

# **Hedging Modal Verbs as Attitudinal Markers in Interpersonal Communication**

Bareq Raad Raheem

Electronic Computer Centre

University of Diyala

Diyala Governorate, Iraq

[zanyareng92@gmail.com](mailto:zanyareng92@gmail.com)

Raashid Nehal

Department of English

Aligarh Muslim University

Aligarh, India

Zanyar Nathir Ghafar

Sulaimani Polytechnic University

Sulaymaniyah, Iraq

## **Abstract**

Effective communication in English is not merely optional but essential, particularly in academic and professional contexts. Modal verbs play a crucial role in enhancing both clarity and politeness in interpersonal communication by expressing various types of modality, including necessity, possibility, probability, and obligation. In addition to their grammatical

functions, modal verbs—especially hedging modal verbs—serve as important pragmatic devices that allow speakers and writers to mitigate statements, show caution, and maintain social harmony. This study aims to examine the significant role of hedging modal verbs in facilitating effective interpersonal communication. Adopting a descriptive qualitative approach, the study is based on a comprehensive review of relevant literature to identify and analyze patterns in the use of hedging modal verbs. The findings from previous empirical and theoretical studies indicate that hedging modal verbs contribute substantially to communicative effectiveness by promoting politeness, reducing face-threatening acts, and enhancing interpersonal relations in both spoken and written discourse. The study concludes that the appropriate use of hedging modal verbs is a key component of pragmatic competence and should be emphasized in English language teaching and communication studies.

**Keywords:** Modal verbs; Hedging; Interpersonal communication; Politeness strategies; Pragmatic competence

## **Introduction**

Language is a means of communication. Communication is about exchanging needs, thoughts, and ideas between two or more people. English is no longer a choice but a need in today's world. Life without communication cannot be considered pleasant. Communication makes us part of the big world and helps us contribute to everything that is happening. There are many strategies to make communication more polite and effective, and one of them is the use of hedges.

Hedging is a pragmatic phenomenon; Lakoff (1973) was the first to introduce the concept of hedging in linguistics. He states that hedges are "words whose meaning simplicity implies fuzziness- words whose jobs are to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy.

Hedges have a comprehensive and universal application in the process of daily human communication. They are used to soften what we write or say. They are essential in polite

conversation and make what we say less direct. In this regard, Brown and Levinson (2011) consider the hedges as a politeness strategy in oral communication. They used to avoid disagreement and express negative politeness.

Samaie et al. (2014) indicated that employing hedging allows researchers to adopt a cautious stance when presenting their perspectives in relation to other studies. The use of hedges indicates that writers are cognizant of conduct norms, as demonstrated by their consideration for others' face. Common hedging forms include tense, aspect, modal verbs, and adverbs.

Hedging modal verbs are very important for how people talk to each other because they let people show how they feel about things like uncertainty, politeness, or tentativeness. Instead of saying things directly, speakers often use modal verbs like might, could, may, or should to soften their claims. This shows that they are open to other points of view or that they want to make their statements less strong. This language strategy helps keep the peace, reduce conflict, and show that you respect the other person's point of view. Hedging modals are attitudinal markers that show how committed or unsure the speaker is, as well as their underlying intentions and emotional state in communication. The present study will explore the role of modal verbs in interpersonal communication.

## **Literature Review**

### ***What is Hedging***

Hedging is an important way of talking that helps people stay polite, take turns, and save face when they talk to each other. It enables people to express themselves more carefully, reduce the threat of face-threatening actions, and intentionally convey vagueness. In linguistics, hedging is a way for speakers to protect themselves and others from the bad social or interpersonal effects of what they say.

As mentioned above, Lakoff (1972) was the first to introduce the concept of hedging in linguistics. In this regard, Lakoff emphasises that hedges function in accordance with the felicity conditions of utterances and the regulatory norms of conversation. This viewpoint lays the groundwork for understanding hedges as linguistic phenomena moulded by pragmatic factors in communicative settings.

Brown and Levinson (1978) define a hedge as "a particle, word, or phrase that modifies the degree of membership of a predicate or a noun phrase in a set," indicating that such membership may be partial, context-dependent, or broader than typically assumed. This definition broadens the concept of hedging to encompass elements of negative politeness, aimed at mitigating potential threats to the participants' face. As a result, hedging consists of both weak and strong expressions. Chafe (1986) elucidates that hedges are linguistic constructs indicating that the alignment between a body of knowledge and its categorical representation is not absolute.

### ***Definition of Modal Verbs***

In English, modal verbs convey acts and events derived from thought, which may not provide any future outcomes. Various linguists have provided multiple definitions of modals and modalities. Fowler (1986) stated that modal verbs are terms that convey varying levels of caution. Additionally, Shaffer (2004) characterized modals as the mental realms of possibility and necessity. Marion (1973) stated that modality reflects the speaker's perspective on the possibilities inherent in the forecast. Ehrman (1966) characterizes modal verbs as a limited class of verbs that hold the initial place inside a verb phrase, cannot be immediately preceded by another verb, may undergo subject–auxiliary inversion in interrogative forms, and are negated directly by 'not.' Moreover, Lyons (1977) asserted that modality pertains to necessity, probability, and possibility, rather than solely to truth or untruth.

### ***The Classification of Modal Verbs***

Nine modal verbs in English are considered central modal verbs. They are can, could, will, would, shall, should, may, might (Biber, Conrad, & Leech, 2002; Hove, 1997). In this regard, they indicated that there is a small group of marginal modals besides the nine central modals, which are ought to, used to, and need to. These marginal Modals can behave like modals, similar to main verbs. On the other hand, Kennedy (2002) indicated that there is a small group of expressions called semi-modals that can function as modals, such as: namely, supposed to, had better, be about to, and be going to.

Additionally, Quirk et al. (1985) categorized modal verbs into three classes according to their similarities and overlapping meanings. Can, could, may, and might denote permission, ability, and possibility, while should and must indicate necessity and obligation, and will, shall, and would express prediction.

### ***Previous Related Work***

Different studies have carried out the concept of hedges. This part will review the previous studies related to hedging modal verbs. **Ling (2016)** examines the use of modal verbs in horoscopes, a common feature in women's publications. This analysis has shown that the most prevalent modal verb in the horoscope is "will," followed by "may." Both are modal verbs indicating likelihood, used to forecast and articulate potential future occurrences.

**Luvuno and Ajani (2022)** seek to investigate whether the explicit instruction of specific modal auxiliary verbs enhances students' writing proficiency in English. A case study was utilized to fulfill the objectives of the research. A total of 40 students participated in the study. Participants were assigned at random to either an experimental group or a control group. The findings indicate that explicit grammar instruction effectively addresses the challenges associated with writing in English.

**Vlasyan (2019)** shed light on the importance of hedging in interpersonal communication. The meaning and the functions of hedging in daily conversation have been reviewed in this study.

He mentioned that hedging is an important issue in language studies, and the correct use of hedging reflects a high level of knowledge. Moreover, when a non-native speaker fails to recognise that a hedge may be perceived as impolite, arrogant, and rude, it may lead to miscommunication.

**Orta (2010)** examined the utilization of modal verbs as indicators of epistemic stance within a corpus of Spanish-English research articles. The study's corpus comprised 48 selected research articles on business management. The findings indicate a significant disparity in the use of modal verbs between native and non-native writers.

**Moafian and Yarahmadzahi (2018)** examine the employment of modal verbs as tools for stance-taking by both native and non-native writers. For the study, ten research articles from each source have been selected. The corpora were analyzed for occurrences of modal verbs through both mechanical and functional methods. This analysis highlights the key similarities and differences between the two groups of writers. The study concluded that both groups of writers employed modal verbs for epistemic functions in addition to their deontic uses, with native writers utilizing modal verbs more frequently than non-native writers.

Another study conducted by Vlasyan (2019), which was entitled "Linguistic Hedging in Interpersonal Communication," explores the use of hedging as a pragmatic strategy to convey politeness, uncertainty, and emotional sensitivity in conversation. It shows that hedges, including adverbs, modal verbs, and circumspect lexical phrases, function to ease assertions, diminish potential face-threatening behaviours, and preserve social cohesion. It also emphasises that hedging is vital for finding a balance between being assertive and respecting other people's points of view. This opinion is in line with larger linguistic and cultural norms. Finally, the study concluded that adept utilisation of hedging fosters mutual comprehension, encourages politeness, and fortifies interpersonal relationships.

**Boginskaya (2023)** studied the utilisation of lexical hedging as a means of politeness in Russian Academic Articles. The researcher has collected 50 manuscript reviews. The findings have revealed that verbs and adverbs are the most shared ways to hedge. It also revealed that hedges serve three primary practical purposes: altering the focus of communication, mitigating criticism, and tempering negative evaluations. The researcher notes that hedging explains the reviewer's pragmatic proficiency and aids in preserving face and collegiality. The results show that academic reviewing is an interactive process that values diplomacy over direct judgment. Lastly, hedging is exposed to be necessary for finding a balance between evaluation and professional courtesy.

Finally, many research studies have been carried out in the area of using hedging as a linguistic and pragmatic strategy. It has been noted that not many have looked at *"hedging modal verbs as attitudinal markers in interpersonal communication"*. Most of the published studies and literature dealt with hedging in academic or professional discourse. These studies did not discuss how modal verbs can be used to cover attitudes such as uncertainty, politeness, or empathy in everyday conversations. Moreover, a limited number of studies have carried out the impact of sociocultural and contextual factors on the utilisation and interpretation of hedging modals in the formation of interpersonal relationships. This gap underscores the necessity for an exhaustive examination of the role of hedging modal verbs as instruments for articulating stance, regulating social distance, and formulating interpersonal meaning in various communicative settings.

### **Methodology**

Using an adequate research method or technique is a master key for the fulfillment of the research objectives. As mentioned above, the present study aims to demonstrate the significant role of hedging modal verbs in interpersonal communication. The researchers prefer to use a descriptive qualitative method for the present study. The data have been obtained from

previously published related works. The data used in this study have organisational patterns, synthesis, and combined summaries to identify the exciting concepts and theories.

### **Hedging Modal Verbs in Interpersonal Communication**

The notion of hedging is likely observed in informal conversation, happening approximately twice as often as in written discourse. Hedging helps to keep and regulate relationships among communicants, significantly contributing to the harmonisation and effectiveness of communication. It is worth mentioning that the main roles of hedging in conversational discourse are to avoid conflicts, preserve the face of both the speaker and the hearer, and ease obligation. Hedges refer to important elements of fuzzy language and are vital for keeping politeness in communication. Hedges enhance communication by promoting politeness and flexibility, thereby facilitating the maintenance and adjustment of relationships between speakers and listeners, and ensuring smooth interactions. ( Vlasyan, 2019).

Attitudinal markers indicate a speaker's emotions, thoughts, or perceptions regarding others (Biber et al., 1999). When used with modality, they change how people understand and respond to messages. So, hedging modal verbs are both grammatical markers and ways to show how people feel about each other.

Interpersonal communication is the way of exchanging information, ideas, feelings, and thoughts between two or more people through verbal and non-verbal means. It habitually includes face-to-face exchange of information in either the spoken or written form. Moreover, it can also happen through facial expression, body language, and gestures. The effectiveness of transferring messages to others measures one's interpersonal communication skills.

The standard interpersonal communication includes daily employee communication, project discussions, meetings, and other team interactions. In addition, online chatting or conversations on social media platforms can also be considered one of the phases of interpersonal communication, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Making interpersonal communication more effective is necessary and required; using modal verbs is one of the approaches to achieve this. Modal verbs can serve multiple types of modalities, such as obligation, necessity, probability, possibility, etc. Alcaraz (2000: 66) noted that modal verbs can possess varying semantic values based on their contextual usage, thereby influencing the propositional value of the conveyed message. Luvuno and Ajani (2022) indicated that using the modal verbs in the construction of the sentence is a viable pragmatic method that can enhance the acquisition and the proper use of the second and the foreign language. The modal verbs can assist learners in developing competitive expressive skills, particularly in writing, characterized by clarity. Poor communication and a lack of understanding of language use result in learners' inability to utilize modal verbs effectively.

Modal verbs are used to convey occurrences arising from thought, which may not provide any future outcomes. Moreover, they provide a significant means of improving politeness strategies. Simpson(2003) mentioned that sentences without modal verbs would sound impolite, for instance, 'sit here' as opposed to 'could you sit here or may you sit here. The use of modal verbs enhances the politeness of requests. Researchers must utilize language resources when disseminating their results for publication, and the appropriate application of modal verbs aids in achieving this goal (Huckin and Olsen, 1991). Biber (1999) stated that modal verbs express the writer's viewpoint regarding the degree of certainty associated with a statement or its implications, encompassing necessity, duty, and permission. In the absence of a modal verb, most verb phrases comprise only a temporal marker and a distinct indication of posture.

It is important to remember that the type of text has a significant effect on how often and where modal verbs are used. Studies indicate that "will" is the most dominant central modal verb, while "would," "could," and "can" are used significantly more regularly than other central modals (Biber, Conrad, Leech, & Finegan, 1999; Kennedy, 2002). In this regard, Vine (2004)

stresses that the employment and dissemination of modal verbs differ significantly between written and spoken texts and across numerous communicative contexts. Since modal verbs allow for the articulation of a variety of speech acts and meanings, they may be examined pragmatically, just like other language components. They are particularly challenging for learners because of their subtle variations in meaning and usage across situations. Modal verbs are often misunderstood, which leads to misunderstandings. Confusion or uncomfortable encounters result from these misconceptions, which often go unreported. Someone's thoughts or feelings about what they said may be altered by even a little error with a modal verb, making them seem impolite or uncertain.

Cultural norms also significantly influence how modals are used. Choosing the proper modal for a situation depends profoundly on the communication guidelines of the group you're in, which shows how modal use is shaped by culture and society. Even if the words are understood correctly, learners may continue to apply usage rules based on an incorrect understanding of their own culture, appearing overly assertive, overly timid, or even rude as a result.

Research on the use of modal verbs by Native English Speakers, especially in New Zealand English, shows that (would) is the most commonly employed central modal, followed by (will) and (can). Empirical evidence demonstrates that modal verbs are frequently utilised in transactional discourse and professional meetings. These findings show that modals are vital for conveying how speakers feel about what they say and for expressing a wide range of social meanings. This demonstrates their importance for communication and their usefulness in communication (McCarthy, 1991). Furthermore, modal verbs are often used by native English authors in their work, according to research by Samaie et al. (2014). The significance of hedging modal verbs in interpersonal communication, whether in written or spoken form, is attested to and shown by all of the aforementioned research.

## Conclusion and Suggestions

The present study deals with hedging modal verbs and intends to explore their role in interpersonal communication. The most common parts of fuzzy language, according to the research, are the hedges. Adjusting the interaction between speakers and listeners, hedges may make communication flexible, courteous, and seamless. A little set of auxiliaries called modal verbs expresses modality, such as possibility, obligation, and so on.

People use modal verbs to express something that can certainly happen in their daily routine. They help to explain concepts such as asking permission, offering, making a request, the speaker's attitude, and many more. The present study has found that modal verbs have an undeniable impact on making interpersonal communication more effective. Their utilisation indicates politeness and helps maintain and regulate relations between communicants. They play an important role in harmonising interpersonal communication, whether in spoken or written form.

Due to the importance of textbooks in the teaching and learning process, the authors suggest that grammar textbook authors and material developers pay attention to the significance of using the hedging modal verbs in communication. Moreover, they have to comprise modal auxiliaries with their different functions in the educational content as one of the valuable linguistic interactive sources, indicating the politeness in the communication. Furthermore, teachers should be prepared with knowledge of modal verbs to enable learners to use them semantically and pragmatically in interpersonal communication.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

**Copyright:** © 2025 by Bareq Raad Raheem, Raashid Nehal, Zanyar Nathir Ghafar Author(s) retain the copyright of their original work while granting publication rights to the journal.

**License:** This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, allowing others to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon it, even for commercial purposes, with proper

attribution. Author(s) are also permitted to post their work in institutional repositories, social media, or other platforms.

## References

- Alcaraz, E. (2000). *El inglés profesional y académico*. Madrid, Spain: Alianza Editorial.
- Biber, D. (1999). A register perspective on grammar and discourse: Variability in the form and use of English complement clauses. *Discourse Studies*, 1(2), 131–150.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445699001002001>
- Biber, D., Conrad, S., & Leech, G. (2002). *Longman student grammar of spoken and written English*. Harlow, England: Pearson Education.
- Biber, D., Johansson, S., Leech, G., Conrad, S., & Finegan, E. (1999). *Longman grammar of spoken and written English*. Harlow, England: Pearson Education.
- Boginskaya, O. A. (2023). Hedging as a politeness strategy in research article reviews. *Izvestiya of Southern Federal University. Philological Sciences*, 27(4), 22–33.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (1978). Universals in language usage: Politeness phenomena. In E. Goody (Ed.), *Questions and politeness: Strategies in social interaction* (pp. 56–311). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Brown, P., & Levinson, S. C. (2011). Politeness. In P. C. Hogan (Ed.), *The Cambridge encyclopedia of the language sciences* (pp. 635–636). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.
- Chafe, W. L., & Nichols, J. (Eds.). (1986). *Evidentiality: The linguistic coding of epistemology*. Norwood, NJ: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Ehrman, M. E. (1966). *The meanings of the modals in present-day American English*. The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton.
- Fowler, R. (1986). *Linguistic criticism*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.
- Hoye, L. (1997). *Adverbs and modality in English*. London, England: Longman.
- Huckin, T. N., & Olsen, L. A. (1996). *Technical writing and professional communication*. New York, NY: McGraw-Hill.

Ismail, I. A., & Febriyanti, A. (2022). The role of interpersonal communication between teachers and students is to improve the success of the learning process. *International Journal of Progressive Sciences and Technologies*, 30(2), 37–41.

Jaime Pastor, M., & Pérez-Guillot, C. (2015). A comparative analysis of modal auxiliary verbs in technical and general English. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 212, 292–297. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2015.11.379>

Kennedy, G. (2002). Variation in the distribution of modal verbs in the British National Corpus. In R. Reppen, S. M. Fitzmaurice, & D. Biber (Eds.), *Using corpora to explore linguistic variation* (pp. 73–92). Amsterdam, Netherlands: John Benjamins.

Lakoff, G. (1973). Hedges: A study in meaning criteria and the logic of fuzzy concepts. *Journal of Philosophical Logic*, 2(4), 458–508. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00262990>

Lakoff, R. (1972). Language in context. *Language*, 48(4), 907–927. <https://doi.org/10.2307/411994>

Ling, Y. S. C. (2016). The use of modal auxiliary verbs in horoscopes: A corpus-based study. *Issues in Language Studies*, 5(2), 1–14.

Luvuno, D., & Ajani, A. A. (2022). The use of modal auxiliary verbs among selected pre-service students at a South African rural university. *International Journal of Higher Education*, 11(2), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.5430/ijhe.v11n2p1>

Lyons, J. (1977). *Semantics* (Vol. 2). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

McCarthy, M. (1991). *Discourse analysis for language teachers*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Moafian, F., Talati-Baghsiahi, A., & Yarahmadzahi, N. (2018). Modal auxiliaries as stance-taking devices in linguistics research articles: A functional contrastive analysis. *Linguistik Online*, 91(4), 89–110.

- Orta, I. V. (2010). A contrastive analysis of the use of modal verbs in the expression of epistemic stance in business management research articles in English and Spanish. *Ibérica*, 19, 77–95.
- Quirk, R., Greenbaum, S., Leech, G., & Svartvik, K. (1985). *A comprehensive grammar of the English language*. London, England: Longman.
- Samaie, M., Khosravian, F., & Boghayeri, M. (2014). The frequency and types of hedges in research article introductions by Persian and English native authors. *Procedia – Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 98, 1678–1685. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2014.03.585>
- Shaffer, B. (2004). Information ordering and speaker subjectivity: Modality in ASL. *Cognitive Linguistics*, 15(2), 175–195. <https://doi.org/10.1515/cogl.2004.007>
- Simpson, P. (2003). *Language, ideology, and point of view*. London, England: Routledge.
- Vethamani, M. E., Manaf, U. K. A., & Akbari, O. (2008). Students' use of modals in narrative compositions: Forms and functions. *English Language Teaching*, 1(1), 61–74.
- Vine, B. (2004). Modal verbs in New Zealand English directives. *Nordic Journal of English Studies*, 3(3), 205–220.
- Vlasyan, G. R. (2019). Linguistic hedging in interpersonal communication. In *European Proceedings of Social and Behavioural Sciences* (pp. 617–623).