

## **Cautious Voices: Linguistic Hedging in Hindi Print Media**

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### **Abstract**

Newspaper editorials play a pivotal role in informing the public, shaping opinions, and promoting democratic engagement. They foster a more knowledgeable, participatory, and dynamic society through analysis, commentary, and advocacy. Linguistic hedges, such as cautious language or qualifiers, are frequently used in journalism to maintain objectivity and avoid making absolute statements. This paper investigates the hedging strategies employed by editorial writers in Hindi newspaper editorials. A dataset of 25 editorials from the Hindi daily ‘Dainik Jagran’ was selected for analysis. Using the theoretical framework by Prince et al. (1982), these editorials were contextually analysed to identify the types, frequencies, and pragmatic functions of various hedges. The results indicate that shields are more prevalent than Approximants in the dataset. The pragmatic functions of these markers include: diminishing the force of a claim, making a categorical/provisional claim rather than universal, politeness, and attributing the source of the claim to someone other than the writer. The study deepens our understanding of the hedging (a sort of mitigation strategy) and their pragmatic functions in Hindi newspaper editorials. The study can also have fruitful implication in teaching hedging

strategies (a crucial part of learners' pragmatic competence) to Hindi language learners by demonstrating practical illustrations from these editorials.

**Keywords:** Hedging; Print Media; Hindi Newspaper Editorials; Pragmatic functions; Metadiscourse markers

## 1. Introduction

Editorials, known as the voice of a newspaper, are public discourses that communicate with a mass audience and play a prominent role in the determining and shifting of public opinion (Van Dijk, 1996). Newspaper editorials play a crucial role in informing and engaging the public, shaping public opinion, fostering democracy, and driving positive change. Through their analysis, commentary, and advocacy, they contribute to a more informed, participatory, and vibrant society.

In effective communication practices, it is essential to place one's opinion strategically without being impolite or hurting the sentiments of others in communication. Newspaper editorials are an effective means to convince the readers of some particular opinion or issue. However, this is generally achieved with the appropriate choice of language so that the readers, instead of feeling being imposed upon, participate in the debate or discussion on the topic. This is often done with a pragmatic strategy of communication known as hedging.

Hedging in linguistic pragmatics primarily refers to a strategy that makes an expression indirect. The term "hedging" was used by Lakoff (1972) to refer "words whose job is to make things more or less fuzzy" (Lakoff, 1972, p. 195). The study of hedging has garnered significant interest among linguists subsequent to Lakoff's first work, and has caught scholarly attention in the field of pragmatics and communication studies in general. Some of the common examples of linguistic markers for hedging in English are modal verbs like *may/might/can*, adverbs like *perhaps* and *probably*, and subjectivity markers such as *I think* and *it seems*. They are used to express an opinion or a statement tentatively to avoid being too assertive or impolite. Apart from Sociolinguistics and Pragmatics, the topic of hedging has been studied extensively in the context of academic writing since the seminal work by Hyland (1998). Fraser (2010) describes hedging as an aspect of the pragmatic

competence (of a speaker): the ability to communicate with all its nuances without being rude or impolite.

The editorials, the main faces of the newspapers through which the editors convey the standpoints of the newspapers, are a rich and exciting source of data to examine the use of hedging strategies. Using an effective hedging strategy becomes extremely important for a responsibly written editorial. Hedging allows the editors to maintain a balance between the effectiveness and appropriateness of the editorials, between assertive and persuasive arguments, and between clarity and ambivalence of the message for diverse readers. In the context of newspaper articles, researchers have approached hedging as a tool used by journalists to avoid conflict (Wibowo & Yusoff 2014), as an expression of ‘toning down a statement’ (Trajkova, 2011) or as an approximator, adaptor or a shield to present one’s opinion safely in front of a varied audience (Khanbutayeva, 2020).

In the context of Indian languages, hedges have not been studied either as a pragmatic strategy of politeness or as a strategy in research articles to examine and identify different types of stand/view a writer may take, such as just to offer an opinion or a suggestion or to evaluate alternative standpoints critically. To the best of our information, a work of this kind needs to be better reported, particularly in the context of Indian-language newspapers, at least on the digital platform. This makes it worth an initial attempt to take up the language of the newspaper genre in an Indian language and analyse how journalists use hedging to safely keep their voices heard and understood without being caught in an unintended controversy or conflict due to bad language choice. This paper examines a selected set of editorials from two Hindi newspapers and analyses how the editors use hedges to present their views and opinions with a shield.

This paper presents the findings of a pilot study aimed at fulfilling the research gap. Data were collected from the popular Hindi newspaper, Dainik Jagran, comprising a dataset of approximately 10,000 words from 25 newspaper editorials. The texts were analysed to identify the linguistic devices or markers used for hedging. Additionally, a classification of the different types and functions of hedging was conducted. The paper focuses on two research questions, as in (A-B) below.

A. What are the functions of the hedges in the Hindi newspaper editorials?

B. What linguistic devices are used for hedging in Hindi, especially in newspaper editorials?

The rest of the paper is divided into five sections. The subsequent section describes the dataset compilation procedure, and the method employed in the analysis of editorials for hedging, along with the classification schema for categorising hedges in the study. The third section gives an overview of the various related scholarly works on hedging, paving way for the present study. The following section presents the results and discusses their implications. Finally, the last section concludes the study by outlining its significance, limitations, and future research directions.

## **2. Material and Method**

### **2.1. Material**

For the present study, a dataset of approximately 10,000 words was compiled from 25 Hindi newspaper editorials published throughout the year 2021. These editorials were randomly selected from the widely circulated Hindi daily, Dainik Jagran. The choice of the newspaper was based on its ease of digital availability, extensive circulation, and popularity among readers.

### **2.2. Method**

Firstly, the Hindi dataset was cleansed for any graphic or noise contents manually. Thereafter, the Hindi texts were transliterated as per the Indian languages Transliteration (ITRANS) schema (see Appendix for details) for the ease of universal readability. The selected editorials were contextually and comprehensively analysed for the various types of linguistic hedges and their pragmatic functions in context. For the sake of the classification of hedges, Prince et al.'s (1982) taxonomy for hedges was utilised. This framework has been chosen as it has been frequently employed in myriad studies analysing hedges, and also because the tags used in his framework capture the semantic and pragmatic roles of hedges in editorials to a large extent.

#### **2.2.1. The framework by Prince et al. (1982)**

Hedges have been broadly divided into two categories (see figure 1), based on a physician-physician interaction corpus by Prince, Frader and Bosk (1982): Approximators (*propositional hedging*) and Shields (*speech act hedging*). Approximators affect the truth condition of the proposition, whereas shields indicate a relation between the propositional content and the speaker or in other words these markers show the attitude of speakers towards their proposition.

Furthermore, each of the types of hedges, i.e. approximators and shields are subdivided into two. Approximators are divided into adaptors and rounders. Adaptors are used to show the degree of qualitative truth associated with a sentence. Adaptors are called hedges by Lakoff (1972), and they provide a degree of fuzziness to the expression (E.g. She looked *a little* pissed off yesternight.). Rounders are used with quantified expressions to estimate numerical information roughly (E.g. I lived in Pokhra for *about* six months.). Shields are further divided into two types: *plausibility shield* that exhibits the doubt of the writer (E.g. *Perhaps* the guest did not turn up due to severe rain.) and *attribution shield* (*According to some sources*, the ruling party is going to win the election.) that attributes the responsibility of the proposition to someone else than the addressor.

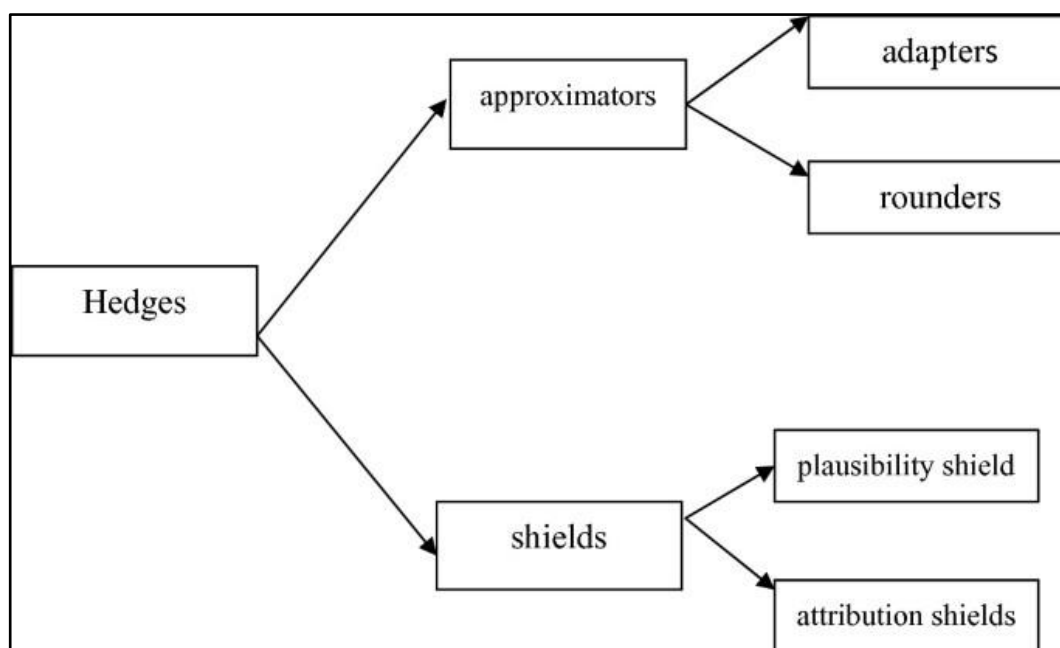


Figure 1. Types of hedges as per the framework of Prince et al. (1982)

Source: Hu, J. (2022)

### 3. Literature Review

In Linguistics, the discussion on hedges was initiated by Lakoff (1972) with his interests in the hedging functions (making a statement less fuzzy or fuzzier) of certain lexical items such as *sort of*, *technically*, etc. Lakoff argued that hedges are interpreted in a context and therefore they should be studied in Pragmatics. Hedges have also been studied in Sociolinguistics, particularly in relation to women's language, since the work of Lakoff (1973). Robin Lakoff studied certain characteristic features of women's language that are distinct in using tag questions and certain lexical elements that give expressions less force and more politeness. On the other hand, in their work on politeness, Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) developed a speech act theory of hedging focusing on the illocutionary force associated with hedging. They argued that using hedges in speech is a 'primary and fundamental method of disarming the routine interactional threat' that may arise in a communication (1978:151). The way Brown and Levinson focus on the speech act effect of hedging leads us to include a lot of expressions used in newspaper editorials that have some specific speech act functions. Hedges have been widely studied in the academic discourse by several scholars (Markkanen, Raija Hartmut Schröder (eds.) 1997, Kim and Lim 2015, Rosaria Mita Amalia and Yusuf Hamzah 2016, Wang 2016).

In the context of spoken medical discourse between two physicians, hedges have been divided into two categories by Prince, Frader and Bosk (1982): *propositional hedging* and *speech act hedging*. Propositional hedging affects the truth condition of the proposition, whereas speech act hedging indicates a relation between the propositional content and the speaker. They further classified hedges into two main classes: *approximators* and *shields*. Approximators are further divided into two types: *adaptors* and *rounders*. Adaptors are used to show the degree of qualitative truth associated with a sentence. Adaptors are called hedges by Lakoff (1972), and they provide a degree of fuzziness to the expression. Rounders are used with quantified expressions to provide a rough estimate. Shields are further divided into two types: *plausibility shield* that exhibits the doubt of the writer and *attribution shield* that attributes the responsibility of the proposition to someone else.

Salager-Meyer (1995) analyses hedges in the written scientific discourse and includes intensifiers such as *surprisingly*, *unexpectedly*, etc., that express the speaker's emotional state in the class of hedges. Using the classification scheme of Prince *et al.*, Gribanova and Graidukova (2019) have analysed the hedging practices in the genres of political speeches and interviews and their communicative impact on the utterance. Omo and Destiny (2020) in

their work titled “Pragmatic Hedges in Editorials: A Focus on Vanguard, Guardian and Sun Newspaper Editorials in 2017”, have investigated the nature and pragmatic functions of hedges deployed in Nigerean newspaper editorials using the theoretical framework by Salager Meyer (1994). The study shows that the most frequent type of hedges in the dataset is shield. Johansen (2020) also analysed hedges used in spoken communication, contrasting the language-specific strategy of English and Norwegian.

There exist quite a few initial works on the use and functions of hedges in the context of newspaper articles. Le (2004) has noted three types of linguistic devices, viz., evidential, person markers and relational markers, in his study of the argumentative structure of a French newspaper. She has also studied the persuasive effect of the newspaper on the public by the use of these linguistic means. The hedges have also been studied as a tool used by journalists to avoid religious, ethnic and cultural conflicts and to promote media ethics (Wibowo and Yusoff, 2014). Trajkova (2011) has studied hedge as an expression of ‘toning down a statement’. Khanbutayeva (2020) has shown that a hedge is used as an approximator, adaptor or shield to present one’s opinion safely in front of a varied audience.

Looking at the various scholarly works, we found a dearth of such works on hedging in Indian languages, especially Hindi. Therefore, this study which aims to investigate hedging in Hindi newspaper editorials would contribute to the discipline of Hindi Pragmatics in a way.

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

The study aimed to contextually analyse the curated dataset of Hindi newspaper editorials for the usage of hedging, their types and pragmatic functions. Table 1 below category-wise presents various types of hedging with their respective types (unique word forms) and tokens (number of individual words).

Table 1. Distribution of various types of Hedges in the dataset

TYPES OF HEDGING	TOKENS	TYPES
Adaptors	34	7
Rounders	16	10
Plausibility Shields	47	29
Attribution Shields	25	11
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>122</b>	<b>57</b>

The results show that overall, shields, which are the linguistic markers signaling a cautious, provisional, and uncertain attitude towards a claim made by the writer, are prevalent in Hindi editorials, followed by approximants, which mitigate the content of the proposition/claim. Our results align with a study by Omo & Destiny (2020), titled “Pragmatic Hedges in Editorials: A Focus on Vanguard, Guardian and Sun Newspaper Editorials in 2017”, who found shields to be the most frequent type of hedges relative to other types like adaptors, rounders, and attribution shields. Based on our findings, we can say that Plausibility shields, which are prevalent in Hindi newspaper editorials, are also most frequent in English newspaper editorials and likewise, adaptors and rounders are relatively low in Hindi editorials.

It is apparent from the figures and tables below that plausibility shield, which is a subtype of shield, account for the most frequent types of hedges (38.5%), among others, in Hindi newspaper editorials. Adaptors and rounders, which are the subtypes of approximants, have relatively lower representation in the dataset 27.9% and 13.1% respectively (see Figure 2 and 3).



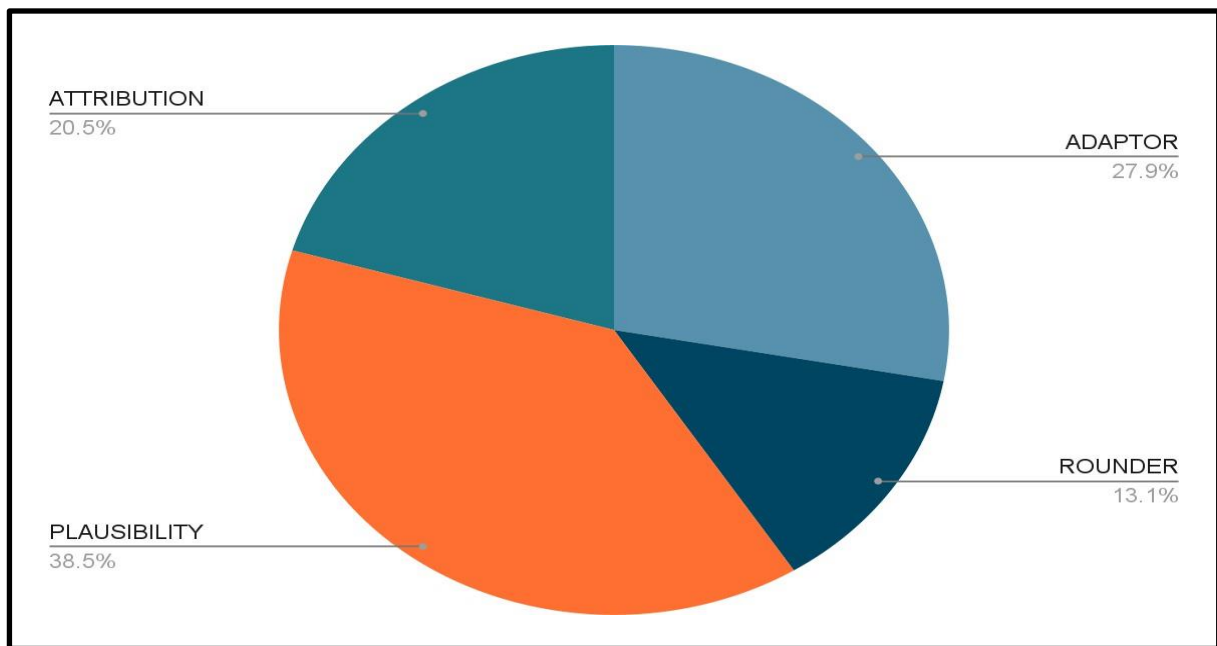


Figure 2. Percentage distribution of various hedges found in the dataset

(Source: Authors)

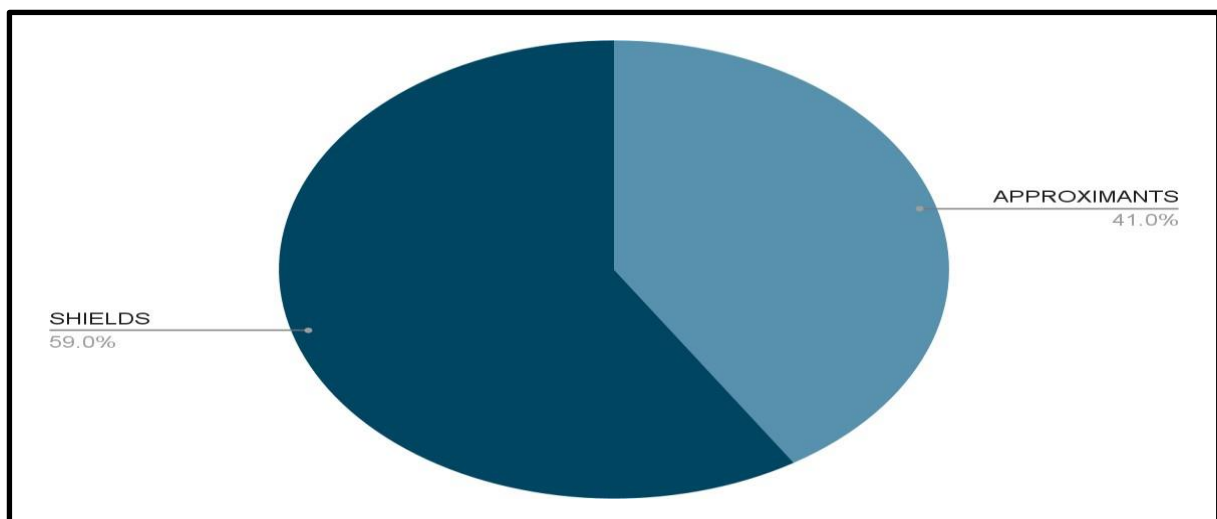


Figure 3. Overall Percentage distribution of two main types of hedges found in the dataset

(Source: Authors)

In Hindi, modal auxiliaries like *sakna* ‘can/could/may/might’ and *chahiye* ‘should’ as a plausibility shield have a considerably higher degree of presence in our dataset. However, we also found some frequent hedging strategies in Hindi. One such major device is the construction *bhale hi...lekin* ‘although..but’ and *lekin* ‘but’. Tag questions and conditionals are also quite

common to be used as shields in Hindi newspaper editorials. Based on the results, it can be inferred that speech act hedging rather than propositional hedging is more prevalent in Hindi opinion articles like newspaper editorials. It is clearly visible that presenting claims or points of view in a polite, inclusive, speculative, provisional, and attenuated tone is the way editorial writers put forth their stance in order to save their faces and the face of the audience and referents as well. The relatively lower representation of adaptors and rounders suggests that while Hindi editorial writers do soften their claims, they do so less frequently than they hedge for plausibility. Adaptors and rounders typically function to provide vague quantities or generalized statements, which are useful but not as central as signaling plausibility in the context of editorial writing.

Table 2 provides with the various sorts of hedges according to the chosen classification schema with Hindi examples from editorials along with their English translation. The examples have been discussed after the table.

Table 2. Types of hedges with transliterated Hindi examples and their respective English translation

Types of hedges	Hindi examples with English translation from the dataset
<p><b>Adaptors</b></p>	<p>1. <i>Yah aur kuCh nahIM, ek tarah se niyam apne haath meM lekar KhullI manmAnI karnA hai</i></p> <p>‘This is nothing but <b>sort of</b> blatant arbitrariness by taking the rules into one's hands.’</p>
<p><b>Rounders</b></p>	<p>2. <i>jab karIb do varSh pahle jammU kashmIr aur paMjAb ke sImAvartI ilAkoM meM Dron kI gatividhiyAM dikhnI shurU hul thIM</i></p> <p>‘When drone activities started appearing in the border areas of</p>

	Jammu-Kashmir and Punjab <b>about</b> two years ago.’
<b>Plausibility Shields</b>	<p>3. <i>loktautra meN virodh kI ek sImA hai, lekin lagtA hai kaI bAr kuch sAMsad iske prati udAsIn ho jAte hai.</i></p> <p>‘There is a limit of opposition in democracy, but it <b>seems</b> that sometimes some MPs become indifferent to it.’</p>
<b>Attribution Shields</b>	<p>4. <i>is samiti ke anusaar dillI sarkAr kI or se baDhA chaDhAkar kI gaI is mAMg ke kAraN kam se kam 12 rajyoM ko AksIjan saMkaT se jUjhnA paRA</i></p> <p>‘<b>According to this committee</b>, at least 12 states had to face oxygen crisis due to this exaggerated demand made by the Delhi government.’</p>

Referring to Example 1 in Table 2, the editorial writer, in spite of labelling an act as “whimsical” on the part of some authority, instead puts it as categorically whimsical using the hedge *ek tarah se* ‘sort of’. By doing so, the author is showing that the act is not typically whimsical, but non-prototypically.

In Example 2 from Table 2, the editorial writer, while locating the incident of drone activities in time, gives the reader a rounded-off value of time using the expression *karib* ‘about’ rather than precise information. This might be due to the fact that precise information is not known, or not needed.

In Example 3 of Table 2, the author has presented an opinion on Members of Parliament using the hedge *lagtA hai* ‘It seems’. Using such an expression before a statement makes it

subjective and less threatening to the face of referents, and also at the same time involving readers for myriad interpretation, and modest appeal, rather than being assertive.

In Example 4 of Table 2, the author is using an evidentiality marker, *is samiti ke anusaar* ‘according to this committee,’ while presenting a claim. Here the editorial writer is evading the responsibility of the truth value of the proposition from them and attributing that to some external source. By doing so author is saving themselves from any possible anticipated criticism.

The pragmatic functions of hedges include: diminishing the force of a proposition/claim, making a categorical comment or claim rather than absolute, attributing the source of the claim to someone else but the writer themselves, conveying a statement politely and indirectly in order to save the face of the interlocutors, make a provisional claim, evading the responsibility of a claim, presenting rounded off the value of numerical information rather than being precise.

The pragmatic functions identified in this study, such as diminishing the force of a claim, attributing claims to external sources, and presenting rounded numerical values, are essential for maintaining a balanced and respectful tone in editorials. These functions help writers navigate the delicate balance of making strong arguments while remaining open to alternative viewpoints and criticism. Understanding the use of hedges in editorial writing can provide insights for writers aiming to enhance their persuasive strategies. By employing hedges effectively, writers can present their viewpoints more diplomatically, increase reader engagement, and foster a more inclusive and reflective discourse.

From these results, we can infer that speech act hedging, which modifies the manner in which a claim is presented, is more prevalent than propositional hedging in Hindi newspaper editorials. This suggests that editorial writers prefer to present their claims in a polite, inclusive, speculative, provisional, and attenuated tone to maintain face for themselves, their audience, and their referents. The predominance of Shields in Hindi editorials aligns with findings in other languages, such as English. This suggests a common strategy across languages where writers use hedges to present their arguments cautiously and avoid absolute assertions. Shields serve to protect the writer's credibility and mitigate potential backlash by presenting claims as tentative or speculative. Plausibility shields, being the most frequent type of hedge, indicate a strong tendency among Hindi editorial writers to signal uncertainty or possibility. This aligns

with the pragmatic need to make statements less assertive and more open to interpretation, thus fostering a polite and respectful discourse. The findings are consistent with Omo & Destiny's (2020) study on hedging in English editorials, where Shields were also the most frequent type of hedge. This cross-linguistic similarity underscores the universal pragmatic function of hedging in editorial writing to present claims in a measured and face-saving manner.

## **5. Conclusion**

This study conducted a contextual analysis of selected Hindi newspaper editorials to identify hedges, their types, and the pragmatic roles they serve in editorial writing. The findings confirm that hedging is a crucial linguistic device in Hindi editorials, akin to its use in English and other languages. It allows writers to present their claims with caution, uncertainty, and politeness. The analysis revealed that Plausibility shields are the most prevalent type of hedge, accounting for around 38% of instances. Other types identified include Adaptors (about 28%), Rounders (around 13%), and Attribution shields (around 20%). Looking at the findings, it seems that hedging, particularly through the use of Plausibility shields, plays a significant role in Hindi newspaper editorials. The pragmatic functions of these hedges include diminishing the force of a proposition or claim, making categorical rather than absolute statements, attributing claims to external sources, conveying statements politely and indirectly to save face, making provisional claims, evading responsibility, and presenting rounded numerical values rather than precise figures. These findings enhance our understanding of hedging strategies in journalistic writing of editorial writing practices in Hindi. This study highlights how Hindi print media tactfully shapes public opinion using the communicative and discourse strategy of hedging. Awareness and proper use of hedging are considered essential for pragmatic competence, particularly for second language learners (Fraser, 2010). Therefore, this study has valuable implications for teaching hedging to both Hindi L1 and L2 learners by incorporating practical examples from editorials, thereby enhancing their written and spoken linguistic skills. However, the study was conducted using a relatively small dataset. A larger dataset could have provided a more nuanced understanding of hedging usage and its functions in editorials. Future research could explore the impact of these hedging strategies on reader perception and the effectiveness of editorial arguments.

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## **Appendix 1**

The "Indian languages Transliteration" (ITRANS) is an ASCII transliteration scheme for Indic scripts, particularly for the Devanagari script. Vowels. Like the Harvard-Kyoto scheme, the ITRANS romanization only uses diacritical signs found on the common English-language computer keyboard, and it is quite easy to read and pick up.



Table 1. List of Devanāgarī vowels with their ITRANS equivalent

Devanāgarī	ITRANS	Devanāgarī	ITRANS
अ	a	ए	e
आ	A/aa		E
इ	i	ई	ae
ई	I/ii/ee		aE
उ	u	ऐ	ai
ऊ	U/uu	ओ	^o
ऋ	RRi/R^i	ओ	o
ॠ	RRI/R^I		O
ऌ	LLi/L^i	औ	au
ॡ	LLI/L^I	अं	M/.m/.n
ऐ	^e	अः	H
		अँ	.N
		अः	.h <a href="#">[el]</a>
		ऽ	.a
		ॐ	OM, AUM

Table 2. List of Devanāgarī consonants with their ITRANS equivalent

क	ख	ग	घ	ङ	Velar
ka	kha	ga	gha	~Na	
च	छ	ज	झ	ञ	Palatal
cha	Cha	ja	jha	~na	
ट	ठ	ड	ढ	ण	Retroflex
Ta	Tha	Da	Dha	Na	
त	थ	द	ध	न	Dental
ta	tha	da	dha	na	
प	फ	ब	भ	म	Labial
pa	pha	ba	bha	ma	
य	र	ल	व		Semi-vowel
ya	ra	la	va		
श	ष	स	ह	ळ	Fricative
sha	Sha	sa	ha	La	

Table 3. List of Devanāgarī Irregular consonant clusters with their ITRANS equivalent

Devanāgarī	ITRANS
क्ष	kSa/kSha/xa
त्र	tra
ज्ञ	GYa/j~na
श्र	shra

Table 4. List of Devanāgarī Consonants with Nuqta with their ITRANS equivalent

Devanāgarī	ITRANS
क़	qa
ख़	Ka
ग़	Ga
ज़	za
फ़	fa
ड़	.Da/Ra
ढ़	.Dha/Rha
व़	wa