

HEDGING AND BOOSTING STRATEGIES IN ALBANIAN NEWSPAPER OPINION PIECES FOR DIALOGICAL COMMUNICATIVE PURPOSES

Bledar TOSKA

Department of Foreign Languages, University of Vlora "Ismail Qemali", Vlora, Albania

Abstract: *This paper focuses on the use of hedges and boosters as interactional metadiscoursal devices in Albanian newspaper opinion pieces. More specifically, I attempt to investigate their role in the realm of dialogical communication in these articles and how their writers engage readers in informative and persuasive processes. Based on Hyland's interpersonal model of metadiscourse (2005), this study looks into both of these strategies and some very common hedging and boosting items/phases in a small specialized corpus. The quantitative and qualitative analyses in the second part of the present article discuss general issues related to this topic, but also concentrate on differences and similarities between texts written by male and female writers. Several illustrations support my observations and contextualize these devices in silent dialogues between interlocutors for communicative and persuasive purposes. The last part includes some tentative remarks, potential suggestions, but also some limitations in this study.*

Keywords: *hedges; boosters; opinion pieces; communication; readers*

1. INTRODUCTION

Opinion pieces are frequent articles in Albanian newspapers and are generally written by well-known analysts. They touch upon and discuss issues related to political, economical, educational, social and cultural developments in Albanian and sometimes even abroad. Although authors of these pieces are not affiliated with any newspaper, apart from a few exceptions, they do tend to align with certain viewpoints of newspapers more often than not. Also, apart from expressing their own opinions on specific issues, analysts attempt to influence readers by forwarding arguments and employing efficient persuasive strategies.

Linguistically speaking, opinion pieces are to be classified as argumentative texts, in which particular stances should be defended by means of supportive premises. So, from a discursive perspective, they are structured differently from other types of texts and are generally rich in vocabulary, but also in grammatical constructions. They offer to a linguist opportunity to investigate linguistic phenomena from various perspectives both at the local and global level of the text.

Additionally, opinion pieces are dialogical *per se*, in the sense that they engage both writers and readers in ongoing silent communicative processes. The linguistic interaction in this instance is as

important as their structure and content. A metadiscoursal approach of investigating them would integrate discourse features and interlocutors' presence (or voices) at the same time. Being aware of readers' presence in discourse, writers attempt to follow particular communicative strategies for persuasive ends and to jointly construct it with them. It is worth looking into linguistic means which assist these strategies, but which also include or even exclude alternative voices in discourse.

My aim in the present article is to study uses of hedges and boosters, frequent devices which open or close dialogue with readers, recognize or close down alternative voices. More specifically, I intend to explore their roles in opinion pieces, and find out potential differences and similarities between male and female writers in terms of quantity and quality. The main motivation for conducting such a research is that both strategies have not been explored in the given context so far. This article would serve as a preliminary study which can be elaborated in the future.

The paper is basically divided into two main parts. The first section deals with some theoretical issues and the second one with quantitative and qualitative research. Tentative remarks, potential suggestions and limitations in this study follow.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework adopted in this article is Hyland's interpersonal model of metadiscourse. He states that metadiscourse is often defined as 'discourse about discourse' / 'talk about talk', clearly referring to aspects of the text itself and its internal organization (Hyland, 2005:16-18), but his more promising and encompassing model considers it to be an interactional process "between text producers and their texts and between text producers and users" (Hyland, 2010:125).

Within this model of metadiscourse, the interactional dimension comprises two frequent processes, namely hedging and boosting, which assist ongoing interactions between writers and readers in dialogical contexts. All the silent dialogues between them are considered to be in response and in relation to the other "voice(s)" present in discourse.

Hedging can be seen as "an intentional action in that the speaker chooses a linguistic device over and above the propositional content of the message which will affect the interpretation of the utterance" (Fraser, 2010: 202) and includes linguistic items, such as *may*, *perhaps* or *it is possible*. The use of hedges involves a lack of full commitment to the propositional content of the utterance, conveys a moderate utterance claim (Jørgensen and Phillips, 2002: 84) and acknowledges "the reader's right to refute claims by marking statements provisional" (Hyland, 1998b: 226).

Boosters include items, such as *obviously*, *certainly* or *no doubt* mainly used to express writer's certainty in what it is stated so as "to mark involvement with the topic and solidarity with their audience" (Hyland, 1998a: 350). Their main role in discourse is to "attribute an increased force or authority to statements" (Bondi, 2008: 32), but also to contribute to dialogical interactions by indirectly highlighting the presence of the audience in verbal exchanges. At the same time, they downplay the presence of the audience (Hyland 2005, 52-53) and limit the possibility of disagreement (Bondi, 2008: 33). Additionally, boosters often express "the speaker's commitment to the truth value of what is being said" (Ädel, 2006: 174) and are "regarded as an important aspect of the evaluation-interaction-stance process" (Toska, 2012: 61). The illustration included in the qualitative analysis section below will exemplify both the role and function of boosters within the interactive model of metadiscourse embraced in this study.

3. DATA AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

In order to conduct empirically systematic research in this article I have built a small specialized corpus containing opinion pieces extracted online from two major Albanian national dailies, namely *Shqip* and *Panorama*. The corpus is called Corpus of Albanian Newspaper Opinion Pieces (CANOP) and amounts to more than half a million words. It contains opinion pieces written from January 2013 to December 2014. Ten samples for each month have been randomly chosen covering different topics, and each of them ranges from 500 to 2,000 words. The gender variable has also been taken into account, so apart from the two subcorpora (*Shqip* daily and *Panorama* one), sub-subcorpora have been created including male and female writer pieces respectively. The following table contains more detailed information about CANOP.

Table 1 CANOP size

Gender	No. of texts	Words
Male	446	542,598
Female	34	39,429
Total	480	582,027

Each of the sample texts has also been indexed so as to include information about the newspaper and the period when the piece has been published in it. For instance, SM140208/PF140208 means that the piece has been taken from *Shqip* (S) or *Panorama* (P), has been written by a male writer (M), or female writer (F), in 2014 (14), in February (02) and that it is the eighth sample (8) in CANOP. All the illustrations included in this article will provide such relevant information.

All in all, I will investigate the frequency and use of 80 common hedging and boosting items or constructions, such as *ndoshta* (*maybe*), *patjetër* (*of course*), *për mendimin tim* (*in my opinion*) or *me siguri* (*definitely*). For both the quantitative and qualitative analysis I have made use of the versatile commercial software WordSmith Tools 6.0, which allows one not only to obtain statistical data but also to extract examples in the proper relevant discourse context.

4. QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

In this section of the paper I will attempt to provide statistical data about the frequency of the hedges and boosters in CANOP, but also about some related phenomena, which enable me to

interpret quantitatively and qualitatively their use in opinion pieces by both male and female writers. It is important to note from the very beginning that the number of text written by male writers makes up almost 93 % of the entire corpora, as Table 1 shows, which is justified, since they outnumber female writers considerably in both newspaper opinion pieces which they write.

Table 2 and 3 below show the occurrences/hits of hedges and boosters as used in CANOP by male and female writers as well as the normalized frequency per 1,000 words.

Table 2 Frequency of hedges in CANOP

Gender	Hits	per 1,000 words
Male	1,803	3.32
Female	169	4.29
Total	1,972	3.39

Table 3 Frequency of boosters in CANOP

Gender	Hits	per 1,000 words
Male	1,413	2.6
Female	113	2.87
Total	1,526	2.62

The number of hits does not tell us much about the frequency of these devices in CANOP, but the normalized value is somehow significant in order to have a clear picture about differences and similarities between male and female writers. At first glance, we might suggest that there are some differences in the quantity of hedges used by male and female writers, but nothing relevant regarding the use of boosters.

However, it is worth conducting the significance test to have a better insight into the frequency values between male and female writers in the use of hedges and boosters. "The higher the G2 value, the more significant is the difference between two frequency scores", as for instance:

95th percentile; 5% level; $p < 0.05$; critical value = 3.84

99th percentile; 1% level; $p < 0.01$; critical value = 6.63

99.9th percentile; 0.1% level; $p < 0.001$; critical value = 10.83

99.99th percentile; 0.01% level; $p < 0.0001$; critical value = 15.13

(<http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/llwizard.html>)

Table 4 Log-likelihood values for hedges

Gender	Hits	per 1,000
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		words
Male	1,803	3.32
Female	169	4.29
$p < 0.002$	critical value =	9.34

Table 5 Log-likelihood values for boosters

Gender	Hits	per 1,000 words
Male	1,413	2.6
Female	113	2.87
$p < 0.334$	critical value =	0.93

The significant test definitely shows that both hedges and boosters are underused in opinion pieces written by male writers relative to female ones, but only the case of hedging is significant and not that of boosting. The *p values* clearly denote these differences in Table 4 and Table 5.

In this part of the paper I also would like to touch upon the issue of dispersion of hedges and boosters in CANOP. The point of dispersion plot is "to show where the search word occurs in the file which the current entry belongs to. That way you can see where mention is made most of your search word in each file" and the plot dispersion value "ranges from 0 to 1, with 0.9 or 1 suggesting very uniform dispersion and 0 or 0.1 suggesting "burstiness" (Katz, 1996)" (Scott, 2012).

Table 6 Hedges dispersion plot in CANOP

Gender	Dispersion value
Male	0.962
Female	0.928
Total	0.961

Table 7 Boosters dispersion plot in CANOP

Gender	Dispersion value
Male	0.991
Female	0.940
Total	0.990

The dispersion values in Tables 6 and 7 clearly indicate use uniformity of hedges and boosters by both male and female writers. Thus, it shows that these devices are employed throughout the sample texts in CANOP despite the respective frequencies.

5. QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

In this last section of the paper I will conduct some qualitative analysis to see how hedges and boosters are used in real discourse and how they operate along the interactional metadiscourse dimension. Examples extracted from male and

female writers are intended to instantiate and support my claims.

The following tables include the ten most frequent hedges and boosters employed by male and female writers. It is interesting to note that in both cases the devices used are almost the same, nine for hedges and eight for boosters.

Table 8 Ten most frequent hedges in CANOP

No.	Male		Female	
1	duket	seem	duket	seem
2	ndoshta	maybe	ndoshta	maybe
3	rreth	about	mendoj	think
4	gati	around	besoj	believe
5	mendoj	think	rreth	about
6	mbase	perhaps	gati	around
7	besoj	believe	thujajse	nearly
8	thujajse	nearly	mundet	possibly
9	afër	about	mbase	perhaps
10	mundet	possibly	pothujaj	almost

Table 9 Ten most frequent boosters in CANOP

No.	Male		Female	
1	qartë	clearly	sigurisht	obviously
2	krejt	absolutely	qartë	clearly
3	natyrisht	certainly	natyrisht	certainly
4	sigurisht	obviously	krejt	absolutely
5	plot	completely	plot	completely
6	tregon	show	tërësisht	entirely
7	pa dyshim	without doubt	dukshëm	visibly
8	tërësisht	entirely	patjetër	of course
9	plotësisht	completely	me siguri	for sure
10	me siguri	for sure	tregon	show

This shows no significant diversity of types of these devices used by male and writers, and at the same time demonstrates that they are common in opinion pieces in terms of what they denote in metadiscourse. At this point we can see that in the case of hedges the differences are only relevant quantitatively and not so much qualitatively. And in the case of boosters we note very close similarities in terms of both quantity and quality.

The following examples illustrate the use of hedges and boosters in real context and some metadiscoursal functions in the interactional realm between writers and readers. In examples (1) and (2) below the hedges *duket* (*seem*) and *ndoshta* (*maybe*) have been employed to involve the audience's alternative voices in discourse. This channel of dialogue can be seen as a rhetorical strategy adopted by prudent writers who wish to project themselves as reliable in their statements by forwarding their opinions and not undeniable facts.

(1) Por këto identitete nuk **duket** se i pengonin shqiptarët e shkuar në Spanjë që sipas Markos përbënin një komunitet kompakt e solidar edhe pse vinin nga të dyja gjinitë, nga të gjitha prejardhjet fetare, nga fshatrat e qytetet ... (SM140710).

But these identities **do not seem** to obstruct the past Albanians in Spain, who according to Marko constituted a compact and solid community even though they came from both genders, from all religions descents, from villages and towns ... (my translation)

(2) Unë nuk e di nëse shqiptarët e zgjedhur për ta pritur dhe për të folur me zonjën Bonino i dinë të gjitha këto. **Ndoshta** po dhe **ndoshta** jo. (PM131002)

I do not know whether all the elected Albanians to meet and talk with Mrs. Bonino know all of these. **Maybe** yes, **maybe** no. (my translation)

Similarly, in examples (3) and (4), written by female writers, the uses of cognitive hedges *besoj* (*believe*) and *mendoj* (*think*) aim at engaging readers in dialogue. Their main function in the present contexts is to present the propositions as mere opinions marking uncertainty and expressing moderate claims. However, unlike *duket* (*seem*) and *ndoshta* (*maybe*) in the two previous examples, they convey plausible reasoning, which, in all likelihood, is based on writers general perception but also on their background information or experience.

(3) **Nuk besoj** se fjala “new” e bën qeverisjen e re të ngjashme me “new Labour” e Blerit apo “new Democrat” të Klintonit. (SF131003)

I do not believe that the word “new” makes the new governance similar to Blair’s “new Labour” or Clinton’s “new Democrat”. (my translation)

(4) Personalisht **mendoj** se Rama ishte i sinqertë kur deklaroi para disa ditësh në TV se ai mendon që Hoxha ishte një katil. (PF140102)

Personally **I think** that Rama was sincere when he declared a few days ago on TV that he thought that Hoxha was criminal. (my translation)

What is extremely important to note in all four examples is that hedging strategies in the respective contexts convey writers’ attempt to withhold complete commitment to propositional contents.

On the other hand, the main function of boosters in discourse is to “attribute an increased force or authority to statements” (Bondi, 2008:32) but also “to construct a dialogical environment by recognizing and including the presence of the audience in interactional verbal activities” (Toska,

2015:66). Unlike hedges, boosters close down alternative interpretations to the utterance. For instance, in examples (5) and (6) below, *krejt e qartë* (*completely clear*) and *sigurisht* (of course) convey some persuasive force and present the statements as facts.

(5) Eshtë **krejt e qartë** se tema e bashkimit kombëtar do të jetë një temë kryesore e kësaj fushate elektorale. (PM131003)

It is **completely clear** that the issue of national unity will be a central topic of this electoral campaign. (my translation)

(6) **Sigurisht** që ndryshimet e mëdha nuk mund të ndodhin brenda një dite, jave apo muaji, por ato mund të fillojnë nga gjëra të vogla. (SM130301)

Of course, major changes cannot occur within one day, week or month, but they can begin with small things. (my translation)

Also, *tërësisht* (*entirely*) and *pa dyshim* (*without doubt*) promote confident and determined writers, who, for communicative and persuasive ends, have opted for the boosting strategy to invite readers to align with their views. This means that alternative viewpoints are recognized by writers, but they have chosen “to narrow this diversity rather than enlarge it” (Hyland, 2005:145) and to take full commitment to their discourse.

(7) Ndëshkimi, sado i pamundur duket, është **tërësisht** i mundur nëse faktet janë aty. (SF140802)
However impossible the punishment may seem, it is **entirely** possible, if the facts are there. (my translation)

(8) Ata **pa dyshim** duhet të jenë zëri i rëndësishëm që duhet të marrë përsipër drejtimin në këtë situatë. (PF140102)

Without doubt they should be the important voice which should undertake the management in this situation. (my translation)

Hopefully, the small scale qualitative analyses of these examples in this section have clearly shown the roles and functions of hedges and booster in newspaper opinion pieces. It is also hoped that the real examples extracted from CANOP have contextualized them accordingly in support to the claims I have made.

6. FINAL REMARKS

This short article attempted to focus on the hedging and boosting strategies employed by male and female writers in Albanian opinion pieces for

dialogical communicative purposes. Hyland’s metadiscourse approach embraced here offered valuable insights into issues related to hedges and boosters presence along the interactional dimension. Quantitative and qualitative analyses conducted in this small-scale research showed that hedging is a process more preferable to female writers rather than male ones, although there is no significant distinction regarding the types of devices included in this process. The boosting process was also much present in these pieces and it was common in the way it was adopted for persuasive purposes in order to get the readership align with the viewpoints expressed in these pieces. Boosting devices are almost equally used by male writers and female ones with the intention of closing down anticipated alternative interpretations in discourse.

There are also a couple of limitations in this short study. Additional important devices, such as attitude markers, self mentions and engagement markers, which are part of the interactional metadiscourse model, have not been looked into this paper. The main reason for not including them here was because I wanted to focus only on dialogical communication, and hedges as well as boosters do enable this. However, I do suggest that further studies integrate a more comprehensive investigation in the realm of dialogical communication including the missing devices in order to evaluate the writer-reader’s response to metadiscourse interaction.

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