforced by the silent pauses sprinkled throughout the utterance. Had the force of the request not been mitigated by the hedge and silent pauses, it would potentially come across as rude. By reducing the force of the statement, it becomes less direct and less likely to the give the interviewer the idea that the interviewee somehow was offended by the initial question.

In some cases, hedges were used in the corpus by the speakers to initiate word searches. This function was more common among males than females, as can be seen in table 4. One of the instances where a hedge was used this way is when one male interviewee was trying to respond to the question “Which personal qualifications will help you with the job?” (Wawra, 2014, p. 28):
(9) Personal ones? Umm probably [2 sec.] umm … in fact I’m very easy to get on with. (Wawra, 2014, p. 98, emphasis added)

The item probably in (9) is uttered right before a two second pause as the speaker looks for the right words to answer the question with. The vagueness introduced by the hedge probably might also hint at the speaker not being entirely certain about the information that follows. Therefore, the hedge signals the initiation of a word search. By using this hedge together with the prolonged pause, the interviewee buys himself time so that he can provide a sufficient answer to the question.

Regarding the use of hedges to avoid assuming the role of expert, table 4 shows that females used this function of hedges more often than males. This could be seen when one of the interviewees discussed the interview question “What are your strengths / weaknesses?” (Wawra, 2014, p. 28):

(10) I mean, perhaps some people find me … overpowering cause I’m quite confident [laughs] that could be … a disadvantage. (Wawra, 2014, p. 114, emphasis added)

While the interviewee in (10) mentions a possible weakness – that she is overpowering – the use of the hedges quite and could signals that she avoids the role of being an expert on what could be considered a weakness in the occupation. This tentativeness is reinforced by the hedge perhaps in the beginning of the utterance. The interviewee leaves the door open for the interviewer to decide what should be considered personal strengths or weaknesses in relation to the job offered, as the interviewer is the expert on things concerning the position and what is required by the job applicant. If the interviewee had not hedged her claims, she would have assumed the role of expert on what should be considered strengths and weaknesses at the expense of the interviewer. In turn this would have disrupted the asymmetrical power relationship between the two.
5 Discussion

The finding that females overall used more hedges than males in the job interview corpus is in line with Lakoff (2004) and Coates (2003) who both observed that women use hedges more often than men. With that said, the results are not consistent when looking at each individual grammatical category. Females made more use of lexical verbs as hedges, while males used hedges from the other three categories more often than women. In this study, the more frequent use of hedges among female interviewees can be accounted for by the fact that they used lexical verbs as hedges more often than men, as lexical verbs accounted for a large number of the total hedges used. As neither Coates (2003) nor Lakoff (2004) examined the distribution of hedges from different grammatical categories, it is not possible to compare the results from individual grammatical categories to their studies.

One limitation of the study is that the statistical significance has not been calculated. This means that the results did not reveal if the observed differences were statistically significant. Another issue is related to the study’s approach to hedges. The items included in the study are just one of many possible collections of hedges. The fact that a single comprehensive list of hedges does not exist makes it difficult to judge whether the most important examples of hedges are actually included. Nevertheless, since the taxonomy in this study is relatively extensive and contains a variety of lexical hedges, this problem is somewhat mitigated.

In comparison with studies that also examined gender differences in hedge use according to a taxonomy, there are some differences in the distribution of hedges across different grammatical categories. For instance, this study found that lexical verbs accounted for close to half of the hedges used by females, while adverbs were the most common lexical hedges used by males. Modal verbs, on the other hand, were relatively rare. This differs from Tajik and Ramezani (2018), who found that modal verbs accounted for most of the hedges used regardless of gender, followed by lexical verbs and adverbials. The results in this study also differ from Dousti and Rasekh (2016), as they found that males most commonly used hedges from the category lexical verbs, while the most common category of hedges among females was the category introductory phrases, which is not included in this study.

The differences in results could be explained by differences in the settings in which the studies took place. Tajik and Ramezani (2018) featured teachers as participants, which can be
considered as being in a position of power in relation to the students. In Dousti and Rasekh (2016), the participants consisted of university students in discussion groups with no designated leader or official hierarchy. This study, however, examined a setting where the interviewees were in a subordinate position, while at the same time answering personal questions that may decide their future. As seen in (7), both adverbs like *quite* and lexical verbs like *think* were used by the interviewee to introduce a lack of commitment to claims about abilities and personal traits. As one purpose of a job interview is to examine whether an applicant is suitable for the job offered, it is reasonable to assume that the interviewee often needs to talk and refer to personal traits and abilities. This is a need that arguably is not as prominent in the settings of Tajik and Ramezani (2018) and Dousti and Rasekh (2016). As (7) shows that hedges from the categories lexical verbs and adverbs can be employed while discussing abilities and personal traits, this could be one possible reason why hedges from these two grammatical categories were often used by the interviewees.

Another possible cause of differences between the studies could be that the participants in Tajik and Ramezani (2018) and Dousti and Rasekh (2016) were L2 speakers of English, while the interviewees in this study were all L1 English speakers. Tajik and Ramezani (2018) points out that L2 speakers of English make less use of hedges (p. 318). It is possible that these differences may affect how often hedges from individual grammatical categories are used as well.

As to why female interviewees used more hedges in total than the male interviewees, it may help to consider the different functions that hedges performed in the study. Lakoff (2004) claimed that women used more hedges than men in order to avoid expressing assertiveness. However, the fact that females utilized all four different functions of hedges, while men only employed three functions, seems to contradict Lakoff’s (2004) reason to why females use more hedges than males. Especially since some of the functions examined are not used to avoid expression of assertiveness. For instance, the reason for using hedges to show consideration to others’ feelings is so that the listener will not be offended or get the idea that the other person took what was said the wrong way. Therefore, Coates’ (2003) notion that females use more hedges because they are better at utilizing their different functions seems like a more plausible explanation as to why females used more hedges overall.
The finding that the most common use of hedges among both males and females was as a way to express a lack of commitment could have its explanation both in previous research and in the setting itself. Coates (2003) refers to this particular function as the basic function of hedges, which indicates that this is a common use of hedges. The job interview setting itself also creates many situations in the interaction where it might be in the interviewee’s interest to not fully commit to what is being said. One example of this is when discussing personal abilities and qualifications. This can be seen in (7), as the interviewee hedges claims about her personality and ability to speak with groups of people. Another explanation is that the definition of this function is quite broad. Therefore, it is possible that this function could have been divided into a couple of more specific sub-categories.

When it comes to other differences between males and females regarding the four different functions of hedges, some of the observed differences can in part be explained by previous research. The finding that women, unlike men, sometimes used hedges to show consideration for others’ feelings can be related to a finding made in another setting. More precisely, the female participants in Doustic and Rasekh (2016) mentioned that they used hedges as a way to show respect to the other participants (p. 226). It is possible that the interviewees in this study thought of similar reasons when they used hedges to show consideration for the feelings of the listener. However, additional data in the form of questioning the interviewees about their reasons for using hedges would be needed to confirm this. From a wider perspective, the female interviewees’ use of hedges to show consideration for others’ feelings might be a way to show respect and in turn build better connections with people. Thus, this finding is in line with Tannen’s (1990) notion that one difference between the genders is that women “speak and hear a language of connection and intimacy” (p. 18).

As for using hedges to avoid the role of expert, it is of interest to discuss why males made less use of this function than females in the study. One possible reason can be found in Coates (2003), who mentions that men are more likely than women to take on the role of expert when communicating with others (p. 338). Therefore, one possibility is that males employed this function of hedges less because they did want to appear as experts on the topic discussed more often than females in the study. One reason for interviewees to appear as an expert in a job interview setting would be to prove that they are competent and know what they are talking about. However, to appear as an expert on subjects that the interviewer is certain to be
more knowledgeable about could disrupt the asymmetrical power balance between interviewer and interviewee. By making less use of this function of hedges, the males probably risked disrupting the relationship of power between themselves and the interviewer to a greater extent than the female interviewees.

Another possible reason why males made less use of hedges to avoid the role of expert could be because expressions of being knowledgeable on a subject are one way to achieve power in the eyes of others, and in turn society. This might be related to R. Lakoff’s (1973) idea that women are locked out of power because women have been taught to avoid expressions of assertiveness (pp. 47-48). As men have not been taught to restrain themselves in expressing assertiveness, they can assert their skills and competence more forcefully, which in turn may get them a job or other positions of power at the expense of women. A job interview may be one of those situations were men possibly assert themselves more forcefully because the way they have been taught to communicate allows them to do it. With that said, one problem with this approach is that R. Lakoff’s (1973) ideas about language and power were created in an era where inequality was arguably much more prominent. It is very likely that society, together with ways that men and women acquire language, has changed since then. On the other hand, the transcripts from Wawra (2014) are more than 15 years old. Thus, it is possible that they reflect a society which is more similar to what is described by R. Lakoff (1973).

Finally, another result that possibly could contradict R. Lakoff’s (1973) thoughts on language and power is that males used hedges to initiate word searches more often than females. It depends on if it was insecurity or something else that caused the male interviewees to use hedges while searching for the right words to say. Without actually discussing the different observations of hedges with the interviewees themselves, it is not possible to definitely know their own reasons to why they used a hedge in a certain situation.
6 Conclusion

The aim of the study was to compare the use of hedges between men and women in a job interview setting. As to if there were any differences in the number of lexical hedges used between males and females, the study found that females used lexical hedges more often than men. When looking at the different categories of lexical hedges separately, women preferred using hedges from the category lexical verbs. Males, on the other hand, made more use of hedges from the three categories modal verbs, adverbs and adjectives. When it comes to what functions lexical hedges are used for by women and men in a job interview setting, one similarity between the genders was that both men and women used a majority of the lexical hedges to express a lack of commitment to what is being said. Furthermore, men used hedges to initiate word searches to a greater extent than women. In contrast, women used hedges to avoid the role of expert or to show consideration for others’ feelings to a greater extent than men. The latter function of hedges was not used by men at all.

One limitation that became apparent while analyzing the results was that insight into the interviewee’s own reasons to use hedges in a particular situation was lacking. Therefore, one suggestion for further research is to examine differences in hedge use between men and women in the same setting, but with the additional step of discussing the reasons for using hedges together with the participants afterwards. This could provide additional insight into why males and females use hedges in a job interview setting. It could also reveal unknown similarities and differences in why men and women use hedges.

Another topic which could be the subject of future research is gender differences in hedge use between L1 and L2 speakers of English. As there were differences in what categories of lexical hedges that were used the most between this study and studies that have examined hedges in L2 English speakers, it would be of interest to find out if L2 and L1 English speakers prefer hedges from different categories in the same setting. Another social variable that could be explored further is hedge use in different regional dialects of English. As this study only examined English as used by people from the United Kingdom, it would be interesting to find out whether speaker of other English dialects use hedges in the same way or not.
In conclusion, as this study found both similarities and differences in how males and females used hedges, it shows that this is a field of research that is still worth attention. Since gender differences in language use during job interviews have not yet been extensively researched, it would be interesting to see other linguists explore this setting from new angles. After all, job interviews are an important setting in our society, since they decide the professional career and future for many of us.
References


## Appendix


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Modal verbs</th>
<th>Lexical verbs</th>
<th>Adjectives</th>
<th>Adverbs</th>
<th>Nouns</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td></td>
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