Hedging Stance: A Corpus-Based Study of Editorial Articles in Student Publications

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Abstract: Hedges are often used in academic and opinion writing to express politeness, uncertainty, or caution. While they are typically studied in research articles and formal texts, this study looks at how they are used in a more accessible and expressive form: editorial articles written by students. These editorials allow young writers to take a stand, share opinions, and speak on behalf of their publication. But even in these assertive spaces, hedging remains important—it helps writers soften claims, show respect for other viewpoints, and build credibility. This research analyzed editorial articles from two different student publications, using AntConc 3.4 to identify common hedging expressions. After identifying frequent hedges, the study examined how they were used in context, not just in terms of language but also their function and tone. The results showed that student writers do use hedges deliberately—though their style and word choices varied depending on the publication's overall voice and approach. These differences reflect each group's values, audience awareness, and rhetorical goals. Ultimately, the study highlights the nuanced ways student writers balance conviction with caution, and contributes to a broader understanding of how language works in shaping respectful, persuasive discourse.

Keywords— *Linguistic Analysis: Corpus Study: Hedges: School Publications*

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the role of hedging in academic discourse has steadily gained attention among scholars in applied linguistics and discourse analysis (Hyland, 2017; Salager-Meyer, 2020; Ädel, 2021). Hedges—linguistic devices that writers use to express tentativeness, caution, or politeness—are especially common in research articles, where authors must carefully balance assertiveness with respect for disciplinary norms and peer evaluation. As Hyland (1998, 2017) points out, hedging is not merely a stylistic feature; rather, it is a fundamental rhetorical strategy through which academic writers negotiate the strength of their claims, soften statements, and invite readers to engage critically with their arguments. In this way, hedging functions as an essential tool for presenting knowledge claims in a manner that aligns with the expectations of the academic community.

Grasping the role of hedging is therefore critical for understanding how writers manage stance, interact with their audience, and construct persuasive arguments. Academic texts should be seen not only as vehicles for information transmission but also as socially situated performances that reflect disciplinary conventions and interpersonal considerations (Hyland & Jiang, 2019; Kranert & Horan, 2020). Furthermore, the use of hedges varies considerably across different academic disciplines and genres, influenced by the epistemological assumptions and communicative practices of each field (Mur-Dueñas, 2019; Diani, 2021). This disciplinary variation highlights how hedging can reveal the underlying values, ideologies, and rhetorical norms that govern specific academic communities.

While there is a substantial body of research on hedging in formal academic genres such as research articles and theses, there has been relatively little investigation into how hedging operates in more accessible, public-facing academic writing—particularly editorial articles authored by students. These editorials provide student journalists with an important platform to articulate collective perspectives, comment on current institutional and social issues, and attempt to persuade their readers. Although editorial writing often involves taking a clear position on contentious topics, student writers are expected to temper their language with humility and rhetorical caution, reflecting the modesty and respect for differing viewpoints that are valued in academic discourse (Hyland & Jiang, 2021).

This study focused on hedging practices in editorial articles from two prominent student publications in the Philippines: *The Philippine Collegian* and *The LaSallian*. Employing a corpus-based approach complemented by qualitative contextual analysis, the research examined how student editors deploy hedging devices to negotiate stance, engage their readers, and maintain politeness within the framework of persuasive discourse. Despite their distinct institutional affiliations and editorial styles, both publications exhibited consistent patterns of hedging usage, along with some notable differences in lexical choices and rhetorical functions.

To structure the investigation, the study posed the following research questions:

1. What are the frequencies and functions of hedges used in the editorial sections of *The Philippine Collegian* and *The Lasallian*?

2. What similarities and differences exist in the use of hedges between these two student publications?

By exploring editorial articles as valid and important sites of academic communication, this study contributes to a broader and more inclusive understanding of hedging and rhetorical stance across academic genres, especially among novice writers who engage socially through their writing. The findings underscore how student writers, even in less formal academic contexts, skillfully employ hedging to balance assertiveness with politeness, positioning themselves as credible yet considerate participants in public discourse.

2. METHODOLOGY

To conduct this study, two corpora were compiled, each consisting of twenty editorial articles (EAs) drawn from two prominent Philippine student publications. The first corpus comprised ten editorials from *The Philippine Collegian*, the official student newspaper of the University of the Philippines, Diliman. These editorials were carefully selected from issues published between February 2016 and March 2017. The second corpus included ten editorials from *The LaSallian*, the official student publication of De La Salle University, Manila, covering a publication range from March 2016 to February 2017.

Together, the two corpora contained a total of approximately 13,374 running words—5,807 words from *The Philippine Collegian* and 7,567 words from *The LaSallian*. This balanced sample size allowed for a meaningful comparison of hedging practices across these distinct but similarly influential student publications.

For the quantitative analysis, the software AntConc (version 3.4) was employed to identify and count the frequency of hedging devices within each corpus. This tool enabled systematic and precise detection of lexical items that function as hedges. However, the analysis did not rely solely on raw frequency counts. To gain a deeper understanding of how hedges were used in context, the study also incorporated qualitative textual and contextual analyses. This allowed for a more nuanced interpretation of the rhetorical functions these hedges served within the editorial texts.

The framework for identifying hedges was based on established categories adapted from Hyland's (1998) and Salager-Meyer's (1994) comprehensive lists of hedging expressions. Four major categories of hedges were applied (see Table 1), enabling a structured examination of how student writers employed linguistic strategies to soften claims, express uncertainty, or demonstrate politeness in their editorials.

By combining corpus linguistics with qualitative analysis, this methodology provided a robust approach to investigating the use and function of hedges across two distinct student editorial contexts, shedding light on the rhetorical choices made by novice academic writers.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
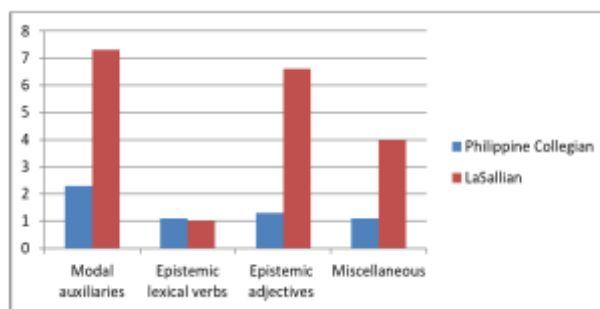
3.1 CATEGORIES OF HEDGES

As presented in Table 2, a notable disparity was observed in the frequency of hedging devices between the editorial articles (EAs) of *The Philippine Collegian* and *The LaSallian.* The former contained 36 hedges within 5,807 running words, while the latter exhibited 152 hedges across 7,567 words. This substantial difference suggests that The LaSallian employs hedging strategies more frequently than The Philippine Collegian.

This variation can be attributed to the distinct sociocultural contexts and disciplinary conventions influencing each publication. As Vázquez Orta and Giner (2008) argue, the use of epistemic modality markers, such as hedges, reflects writers' strategies for navigating the social conditions inherent in the publication process, which are tailored to address different discourse communities. Each discipline and publication seek to fulfill unique social needs, thereby shaping its discourse practices accordingly. The sociological features of each editorial article may thus contribute to the observed differences in hedging frequency and function

Table 2: Categories of hedges in EAs from "*The Philippine Collegian*" and from "*The LaSallian*"

HEDGES	"The Philippine Collegian" Raw Number	Percent	"LaSallian". Raw Number	Percent
Modal auxiliaries	14	38.8	59	38.8
Epistemic lexical verbs	7	19.4	8	5.2
Epistemic adjectives and adverbs	8	22.2	53	34.8
Miscellaneous	7	19.4	32	21.0
TOTAL	36	100	152	100

There is specifically a difference between two student publications in terms of the most used category. Modal auxiliaries (7.3% per 1000 words) was the most used category among four categories in the EAs from "The LaSallian" while Modal auxiliaries from "The Philippine Collegian" used only (2.3 % per 1,000 words). On the contrary, Epistemic lexical verbs (1.0% per 1,000 words) was utilized the least in both EAs from two school publications.

Figure 1: Categories of hedges in EAs from "The Philippine Collegian" and from "The LaSallian" per 1,000 words

3.2 Functions of Hedging

Hedging from "The LaSallian"

In the analysis of the first four editorial articles (EAs) from *The LaSallian*, the hedging device *would* appeared eleven times as identified through concordance analysis. In each instance, *would* function primarily as a mitigative strategy, enabling the editor to temper assertions and thereby minimize potential disagreement or opposition from readers. This strategic use of *would* aligns with current perspectives on hedging as an interpersonal tool to manage risk and maintain face in academic and persuasive discourse (Hyland & Jiang, 2021; Ädel, 2021).

Moreover, the employment of such down-toning devices can be understood as an effort by the writer to protect themselves from possible negative reactions, including anger or contempt, from the audience. This aligns with the broader notion of hedging as a politeness strategy that softens claims to preserve social harmony and positive relational dynamics (Locher & Watts, 2008; Hyland, 2017). By carefully modulating the strength of their statements, the editors effectively balance assertiveness with deference, fostering a respectful and engaging dialogue with their readership within the socio-pragmatic framework of student editorial discourse.

Hedging from "The Philippine Collegian"

In examining the initial editorial articles (EAs) from *The Philippine Collegian*, it is evident that the editor strategically modulated statements by incorporating quotations and employing hedging devices such as *support*, *suggest*, and *can*. These linguistic choices serve to strengthen the writer's credibility by presenting claims as cautiously framed interpretations rather than absolute truths, thereby inviting readers to consider the arguments thoughtfully. Such use of hedging aligns with Varttala's (2001) assertion that modal verbs and epistemic verbs function to enhance the writer's ethos while managing the degree of certainty conveyed in academic discourse.

Furthermore, the employment of *should* within these texts performs a dual function: it not only introduces an element of vagueness but also acts as a politeness strategy aimed at mitigating potential confrontations between the writer and the audience. This approach reflects a deliberate effort to maintain a cooperative and respectful dialogue, consistent with findings in recent pragmatic and discourse studies that emphasize hedging as a mechanism for preserving interpersonal harmony and facilitating persuasive communication (Hyland & Jiang, 2021; Ädel, 2021). By balancing assertiveness with caution, the editor negotiates authority while respecting the diverse perspectives of readers, a crucial aspect in the socially situated nature of student editorials.

4. CONCLUSION

After The findings of this study underscore the pivotal role of hedging as a rhetorical and sociolinguistic strategy that reflects both the subject matter and the audience's expectations, shaped by the ideological frameworks within which editors operate. According to Bazerman's (1988) theory of discourse communities, communicative practices—including the use of hedges—are deeply embedded in the norms and values of specific social groups. In this light, editorial articles (EAs) from *The LaSallian* and *The Philippine Collegian* manifest distinct hedging patterns that align with their respective institutional cultures and ideological orientations.

Editors in *The LaSallian* employ a higher frequency of hedges, which aligns with Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, suggesting a strategic use of linguistic mitigation to preserve face and demonstrate deference, consistent with the Christian values emphasized in their academic community. This propensity to express fuzziness and open space for negotiation reflects a communication style oriented towards relational harmony and respect for diverse viewpoints.

Conversely, *The Philippine Collegian*'s editorial writers adopt a more assertive stance, using fewer hedges and engaging in direct argumentation to champion basic student rights and social activism. This assertiveness resonates with Fairclough's (1995) critical discourse analysis framework, which interprets language as a form of social practice where power dynamics and resistance are negotiated through discourse. The relatively lower use of hedges in this context signals a deliberate rhetorical choice to assert authority and challenge dominant structures, reflecting the publication's activist ethos.

These differences highlight the importance of situating rhetorical strategies such as hedging within the broader

sociocultural and ideological contexts that shape academic writing. Therefore, teaching writing—particularly in the genre of editorial articles—should incorporate awareness of how rhetorical conventions vary across communities and how language functions as a marker of identity and ideology.

Nonetheless, the study acknowledges certain limitations, primarily the restricted corpus size and the focus solely on hedges as a single variable. Future research could benefit from larger and more diverse samples and extend the scope to include related pragmatic features such as boosters, which work in tandem with hedges to modulate stance and persuasion. Such investigations would further enrich our understanding of the nuanced ways writers construct meaning and negotiate interpersonal relations through language.

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