

## CHỨC NĂNG CỦA CÁC BIỂU THỨC RÀO ĐÓN TRONG CÁC BÀI NGHIÊN CỨU KINH TẾ TIẾNG ANH

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*Bài viết đề cập tới chức năng giao tiếp của các biểu thức rào đón trong các bài báo nghiên cứu kinh tế dựa trên việc tổng hợp số liệu từ 15 bài báo nghiên cứu tiếng Anh trong lĩnh vực kinh tế. Bài viết cho thấy các tác giả kinh tế thường tìm sự đồng tình từ phía độc giả bằng những chứng cứ rõ ràng cho những nhận định quan trọng của mình trong khi vẫn tạo ra một không gian mở tiếp nhận các ý kiến trái ngược. Các biểu thức rào đón cho phép các tác giả kinh tế tăng hoặc giảm mức độ lập luận của mình nhằm củng cố các nhận định đó bằng cách thừa nhận những hạn chế trong nghiên cứu, và mở ra một không gian cho các độc giả chuyên nghiệp tham gia tranh luận. Các tác giả kinh tế thường chọn những biểu thức rào đón có chức năng hỗ trợ việc trình bày những nhận định khoa học một cách chính xác hơn và đồng thời có thể bảo vệ họ trước những phản ứng thiếu tích cực có thể có từ phía độc giả trong quá trình tranh luận khoa học.*

**Từ khóa:** rào đón, biểu thức rào đón, bài nghiên cứu kinh tế, chức năng giao tiếp.

*The paper sets out to characterize the communicative role of hedging in economic research articles (RAs) based on a corpus of 15 English RAs in economic field. The paper finds out that economic writers often seek agreement and support for the strongest claims with clear evidence, while also look for the possibility of opposition. Hedges allow economic writers to upgrade or downplay their statements and strengthen their arguments by admitting limitations, uncertainties, and leave a place for peers to participate in approving knowledge. Economic writers often select a hedge that functions to present a claim with greater accuracy or with an assessment of its reliability or a hedge that provides some protection from the professional damage that might result from a claim.*

**Key words:** hedge, hedging, economic research articles, communicative function.

## FUNCTIONS OF HEDGING IN ECONOMIC RESEARCH ARTICLES

### I. Introduction

One kind of rhetorical devices that has been studied quite a lot recently is the phenomenon of hedging. The term

hedging was first used by Lakoff [4] to describe “words whose job is to make things more or less fuzzy”. The term has subsequently been applied to initial phrases such as *I think, perhaps, might, maybe...* Hedging now is often known as “the expression of tentativeness and

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possibility” and becomes a common feature in academic discourse (Hyland [3]). In economic RAs, hedging will probably enable economists especially normative economists to express a perspective on their statements, to present unproven claims with caution, and to enter into a dialogue with their audience (McClosky [5]). The paper sets out to characterize the communicative role of hedging in economic RAs. It seeks to clarify the incidence and function of particular hedging expressions and provide baseline data for subsequent comparative studies of hedging in other fields and in the evolution of key genres of writing.

The paper is based on a corpus of RAs drawn from English economic field. The corpus is made up of 15 economic RAs from *The Economic Journal* (5 articles); *Journal of Economic Issues* (3 articles); *Quarterly Journal of Business and Economics* (2 articles); *The American Economic Review* (3 articles); *The Journal of Economic Perspective* (2 articles). In light of the experience gained during the present research, it is possible to divide collection criteria into Authenticity, Reputation, Accessibility and Variation. The data in the present writing is empirical research papers selected from journals published in the United States. The sample collected exemplifies the typical language of Economics and is linguistically recognizable. The sources from which data for the present analysis has been collected are reputable sources in the Economic field. For one thing, they all

have world-wide coverage. For another, these articles are ranked by the *Econometric Journal*. With regard to the availability, most of the articles are available and can be downloaded from electronic journal service in the libraries of the National Economics University (either PDF files or html. files). The updated articles published in 2005 forward were found as hard copy in the library. Only articles written by native speakers are chosen in order to avoid possible interference from other languages. The corpus contains the whole of the text of the articles, excluding only the abstract since it seems that the language of an abstract is a register in itself, and is not necessarily the same as that of an academic article, even when both are from the same domain.

A corpus (sample) of naturalistic economic discourse excerpts that are relevant to the paper’s particular research questions was collected. The discourse corpus was analyzed by counting the frequency of discourse elements, categories, sequences, and combinations of these linguistic/ discourse entities. The frequencies could be normalized by counting the number of occurrences per 100 words. According to the hard-core scientific researchers, the discourse corpus needs to be sampled systematically and scientifically, rather than haphazardly or with bias. To avoid possible mistakes, the corpus for the thesis was selected carefully, at random and with suggestions of economic experts. A comprehensive understanding of hedging in English



economic articles involves at least two levels of linguistic description: an analysis at surface-level hedging devices employed in a particular academic genre, and a deeper functional analysis at pragmatic level. The analysis of the corpus was undertaken by blending qualitative and quantitative methods. The analysis followed several steps, beginning with a quantitative search, followed by a computerized compilation of the corpus, then by a qualitative analysis all the texts and a contrastive analysis. The articles making up the corpus relate to the macro and micro-economic issues. The paper only examines the use of hedging in a typical epistemic lexical item in word-classes such as modal auxiliaries (e.g. *may*), main verbs (e.g. *argue*), adverbs (e.g. *possible*), adjectives (e.g. *probable*), and nouns (e.g. *hypothesis*). They are all expressions characterized by a component of tentativeness or possibility in the form of epistemic modality. Though it is difficult to have an exhaustive list of lexical hedges, the selection contains items that the readers of economic texts, even fluent non-native speakers of English would most likely identify as expressions containing elements of tentativeness or possibility.

## II. Functions of hedging in economic discourses

### 1. Content-motivated functions

The most common means of expressing content-based hedging is by conventional epistemic forms in the main grammatical classes, principally modal verbs, modal

adjectives and nouns, adverbs... The major forms of lexical hedging will be discussed below.

#### a. Modal auxiliaries

According to Coates [1], the modal auxiliaries are recognized to be polysemous. They are used as hedging to avoid bald assertions and to express tentative possibilities. In economic RAs corpus, three verbs frequently found in their epistemic meaning were *may*, *must*, *could*. These three modal auxiliaries only appear frequently in normative economics when economists tend to talk about supposed errors of others in a non-specific way when speaking in a formal situation, as opposed to the informal situations where they tend to be much more specific and assertive. Therefore, it would seem reasonable that such a formal situation as in RAs will lead economists to be less assertive to hedge their bets, on points that might open to disagreement. For example,

- (1) That a fraction of them [expectations of inflation] may appear misinformed is completely in line with the theory that agents *may* not find it worthwhile to forecast well. (EE.4)

#### b. Epistemic Main Verbs

In economic RAs, two core groups of epistemic main verbs are typical “hedgers”: (i) *epistemic reporting verbs* such as *claim*, *suggest*, *hypothesize*, *propose* and (ii) three *intransitive verbs* (*appear*, *seem*, *tend*) which, according to Zuck & Zuck [8], frequently function as indicators of epistemic possibility.

The first category contains verbs which characteristically occur as markers of tentativeness in reports of the author's own or other researchers' work. Going with these verbs are either an economist with or self-promotional *I* and *We*, or in many cases, an inanimate noun such as data, evidence, or results. According to Nuyts [6], we can divide these verbs into two general types: (i) assertive reporting verbs (e.g. argue, propose), and (ii) reporting mental state verbs (e.g. assume, maintain). In economic RAs, epistemic reporting verbs are used commonly in both types. Reporting mental state verbs are used more often than assertive reporting verbs.

For example,

- (2) We further assume that when agents report their expectations they report the value returned by their forecast method plus an idiosyncratic shock. (EE.7)

The second group of epistemic main verbs is often referred to as semi-auxiliaries such as *appear*, *seem*, *tend*. However, to some extent, these verbs express many the same as epistemic reporting verbs because they are used to express tentativeness when the author's or the researcher's ideas are described. Hyland [3] calls the second category of lexical verbs as *evidential verbs* which refer to evidential justification, based either on the reports of others, the writer's senses, or the purpose of discovery itself.

For example,

- (3) Our study appears to surmise that the effect of many other variables used in the economic literature so far, be they on the individual or on the national level, will turn out to be very different. (EE.10)

There is a little difference in the use of *appear* and *seem*. *Appear* is more formal than *seem*. However, *seem*, the less formal of the two, was more frequently used in economic RAs. This can show that the stylistic traditions of the research article are not followed in popularizations, where a more familiar style may result in better rhetorical effects.

In economic RAs, there also appear a lot of lexical verbs named by Hyland [3] as *speculative verbs*. These speculative verbs indicate that there is some conjecture about the truth of a proposition. They comprise mainly conventional "performative" items, and the tentativeness of these items allows writers to distinguish clearly the speculative.

- (4) In this direction, our model would proposes further insights into the debate on the various measures of core inflation. (EE. 15)

The tentative nature of the underlined verb in example (4) is expressed through the non-writer subject structures *our modal proposes*. Combining with the hedging device diminishing, *would*, the performative verb express an uncertainty of the writers to the truth value of the statements.



In general, in economic RAs, these hedging verbs represent a clear function of displaying the subjectivity of the epistemic source and are used to hedge either commitment or assertiveness. They contribute to the evidential reasoning between data and hypotheses made by economists. With impersonal phrasings, these verbs indicate a lack of confidence from writers and give a way for readers to evaluate statements more accurately. Besides that, as indicated, many of these verbs accompanied by personal attribution, and they generally help to soften claims made by economists. These verbs function as reader-based hedges. For example,

- (5) We believe that general-equilibrium effects would tend to be biased against 401(k) plans relative to DB plans. (EE. 3)

In example (5), the verb “*believe*” together with plural first person subject *we* indicated that the statement was the author’s own viewpoint. By narrowing down the scope of the statement, or/and introducing the author’s personal ideas as used in the examples above, the author wanted to get the readers involved into the academic conversations. The door of judgment was totally opened for readers in this situation. This hedging device reveals that there are other alternative choices that the readers may decide to follow or may find other more reliable statements to base on. Therefore, readers are totally free to make their own decisions.

### c. Epistemic Adverbs

Another often-mentioned group of epistemic item is adverbs. The focus of

adverbs in this study is modal probability adverbs (Hyland [3]). Thirty-six forms were identified in economic RAs, with the most frequent being *apparently*, *presumably* and *probably*. In economic RAs, epistemic adverbs are very mobile, which allows the modality of an utterance to be either “thematized” or inserted into the middle of the sentence.

For example,

- (6) In the absence of randomized trials, these data probably provide a reliable estimate of outcome for parents treated with observation... (EE.1)

The initial-positioned adverbs can serve to accent a hedge and provide a reader with an alternative interpretation for the rest of a sentence, marking what follows as hypothetical and subjective.

According to Quirk et al. [7], Greenbaum [2], hedging adverbs are either “down-toners” such as *quite*, *almost*, and *usually* which lower the effect of the force of the verb, or “disjuncts” (e.g. *probably*, *generally*, *evidently*) which convey an attitude toward the truth of a statement. In most cases in economic RAs, such adverbs appear in *content disjunct* function or as Greenbaum [2] puts it *attitudinal disjuncts* to indicate the speaker’s or writer’s attitude or approach toward the statement put forth.

- (7) Thus, a potential criticism may arise from the fact that we use annual data to assess the impact on growth, possibly reflecting the short-term effect of a change in the

exchange rate regime, rather than a long-term association between regimes and growth. (EE. 8)

The disjunct “possibly” used in the example (7) expresses some degree of doubt. Clearly, this probability adverb implies that the writer spent much time judging what he/she said to be true or false. It also infers that because the writer is aware of the possible negative reaction from his/her readers, he/she tries to mitigate the statement. More specific, *possibly* used in example (7) to indicate that *the rise of a potential criticism* may or may not *reflect the short-term effect of a change in the exchange rate regime*. What the writer states is just his/her own assessment which may not true and applied in all cases.

In general, hedging adverbs in economic RAs perform accuracy-based functions, and items that mitigate the force of the verb occur slightly more often than those that comment on what is said. In disjunct categories, judgments predominate over a concern with how truth is perceived.

#### d. Epistemic Adjectives

Instead of using epistemic verbs or adverbs, it is possible to express tentativeness by means of epistemic adjectives such as *hypothetical*, *potential*, and *presumptive*. As the case with adverbs, this study concentrated on the occurrence of those adjectives that can most readily be associated with epistemic possibility. Twenty percent of the hedging devices in the economic RAs corpus were adjectives.

The most frequent hedge is *possible*. *Possible* is often used in economic RAs to obscure the source of epistemic judgment.

For example,

- (8) It appears possible that this model is mathematically very similar to the fixed-effect logit model developed by Chamberlain. (EE.5)

By using “possible”, the writer can minimize his/her personal involvement and allow them to maintain a distance from the statement.

#### e. Epistemic Nouns

All of the nouns identified in the data share a component of tentativeness expressing that the authors can be thought to be assuming instead of making categorical statements. Possible is also found in a form of a noun. Nominalization which transforms an opinion into an abstract quality, achieves a similar effect.

For example,

- (9) One cannot exclude possibility that models that are consistent with observed behavior entail more elaborate and complex dynamic interactions among key variables. (EE.9)

Altogether, 15 different epistemic nouns were identified in the data. The number of nominal hedges in the Discussion section in economic RAs is the highest.

In conclusion, content-oriented/motivated hedges perform the pragmatic function of hedging the writer’s commitment to the content of the



proposition by leaving its true value open. On the one hand, writers want to present statements with appropriate accuracy; on the other hand, they want to protect their reputations and limit any damage or discountenance negative reactions incurred from categorical commitments. The achievement of adequacy conditions therefore involves mitigating the propositional content of an utterance to gain the agreement of that content. However, this issue has not received much attention in earlier studies. This is probably because hedging didn't use to be thought needed in communicative situations especially in academic writing where readers are not in position to question or comment on the exactitude or validity of the information put forth by specialist authors. The motivation for hedging appears to differ according to the communicative situation, lexical hedges occurring in different functions in different sections in economic RAs.

## 2. Reader-motivated Functions

While content-motivated hedges are normally expressed by conventional formats, principally epistemic lexical items, reader-motivated hedges are mostly indicated in some following discourse-based strategies providing a significant means for economists to hedge their opinions.

### a. Personal Subject

In economic RAs, economic writers play a different role in marking alternative views rather than giving definitive statement of the truth. Economic writers

use these hedges to signal that this is a personal opinion allowing the reader to choose the more persuasive explanation. For example,

- (10) We have not been able to determine precisely whether the varied degrees of sophistication in expectations with the heterogeneity depend upon benefits and preferences over these benefits. (EE.12)

By using this most common discourse-based strategy “We” as in (7), the writer marks a position as an individual interpretation for the reader simply by failing to guarantee the precision of experimental results with any assurance or by withholding endorsement of the decisiveness of claims.

### b. Personal Attribution

Personal attribution also expresses reader-motivated functions when introducing claims in economic RAs. Like writer-motivated hedges, economic writers often use personal attribution with epistemic lexical verbs in which verbs of judgment and deduction are common.

For example;

- (11) I infer that hypothesis that the parameters on lagged money growth, interest rates, and unemployment are jointly zero. (EE.14)

Like personal subject, personal attributions used in the above examples signal that the claim is left open to the reader's judgment.

*c. Indications of Alternatives*

Besides, economic writers also defer to readers with a more tactical indication by offering a claim as one possibility among many. The writers may use indefinite article (as in example 9) or hypothetical conditionals (as in example 10) to realize their intention.

- (12) From our findings, an approach assumes that agents use models with optimally chosen parameters could be suggested... (EE.3)
- (13) If respondents expected prices to go down, then question 2 would be coded as the negative of the percentage that respondents provided. (EE.6)

*d. Rhetorical Devices*

Besides using personal subjects with lexical verbs, personal attribution, and indication of alternative, economic writers also create a relationship with the reader by using questions (real questions or rhetorical questions). Questions are a relatively common means of highlighting knowledge limitations, because they can hedge the truth of a proposition by making it relative to a writer's knowledge. Writers also refer to deficiencies in the research model, theory, or method that may compromise the accuracy of their results. This allows researchers to anticipate challenges to the premises or methods by which results were achieved. In other word, by using questions, the writers involve the reader more closely in the research and convey the communality of the scientific quest.

For example,

- (14) What determines whether the price elasticity of demand for a good is high (say, -5) or low (say -0.5)? Ultimately the answer must be sought in consumer tastes. (EE.11)

By using questions in example (14), the writer hedges the claim by putting the reader into a deductive process. The writer explicitly treats the audience as capable people in making the same logical inferences.

The reader may also be addressed directly in to frame a theoretical possibility as in example (12) below.

- (15) One might argue that the problem is not monthly inflation as an input but adaptive expectations as the weighted average of past monthly annualized inflation rates. (EE.3)

In the above cases, the reader is considered as a fellow scientist and is respected for his/her judgments and views.

To sum up, reader-motivated hedges realize their functions through the suggestion of alternatives, personal attribution, particularly in combination with judgmental and deductive lexical verbs, and some rhetorical devices. However, these various forms used to express the reader-motivated hedges are not quantifiable. These strategies need studying more.



### III. Conclusion

From the data, there are some points which are worth emphasizing again. First, lexical hedging devices and discourse-based strategies can be used in a variety of functions depending on the communicative situation. These devices have function to signal to readers that what is said should not be perceived as the only possible interpretation.

Second, economic writers employ hedges to express interpersonal positive politeness and adjust the information to correspond to both the interests of the layman audience and the presumed shared background knowledge of the unequal participants. It is because economic authors have to have tension between their roles as writers and their roles as researchers in front of other researchers. They need to avoid hurting the audience and to try to make audience feel they are a part of the scientific community, which means that authors have to adopt positive politeness strategies. By hedging, economic writers can not only make their accounts correspond to the preconceptions of the audience, but also enhance the readership's self-image by emphasizing closeness between the author and his/her reader by creating common topics for open discussions. Therefore, hedges may be perceived as expressions aiming at the communicative interpersonal goal of positive politeness by making the readership feel like part of the academic world.

In other word, in many instances, hedging is not a question of being

cautious so as not to make categorical claims, which is typical of specialist discourse. Instead, this kind of hedging can be regarded as a textual strategy that writers can use to adjust their accounts of activities to their readers' limited background knowledge to secure the correct interpretation of what is said.

The RA is the key genre in academic disciplines, and it is suggested to familiarize with its conventions, including the ability to recognize and use hedges accurately. To achieve it, it is necessary to grant hedges a higher priority in both teaching and researching.

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