A Cognitive Analysis of Hedges in Teacher Talk

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Abstract

Teacher talk considerably contributes to teacher-student interaction which is a major medium of classroom exchange and the adoption of hedges in teacher talk can lead to their negotiation of meaning and be the samples for students to learn a second language. The paper is intended to approach the linguistic phenomenon concerning the application and construal of hedges in teacher talk of the classroom context from the perspective of prototype theory in order to reveal the enlightenment and significance of hedges application in second language learning.

Key words: Hedges; Prototype theory; Teacher talk; Negotiation of meaning

INTRODUCTION

Teacher-student interaction is centered on the negotiation of meaning, which is a process of face-to-face communication constructed between teachers' meanings and students' understandings (Jiang, 2006). Undoubtedly, teachers should exert optimal control over the structure and content in teacher talk for their comparatively higher status in power relations with students. Hedges as a linguistic device as well as a pedagogical strategy can be widely applied by teachers in the process of communication for the sake of students-centered learning environment. First and foremost, they can be explicitly or implicitly used in teachers' assessment of students' performance, which can be more accurate and objective and to some extent save the other party's face. Second, teacher talk accompanied with the application of hedges can elicit students' further response and kindle their initiative in their turns of negotiation of meaning. Third, Brown (1979) expounds that "learning to be imprecise" is one important aspect of SLA, and the teaching of vague expressions as well as their appropriate use can be conducted in teacher-student interaction. In other words, we should attach importance to the application and construal of hedges in teacher talk in view of the significance in second language learning, and the theoretical study can further reason out the correlation between the linguistic device and the pedagogical significance.

Hedges have long been studied from multiple perspectives of semantics, pragmatics, functional linguistics and cognitive linguistics. Cognitive linguistics and hedges are inherently correlated due to the generation of the linguistic phenomenon. The cognitively-oriented work by Lakoff (1972), Rosch (1973, 1978) and Deese (1974) posit the emphasis on the cognitive aspect of vagueness in communication and the cognitive model such as prototype theory and categorization can at large reveal the truth of hedges. Moreover, the study of hedges has been promoted abroad and at home by scholars in the practical field of language learning and teaching. Channell (1994) elaborates on the application of the study of language vagueness in English language teaching. Wu and Chen (2001) probe into the influence of language vagueness on language teaching within the cognitive framework. We can go further with respect to the characteristics of classroom

setting to explain and expand it concerning teacher talk by means of prototype theory.

1. CORRELATION BETWEEN HEDGES AND PROTOTYPE THEORY

1.1 Prototype Theory and Hedges

The modern prototypic theory of categories derives partly from Wittgenstein's family resemblance concluded from the overlapping similarities of games, and it is developed by Rosch's research into the internal category structure. She has conducted a series of experiments and concluded that categories are composed of a core meaning which consists of the clearest cases of the category and they are surrounded by other category members of decreasing similarity to that core meaning. Ungerer and Schmid (1996) discuss the attribute structure of prototype categories and assert that the category boundaries are fuzzy. As is suggested by Taylor (2001), prototype theory is formulated as: (a) certain members of a category are prototypical, or instantiate the prototype; (b) categories form around prototypes with new members added on the basis of resemblance to prototype; (c) there are no requirements that an attribute or a set of attributes be shared by all members, namely, no critical attributes; (d) category membership is a matter of degree, and features or attributes are generally gradable; (e) categories are blurred at the edges.

Hedges are indispensable in language; even though the origin of Hedges is controversial as is suggested by Wu and Chen (2001), it is not isolated from conceptualization of mind. Lakoff (1972) defines the concept of hedges in linguistics as "words whose meaning implicitly involves fuzziness, words whose job it is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy", implying that speakers are less than fully committed to the certainty of the referential information they convey in their speech. The cognitive study of hedges in teacher talk can help learners and teachers to be informed of the cognitive process and features of how hedges function in categorization in natural language. Besides, teachers cannot fulfill hedges unless the value of this alternative in teachers' discourse can be assigned to a greater extent together with the construction of materials for the teaching of vague expressions and their appropriate use the other way round.

1.2 Construal of Hedges Within the Prototype Framework

Prototype theory in the cognitive paradigm revolutionizes classical categorization and the linguistic device of hedges demonstrates the fuzziness of category borderline. Language learners are always in the continuum of interlanguage to natural language; likewise, language also reflects the degrees of membership in categorization, so it is necessary that learners must acquire the awareness in language use. In a sense teacher talk can be the samples for students while they are imparting the function of hedges knowingly or unknowingly. Understanding the dynamic process of classroom interaction is of crucial importance to second language learning.

According to Lakoff's definition of hedges, Prince et al. (1982) classify hedges into approximators and shields, and the two categories differ in that the former refers to the hedges that affect the truth-conditions of propositions, whereas the latter refers to those that do not affect the truth-conditions but reflect the degree of the speaker's commitment to the truth-value of the whole proposition. Furthermore, they can be respectively divided into four subsets. To be specific, adaptors refer to the kind of hedges revealing the truth degree of an utterance and rounders are the kind of hedges that can bring a certain range to an utterance, which are always about measuring and make the original accurate numbers fuzzy. In contrast, plausibility shields can directly express the speaker's guesswork or doubtful attitudes to an utterance, while attribution shields are employed to express the guess or doubt of a third person, which appear to be more indirect and objective to shield the speaker's tone. The cognitive paradigm can be conducted with reference to the classification of hedges which acknowledges the variable degrees of membership and the interchangeablity of core meaning and peripheral meaning by virtue of hedges.

1.2.1 Modification of Prototypicality Through Hedges

Teachers can better assess students' performance in a more euphemistic yet less absolute way because hedges in their speech can modify the features of the proposition in a continuum. The linguistic device is employed as a pedagogical strategy in the classroom context to enhance the flexibility in negotiation of meaning with students. Adaptors bear truth degrees of the proposition, and thus their existence to some extent changes in fuzziness. For example:

(a) When you finish the exercise, shall we have *sort of* meet *or something*?

(b) I agree with you *to a certain extent*.

As to (a) "meet" is only what the teacher is requesting, but "sort of" and "or something" before and after the core meaning actually blurs the meaning and prototypicality of the act. Accordingly, the distance from the core meaning actually bridges the unequal statuses between the teacher and the student. The student can construe the command around the core meaning and consider it more acceptable. Likewise, (b) with the hedge "to a certain extent" indicates the reserved attitude towards the student's response, and the feedback of lesser degree of acknowledgement is still positive and is expected to trigger the next sequence of teacher-student interaction.

(c) Be quick. You only have *about* five minutes left.

(d) Please divide yourselves into five groups; each group has *five or six people*.

Rounders in (c) and (d) show the boundaries of the categories are fuzzy because any point around five minutes is justified and either of the number of people is acceptable. The extension of the categories with modification makes the measuring fuzzier, which can adapt to the in-class activities and motivate students with more chances for negotiation.

1.2.2 Differentiation of the Prototype and Non-Prototype Through Hedges

According to Lakoff (1972), shields are composed of plausibility shields and attribution shields, which suggest the speaker's attitude by different sources of information. This kind of hedges is often focused on the degree of the speaker's commitment to the truth-value of the whole proposition. In this respect the whole proposition is conceptualized as the prototype in categorization, and the embedded hedges imply the detachment from the objectivity of proposition. Therefore, they function in a sense as the signalers of the differentiation between the prototype and non-prototype. The additional meaning of the hedges projects the cues on the listeners and suggests the indefiniteness of the proposition, which can be construed as indicators that cancel the prototypicality of the whole proposition. Different from the approximators, shields appear to be involved in the construal of the categories with the force imposed by the external attributes.

(e) *I believe* Cathy has more to say to us.

(f) You *might* be confused by these two similar words.

(e) and (f) instantiate the plausibility as well as the distance from the judgment, which reflect the teacher mildness in comment on the student's response. In the students-centered learning environment, teachers are in urgent need to reconsider the teacher-student relationship, which is aimed to maximally motivate students in learning, so students' affect must be considered as a crucial element in the learning process. The negotiation of meaning in the sequence of teacher-student interaction serves the purpose and teachers must measure the features of the proposition.

(g) *According to Oxford Dictionary*, this word has another meaning.

(h) *One student* asked me whether the home-listening part could be cancelled.

The two examples above consist of the attribution shields that indicate the speaker's intentional detachment from the judgment with resort to the third person source of information. The proposition can be attributed to people other than the speaker and thus reinforce the fuzziness. It can be inferred that the prototypicality of the proposition can be confined by such hedges. Given the special roles of teachers in communication, they must be more prudent in instruction and the measuring from the absoluteness or prototype can otherwise make their instruction more authoritatative and objective;

students can reprocess the hedges and apply them to real world.

2. IMPLICATIONS OF THE COGNITIVE ANALYSIS OF HEDGES IN TEACHERS' CLASSROOM DISCOURSE

2.1 Promotion of Vagueness-Oriented Learning Model

Students tend to use language in an explicit way and assume that meaning is not an implicit response but a clearly articulated and precisely differentiated conscious experience. They are often required to seek clarity, accuracy and distinctiveness in their learning process in both language input and output. However, the communicative intentions are often implied in the verbal exchange so the difficulty arises from the inadequacy of knowledge about hedges. They are not negligible for the sake of efficient communication on the basis of the cognitive-inferential capability. More often than not the accuracy-oriented learning strategy cannot contribute to the dynamic communication but undermine it in view of the contextual factors. Furthermore, it is likely to hinder the development of communicative competence in case that vagueness in the interaction cannot be assimilated by students. In fact the modification of hedges pervasive in utterances tactfully triggers the categorization, which effectively clarifies and filters the message verbally conveyed in teacher-student negotiation of meaning. The peripheral attributes of the proposition actually transmit more profound information beyond it. Accordingly, the deviance of the accuracy-oriented learning style should be reversed by the accentuation of vagueness-oriented learning style. The learning process should be alternatively promoted by both the explicit and implicit learning strategy and hence the improvement of communication competence.

2.2 Redefintion of Teachers' Roles

The cognitive study on hedges reveals why and how they can fulfill the communicative event in the semantic stratum. Jiang (2006) asserts that the challenge for the communicative classroom is to find activities and procedures for speaking which will prepare students for spontaneous interaction and which will aid the acquisition process. Accordingly, the study of hedges in teacher talk cannot be ignored as a move to meet the needs, because Pica (1987) present data to demonstrate how these interactional features that are lacking during the teacher-student interaction could assist language comprehension and production. The changes of teachers' roles from a controller to an organizer, from an instructor to a facilitator, from an assessor to a commentator, and the redefinition of teachers as a co-communicator or a participant and a consultant or prompter can definitely

exert influence on teacher-talk, hence the characteristics and application of hedges. Teacher-student interaction no longer emphasizes the authoritative status of teachers but the relatively acceptable status as helpful interactants who can motivate them and promote the verbal exchange.

CONCLUSION

Teacher talk cannot be isolated from the widely adopted linguistic device of hedges in order to serve the communicative needs in students-centered learning environment. Prototype theory can be approached with respect to the particularity of them in the process of application as well as construal of hedges in teacher talk. The analysis can also shed light on the further study in the correlation between cognitive study and pedagogical implications.

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