Disciplinary and Move Analyses of Hedging in Abstracts of DIPES II Dissertations of the Higher Teachers' Training college of Maroua

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines hedging as a rhetorical resource employed by fifth year (DIPES II) students of the Higher Teacher Training College of Maroua in Cameroon to show politeness, respect, humility and tentativeness in presenting their arguments or stating facts and subjective opinions. A specialized corpus of 46.368 tokens was used and hedges were retrieved using AntConc 3.4.4. Data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. The analysis shows that there is generally an unsatisfactory representation of hedges in the abstracts. The findings further reveal that markers of intentional vagueness, accuracy hedges and writer-oriented hedges are the most common hedging strategies. Students seemingly rely on relatively simpler types of hedging like *some, few, may, could, a number of*. Conversely, more complicated constructions such as *it appears that, it is possible that* seem virtually inexistent. Students in the Department of Bilingual Letters were found to be more tentative than their counterparts of other disciplines. It is equally observed that more hedging strategies are used in stating research findings than in any other communicative purpose of the abstracts. In substance, the innovation in this paper may lie on its artful combination of disciplinary investigation with move analysis of hedging in a seemingly 'marginalized' academic genre, and its exclusive focus on novice writing in a non-native professional academic institution. This has led to the conclusion that the use of hedging can now be regarded as not only discipline-specific but also move-specific.

Key words: Academic Writing, Hedging, Genre, Communicative Purpose, Abstract, DIPES II

INTRODUCTION

It is widely acknowledged that a written text is an interaction between the writer and the expected audience/reader (Hyland, 1994; Nkemleke, 2011; Schmied, 2012; Varsanis, 2020). In such an interaction, the role of readers is very crucial since the writer has to engage with them and anticipate their "background knowledge, processing problems and reactions to the text" (Hyland, 1994:239). On the other hand, readers try to predict the writer's line of thought, interrogate them on their positions, and evaluate their work to see how useful it can be to their own research. Accordingly, writers, consciously or unconsciously, enter into a form of dialogue and indicate their attitude to the claims they state through the use of interactional resources. This interactional function of discourse is assumed by several metadiscourse features including hedges which constitute an indispensable component of scientific writing. Hedges are used in discourse to show, amongst other things, that no one holds "infuse science" to be able to say the last word on issues even in the hard science. The truth is therefore thought to seldom be pure, complete or overall. And even when it seems to be, its expression is suggestively still done with humility, caution, respect and moderation.

Writing in the academia is not a simple task since both students and established experts have to cope with the restrictions imposed by academic writing. The scientificity of a piece of writing is thus, conditioned by a number of factors. Some of these factors which are stressed upon by specialists such as Hyland (2005), Whitaker (2009), Bailey (2018)) and Varsanis (2020) include the importance of clarity, precision and concision, the imperative of good punctuation, sentence structure and paragraphing, and amongst all, the inevitable pursuit of cautious, tentative and non-face threatening language. Bearing this in mind, students and researchers have to write in accordance with these academic conventions for their write-up to be regarded as scientific. Hedges represent one of these academic writing requirements and constitute the essence of the present paper.

The importance of hedging either as an academic convention or as a marker of humility, moderation, and cautious linguistic production has been ascertained by a number of scholars in academic writing and metadiscourse studies (Hyland, 1996; Al-Qurashy, 2010; Alonzo, Alonzo & Mari-

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nas, 2012; Kim & Suh, 2014; Kuhi & Babapour, 2019; Varsanis, 2020). However, despite this established recognition, it can be observed that these remarkable rhetorical devices remain under-investigated in the abstract as an academic genre. Precisely, to the best of our knowledge, the abstract has not yet been investigated for the distribution of hedging in its various communicative functions (moves). Also, it is surprising to note that despite the prominence attached to hedging in other cultures, there seems to be some sort of reluctance or dispassion in non-native setting about the use of these devices. Some instructors tend to discourage the use of hedging preferring objective and straight assertiveness of claims. This situation which is likely to leave students disillusioned has also prompted this investigation.

This paper aims at comparatively examining the use of hedging devices in the abstracts of four disciplines of the Higher Teacher Training College (henceforth H.T.T.C) of Maroua namely: Bilingual Letters (BIL), English language and Literatures of English Expression (EL/LEE), Geography (GEO) and History (HIST). The paper further analyses the moves or communicative functions of the abstract for its use of hedging. More specifically, the following objectives will guide the research.

1. To examine the types and functions of hedging devices in the abstracts across disciplines.
2. To assess the distribution of hedging devices in the different moves of the abstracts by means of a comparative analysis.
3. To discuss the pedagogic implications of the use of hedging by graduates of the H.T.T.C. of Maroua as a professional academic institution.

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

Much research has been conducted on hedging (e. g. Hyland, 1994, 1995, 1996, Nkemleke, 2010, Li & Pramoolsook, 2015). This sufficiently corroborates the importance academic experts place on humility, respect for colleagues' views, cautious language and moderation of claims in the academia. Contrary to the widespread misconstruction that academic writing is built on a "neutral account of factual information", scholars now structure their discourse by using specific linguistic strategies in a way that engage the readers in a kind of negotiation and persuasion when presenting claims, opinions and findings (Dallyono, Hidayati & Muhammad 2008: 27).

Since the introduction of the term "hedge" by Lakoff (1972) to designate an expression or a word that "makes things fuzzier or less fuzzy", the term has undergone significant modifications wherein its meaning has considerably been expanded and different theories put forward for its identification in both casual texts and academic discourses. The continuous development of this rhetorical device has given way to various classifications. Prince, Frader and Bosk (as cited in Liu, 2020) classify hedges into two main groups namely: approximators and shields. Drawing from Prince et al, the Chinese expert, Ziran (as cited in Liu, 2020) further subdivides approximators into adaptors and rounders, while he extends shields to plausibility shields and attribution shields. The term shield has now become common in the studies of hedges as seen in Salager-Meyer (1994) who classifies hedges into five types. From this author's point of view, hedges can be categorized into: shields, approximators, author's insufficiency and doubt, emotionally charged expressions and compound hedges. Functionally, hedges are categorized into content oriented hedges and reader-oriented hedges (Hyland, 1996), while Ziaofang and Zhang Qin (as cited in Liu, 2020) suggest semantic and pragmatic hedges.

A recent categorization drawn from Hyland's (1996, 1998) taxonomy and modified by Al-Quraishy (2010) is used. The taxonomy consists of six categories; namely, *accuracy hedges*, *downgraders*, *markers of intentional vagueness*, *reliability hedges*, *writer-oriented hedges* and *reader-oriented hedges*. The first five components constitute the subcategories of "content motivated hedges" while the last one is the subcategory of "reader motivated hedges" in Hyland's (1996) terminology.

Specifically, *Accuracy hedges* are used to indicate that the proposition is based on plausive reasoning in the absence of knowledge. They include words such as *may, appear, little*. *Downgraders* are employed to show non-imposition, serving as a form of self-protection of the researcher or speaker in giving insufficient information or knowledge. They include simple hedges like *just, a few, most of, scarcely*. As for *Markers of intentional vagueness*, they include pragmatic makers such as *a sort of, kind of, somehow* and approximators of quantity, frequency and time such as *mainly, generally, often, approximately*. Their function is to be indirect and bald in communicating meaning. On the contrary, *Reliability hedges* in this taxonomy are equal to what Hyland (1994, 1998) refers to as the epistemic system or epistemic modalities. Their main function is to indicate the researcher's wish to be polite, indirect, and to leave doors open for possible disagreements or non-face-threatening interventions. This is seemingly the view supported by Nkemleke (2010) according to whom, hedges do not only help avoid face-threatening act, but are also employed as academic writing convention in academic disciplines. They include *may, can, likely, possible, seems*.

On the other hand, the use of *writer-oriented hedges* relieves the speaker of the responsibility for the truth of the proposition expressed and accordingly, it saves their faces from criticism against the negative consequences of the propositions (Alquraishy, 2010: 7). They include impersonal, passive and agentless constructions such as *suggest, reveal, was said to, thought to be, show*. Unlike writer-oriented hedges, *Reader-oriented hedges* involve readers in the dialogue and address them as thoughtful individuals capable of evaluating and judging the truth of propositions. They indicate writer's subjectivity to the claims being stated. They include expressions such as *in my opinion, in my view, it seems to me, it appears that*. These various rhetorical functions constitute the ground on which the forthcoming analysis will be based.

EMPIRICAL REVIEW

The importance of hedges in academic writing is no longer questionable and researchers are engagingly unanimous on

this fact. Researchers (Myers cited in Dudley-Evans, 1994; Hyland, 1994, 1996a; Dudley-Evans, 1994 & Yagiz and Demir, 2014) have established the importance of hedging in many respects. Firstly, hedges can be seen as contributing to connect together participants of an academic discourse community (Swales, 1990: 175). The notion of hedges can be related here to the expectations of the discourse community as "projecting honesty, modesty and proper caution in self-reports and as diplomatically creating space in areas heavily populated by other researchers." More clearly, Myers summarizes the importance of hedges in academic writing as follows:

> Scientific discourse consists of interactions among scientists in which the maintenance of face is crucial. We can see scientists as building alliances that define what knowledge is: the statement of the individual becomes a fact when it is accepted and used by a consensus of the community. In these interactions certain FTAs (Face Threatening Acts) are unavoidable and must be redressed with various politeness devices. Every scientific report makes a claim: in other words, it makes a statement that is to be taken as the article's contribution to knowledge. This is the statement that is implied when one cites the article. Most reports, in stating a claim, deny or supersede the claims of others (Myers as cited in Dudley-Evans, 1994: 7).

In other words, hedges help writers to discuss, review or challenge their colleagues' findings and points of view with appropriate caution, humility, respect, and collegiality. Secondly, Hyland (1994) draws our attention to the utmost importance of hedges by consistently militating for their inclusion in textbooks even at the earliest stages of education. Similarly, Dudley-Evans (1994) recognizes two important roles of hedges. One is that they are a device for showing caution and for making "appropriately guarded statements". The other is that they are used for reasons of politeness to show the appropriate deference to fellow researchers and at the same time, to show the general academic community that one has the necessary humility in making claims. Besides, hedges can be regarded as indicators of writer's perspective. Their importance in building writer-reader's relationship warrants them the stature of requisite component of academic writing or as Nkemleke (2011) and Hyland (1994) put it an "academic writing convention" that participates in fluent, convincing, acceptable, and competitive academic style.

The mastery, appropriate and frequent use of hedges to modulate claims seems to be a major challenge especially in EFL cultures and other non-native settings (Gilbert, 1991; Hyland, 1998, Al-Quraishy, 2010; Nkemleke, 2010; Yuksel & Kavanoz, 2015, Angwah, 2019). These difficulties faced by non-native speakers can be attributed to a number of factors. As an example, students' instructors according to Gilbert, share a part of the blame. They give the students the impression that writing research papers in English requires "direct and linear arguments" and that these arguments are deteriorated by any "individual references or hedges". Another reason for unsuccessful use of hedges by EFL learners is that the teaching of this important area of rhetoric is often neglected by EFL teachers (AL-Quraishy, 2010). Hyland

(1994) suggests that these important devices should be introduced in textbooks and taught even at the elementary levels of education. Besides, the "linguistic competences, vocabulary size, and/or differences between L1 and L2 writing conventions and norms also account for unsuccessful rhetorical practices by EFL learners" (Yuksel & Kavaoz, 2015: 268). Ignorance of academic convention of scientific writing is equally amongst the causes of non-native learners' failure to modulate successfully (Hyland, 1994, and Nkemleke, 2011).

Culturally, there appear to be significant differences between native and non-native use of hedging expressions. These differences range from the ability to recognize and produce hedges to the preferences of types of hedges. Essentially, non-native speakers, either as learners or writers, have been found to cherish some particular types of hedges (Hyland, 1994, 1998, Nivales, 2011). They mostly rely on simple types of hedges like quantifiers (*some, many, a number of*) and modal verbs such as *can, could, may.* While on the contrary, more complicated types of hedges like *it is possible that, it is likely that and it can be seen that* tend to pose serious difficulties to non-native learners in particular. One of the reasons for this preference may be the issue of pragmatic transfer from one source language to a target one which remains a permanent trick to other non-native learners and writers (Alonzo, Alonzo & Marinas, 2012). In times of crisis too, hedges have served various discourse and communicative functions. According to Ngwobela, Cheo and Nkwetisama (2023), approximators and rounders have been used to distance the government of Cameroon from controversial claims about the Anglophone crisis, while contrastive conjunctions have been used to "highlight support for government crisis management strategies" (p.34).

At the level of production of hedges, non-native speakers tend to use hedges less frequently than their native counterparts (Hyland, 1994; Nkemleke, 2010; Alquraishy, 2010; Yagiz & Demir, 2014; Yuksel & Kavonoz, 2015). Hyland (1994: 244) for example has shown that "the use of modality presents considerable problems for linguistically unsophisticated writers of academic texts and is an area of pragmatic failure in the work of second language speakers." This view is echoed by Al-Quraishy (ibid) who indicates that Iraqi EFL learners face serious difficulty in interpreting and using hedging devices appropriately in their academic research papers. The author attributes these difficulties to two principal factors: the absence of "systematic attention" to the use of hedging in textbooks and the "lack of instructions" given by teachers. However, this strict picture is mitigated by Yuksel and Kavonoz, (ibid) who have found some similarities in the two cultures (native and non-native cultures), especially with regard to hedges categories while Seskaukine's (2008) findings seem even more relativizing. Essentially, her findings challenge earlier views that L2 users of English can hardly notice hedges. On the contrary, the author suggests that more advanced and proficient L2 learners of English are able to "produce texts which in terms of hedging are comparable to those produced by experienced academics" (p. 71).

Apart from cultural dichotomies between native and non-native speakers, the sectional and disciplinary distribu-

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tion of hedging devices in various parts of research papers and abstracts is equally an important source of concern. This distribution has attracted interest from researchers such as Bahnam, Darvishzade and Naeimi (2012) who have found out that the discussion sections of qualitative research articles are more hedged than discussion sections of quantitative articles. Also, Li and Pramoolsook (2015) who studied abstracts of Management and Marketing disciplines indicated that "Epistemic lexical verbs" are the most frequently used type of hedges in Management and Marketing while epistemic nouns were more prevalent in management abstracts. On the contrary, Bagherieh and Afshar (2014) found out that markers of author's personal doubt and direct involvement were scarce in MA/MS abstracts of English and Persian. The authors attributed this discovery to the fact that in abstracts, writers "rely more on their findings than on personal interpretations" (p. 1824). Again, it was further revealed in this study that civil engineering students used more hedges than Persian Literature students.

Disciplinary differences are also an important source of insights in the literature about hedges (Nivales, 2011; Hyland, 2005). Some disciplines have a natural tendency of making use of hedges than others. This is for example the case of psychology which uses more hedges than disciplines like Biology, English, Mass Communication, and Political Science (Nivales, ibid). The author attributes this prevalence of hedging in psychology to the fact that the discipline mostly relies on interpretation and personal judgement and less on scientific facts. Likewise, Hyland (2005) compares "soft" and "hard" science disciplines from the point of view of writers' ability to hide authorial presence in writing. The findings of Hyland's research suggest that writers of the "soft" fields persistently intervene in their texts to stress subjectivity when hedging statements. However, on the whole, the findings further reveal that writers distance themselves from their interpretations for different reasons; the main effect being to create a discourse where research papers and findings speak for themselves by suppressing the author's voice.

To sum up, hedging devices have already been investigated from the perspectives of their importance, their production by different types of speakers in different settings. They have equally been investigated from the perspectives of cultural divergences, disciplinary differences and sectional distribution. In spite of the numerous studies carried out in this domain, the present paper finds its ground. This paper is unique from the existing literatures in many respects. The paper examines the academic writing skills of professional would-be teachers of the University of Maroua for their use of hedging devices in four disciplines, namely, Bilingual letters, English language and Literatures of English expression, Geography and History. The paper also pioneers the combination of disciplinary analysis with move analysis of the abstract as a 'marginalized' academic genre. Besides, this paper equally investigates learners' writings without necessarily comparing them with experts' writings or native writings, as it is generally the trend in the literature.

CORPUS AND METHOD

The corpus for this paper is composed of one academic genre which is the abstract. It was written by fifth year students of the HTTC of Maroua who were about to obtain their Secondary and High School Teachers' Diploma (DIPES II). The data came from the disciplines of Bilingual Letters, English, Geography and History. The abstracts were written from 2012 to 2018. Following the principles of the International Corpus of English (ICE), this corpus was given the name Corpus of Maroua University Learners (CMUL). For the sub-corpora, the following identifications were assigned: CMULB for Bilingual Letters, CMULE for English Language and Literatures of English Expression, CMULG for Geography and CMULH for History. However, the names of the disciplines where the corpora were compiled will be used for traceability and comparison.

A phone device and a photocopy machine were the two instruments used to collect data from the selected departments. The researchers used a Nextel phone N8502 with a clear camera and a picture size of 8m pixels to snap 210 abstracts in the departments of Bilingual Letters, Geography, and History. They were assisted by a colleague who photocopied 70 abstracts in the department of English for them. The abstracts collected were later processed into electronic data through keyboarding and transformed from Word document to Plain text document given that the hardware, Ant-Conc, used to analyse or retrieve quantitative data supports texts in plain form only.

The informants of this research are non-native speakers of English. They are made up of a good number of Cameroonian and a handful of Chadian learners (about 3 % of Chadians and 97% of Cameroonians). Given the bilingual nature of the country, the learners of the English Department receive some training in French while those of Geography and History receive some training in English. The Bilingual Letters learners are intensively trained in both English and French. These informants have different levels of linguistic proficiency. This is not a shortcoming, but strength because the essence of corpus-based study is generally to study a (particular) variety (ies) of English using large and diversified corpora. To maintain the integrity and authenticity of the corpus, the mistakes or errors made by some students in the abstracts were not corrected. Nkemleke (2015) noted in this respect that "corpora have to be available in two or more varieties of English and/or comparable text types from different settings, authors or group of users, if comparative studies are to be undertaken" (p.117). Therefore, the choice of the informants in the present study is justified as the essence of the work is to compare the use of hedges by DIPES II learners of selected disciplines.

All in all, the corpus for this study is made up of 46,368 words. But for comparative analysis, each corpus of roughly 11,000 words will be considered separately as representative of each discipline as seen in the table below.

The present study uses both quantitative and qualitative analytical techniques. To explore possibilities for the findings to help in learning more about language use in general and academic English of professional teachers of the University of Maroua.

Table 1. The corpora and word counts

Disciplines	Corpus name	Number of abstracts	Number of words
BIL	CMULB	70	11,006
EL/LEE	CMULE	70	11,720
GEO	CMULG	70	12, 623
HIST	CMULH	70	11,150
4	04	280	46,368

RESULTS

The specialized and experimental corpus of 46,368 tokens used in the present study generated some findings representing the discourse of students from four disciplines in the H. T. T. C of the University of Maroua. The results related to types and frequency of hedges, and communicative function of hedges are presented in turn.

Types of Hedges

The findings show six types of hedges: markers of intentional vagueness, reliability hedges, writer-oriented hedges, downgraders, accuracy hedges and reader-oriented hedges. These and their frequencies across disciplines are encapsulated in table 2 below.

The vertical line in the above table represents the disciplines while the horizontal lines represent the different rhetorical functions of hedges following a modified taxonomy from Al-Quraishy (2010). More succinctly, the most commonly employed strategy is markers of intentional vagueness with 398 instances, followed by reliability hedges with 309 tokens. Writer-oriented hedges are also illustrated in this table with 177 cases followed closely by downgraders with 170 cases. Accuracy hedges take the second to the last position with 162 tokens and reader-oriented hedges are the least category in students' abstracts with merely 22 tokens. Details on the types of hedges found in the data can be seen in the following discussion.

Markers of intentional vagueness

Markers of intentional vagueness were found to be densely used in students' abstracts in the four disciplines. The highest occurrences of markers of intentional vagueness were found to be employed by the Bilingual Letters (117), Geography (101) and History (99) disciplines. Hedges related to quantity such as *most, some,* and *many* which occupy a great proportion of markers of intentional vagueness were found to be a significant feature of GEO and HIST. This could be explained by the fact that these two fields deal with physical, human and natural data which can easily be described using numbers as shown in the examples below.

(1) To better carry out this investigation, the hypothetic deductive step combined with the collection and analysis of data was used. *Several* documents were exploited. (CMULG 68)

Table 2. Types of hedges and their frequencies across disciplines

Hedges types	BIL	EL/LEE	GEO	HIST	Total
Markers of intentio- nal vagueness	117	81	101	99	398
	29.3%	20.3%	25.3%	24.8%	
Reliability hedges	113	114	53	26	306
	36.9%	37.2%	17.3%	8.4%	
Writer-oriented hedges	56	62	49	18	177
	31.6%	35%	27.6%	10.1%	
Downgraders	64	36	28	42	170
	37.6%	21.6%	16, 4%	24.7%	
Accuracy hedges	55	57	23	27	162
	33.9%	35.1%	14.1%	16%	
Reader-oriented hedges	4	6	6	6	22
	18.1%	27.2%	27.2%	27.2%	
Total hedges used across discipline and frequencies	409	356	260	185	1210
	31.2%	29.4%	21.2%	18.5%	100%

(2) At the same time, Kousseri being a touristic town receives *many* foreigners in transit. (CMULG 11)

(3) It was for the cited reasons that Maga became what it is today; *many* people can ensure their livelihood by either practicing rice cultivation or fishing. (CMULH 28)

On the other hand, the students of the departments of Bilingual Letters and English rely much on markers of intentional vagueness to present their claims with some academic adequacy. In doing this, these students indicate that what they are stating is the most important but some of the aspects have been left out for other reasons (see example 4), they also show lack of complete commitment or distance themselves from the truth being uttered (see example 5). In some cases, they deliberately decide to obfuscate or conceal the truth of propositions (see example 6). Consider the excerpts below:

(4) This work is classified within the domain of didactics and its *main* objective is to investigate on the factors affecting students' performances in reading comprehension (CMULB36)

(5) The researcher also discovered that teacher evaluate students *mostly* to enable them to move to the next level and also to keep administrative records (CMULE 67)

(6) The results obtained from the interpretation of the data confirm the above hypotheses, despite the difficulties faced, *a number of* suggestions were made in order to ameliorate the quality of teaching in lecture appliquée (CMULB 51).

With many other examples such as *many, certain; most of, not always, largely, such as, a kind of*, the hedged word in example (1) does not only assume the rhetorical function of non-imposition and self-protection, but equally, it expresses an intentional desire to be vague and provide tentative information. It can be interpreted as the students' impossibility to list all the documents in a genre that demands absolute precision and economy.

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Reliability hedges

As it is inferred in the data, reliability hedges are more prevalent in the abstracts of the English and Bilingual letters disciplines with 114 and 113 tokens respectively. These fields are outstanding in their ways of stating claims indirectly and politely (see examples 1 and 2 below), or acknowledging that their findings may not be the final words on the issues raised (see example 3). The Geography and the History as social sciences do not seem to have acquired this academic way of stating scientific facts. However, they use some hedges which may simply be regarded as academic convention (see example 4). Consider the extracts below:

(1) We have come out with the conclusion that, these strategies, based on the method of non-violence or methods of violence respectively taken in isolation *seem* inadequate or insufficient against the White racists who are well armed and violent in the South to obtain freedom. (CMULB 52)

(2) We *would* therefore recommend that those areas of great difficulties be taught in order to ease the learning process to Tupuri learners of English. (CMULE 70)

(3) This work is based on the *hypothesis* that the valorization of economic resources of Tokombere commune impact on his development. (CMULG 2)

(4) But such actions do not *appear* to be sufficient to date for the welfare of the elderly in Maroua. (CMULH 17).

Reliability hedges were the second most productive type in students abstracts yet with serious disciplinary dissimilarities. They are closely followed by writer-oriented hedges.

Writer-oriented hedges

The abstracts of the English discipline were found to be more equipped with this type of hedges with precisely 35% of tokens, followed by those of Bilingual letters with 31.6% and Geography with 27.6 % respectively. Words like *suggest, reveal, show, indicate* and the use of *anticipatory it-clause* are some of the hedging strategies that generally figure in this case.

Students of all the disciplines use this type of hedges very densely as a way to show that the results of their work speak for itself thereby diminishing accountability. They indicate that some aspects of their work speak on their own (see example 1), that the work is crowned with some intrinsic self-revealing findings (see example 2) or to show that the findings being stated are the end product of a systematic process over which they have little or no control (see examples 3 and 4).

(1) Chapter three *shows* that notwithstanding the differences posed by the problem of double identity, there are attempts by the novelists at harmonizing these identities. (CMULE 68)

(2) The work *suggests* training for both teachers and students on the ICT as well as its use in English language teaching and learning situations. (CMULE 62)

(3) As for the analysis of morbidity, *it was revealed that* all types of environmental materials can have an influence on the physical health and those of the students. (CMULG 59)

(4) The findings *reveal* significant linguistic similarities and differences between Cameroon Pidgin English proverbs and their standard British equivalents; the study further *reveals* that some Cameroonians do not sufficiently use proverbs in their discussions for personal reasons. (CMULB 41)

With just 18 occurrences of writer-oriented hedges in the abstracts of History, it appears evident that learners of this discipline state claims with less tentativeness than their counterparts of other disciplines.

Downgraders

Downgraders is one of the least prevalent in the corpus. This type was found to be cherished by students of Bilingual Letters and History with 37.6% and 24. 7% respectively, while students of English (21.6%) and Geography (16.4%) seem to find this rhetorical strategy fairly complicated. Students use this strategy in their DIPES II abstracts to show that they are more careful and attentive to overstatements (example 1); they are not sure about the right amount, numbers or quantity, (example 2); that they fear to give faulty or wrong figures about aspects of research (example 3). See the excerpts below.

(1) The researchers came up with findings which reveal that Terminale A4 students face difficulties in reporting sentences because of language transfer, carelessness, *limited* exposure to the English language, learning conditions, personal factors, textbook in use and the lesson contents. (CMULB 54)

(2) …the introduction of cartography in the syllabuses and training colleges and above all a culture of professional consciousness are key solutions of the *little* interest shown in the teaching of cartography. (CMULG 40)

(3) The work equally examined *some* of the effects of modernism on love which include: high rate of divorce and crimes (like murder and rape), lesbianism, homosexuality and prostitution that have contributed to so much disorder and chaos in the society. (CMULE 63)

In example 3, *some* is used alongside other downgraders such as *few, limited* and *insufficien*t to show non-imposition and deliberate decision to be economical or egotistic with details or information. This economy of words can seemingly be best explained by the length of this genre.

Accuracy hedges

It was discovered that students of Bilingual Letters state claims more accurately with 35.1% followed by those of English with 33.9%. The abstracts of Geography were found wanting for accuracy hedges (only 14.1%) just like those of History (16%). Accuracy hedges reveal various functional perspectives in the abstract and may indicate that the claim being stated is tentative (see example 1); the explanation or some results are based on tentative reasoning in the absence of plausible facts (see example 2); state academic facts with some politeness (see example 3), show that something is possible but has not been proven yet (see example 4). They could also be used to avoid ostentatious claims by emitting

some reserve about the message being passed across (example 5). Consider the extracts below.

(1) It also aimed at coming out with strategies that *may* lay a solid foundation for the programme (CMULB 1)

(2) The study is posited on the hypotheses that since heterogeneous marriage relationship *apparently* does not work among African American couples, homosexuality should be the alternative as demonstrated by Alice Walker's character. (CMULE 13)

(3) The study *would* not have been possible without a combination of steps beginning with field observation to botanical recording. (CMULG 25)

(4) This study sought to verify if the analysis of investigations regarding language diversity, especially French, *could* influence linguistic performance (CMULB 6)

(5) But such actions do not *appear* to be sufficient to date for the welfare of the elderly in Maroua. (CMULH 17)

Accuracy hedges are a rhetorical function that is mostly mastered by the language disciplines. Students of Bilingual letters and those of English state claims with more caution than their counterparts of humanities. However, it is worth noting that students of History are somewhat comfortable with this way of stating claims.

Reader-oriented hedges

Reader-oriented hedges include expressions such as "in my view", "in my opinion", "it seems to me", "it appears". This hedging strategy is the least represented in students' abstracts across disciplines. By the way, the abstracts of the disciplines under study contain nearly the same number of tokens with 6 occurrences in the English, Geography and History abstracts while those of Bilingual Letters contain only 4 reader-oriented hedges.

This strategy helps to involve the reader in the development of ideas in view of gaining their approval of the researcher's subjective opinion. It also enables readers to draw their own conclusions about the claims presented. Consider the following three examples:

(1) At the end of our investigation, *it appears that* importance is not attached to poetry, and that the tools that are used for its exploitation seem to be inadequate (CMULB 59)

(2) Despite all these advantages, *it appears that* socially immoral behaviours such as rudeness, incivility, banditry and others have established corners in the city of Maroua. (CMULH 25)

(3) According to inquiries done on the population and state institutions in charge of land, it has resulted that the urban periphery zone of Maroua town is experiencing a fast rate of land appropriation. The main instances occur at the levels of some quarters where lands *seem to be* available. (CMULG 55)

The reader-oriented hedges, *it appears that* and *seem to be* are used to thrill the readers into perceiving themselves as co-constructors of knowledge and to navigate with writers, following their interpretations and their careful usage of language as an invitation to adopt the same writing convention.

Overall, students of Bilingual letters assert claims and discuss academic facts with more caution and more tentativeness. They use the highest volume of hedges for a percentage of 31.2 %. Their counterparts of English also assert claims with some degree of humility and caution with 29.4 %. The students of Geography also use hedging strategies in an encouraging way. With 21.2 %, their frequency of use of hedges is above that of the History with 18.5%. The Bilingual letters' ability to moderate claims more successfully could be attributed to their dual training or knowledge of both English and French and to their laudable awareness of the different rhetorical moves of the abstract. Students of History use the least number of hedging strategies and consequently, they can be blamed for stating claims with more authority, less caution and less politeness than the other disciplines. This limited presence of hedging devices in their abstracts could be attributed to their way of writing abstracts as a narrative text. This could also be interpreted as a particularity of this discipline in which most of the abstracts are written in three steps (problem/introduction, method and product) and sometimes only one or two moves are identifiable instead of four.

On the other hand, all types of hedging strategies used by DIPES II graduates represented less than 10 % of the entire corpus and this is a proof that students do not appropriately use cautious and attentive language in their academic abstracts as stated in the literature (Bagherieh & Afshar, 2014; Li & Pramoolsook, 2015). It shows that certainty and affect in academic writing are particularly problematic for L2 students. This could be attributed to lack of familiarity with academic conventions (Hyland, 1994) or as Bazerman (1998:6) puts it, "failure to modulate successfully has been noted as a feature of the work of L2 writers at Western universities". As a matter of evidence, we could not find one hedged word in every 3.7 or 2.2 lines in this genre (see Hyland, 1994).

Students of Bilingual Letters use hedges more appropriately than those of English, Geography and History. But specifically, there are some peculiar uses proper to each of these disciplines. As can be seen from data, the English uses more accuracy hedges, more writer-oriented and more reader-oriented hedges than the Bilingual Letters. Also, the Geography and the History use more markers of intentional vagueness than the English does and more reader-oriented hedges than the Bilingual discipline does. This use of hedges may be regarded as a good insertion of the Bilingual discipline in the English discourse community and for the social science disciplines it could be interpreted as a sign of difficult insertion if not lack of experience.

Communicative Purposes of the Abstract

On the question of the distribution of hedges in the various sections of the abstract or better still in its four communicative purposes, the abstract of the disciplines under study portray glaring uniqueness. In reference to this, the spread of functional hedges following the four acceptable communicative purposes found in the abstract was examined and table 3 below encapsulates their distribution.

Table 3 above encapsulates the distribution of hedges across the communicative purposes or moves of the abstract.

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Table 3. Distribution of types of hedges across the communicative purposes of the abstract

	Aim/purpose	Method/Approach	Findings/results	Conclusion/Recommendation
Accuracy hedges	++	++		
Downgraders	+		++	
Markers of intentional Vagueness	+	++	++	+
Reliability hedges		+		++
Writer-oriented hedges			+++	+
Reader-oriented hedges			++	

Legend: += poor representation; ++= average representation; +++ acceptable representation

As it can be inferred from the table, all the communicative purposes are structured using at least three categories of hedging devices. However, not all the categories of hedges are found in the different moves of abstracts. For more illuminating details let's consider the discussion below.

The findings/result move

The first interesting reading of table 3 points to the fact that 4 of the 6 functional categories of hedges are used in stating the findings of research in dissertation abstracts with high proportions of individual tokens as symbolized with the sign (+). This may suggest that the move entitled *findings/results* is one of the most important, why not an indispensable communicative purpose of the abstract. It can be seen that apart from accuracy and reliability hedges which are inexplicably absent in announcing the findings of the work in the abstract, all the other four categories are represented. It is also observed that writer-oriented hedges are the most employed category of hedges when presenting the findings. This can be explained by the fact that this category of hedges enables the writer to diminish their presence and implication and allow the results of their work to speak. It is, as Hyland (2005) put it, a strategy used by soft disciplines to distance themselves from the claims and proposition being stated.

The Method/approach move

The second communicative move in terms of the number of hedges is the Method/Approach move. The importance of this communicative purpose seems to be acknowledged in students' abstracts given the "satisfactory" proportion of markers of intentional vagueness and accuracy hedges used. There is a poor representation of reliability hedges and total absence of downgraders, writer-oriented and reader-oriented hedges in this section of the abstract. This generic move deals with objective facts and quantities accordingly, students do not deliberately allow themselves to be criticized or give insufficient information. Likewise, hiding the researcher's presence and involving the readers in the discourse to convince them into accepting the claims may not faithfully render the objectivity and factuality generally attributed to this communicative function of the abstract.

The aim/purpose move

The move, *Aim/purpose*, is equally well anchored in the abstract through the use of accuracy hedges and a relatively poor representation of downgraders and markers of intentional vagueness. Surprisingly, writer-oriented and reader-oriented hedges are equally not productive in this communicative move. It is possible that this unrepresentativeness is conditioned by the overall very limited frequency of reader-oriented hedges in the entire corpus (only two types) and that the aim or purpose of the work has to be stated as explicitly as possible and therefore, using agentless and passive constructions may soil the rationale of this communication move.

The conclusion or recommendation move

The contested and divisive move, *conclusion/recommendation*, has its place in the abstract as an important move or communicative purpose given that it uses 3 of the 6 types of hedging strategies before relying more extensively on reliability hedges. The use of writer-oriented hedges in this section can be justified by the fact that this move is not too distinct from the findings or results. As can be seen, markers of intentional vagueness are the only category that cuts across the four communicative functions of abstracts. This attests to the fact that students of DIPES II of the University of Maroua are at least aware of the importance of tentativeness in their academic writing.

DISCUSSIONS

This research used a corpus-based approach to study the ways DIPES II graduates of the University of Maroua use hedging devices in their abstracts by means of a comparative analysis in four disciplines namely; Bilingual Letters, English, Geography and History. The results related to types and functions of hedges, and the use of hedges across communicative purposes of the abstract are discussed in turn.

Typology, functions and use of hedging in the abstract across disciplines

The analysis of data has revealed that students of these disciplines use hedges in a way that represents less than 10% of the corpus or more precisely, only 2.6% of the entire corpus. This is from the point of view of frequency, an unsatisfactory performance. It is a conclusion most researchers (Gilbert, 1991; Hyland, 1994; Nkemleke, 2011; Bahnam et al, 2012) have arrived at. From the functional perspective, it is interesting to discover that these students know how to distance themselves from claims, hide authorial presence, avoid being proven wrong by other researchers

and above all, to be bald, engage the readers and convince them into accepting their subjective interpretations. With regard to disciplinary comparison, the Bilingual letters state claims more appropriately, followed by the English while the Geography outshines the History in stating tentative claims with roughly 31%, 29% 21% and 18% respectively. Hyland (2005) and Nivales (2011) have also encountered such disciplinary differences in their studies though with other disciplines than the ones examined in the present paper.

Unlike Hyland (2005) who showed that the soft disciplines are too subjective in their interpretation, the present paper argues that the most common types of hedges in DIPES II dissertations abstracts of the University of Maroua are markers of intentional vagueness, reliability hedges and writer-oriented hedges. From this finding, it can be contended that the abstract is rather structured in a way that allows the findings and other moves to speak on their own, thereby reducing the writer's intervention in their own discourse. On the other hand, the present paper corroborates Nivales (2011) ideas on the ground that the use of hedges seems to be culturally driven and discipline specific. The research also echoes the above author in that students of the University of Maroua as well as Philipo (term from Nivales ibid) students as novice writers rely more on tentative verbs and modals such as *may, can, appear, seem.* They also rely more on distancing verbs and phrases such as *indicate, show, the data reveal, it was discovered,* in all disciplines. The present paper argues that the problem these particular students face is not unawareness of hedges but their infrequent use. They have used all the types of hedges as consigned in Alquraishy's (2010) taxonomy to relate the various rhetorical functions and communicative purposes of the genre of abstract.

Use of Hedging Across the Communicative Purposes of the Abstract

As far as the use of hedging across the communicative purposes of the abstract is concerned, there appears to be significant dissimilarities in the use of hedging devices across the communicative purposes of this academic genre. Data reveal that every move or communicative purpose is structured around specific types of hedges apart from *Findings*/*results* which encompasses a broader range of functional types since it can be thought of as the most important communicative move of the abstract. This move relies more comprehensively on writer-oriented hedges followed by reader-oriented hedges. It can be argued following this finding that the statement of the findings in the abstract is done in a kind of dialogic manner so as to convince the readership into accepting the findings which the writer presents as logically drawn from a systematic and methodic analysis. The other moves such as *Aim, Method* and *Conclusion* have not been reserved too much explanation given that they virtually have the same volume of hedges though with different hedging types.

In terms of these communicative purposes, it is indicated that the move entitled Findings/results use the highest proportion of hedges with the most prevalent hedging type being writer-oriented hedges followed by the move Method/approach. While other researchers (Bahnam et al, 2012)

have shown that the discussion section of research papers is the most hedged section, the present research shows that the communicative purpose of Finding/results is the most hedged in the abstract. The findings also show that markers of intentional vagueness are the only functional category that cuts across all the communicative purposes of the abstract.

PEDAGOGIC IMPLICATIONS OF THE STUDY

Faced with this seriously flawed communication which is due to a considerable infrequent use and mismanagement of the hedging repertoire, two principal things come to mind: the question of whether DIPES II graduates and undergraduates are taught hedging devices, whether they are aware of their use as one of the conventions of scientific writing and the necessity to address these questions by effectively exposing students not only to the convention of good referencing, but most importantly to the supra importance of cautious, collegial, tentative, humble and reserved communication.

The abstracts of the disciplines under study are characterized by a very low if not problematic use of hedges in general. Urgently, there is the need for this unsatisfactory use of tentative language to be redressed. Hedges are indispensable tools which make an academic work appear more scientific, mature and more competitive. Their insufficient use is generally regarded as evidence of difficult insertion of EFL and ESL learners at international levels. Hedges as discourse features are important enough to be included in teaching materials and taught by ESP and EAP teachers at universities nationwide and elsewhere. Hyland (1994) advocates the inclusion of hedges even at the basic stage of learning. According to him, hedges are "sufficiently important to warrant their inclusion in even introductory level textbooks and their acquisition, a process that learners should be exposed to from the earliest stages" (p. 244). As can be observed, the infrequent use of hedges by university learners as non-native speakers of English could be attributed to the fact that they ignore their existence because they were not introduced to these devices in school programmes at basic levels. Therefore, they fail to be aware of these devices and their significance in achieving tentativeness, fluency and the negotiation of meaning in scientific research.

In essence, this paper suggests that much attention still need to be paid to the teaching of hedging devices in academic writing to professionals of teaching as it is the case in this study. The proper teaching of these rhetorical devices would go a long way to improve Cameroonian learners' academic writing style and future teachers' argumentative prowess. The mastery of hedging devices can equally warrant the acceptability of their works at international level. Though the question of teaching hedging to the four disciplines under study remains central, the GEO and HIST disciplines in particular need intensive and extensive remediation in order to level up with the BIL and EL/LEE.

CONCLUSION

This paper on disciplinary and move analyses of hedging in abstracts of four disciplines of the University of Maroua

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has echoed the widespread assumption that non-native learners of English are not sufficiently tentative in their academic discourse. As a matter of fact, they used only 2.6% of hedges on a scale of 10% and their disciplinary variations are equally a call for concern. The reasons for this infrequent use are speculatively, the lack of appropriate exposure to hedges, ignorance of academic conventions, lack of intuitive knowledge of English and the desire to impress the readers. Admittedly, hedging expressions have been found to contribute to a healthier writer-reader dialogue in abstracts. This finding is in line with Hyland's (1998:35) idea that "hedges appeal to readers as intelligent colleagues, capable of deciding the issues, and indicate that statements are provisional". This rhetorical function is assumed in the corpus under study by the employment of writer-oriented and reader-oriented hedges. With regard to the communicative purposes of the abstract, the paper contends that hedging devices are used in structuring all the four communicative purposes of this genre. However, the finding/results move appears to be the most productive communicative purpose of the genre. The study has also suggested that no systematic attention seems to be given to the use of hedging devices in the H.T.T.C of Maroua as a professional academic institution. The policy of hedges in such a circumstance needs careful revision for a more healthy interpersonal communication in academic writing.

The conclusion of this paper sustains the need for further studies into the generic use of hedging devices in the abstract. The present study may not present a complete picture of hedging in the genre of the abstract; there is need for other researchers to use a larger corpus to replicate this investigation. There is equally the need for other scholars to investigate the impact of teaching hedging on learners' improvement of English for academic purposes. It is also recommended that other researchers carry out an experimental study to determine students' perceptions of a hedged and an unhedged text. Lastly, it is possible that using other taxonomies than that of Al-Quraishy (2010) other researchers may also reveal worthwhile findings.

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