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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Hedges and Boosters in the Abstract Sections of Master Thesis at Yarmouk University

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| ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to investigate the employment of hedges and boosters in thesis abstracts in linguistics written in English by M.A. students at Yarmouk University. To achieve this objective, the abstract sections of 30 M.A. theses submitted to the English Language Department at Yarmouk University in the timeframe 2018-2020 were selected. Following Hyland's model (2005), data were analyzed quantitatively to count the frequency of hedges and boosters and qualitatively to find out the function of these markers within M.A. thesis abstracts. The findings reveal that hedges are predominant in these abstracts as a means of minimizing the risk of opposition, as a way of being polite, and as a way of presenting results cautiously. The findings also reveal that boosters are also employed to assert research originality and stress certainty. This study emphasizes the importance of hedges and boosters to create more effective and well-structured thesis abstracts.

| KEYWORDS

Boosters, hedges, M.A. students, thesis abstracts.

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### 1. Introduction

A master's thesis has been considered an extremely significant genre as it allows researchers to announce their novel findings. It is an advanced graduate research paper that is marked by a high standard of writing. Basically, it is a structured piece of writing, which mainly includes many parts such as abstract, literature review, methodology, and findings. The abstract section, which is the primary concern of this study, is an essential part of the whole thesis that consists of a very brief, precise summary of the thesis and announces the objectives of the research, the methodology, and the most important findings.

The importance of the thesis abstract originates in the different functions it plays. (Nasseri & Thompson, 2021). Firstly, it allows researchers to briefly disseminate their significant findings to the discourse community. Secondly, it saves the reader time as it epitomizes the content of the whole thesis. Thirdly, it determines the reader's first impression to pursue reading or not, as it is the first section to be read. It also serves as a tool for arousing the curiosity and interest of the reader. Lastly, it reveals the author's academic credibility and acceptability in an academic community (Sidek et al., 2016). Given the significance of thesis abstracts, even experienced writers usually have to review them several times to produce a well-structured, organized abstract.

The function of the thesis abstract in reflecting the writer's interaction with a specific discourse community is mainly specified by a set of persuasive strategies. This means that writers of thesis abstracts rely not only on new findings or on strong arguments to persuade their readers, but also on linguistics features, such as hedges and boosters, to engage readers, and avoid the risk of oppositions "which contribute to the strengthening of the credibility of their writing" (Ngai & Singh, 2020, p. 30).

In order to write a well-structured persuasive abstract, students, especially non-native English speakers, have to master the employment of linguistic markers that are considered convincing by the academic community. Basically, they need to create certain interactions with their readers in a way to convince them with their arguments. This interaction includes the employment of hedges and boosters, which increases the possible persuasive aim of the abstracts.

Hedges and boosters are rhetorical features expressing the author's degree of commitment to the truth of an argument and conveying an attitude to the reader (Hyland, 2004). The employment of hedges helps writers to "convey a perspective on their statements, to present unproven claims with caution and to initiate a dialogue with their readers, while the employment of boosters enables writers to close down alternatives and to express a high degree of certainty" (Hyland, 2005, p. 105).

Hedges such as *perhaps*, *may*, and *probably* are lexical devices employed to indicate tentativeness about the truth in communication. Hyland (2005, p.169) defines hedges as "devices that indicate the writer's decision to withhold complete commitment to a proposition". He points out that hedges are used to signal "a lack of complete commitment to the truth of the proposition and a desire not to express the commitment categorically" Hyland (1998, p. 1). In other words, hedges play an essential function in achieving persuasion since they give writers the opportunity to present the claim "as an opinion rather than fact" (Hyland, 2005, p. 179).

Boosters, on the other hand, are lexical items such as *certainly*, *sure*, and *indeed*, which convey the writers' certainty in what they claim and raise the degree of certainty about an argument (Hyland, 1998, 2005, 2008). Hyland points out that boosters can be used as a tool or medium to create interpersonal solidarity with readers. Boosters' essential purposes are connected to convincing the readers with the new propositional information. As asserted by Hyland (1998, p. 368), "Boosters are then rhetorical persuasive strategies which function to mark or rhetorically manipulate consensual understandings based on the shared community membership".

The significance of hedges and boosters in thesis abstracts stems from their contribution to a specific rhetorical and interactive function, expressing both epistemic and affective sense. In other words, they convey not only the author's degree of certainty in the truth of an argument but also an attitude to the readers. Both boosters and hedgers are responsible for providing persuasion to the audience, they are often considered closely connected, sometimes even inseparable from each other to the persuasiveness of the writers' arguments.

This study examines two interpersonal metadiscourse features, namely hedges and boosters in thesis abstracts in linguistics written in English by M.A. students following Hyland's taxonomy of interactional metadiscourse as an analytical model. This model is considered the most comprehensive model to identify metadiscourse markers (Table 1).

**Table 1. An Interpersonal Model of Metadiscourse (Hyland 2005: 49)**

Category	Function	Examples
<b>Interactive</b>	<b>Help to guide the reader through the text</b>	<b>Resources</b>
Transitions	express relations between main clauses	in addition, and, but, thus
Frame markers	refer to discourse acts, sequences or stages of parts of the text	first, next, finally, to conclude
Endophoric markers	refer to information in other parts of the text	as noted above, see Fig, in section ...
Evidentials	refer to information from other texts	according to X, Z states
Code glosses	elaborate propositional meanings	namely, for example, such as, in other words
<b>Interactional</b>	<b>Involve readers in the text</b>	<b>Resources</b>
Hedges	withhold certainty and open dialogue	might, perhaps, possible, about
Boosters	emphasize certainty or close dialogue	in fact, definitely, obviously, it is clear that, demonstrate
Attitude markers	express writer's attitude to proposition	unfortunately, hopefully, surprisingly, I agree
<u>Self mentions</u>	explicit reference to author(s) in the text	I, we, my, me, our
Engagement markers	explicitly build relationship with reader	you, your, consider, note, you can see that

Hyland's model includes two main types of metadiscourse: interactive and interactional. The first category consists of transitions, frame markers, endophoric markers, evidentials and code glosses. The primary objective of these markers is to offer an organized and coherent text that assists the reader through the text in a way that meets the reader's needs based on the writer's expectations. The second category consists of hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions, and engagement markers. It mainly aims to provide a vivid text where the reader can easily find the writer's voice. It also aims to provide a personal interaction with the audience as it is deployed to reveal the writer's reactions to the text and enables writers to comment on their content. This study focuses only on two interactional features, namely, hedges and boosters, since they are significant to balance conviction with caution to present "an appropriate disciplinary persona of modesty and assertiveness" Hyland (2000, p.180).

### **1.1 Statement of the Study Problem**

Writing abstracts is one of the most challenging parts of a thesis because it includes a precise summary of the whole thesis. Writing a well-organized persuasive abstract is a complex task for both native and non-native writers because they are required to have a good level of language competence as well as to be acquainted with the linguistic resources deployed to produce an acceptable persuasive abstract. In order to create a clear and persuasive thesis abstract, writers need to employ adequate lexical features such as hedges and boosters within their writing. In fact, one of the problems faced by non-native writers in writing English thesis abstracts is the appropriate use of hedges and boosters (Mazidah, 2022a). They have to choose either to raise the force of their claims by employing boosters or reduce the strength by using hedges. The adequate employment of hedges and boosters necessitates writers, specifically non-native ones, to acquire a rich knowledge of such items as well as how and when to use them. Thus, it has been considered a challenging task for many writers. Recently, there has been an increasing number of research that has revealed the importance of hedges and boosters to improve thesis abstract writing in different contexts. These studies have shown that writers of higher education misuse, overuse, or underuse hedges and boosters in their thesis abstract writing, which shows that they lack the knowledge of the appropriate use of such resources. However, little is known about how native Arabic speakers use hedges and boosters at postgraduate level writing in English. Therefore, the current study aims to examine the employment of these interactional metadiscourse markers in thesis abstracts in linguistics written by M.A. native Arabic speakers.

### **1.2 Objective of the Study**

This study addresses the following objectives:

To determine the most and least frequent types of hedges and boosters used in thesis abstracts in linguistics written in English by M.A. students at Yarmouk University.

To identify the functions of hedges and boosters used by M.A. students in thesis abstracts.

### **1.3 Significance of the Study**

The current study is particularly set to examine whether M.A. students are obviously committed or detached to their claims when they present their thesis abstracts to the discourse community. The study is specifically useful since the analysis of how these writers confidently or detachedly reveal their claims would be of great benefit for M.A. students, academic writing instruction, and metadiscourse research in thesis abstracts. More particularly, this study is significant as it helps to raise postgraduate students' awareness towards the employment of hedges and boosters in their thesis abstracts. It also raises language instructors' awareness of their students' employment of hedges and boosters in order to highlight this issue in future writing courses.

## **2. Literature Review**

Thesis abstracts have recently attracted wide attention, especially from those whose main concern is on metadiscourse. Existing literature has revealed that thesis abstract is considered a unique genre with specific linguistic features.

Several studies have examined the employment of hedges and boosters in thesis abstracts with various approaches. Some of them focused on the employment of these interactional metadiscourse features across different academic disciplines (Mazidah, 2022b). Other studies examined their use across cultures and compared natives with non-natives (Chafidha, 2021; Hussein et al., 2018), whereas others studied their use from a methodological perspective. Additionally, other studies were carried out to examine gender differences in the employment of hedges and boosters (Hussein et al., 2018).

Kondowe (2014) analyzes the employment of hedges and boosters in literature dissertation abstracts using Hyland's (2005) interpersonal model. The study reveals that students use hedges more than boosters, favouring the employment of modal auxiliary can. The study also reveals that students prefer the use of hedges as a means of minimizing the risk of opposition and as a way of being polite in order to achieve thesis approval. However, they use boosters to indicate their research originality and to show that their claims share some universal understanding.

Musa (2014) adopts a mixed method approach to examine the use of hedges and boosters in the Introduction and Discussion section of the masters' thesis in English and Chemistry at the University of Cape Coast, Ghana. The study follows Quirk et al.'s (1985) Functional Principle for establishing word class and Hyland's (1998) model of grammatical and strategic hedges as its analytical models. The study reveals that the employment of hedges in English and Chemistry is lexical and grammatical. However, more hedges are used in the thesis from English fields.

On the other hand, in a more novel study, Mazidah (2022a) compares the employment of hedges and boosters in the abstract section of theses from different study programs at Universitas Qomaruddin. They are The English Department (PBI), Mathematic Department (PMT), Industrial Engineering (TI), Electrical Engineering (TE), Mechanical Engineering (MS), and Informatics Engineering (IF). Based on Hyland's (2005) model, the study investigates the employment of hedges and boosters in the thesis abstract section as a persuasive strategy to boost or hedge the force of the argument. The researcher attributes the causes behind more or less employment of these markers to the different styles used in students' writing across disciplines.

Haufiku and Kangira (2018) examined hedges and boosters in master theses in English at the University of Namibia between 2014 and 2015. The study only analyzes three chapters of the thesis: the Introduction, Discussion, and Conclusion. Their study shows that Type 3 hedges and boosters are preferable in all chapters. It also shows that hedges and boosters are unequally distributed in all chapters. Generally, the study concludes that the similarities and differences in the employment of different categories of hedges and boosters refer to different factors, such as the nature of the analyzed data and the writer's level of English language proficiency.

In order to focus on another factor that could be related to the employment of hedges and boosters, Belouettar & Mesbahi (2019) examine hedges and boosters in the Discussion Sections of experimental and non-experimental master theses. The aim of this study is to find out if the employment of hedges and boosters is related to the adopted research methodology. The results reveal a statistically significant difference between experimental and non-experimental discussion sections in accordance with both the frequency and form of the hedges and boosters used.

In a comparative study, Chafidha (2021) compares the use of hedges and boosters in English and Indonesian thesis abstracts. Following the framework of Hyland (1998), the study examines thirty master's thesis abstracts published from 2018 to 2022. The study reveals that the use of hedges categories (e.g., writer-oriented hedges, accuracy-oriented hedges, and reader-oriented hedges) are mainly similar in English and Indonesian thesis abstracts. Moreover, the study reveals similar lexical resources to indicate various hedging pragmatic functions. The study concludes that English writers prefer to employ more writer-oriented hedges in contrast to Indonesian writers, who tend to engage the readers by employing reader-oriented hedges.

One of the few studies that examines the employment of hedges and boosters of thesis abstracts between native and non-native speakers is Hussein et al. (2018). They critically investigate the use of metadiscourse markers in 24 master thesis abstracts. Half of them are composed of native American female students, while the rest are written by non-native Iraqi female students. The findings reveal that the interactive markers are frequently used by both groups despite the fact that the American students can engage with their readers because their employment of the interactional markers is higher than that of non-native Iraqi students. The study also shows that discipline has no evidence of the employment of metadiscourse markers.

However, the researchers do not provide a functional analysis of hedges and boosters; they only present the frequency of these markers among other metadiscourse markers without supporting the quantitative analysis with examples from the corpus of the study. It puts the major focus on the categories and frequency of all metadiscourse markers, disregarding the functional analysis of these markers within students' thesis.

These few studies are insufficient to present a thorough understanding of the employment of hedges and boosters in thesis abstracts. The existing literature examines the variation of these markers in terms of their type and frequency in thesis abstracts as a result of disciplinary, cultural, or methodological reasons. In fact, another issue is required to analyze the context of native speakers of Arabic writing thesis abstracts in English. One can scarcely find studies that examine the employment of these interactional metadiscourse features in thesis abstracts written by native speakers of Arabic. Considering this gap, the aim of the present study is to investigate the way native speakers of Arabic employ hedges and boosters in their master thesis abstracts.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Data Collection**

The data used in this study consists of 30 English thesis abstracts written by M.A. students in linguistics in the timeframe 2018-2020. The data were retrieved from the official website of Yarmouk University's Digital Library. It allows access to thesis abstracts written in English, categorized according to subjects. Each abstract ranged from 350 to 450 words. The total number of thesis abstracts for the current study consists of 11,500 words. Word number is necessary to quantify the frequency of hedges and boosters used in the study based on the number of occurrences per 10000 words. This method is essential since the total number of words in the thesis abstracts is definitely unequal.

#### **3.2 Data Analysis**

The study follows the interpersonal framework of metadiscourse by Hyland (2005). Hyland presents a total number of 101 lexical devices, which are employed as hedges and 64 as boosters. Each of these markers was identified in the abstracts manually since metadiscourse is context-dependent (Ädel, 2006). However, some lexical items that do not exist in the list were also counted in the process of identification since scholars have revealed that there is no comprehensive list (Ädel, 2006; Vassileva, 2001). Upon identifying hedges and boosters, a quantitative analysis is conducted. The importance of this analysis is to determine the most and least frequently used hedges and boosters by M.A. students. After determining the frequency of each lexical item, a more detailed analysis is presented to find out their pragmatic functions within thesis abstracts, and possible explanations of the rhetorical intentions behind the employment of these markers are provided.

In order to reach research reliability, the analysis of 10 randomly selected abstracts is examined and compared by the researcher and a second rater who is a Professor specialist in applied linguistics, achieving high inter-rater reliability rates (98%). Validity is achieved by asking two experts for their opinion on the suitability of the taxonomy to the research aims. The taxonomy is considered valid since it was employed in plenty of similar research and adopted from the original study of Hyland (2005).

### **4. Results and Discussion**

This section provides an analysis of the major findings of the current study. Table 2 shows the frequency and percentage of hedges and boosters employed in the abstract section of the M.A. thesis.

**Table 2. Frequency and Percentage of Hedges and Boosters in the Corpus**

Category	Frequency	Percentage
Hedges	117	66%
Boosters	60	34%
Total	177	100%

According to Table 2, the total frequency of hedges and boosters in thesis abstracts in linguistics written in English by M.A. native Arabic speakers is 177 occurrences. It can be seen that hedges are used more than boosters in the whole corpus. This finding is in line with other related studies such as (Belouettar & Mesbahi, 2019; Hussein et al., 2018; Kondowe, 2014, Obeng et al., 2023). The findings of these studies reveal that hedges are more frequent than boosters within thesis abstracts. Frequent employment of hedges, which reveals the writers' uncertainty towards the content, reflects the need for claims to be presented cautiously rather than assertively. More justifications for these findings will be addressed in the following sections, which are concerned with presenting the types, frequency, and percentage of hedges and boosters employed in the thesis abstracts.

#### 4.1 Hedges

As indicated earlier, hedges were more notable in the M.A. abstract section, as their frequency was more than (117) that of boosters (60), which presumably suggests that writers withhold complete commitment to their arguments. The types of hedges that were found in the corpus include four types: modals, epistemic lexical verbs, epistemic adverbs, and epistemic adjectives. Table 3 shows the overall frequency and percentage of various categories of hedges in the study corpus.

**Table 3. Distribution of Hedges in M.A. Thesis Abstracts**

Category	Types	Frequency	Percentage
Hedges	Modals (e.g. would, may)	47	40%
	Epistemic lexical verbs(e.g. show, claim)	35	30%
	Epistemic adverbs(e.g. possibly, probably).	19	16%
	Epistemic adjective(e.g. possible, apparent)	16	14%
Total		117	100%

According to Table 3, modal verbs, which indicate the author's attitude toward the truth-value of an argument, are the most frequently used resources to indicate hedging (40%). Likewise, epistemic lexical verbs, which are used to express the degree of the writer's commitment to the finding (e.g., showed, appeared), have also shown to be important elements employed in the corpus with 35 instances (30%). Epistemic adverbs and adjectives constitute the least frequently hedging devices, with percentages of 16% and 14%, respectively.

Examples of hedges subcategories employed in M.A. thesis abstracts written in English by native Arabic speakers are illustrated in (1) – (4).

- (1) Modal verbs: yes/no questions in Jordanian Arabic consist of full sentences; they *might* help identify the structure of their questions.
- (2) Epistemic lexical verbs: the researcher *claims* that in the case of the inimitable context, the issue is totally different for various reasons.
- (1) Epistemic adverbs: the sample recognizes that having expert language and cultural facilitators *probably* makes them better prepared for dealing with people of the Jordanian culture.
- (2) Epistemic adjectives: the study investigates the *possible* educational and socio-cultural factors that affect linguistic behavior.

As mentioned earlier, of the four hedging types, modal verbs are most frequently used by native Arabic speakers in their thesis abstracts when showing detachment from their claims. This could be explained as an attempt to tell the readers that they do not claim the final word on the topic. The same results are found in the studies of (haufiku et al., 2018; kondowe, 2014; Taymaz, 2021), who found that modals are the favoured resource of hedging frequently used in thesis abstracts. Epistemic lexical verbs are the second category that is mostly used. The qualitative analysis of the data reveals that these hedging verbs perform a range of pragmatic functions, such as possibility, vagueness, and politeness. Epistemic adverbs and adjectives equally serve a similar

function in the corpus; they are used to indicate precision in reporting the results of the thesis. Such appropriate use of precision indicates the actual state of the writers' comprehension and reduces the risk of opposition.

Overall, hedges are frequently used in their thesis abstracts by native speakers of Arabic of higher education. This may stem from the fact that they stress "the subjectivity of a position by allowing information to be presented as an opinion rather than a fact." (Hyland, 2005, p. 52). In the data of the study, hedges are used by M.A. students to distinguish facts from opinions, to present facts cautiously, and to present claims in a way that leaves room for alternative interpretations.

#### 4.2 Boosters

Table 4 presents the frequency of the boosting categories employed by native Arabic speakers in their M.A. thesis abstracts. The overall number of instances of these markers in the abstracts produced is 60. It also shows that only two types of boosters were found in the corpus, namely emphatics and universal pronouns. This may indicate that writers lack sufficient knowledge to strengthen their claims.

**Table 4. Distribution of boosters in M.A. Thesis Abstracts**

Category	Types	Frequency	Percentage
Boosters	Emphatics (e.g. sure)	48	80%
	Universal pronouns(e.g. all, every)	12	20%
<b>Total</b>		60	100%

Table 4 shows that two types of boosters are employed in the corpus of the study; the category of emphatics is more frequently used, accounting for 80% of all the boosters found in the corpus, while the category of universal pronouns occurs only in 20% of the detected boosters. This indicates the significant role of emphatics as a way to emphasize claims and to reflect that arguments share some universal understanding. This result is in agreement with Belouettar & Mesbahi's (2019) study, which shows that emphatics are frequently used as boosting devices within thesis abstracts.

Examples of boosters subcategories employed in the M.A. thesis abstract section written by native Arabic speakers are illustrated in the following examples:

- (1) Emphatics: each lexical item is *certainly* used in the most suitable place to play a specific role.
- (2) Universal pronouns: *All* teachers (100%) state that they offer various strategies to improve students' morphological knowledge.

As mentioned earlier, boosters are less frequently used markers compared to hedges. These findings are in agreement with previous studies where boosters are found to be less frequently used in the thesis writing context (Kondowe, 2014; Obeng et al., 2023). The qualitative analysis of the data reveals that boosters are used by students as a technique of persuasion as well as to convince readers and persuade them about their points of view. An overview of the data reveals that native speakers of Arabic at higher education level writing in English use more emphatics as a preferred form of boosting than universal pronouns. The use of these strong boosters indicates students' high commitment to their arguments, while universal pronouns have been disfavoured as a form of boosting in the corpus due to their low strength of the proposition.

Overall, it is obvious that hedges and boosters play an important function in convincing readers and creating more persuasive arguments. Generally, the role of hedges and boosters is to make the text more persuasive and explicitly lead the reader through the text. In the current study, the findings reveal that hedges are employed more frequently than boosters. This can be explained by taking the discipline of the texts studied in this study into consideration. Master theses in linguistics are subjective in nature; they are meant to be original, and claims should be cautiously presented to experienced professors. As a consequence, deploying more hedges than boosters would help students reduce the risk of opposition and open a debate in the field. However, boosters in the current study are used to a very low extent. Specifically, the infrequent employment of this category by native speakers of Arabic may reveal that they do not recognize their significance in strengthening the claim and persuading readers of their arguments. It also reveals that these students are less confident in taking clear responsibility for their claims.

## **5. Conclusion**

The principal aim of the present study is to examine the employment of hedges and boosters in thesis abstracts in linguistics written in English by M.A. students at Yarmouk University. The analysis reveals that M.A. students have shown a greater tendency to employ hedges than boosters. This implies that the students focus more on presenting findings cautiously than strengthening their claims. This could be attributed to the fact that they have not been taught how to employ these interactional markers in their writing. The high frequency of hedges is rationalized since they leave readers with the sense that their arguments are merely assumptions in order to leave room for future debates.

Although the M.A. students at Yarmouk University were not previously introduced to the concept of metadiscourse, the findings of this research certainly reveal that they are capable of using some categories of these interactional metadiscourse markers. However, some types of hedges and boosters are inadequately employed, or they are sometimes used to a very low extent. Furthermore, specific types of boosters are used too often in successive sentences. This could be attributed to the fact that the focus on academic writing proficiency is insufficient in higher educational contexts. As such, the present study suggests that M.A. students need instructions on the appropriate employment of these lexical devices. They need to learn "appropriate ways to convey attitude, mark structure, and engage with readers" (Hyland, 2004, p. 148). They also need to be acquainted with ways of expressing their commitments or detachment in writing their master thesis abstracts.

The findings of the current study are essential as they assist M.A. students in writing a well-organized persuasive thesis abstract and persuading readers effectively. More specifically, this study will be a source for students as well as English language instructors to refer to and learn the different categories of hedges and boosters to be deployed in writing master thesis abstracts so that it will enhance their quality of academic writing.

This study has some limitations. This study is limited to the employment of hedges and boosters in the master thesis. Future studies can examine other types of metadiscourse (e.g., attitude markers, self-mentions) in a way to find out the extent to which the present findings hold true for other types of metadiscourse markers. Another limitation is that this study investigates a small corpus of master thesis; therefore, a larger scale-based research is needed to verify whether the findings of the present study could be generalized. In addition, future research can compare the employment of hedges and boosters by Arabic native speakers and their English language native speakers to examine whether overuses or underuses of specific metadiscourse categories are related to nativeness.

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