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A Study on Hedges, Boosters and Lexical Invisibility in Political Blog Articles

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Abstract: This research focuses on the use of lexical hedges, boosters and lexical invisibility present in political blog articles. Writers have unique manners of constructing facts and relaying opinion. It is the responsibility of the readers to scrutinize the word choices interpreting the contention of the text. The corpus of this study is 150 tertiary students in 1st year and 3rd year universities in the Philippines. The framework of this research is based on Ken Hyland's (2000) similar study on Hedges and Boosters in Academic Text and Low's Lexical Invisibility Hypothesis (1996). Unlike the previous researches, the study focused on political blog article on the internet. The results show the complexity of understanding lexical hedges and boosters which lead to multiple function understanding. Furthermore, this research demonstrates the direct and indirect evidence of apprehension with these lexicons.

Key Words: Hedges, Boosters, Political blogs, Discourse Analysis, Lexical Invisibility

1. INTRODUCTION

At times writing has to be free from the writer's opinion to serve its purpose of conveying factual and reliable information to the reader. Writing a thesis or academic paper can be one of those written works that has to be factual and of reliable source since the writer of it has to support their stand regarding the study that they are working on. According to Serholt (2012), professional academic writing often gives the impression of being object and impersonal due to its linguistic discourse, which lacks direct reference to the interpretations and judgements of its authors. Not only academic writing has to be free of the writer's bias but even articles like news or blogs have to present factual information that can help the people better understand the issues of our society. Words used for writing have to be carefully chosen as

the choice of words can make or break the people's understanding and interpretation of the text written by the author.

There are some words or expressions that can be used to facilitate the writers in conveying the message they intend to convey to the readers. These are hedges and boosters. Hedges and boosters as defined by Hyland (1998) are communicative strategies for increasing or reducing the force of statements. Lakoff (1972) on the other hand said that these are "words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy."

Writers have often their unique way of expressing their thoughts. They construct their sentences based on the facts given to them and associate it with several rhetorical statements or



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subjective statements. Writers often have their own manner of using metadiscourse markers. Metadiscourse markers can be grouped into categories. Interactive discourse guide the reader through the text and the other is the interactional metadiscourse devices which convey the attitude of the writer (Hyland, 2004). Part of the discourse used by the writers is the word choices or what we call lexicons which are addressing doubt and expressing certainty. These are what we call lexical hedges and boosters.

Hedges and boosters are catalysts of provoking or pacifying the power of the statement's contention. Some example of boosters are greatly, strongly, highly, much, intensely which work a trigger to confirmation or conviction. There is an existence of a powerful claim in the statement. On the other hand, hedges like, possibly, approximately, may and might are lexicons which denotes doubt and uncertainty. The state of subjective information is being relayed by the source or the writer (Myers, 1989).

These lexicons do not exist in vacuum. Those are written together with other lexicons. There is an implication of misunderstanding or even neglecting the existence of these words. A study conducted by Low focused on Lexical Invisibility of lexical hedges and boosters followed by a think aloud strategy. He formulated this "Lexical Invisibility Hypothesis" which is the neglect of vital lexicons in a particular utterance or statement.

The theoretical framework of this study is adopted from Hyland's research. It is then supported by Perfetti & McCutchen (1987) stand that the "domain knowledge is insufficient for text interpretation and that syntactic and vocabulary knowledge are critical components of reading comprehension."

The researchers aim to answer the following questions:

1. How do the respondents interpret the meaning of the entire text in political blog articles with the use of hedges and boosters?
2. What is the basis of the subjective state of the respondents upon reading the political blog article?

3. What are the implications of lexical invisibility in objective writing?

2. METHODOLOGY

The respondents of the study comprised of 150 tertiary students in first year and third year students in the second semester of the school year 2017-2018. The purpose of the research was not revealed to the participants of the research. The initial part of the research is a survey with the subjects of the study. The second phase is the interview or think aloud phase.

The text comprised of 900 words. The passage was chosen from a political blog called PTV NEWS. The researchers chose political blog article which is entitled "Legarda:2018 Budget is Pro-People, needs-Based". It was published on December 4, 2017. The political blog article is about the distribution of the national budget in different agencies and priorities.

The survey is composed of a reading text, comprehension check and questionnaire. The survey aims to gather information about the respondents' understanding of lexical hedges and boosters. The participants are given 30 minutes to answer the survey. The respondents answered a 7-item True or False statements and 3-item multiple choice questions. The questions were modified to test the knowledge of the subjects when it comes to the use of hedges and boosters.

The next part was comprised of 15-item questionnaire statements. Subjects were asked to mark the statements according to level of certainty. Respondents were instructed to mark each statement according to whether they perceived that the writer was "completely certain", fairly sure", or "uncertain" about the claim, or whether they did not know.

Eventually, respondents were asked to explain the reasons upon choosing the answers through unstructured interview. Immediate retrospective accounts seemed the best to reduce the possibility of distortion through memory loss and to eliminate the opportunity for subsequent events to support the decision making part in the comprehension and questionnaire portions (Low, 1996).



3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Lexical Invisibility and mistaken premises for truthfulness

The researchers found out that direct evidence is also existing with the recognition of certain lexicons mistakenly viewed as a premise for truthfulness. The following are the categories of direct evidence outside the domain of hedges and boosters.

- The use of figures. One of the basis of the credibility of the text is based on the number of figures inherent in the discourse. For example, in item no. 5, respondents cited “10M and 15M” as the reason upon selecting their answers. The number or figure makes the process of convincing successful.
- The use of proper noun. The citation of specific places and people denotes truthfulness of the content based on the respondents’ explanation in the think aloud phase. It makes the participants more persuaded with the existence of these lexicons. For example, in item no. 10, “Philippine Rise”.
- The use of lexicons with positive meaning. The use of words associated with goodness or positivity are effective catalysts to persuade to eliminate doubt with the readers. For example, in item no. 2, respondents cited “pro people and poor people. Subjects also cited the descriptive word “optimistic” in item 13. In addition, participants also focused on the word “strengthen” in item no.18. The words mentioned are related to positivity and goodness. The usage of these words uplifts the certainty of the statement in the text.

3.2 Indirect Evidence Classification of the Respondents’ Statements

In the interview phase, respondents were asked about the reasons why they consider some statements objective, without trace of bias after reading the political blog article. In these classifications, the researchers gathered various indirect pieces of evidence that respondents based their answers from. The premises that the participants laid out are not based on lexical visibility.

Table 1. Indirect Evidence Classification

| Classification | Meaning |
|---------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Respondent didn't know | The respondents of the study didn't have any reason upon choosing the answer, |
| Contention of the sentence | The participants just expounded the argument or the issues inherent in the statement. |
| Similarity with the article | The respondents compared the physical structure of the text. It focused more on the similarity with the word choices and form of the sentence. |
| Difference with the article | The respondents determine the differences between the reading text and the survey question. The features analyzed are the structure and word choices verbatim. |
| Explained using quotation | The subjects of the study explained respective assurance with the truthfulness of the statement through the direct speech quoted from a person. It uses quotation as part of the criteria. |
| Respondent gave an opinion | The participants mentioned subjective statement based on their affective premises. |
| Respondent gave an opinion with the writer's contention | The respondents mentioned subjective statement debunking or agreeing with the writer's contention. The persona of the writer is the focused. |
| Implicit explanation | The subjects' awareness in answering the item correctly is present. However, there is |



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| | sufficiency of explanation or lack premises as a reference of decision making. |
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Table 1 shows the categories under indirect evidence. The interview phase of the research methodology allows the researchers to scrutinize the other constructive reasons for lexical invisibility. At the end of the day, readers don't dissect or understand solely through lexicons. The data shows that indirect evidence is classified into (1) lack of knowledge which means that the respondents often just lack schema, (2) argumentation with the contention which means contention of the sentence is being expound and focused, (3) physical structure which is broken down into two subtypes (a) similarity with the article and (b) difference with the article, (4) the use of quotation, (5) subjective responses occurs when respondents gave an opinion or respondent gave an opinion with the writer's contention and lastly, (6) implicit explanation which means respondents have knowledge about the certainty of the statement but lack of skill to elaborate the premises or basis.

When it comes to objectivity in writing, it is observed that the items which have mean (m) below 50% are items 2, 5, 6, 8 and 10. These are the word choices deemed to be invisible in the article which are mostly hedges such as likely, probably, approximately and may. The only booster used is clearly. On the other hand, the items with m = higher than 50% are 1, 3 and 4 which are all boosters such as greatly, highly and much. It reflects that the objectivity and certainty and writing are greatly affected by the invisibility of hedges and visibility of boosters. In general, lexical invisibility affects the objectivity in writing. Readers mostly misinterpret the use of hedges ought to give uncertainty as the opposite of its functions.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study of lexical visibility and the awareness of a

group of university students of hedges and boosters support Hyland's Hedges, Boosters and lexical Invisibility study using academic text. This research concludes the complexity of using lexical hedges and boosters. Two or more hedges or boosters in one statement make the meaning of the sentence more difficult to understand.

The interview phase is a leeway for the researchers to find out the lexicons which are visible in the process. Respondents were able to determine some words which determine the validity of the statement with the referent of the reading text. In comprehension check, the boosters which are evident and clearly (item 3 and 9), sure (item 7). In the questionnaire portion, the most noticeable boosters are: will (item 15), firmly (item 18). On the other hand, the hedges visible in comprehension check part are assume (1), approximately (item 4), probably and likely (item 9). In questionnaire portion, speculate (item 14), likely (item 13), at least and might (item 19) are easily recognized by the respondents

Lexical invisibility occurs when the target functions of the words are not distinguished by the language learner. It has an impact with the holistic meaning of the reading text. Hedges and boosters play a vital role in understanding the text. However, the words which are not easily recognized are named in Table 4. in comprehension check, invisible boosters are the following claimed (item 6), clearly, in fact (item 8), clearly (item 10), scrutinize (item 11), address (item 12), included (item 16). The unrecognized hedges are as follows suggests (item 2), some (item 5) and probably (item 20).

The direct evidence of statements reflects the recognition of the lexical hedges and boosters. But there are conflicts when it comes to the function apprehension. Some of the lexical hedges and boosters are given the opposite of its authentic function. The study reveals the lexicons with misapprehension are scrutinized and assume, clearly and already, will and firmly. In addition, the researchers found out that certain lexicons establish certainty in the process of reading which are the



following: (1) the use of figures, (2) proper noun and (3) citing lexicons with positive meaning. On the other hand, indirect evidence of interpreting the text are based on different categories such as (1) lack of knowledge; (2) argumentation with the contention of the statement; (3) physical structure of the text; (4) the use of quotation; (5) subjective responses and lastly; (6) implicit explanation.

Studying lexical booster and hedges posts a vital part of language learning, especially in second language learning. Filipinos are adept in speaking English compared to other countries in Asia. However, in the matter of understanding texts in the advent of online sources, like the political blog article used in this study, it is important to understand the crucial function of lexicons which establish doubt and certainty. The certainty of the text is inherently embedded in the word choices of the author, it is the responsibility of readers to interpret and analyze the text through these inherent features. It is more likely a matter of effect of proficiency instead of the impact of first language (Hyland, 2000). The results of this study is a good stepping stone to a more complex research that is helpful in the field of language learning and teaching.

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