SOME PERSPECTIVES ON HEDGING: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

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The problems surrounding hedging research may never be sufficiently resolved, linguists may never agree on matters such as "what is a hedge", "what exactly is their function", "what devices can act as hedges", etc. But awareness of hedging does make us better communicators and its impact is indubitable. The present paper provides a brief overview of some significant research on hedging.

Key words: *hedges, hedging, face-threatening acts, negative/positive politeness, rounders, adaptors, plausibility/attribution shields*

This paper overviews some of the literature that has had a significant impact on hedging research. The author has elsewhere[1] examined the difficulties that hinder the identification of the phenomenon into another language, i.e. Bulgarian, so this is a side step to further research into later approaches to hedging, namely, those of Kay (1983), Fraser (2010), Brown and Levinson (1979), Prince et al. (1980), and Hübler (1983).

With his "Hedges: A Study in Meaning Criteria and the Logic of Fuzzy Concepts", Lakoff (1973) has spurred numerous linguists into the discussion of hedging. Among those is Paul Kay who uses the concept of folk theory[2], a term borrowed from anthropology, to explain how the two hedges *loosely speaking* and *technically* function. He claims that in the same way as "words like *chair* and *table* are [*about*] furniture, hedges are words about language and speech" (Kay 1983: 128). The difference lies in the way that a hedge invokes an additional quality to the utterance it appears in "a comment on itself" (ibid.: 128) if you like. In Kay's example, here given as example (1),

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1 Cf. Petcova (2016: 152-158).

2 "Ordinary people without any technical expertise have theories, either implicit or explicit, about every important aspect of their lives. Cognitive anthropologists refer to such theories as folk theories or folk models." (Lakoff 1987: 118).

(1) Loosely speaking France is hexagonal.

he claims that the words function in two ways "in their familiar role as part of the linguistic stream" but also "in a theoretically unfamiliar role as part of the world the utterance is about" (ibid., 129). He sees hedges as providing metalinguistic information and is convinced that any theory of natural language meaning will fall short of a satisfactory analysis of these *exceptions*, as Kay calls them, until they overcome the desire to draw a distinction between semantics and pragmatics at any cost (1983: 8-9). Kay believes it is through schemata or folk theories that we are able to make out this additional meaning that hedges invoke when used in a sentence.

In contrast to Kay, who favours the concept of hedging as not strictly belonging to semantics and pragmatics, Fraser looks at hedging as part of the concept of pragmatic competence or "the ability to communicate your intended message with all its nuances in any socio-cultural context and to interpret the message of your interlocutor as it was intended" (Fraser 2010: 15).

Fraser stresses the importance of hedging for second-language learners and states that failing to adopt and apply hedging properly may lead not only to miscommunication but also to the speaker being seen as rude or impertinent. He underscores that for advanced learners the expectations of the interlocutor would be even greater and this is not counterintuitive since if the learner demonstrates adequate knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, knowledge of finer communicative nuances like hedging would be assumed (ibid., 16). Therefore, failure to hedge properly could be unexpected and perhaps the speaker could even be judged more harshly as a communicator in the respective non-native language because of that.

Fraser's research also seems to pick up on certain aspects of Lakoff's '73 paper in which the latter poses various questions, most of which have been picked up for further research into the concept of hedging. Lakoff raises a myriad of prospective lines of research one of which suggested it might be interesting to see how hedges interact with performatives. He notes that in personal communication Robin Lakoff has shared her belief that some verbs and syntactic constructions can contain hedged performatives (Lakoff 1973: 490). But apart from a brief observation and an illustration he does not pursue the matter further. Fraser, however, as well as Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson pick up this line of research later.

In Fraser's terms there are "certain performative verbs such as *apologize*, *promise*, and *request* when preceded by specific modals such as *can*, *must,* and *should* [...] result in an attenuated illocutionary force of the speech act designed by the verb" (Fraser 2010: 18). These he sees as hedged performatives and the modals act as hedges and weaken the

performative verb. In this sense, in (2) the sentence would sound a lot more apologetic were it not for the modal *should.*

(2) I **should** apologize for running over your cat.

Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson's research on the other hand focuses entirely on politeness. Following Grice's maxims and Goffman's definition of 'face'[3], they discuss the place of hedging in politeness theory and face threatening acts (FTAs), and propose the model presented in Fig. 1 below:
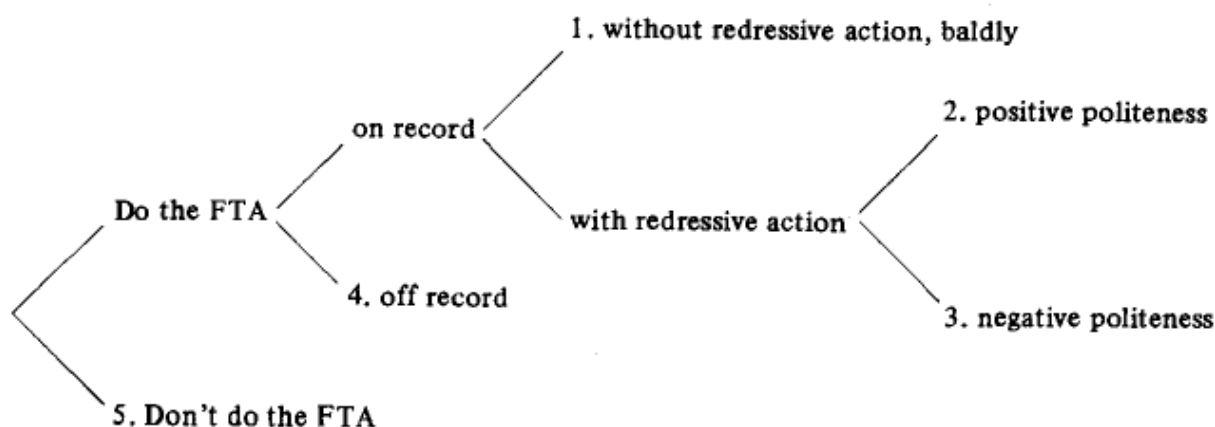

Fig. 1 Possible Strategies for Doing FTAs
(Brown and Levinson 1979: 69)

According to Brown and Levinson's model shown above, hedges find their place in negative politeness (far right in Fig. 1) when some redressive action needs to be taken, so as to allow the hearer to *save face*. One of the strategies by which this can be achieved is hedging. Even though they see hedges as part of negative politeness strategies they admit that some hedges (underlined in their examples below) may have a place in positive politeness as well. One of the ways they can be seen to function is – turning one's own opinion vague:

(3)   a. I really <u>sort of</u> think/ hope/ wonder…
       b. It's really beautiful, <u>in a way</u>.
       c. I <u>kind of</u> want Florin to win the race, since I've bet on him.

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[3]   Face is something situated entirely in the emotional and as such it can be hurt or "manipulated", in interaction it is pertinent that it is heeded. (Brown and Levinson 1979: 61)

      d. I don't know, <u>like</u> I think people have a right to their own opinions.

They can also soften FTAs:

(4)   a. You really <u>sort of</u> botched it, didn't you?

      b. You really should <u>sort of</u> try harder.

      c. You really are <u>sort of</u> a loner, aren't you?

      d. A: What's the matter? B: Well my husband <u>sort of</u>, never does anything, <u>you know</u>.../ is always<u> sort of</u> at me, <u>you know</u>…

(Brown and Levinson 1979: 116-117)

Interestingly, while the authors conform to common assumptions about hedging, namely that "a 'hedge' is a particle, word or phrase that modifies the degree of membership of a predicate or noun phrase in a set, it says of that membership that it is partial, or true only in certain respects, or that it is more true and complete than perhaps might be expected" (Brown and Levinson 1979: 145). They accepted hedges to have both attenuating and reinforcing effects.[4] Furthermore, it is their belief that in interaction we operate on the basis of assumptions and our intentions are encoded in our speech, therefore any speech act carries a potential threat. We hedge in an attempt to disarm said threat, to avoid committing ourselves to it, to eliminate the threat that commonly occurs in interaction (Brown and Levinson 1979: 146).

      Following a modified version of Lakoff's definition of hedges Prince, Frader and Bosk view hedges as words "whose job is to make things fuzzier" (Prince et al. 1980: 3) and divide them into two classes. The first class, called *approximators*, fuzzifies the propositional content, while the second one, *shields*, acts on the relationship between the propositional content and the speaker (ibid., 4) or in other words speaks to how committed the speaker is to the proposition they utter. Illustrated in the following examples from Prince et al. (ibid.):

(5).   a. His feet were blue.

      b. His feet were <u>sort of</u> blue.

      c. <u>I think</u> his feet were blue.

Sort of in (5a) acts on the propositional content and as such is an *approximator*, meaning that there is no doubt concerning the commitment

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4   Although, as Fraser remarks, Brown/Levinson do not focus on hedging having reinforcing effect and their primary concern seems to be attenuation. (Fraser 2010: 19)

of the speaker. In fact, what we take from this proposition is that the blue was less than the prototypical blue. In (5c), however, doubt is implied in the speaker's commitment and instances like (5c) are called *shields*. *Approximators*, the authors surmise, seem to be a semantic class and – as illustrated in Table 1 below – Prince et al. (1980: 6-11) further divide them into two subclasses – *adaptors* and *rounders*. While *shields* have a more pragmatic function and are divided into the subclasses of *plausibility shields* and *attribution shields* (ibid.).

● Approximators	
❖ Adaptors	❖ Rounders
➔ He also has a <u>somewhat</u> low interior larynx. ➔ Q: What about his ears? Is he still draining serosanguinous fluid? A: Uh: it's more <u>just sort of</u> crusted than-- uh not...<u>really</u> draining. ➔ He had uh some ocular-- interesting ocular movements uh, <u>almost describable as</u> ocular bobbing. With <u>sort of</u> vertical uh motions…	➔ His weight was <u>approximately</u> three point two kilograms, um which is <u>essentially</u> what his birth weight was. ➔ Um: the: baby's blood pressure on the ride over here was also <u>about</u> uh <u>something between</u> forty <u>and</u> fifty palpable.
● Shields	
❖ Plausibility shields	❖ Attribution shields
➔ And <u>I think</u> we can <u>probably</u> just slow him down to a little over maintenance […] ➔ But uh <u>as far as I can tell right now</u> he's— you can wean him. ➔ Q: Can you explain this...for me? A: Well-- <u>I think you might explain that</u> it's just— this really was...spinal.	➔ Um and <u>according to her estimates</u>, she got the baby's high heart rate back within...two to three minutes or so. ➔ Um which...was noted <u>presumably</u> very quickly [...] ➔ [...] never-- <u>according to the mo— as far as I could tell from the mother</u>, never had <u>documented</u> aspiration.

Table 1. Summary of Prince et al.'s classification (1980: 6 – 11) Finally, the authors stress that the use of hedges actually signals such processes as plausible reasoning, a mark of rational thought, which "demonstrates a scholarly orderliness in [the] representation of knowledge" (Prince et al. 1980: 25).

In contrast to Kay, Frase, Brown and Levinson, and Prince et al., Hübler's work sees hedges as subsumed into what he calls *understatements*. Interestingly enough, he looks back to history to trace authors who have expressly underlined the Englishness of hedges. Hübler references Pear who thinks that "an Englishman who employs gentle irony of understatement, when speaking to a foreigner who thinks he understands English, runs the risk of being taken seriously," as well as Mikes who not only sees hedging as one of the most noticeable distinctions between native English and non-native English speakers but also underlines this stance by stating "Foreigners have souls; the English haven't... they have the understatement instead" (1983: 2). Hübler insists on this line of thought and provides support with more research quoting Leonhardt, Gorer, inter alia. The author's position is based on another point, namely that there is a link between understatement and ethics. That is why he first looks at the historical background of the term understatement and once he has traced its first uses, he moves on to make his case by examining Fielding's *Essay on Conversation* (1742) and Adam Smith's *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759).

In its essence Hübler's study draws on "Wittgenstein's characterization of the sentence as a hypothesis by the speaker" (Hübler 1983: 12). This hypothetical nature of sentences, according to Hübler, suggests that when one picks a sentence one picks among a multitude of other alternatives and that they still exist despite the choice of the speaker. Or in other words, there is a quality of *negatability* in any one uttered sentence and by uttering one the speaker is making a choice between that particular sentence and many alternative sentences. The hearer, on the other hand, has the right to rebut that said sentence. A sentence can be refuted on objective grounds but also on subjective, or as Hübler terms them, emotional grounds. It becomes clear that it is up to the hearer to accept the utterance put forward to them or not. (ibid.: 12)

This is how Hübler sees hedges. For him *phrastic* equates the propositional content and the *neustic* "represents that part of the illocution which expresses the attitude of the speaker to the hearer regarding the proposition" (Hübler 1983: 11). And

Where the emotional negatability is restricted by the indetermination of the phrastic, this will from now on be described as an

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understatement in the narrow sense. When the emotional negatability is restricted by the indetermination of the neustic, this will be referred to as a hedge. (ibid., 20)

The author has received some criticism for applying such a narrow outlook on hedges and the devices which might represent them. Janet Holmes remarks that

[a] hedge in conventional usage and in much of the sociolinguistic literature is a form used to attenuate the strength of a lexical item or speech act [...], while theoretical linguists tend to use it in the technical sense of changing distribution curves defined by G. Lakoff. (Holmes 1986: 246)

She also refers to the conditions that Hübler sets, which have to be met in order to speak of a hedge in the first place. Holmes thinks that Hübler's approach narrows down the category, or should we speak of a subcategory since in Hübler's view hedges belong to the greater category of *understatements*. In conclusion, Hübler's hedges are a tiny portion of what are considered items of hedging in the literature (Holmes 1986: 246).

Many accept Lakoff as the father of the term *hedge*. This he may very well be, but what is striking is that he not only gave the phenomenon its name but also that his authoritative study "Hedges: A Study in Meaning Criteria and the Logic of Fuzzy Concepts" started a discussion. Since then, Lakoff's work has continued to bring forth studies after studies of original research that has followed so many and so different lines of research – a lot of which suggested in his pivotal paper.

Before we could think of the phenomenon of hedging in Bulgarian, an in-depth overview of the literature needed to be carried out. It was the purpose of this paper to provide such a brief examination of the contributions of Kay (1983), Fraser (2010), Brown and Levinson (1973), Prince et al. (1980), and Hübler (1983).

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