

Grażyna Dydel-Wróblewska
**PERSONAL COMMITMENT IN ACADEMIC
WRITING**

Originally published as "Język do celów akademickich. Unikanie osobistego zaangażowania w tekstach naukowych," *Studia Semiotyczne* 27 (2010), 177–184. Translated by Grażyna Dydel-Wróblewska.

Hedging

Being informative without becoming persuasive when writing for academic purposes seems to be a difficult task connected with the use of natural language as the language of science.

According to Master until a fact is absolutely proven, scientists can only make sophisticated guesses based on their research. When reporting the results of such research, scientific writers must be careful to indicate whether their results are proven facts or probable facts. They do this by means of **hedging, the qualification of the truth of a statement**. Hedging is accomplished by means of 1) modals or 2) a statement of probability with a subordinate clause. (Master 2004: 240).

White and McGovern in *Writing* provide a list of **ways of avoiding personal commitment (hedging)**. Discussing the nature of academic writing¹ they state that one can hedge by using:

- non-personal nouns or noun phrases
- passive verbs
- indirect statements: *X appears to be Y*

¹In academic argument, it is common to be impersonal, even when the writer is personally involved in the argument. Impersonality is a way of putting a distance between the writer and the argument. (White and McGovern 1994: 60).

- soft proposals: *may*
- attitudinal signals such as *apparently, unexpectedly, surprisingly, no doubt*,² etc. and by avoiding the use of verbs like think, believe.

Furthermore, the authors maintain that using attitudinal signals such as certainly, undoubtedly, obviously, in my view, etc. we show personal commitment (White and McGovern 1994: 61).

Firstly, the reader is provided with two different definitions of hedging. For Master it is specifying the qualification of the truth of a statement, in other words evaluating the degree of probability of a given assertion. White and McGovern identify hedging as the ways of avoiding personal commitment. Secondly, if the sentences 1 and 2 are based on the conducted research, there is little difference in the meaning of the two sentences, though the first one would be classified as personal and the second as impersonal writing style.

1. *Undoubtedly, X is an efficient method of object recognition.*
2. *Apparently, X is an efficient method of object recognition.*

From a logical point of view both 1 and 2 state that: *X is an efficient method of object recognition* (the statement may be verified) and at the same time express the speakers believe that the proposition *X is an efficient method of object recognition* is true,³ (1), or may be true⁴ (2). Finally, the structure of 3 and 4 seems to be fairly similar.

3 *It seems to me that p.*

4 *It seems that p.*

However, sentence 3 with the personal pronoun would be classified as personal, while 4 as impersonal style.

Thus, to deal with the problem of hedging and to discuss various types of personal commitment in academic writing, the following factors are taken into consideration:

- Vocabulary: token-reflective words, and words with emotional impact

²Putting *no doubt* on this list seems to be an editorial error.

³E.g. when the research was done many times in various centres.

⁴When the research was conducted only once.

- Presuppositions
- Self-referential statements and the difference between metalanguage and language. *I think, In my opinion, I am sure, It must /may /might /have been very difficult, No doubt, etc.*

Tarskis semantic definition of truth based on classical theory of truth and two-valued logic is adopted. P is true if, and only if, p. For example: X is an efficient method of object recognition is true if, and only if X is an efficient method of object recognition. In other words, if a given language is L, then the definition should be formulated in another language M, known as the metalanguage (Tarski 1952).

Furthermore, it is assumed that the speaker/writer has the knowledge of the presented or discussed subject and wants to tell the truth (Olech 2007), i.e. that he/she wants to inform, not to persuade or manipulate.

It is also assumed that the meaning of the word is its connotation and proposition is the connotation of sentence stating and denoting. (Ajdukiewicz 1979: 81).

Choice of Words

Personal pronouns such as *I, we* and *you* are token-reflective words and their meaning changes depending on by whom, when, and where they are used. As stated by White and McGovern they should be avoided. Nevertheless, the advice is rather difficult to follow because not all token-reflective expressions are so easy as personal pronouns to identify. The concept of *sustainable development* introduced by Ms Brundtland in 1987, used in environmental science and defined as a development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (Ryden 2003: 767) or as a growth that satisfies to-days needs without jeopardizing the needs of future generations (Korshuk 2003: 17) should be classified as token-reflective. Even for a given place and time, e.g. the Rozpuda Valley 2008, depending on who expresses the opinion, a certain project may or may not be sustainable as the connotation of the expressions *present needs* and *future needs* may be entirely different for various writers.

Words with emotional impact e.g. *mob* for *crowd, coterie or gang* for *group or team*, and in Polish *collaboration* for *cooperation* seem to constitute no problem and they hardly ever appear in the writing of the author wanting to be objective. However, adjectives such as *Polish, German* although seem to be neutral, may have a negative emotional impact particularly in contexts

referring to the World War II e.g. *Nazi-German concentration camps* is politically correct while *Polish concentration camps* (meaning located in Poland occupied by Nazi-Germans) is evidently anti-Polish.

Presuppositions

Presuppositions are very common in natural languages. Any wh-question assumes a certain statement e.g. *Why did the climate change?* states that the climate changed. Question: *How much did average temperature in Poland increase last year?* presupposes that the *average temperature in Poland increased last year*.

B. Russells famous sentence *The present king of France is bold* takes for granted that there is such a person as the present king of France. Therefore, to decide whether it is true or false, it is analysed as a conjunction: *There is such an entity as the present King of France and this entity is bold* (Russell 1967: 270). The same refers to the definite description *Polish concentration camps*.

To avoid giving misleading information resulting in false claims such as the described above, whenever possible, precise descriptions and/or data should be presented. When writing about the quantity of something the exact amount or number of items is preferable. Words like *only*, *mere*, *majority* and *minority* may imply false presuppositions that may be challenged by others.

Students doing the test from *Market Leader Test File* were asked to read the text: With around 40 carmakers, the market was crowded. Less than half of these had market shares of over 1% and mark the statement: *Only ten car manufactures have a market share of more than 1%*. as T (true), F (false) or C (cant tell) (Johnson, 2000: 11). 43 students of technology from various faculties at the Technical University of Lodz, all of them at B2 level of CEF, were tested. The answer expected by the author of the test was C. However, the majority of them, i.e. 23, chose the answer F due to the word *only*, declaring that it was not mentioned in the text that *less than a half* is considered to be *many* or *few*. C was chosen by 17, they maintained that the phrase *less than a half* is inaccurate and was used to avoid giving precise information. T was chosen by the remaining 3 students, their argument was based on the fact that the formula: $10 \div 20$ is true.

In natural languages it is possible to state a fact and to comment on it in one sentence. The word *only* when used in a sentence introduces a presupposition that the writer expected more. Thus, the statement: *Only ten cars were sold* is not a simple sentence but a conjunction: *Ten cars were sold*

and I expected/ it was expected/ there would be more. This may explain why so many students chose the answer false. An apparently easy test of reading skills based on true/false questions may be difficult to solve. While reading very quickly students may interpret sentences in various ways depending on the memorised context.

Metalanguage and Language

In academic writing it is often necessary to make comments on the conducted research and/or to generalise to draw conclusions. R.R. Jordan in *Academic Writing Course*, when dealing with generalisations, suggests, like Master, qualifying the statements or hypotheses to make them less definite. (Jordan 1996: 64)

Master gives the following examples of hedging with modals and modal paraphrases: (Master 2004: 240):

Fact	Truth Probability
Cancer is caused by a faulty gene.	
Cancer is caused by a virus.	98-100%
Hedge:	
5. Cancer must be caused by a faulty gene.	
Cancer is certain to be caused by a virus.	80-98%
6. Cancer should be by caused by a faulty gene.	
Cancer is likely to be caused by a virus.	40-70%
7. Cancer may be caused by a faulty gene.	
Cancer is perhaps caused by a virus.	20-40%
8. Cancer might/could be caused by a faulty gene.	
Cancer is possibly caused by a virus.	5-20%

The second way of qualifying and weakening an assertion or generalisation is to subordinate it either by using a that-clause or by a passive-infinitive structure and is illustrated by Master with the following example:

Gasoline fumes cause kidney cancer.

Gasoline fumes are believed to cause kidney cancer.

It is possible that gasoline fumes cause kidney cancer.

There is a slight possibility that gasoline fumes cause kidney cancer

(Master 2004: 242).

In brief, to avoid personal commitment scientific writers should inform the readers about the probability of achieving the same results and to what extent their generalisations are hypothetical.

From a semiotic point of view Whites and McGoverns attitudinal signals introduce self-referential sentences i.e. sentences which state a certain fact and at the same time express speakers attitude evaluating the truth or falsity of the proposition. Hedging with modals or with a subordinate clause proposed by Master and Jordan is also accomplished by self-referential statements. Let us examine the following hypotheses referring to the past event:

9. The drug must have caused a malfunction in the liver.
10. Im sure the drug caused a malfunction in the liver.
11. No doubt, the drug caused a malfunction in the liver.
12. It is possible that the drug caused a malfunction in the liver.
13. I think, the drug caused a malfunction in the liver.
14. The drug probably caused a malfunction in the liver.
15. The drug may/ might have caused a malfunction in the liver.
16. The drug cant have caused a malfunction in the liver.

All the sentences given above i.e. 9 to 16 state *that the drug caused a malfunction in the liver*. In 9, 10 and 11 the speaker declares that the proposition *the drug caused a malfunction in the liver* is true. In 12, 13, 14, 15 it is said that the proposition may be true. In 16, the same proposition *the drug caused a malfunction in the liver* is assumed to be false. Therefore, sentences 9, 10, 11 have the structure *It is very likely that p*; 12-15 *It is likely that p*, and 16 *It is unlikely that p*.

Illustrating the problem of personal commitment, a specialist in EAP1 demonstrates proper ways to make generalisations more precise by qualifying them (Jordan 1996: 62). Since they do not analyse the statements from the psychological point of view, it may be assumed that the presented methods of hedging lead to the use of metalanguage and language in one assertion.

Conclusions

Although objectivity is a very important quality of academic writing, the term hedging has not been properly defined. The problem is reduced to the correct choice of words since Jordan, Master, White and McGovern only enumerate phrases which, in their opinion, allow the avoidance of personal commitment. Their list seems to be too short to describe the objectivity of academic texts thoroughly.

A variety of grammatical structures is used to put a distance between the writer and the argument. Thus, to deal with personal commitment in writing,

four aspects of natural languages should be taken into consideration, namely: token-reflective words, words with emotional impact, presuppositions, and self-referential sentences.

From a logical point of view all the attitudinal signals and other ways of hedging listed by White and McGovern (1994: 71), Jordan (1997: 66-67) and Master (2004: 242) do not reduce our subjectivity. We show personal commitment because statements structured according to the proposed patterns (see sentences 5 to 16) can be rewritten as follows: *it is highly possible that p*, *it is quite possible that p*, *it is possible that p*, *it is remotely possible that p* and *it is impossible that p*. Although in academic writing the evaluation of conclusions and generalisations is based on research and accurate analysis, it is done by the author and his/her assessment may be subjective. Consequently, it may also be maintained that an impersonal style statement *it seems that p*, is in fact understood as *it seems to the author that p* and is quite similar to personal style *it seems to me that p*.

In conclusion, academic papers should inform accurately, i.e. the problem, input data, research and results should be described very precisely to eliminate false or misleading presuppositions. Semiotic analysis shows that the most efficient method of avoiding personal commitment is to use verifiable sentences allowing the reader to assess conclusions himself/herself. In other words, instead of generalising as in 17 which is classified as an impersonal style:

17. *Apparently, X is an efficient method in medical diagnostics.*

it is better to hedge by stating:

18. *The conducted research shows/The computer simulations show/that X is an efficient method in medical diagnostics.*

In general, academic writers write in an impersonal style. In some cases, however, it is better to use the first person to become more direct and convincing, particularly when there is no or little empirical evidence available.

Bibliography

1. Jordan, Robert R. (1996) Academic Writing Course. Harlow, Essex: Addison Wesley Longman Ltd.

2. Johnson, Christine (2000) Market Leader Test File. Harlow, Essex: Person Education Limited.
3. Korshuk, Elena, ed. (2003) English for Environmental Science. Uppsala: The Baltic University Press.
4. Master, Peter (2004) English Grammar and Technical Writing. Washington, DC: Office of English Language Programs.
5. Olech, Adam. O prawdomówności i prawdziwości. Available from: <http://pts.edu.pl/subdomains/seminarium//httpdocs/aolech.pdf>
6. Pelc, Jerzy (1979) A Functional Approach to Semiotics J. Pelc (red.) Semiotics in Poland 1894-1969. Dordrecht: Reidel Publishing Company.
7. Russell, Bertrand (1967) Denotowanie. In Logika i j?zyk. ed. Jerzy Pelc. Warszawa: PWN. In English: (1905) On Denoting. Mind 14: 479-493.
8. Sundstrom Tage and Lars Ryden (2003) The Prospect of Sustainable Development. In Environmental Science, eds. Lars Ryden, Pawel Migula and Magnus Andersson. Uppsala: The Baltic University Press.
9. Tarski, Alfred (1952) The Semantic Conception of Truth. In Philosophy of Language, ed. Leonard Linsky. Urbana: The University of Illinois Press.
10. White, Ronald V. and Don McGovern (1994) Writing. Hemel Hempstead: Prentice Hall International.