

## Gender Differences in The Use of Hedges by Writers in Selected Pakistani Newspapers: A Corpus-Based Study of The Express Tribune and The Dawn

### ABSTRACT:

This paper investigates the uses of hedges by Pakistani writers in The Express Tribune and The Dawn Newspaper. Hedges are words that speakers or writers use to express uncertainty and tentativeness in their language. A corpus of 28 articles was compiled for the study. The raw data were then cleaned and converted into text files. To find out hedges, each text file was uploaded to Metapak that produced a list of hedges used in each article. This list was further refined by removing undesired words. The study reveals that the writers of both newspapers used a total of forty-eight hedges. It uncovers that the male contributors use more hedges than the female contributors and that The Dawn Newspaper employs more hedges than The Express Tribune. Both writer-oriented and reader-oriented hedges were observed across the two newspapers. The study concludes that Pakistani English newspapers employ hedging practices in the writing. The study is limited by its small sample size and focus on only two newspapers, suggesting the need for broader research across larger datasets and diverse media outlets.

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### Introduction

The study of gender is a significant area of interest in research in linguistics holding both academic and popular appeal. This field encompasses a wide range of theoretical approaches such as critical discourse analysis, conversational analysis, corpus linguistics, epistemologies, and methodologies, making it appealing to a broad audience. Since the 1960s, sociolinguists have established mechanisms for scientific inquiry into variations in language attributed to various social factors including gender, age, class, and

socioeconomic background of people. Investigation of language and gender is essential as it highlights inequalities and disparities in the real world (Lakoff, 1973). Gender differences in language are a reflection of and contribute to the promotion of inequalities between sexes (Dixon & Foster, 1997, Hussain, et al., 2023). The research on gender-based variations in the use of hedges has supported Dixon's and Foster's viewpoints. Particularly, Robin Lakoff's groundbreaking work 'Language and Woman's Place' has profoundly influenced research on the uses of hedges in both men's and women's speech. Lakoff's (1975) analysis of everyday conversation of American women demonstrates that women use hedges to soften their opinions. Lakoff further highlights that 'women are expected to be more conservative of expressions, refined, polite and indirect as compared to men' (Eckert & McConnell Ginnet, 2003).

A writer employs hedges when explaining the prototype theory with reference to category membership enabling them to indicate how an item may possibly be linked to different categories either atypically or typically. In writing, hedges are used to reduce the possibility of critique or generalization whereas when used in speaking, hedges serve to mitigate the impact of an utterance that happens owing to different constraints between a speaker and a listener (Lewin, 2005; Salager-Meyer, 1997). Falling under different parts of speech such as modal verbs, adverbs and adjectives, hedges may be as well as composed of clauses like the use of tag questions in speaking and writing. Hedges may also be used euphemistically in some cases. In epistemic modality, hedges allow speakers and writers to make a signal or a level of caution in proposition (Kranich, 2011).

Different studies have been carried out on hedges in various contexts; however, this study focuses on the use of hedges by males and females in newspaper articles which depict dynamics in journalistic writing. The current study explores the usage of hedges employed by both men and women in writing to articulate different thoughts. The purpose of the study is to explore the use of hedges in two well-renowned newspapers in Pakistan. The study is governed by the following research questions: Who uses more hedges: male or female writers? What specific hedges are used by male or female writers, and how do male and female writers employ hedges? The study concludes that the male writers use more hedges than the female writers; The Dawn's writers use more hedges than The Express Tribune's. Furthermore, the study demonstrates that both writer-oriented and reader-oriented hedges were used by the writers in their articles.

## **Literature Review**

Hedges can be statements whereby a writer/speaker expresses his/her reasoning based on plausibility rather than absolute certainty, thus exhibiting the degree of confidence that is appropriate in a particular context (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Hedges are aimed at acknowledging the boundaries of knowledge and emphasize the cautious manner in which the writer articulates their thoughts. Hedges, being a key concept

in pragmatics, is an extensively researched area. Hedges also called hedging (Lakoff, 1975) used both in speaking and writing, refer to expressions used in different types/forms of writing by writers and speakers also to signal caution, certainty / uncertainty or eliminate or introduce ambiguity in the meaning (Lewis & Lawry, 2014). According to her, hedges modify words or phrases within a proposal that makes the border indistinct or make the border distinct (Fetzer, 2010; Fraser, 2010).

Hedges can be classified into two types; the first kind modifies words or phrases within a proposition and the second kind modifies one's commitment to the propositional content. In order to differentiate between two kinds of hedging, some researcher thinks of it; using various contexts, and found that hedging devices are used to reduce the strength or force of an utterance by expressing uncertainty, possibility, and tentativeness. Conversely, boosting devices are used to intensify or emphasize the force of a statement by expressing an opinion and asserting a proposal with confidence (Holmes, 1995; Hyland, 1998).

Lakoff (1973) argues that "languages use us as much as we use language" (p. 45). Our thoughts guide the form of expression that we want to express. Similarly, we could express ourselves to the extent as much as we think and feel about things and they govern the way we express ourselves. On numerous occasions, despite their shared denotative senses, two synonymous words cannot be substituted for each other leading to a speaker/writer's failure to articulate one's thoughts. Similarly, a person may exhibit numerous emotional states such as interest, uncertainty or other emotional states while attempting to express one's thoughts. While engaged in a conversation with an interlocutor, the two individuals may conclude their discussion successfully if they operate from the same context and are in possession of a similar mental lexicon.

Lakoff reports that women experience discrimination in two distinct forms. First, they are instructed in the ways of speech, second, language usage is generally directed against them. She has highlighted the role of language in the eradication of inequalities and the resolution of problems. It has been noted that different lexical items carry different connotations for both men and women, and such differences can be anticipated by noting the societal roles of both sexes. She notes that in some cultures and societies 'women's language', though these women were not uninfluential, has been refuted, misinterpreted, and criticized mostly for 30 years (1973, p. 18). Lakoff as cited by Holmes has identified different features of a woman's language and these include various distinguished linguistic devices such as indirect requests, tag questions, fillers, and empty adjectives (1982; 1983). In her research, she explicitly delineated the ways in which speakers' express tentativeness or uncertainty about various statements. She asserts that hedges are used when speaking is uncertain about some facts or to reduce the effect or force of an utterance "for the sake of politeness" (Lakoff, 1975, pp. 53-54).

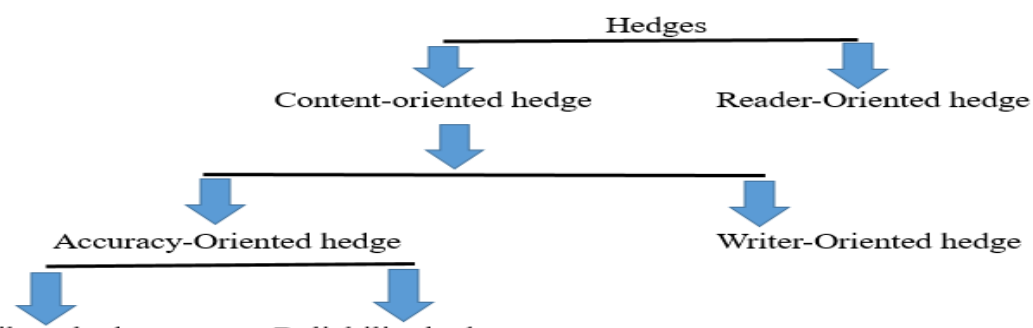
Interactional resources provide opportunities to writers to express their views while keeping in view the culturally and socially determined position of other members of society. Therefore, they acknowledge, challenge, or suppress alternatives or anticipate so that work could be expanded or restricted for such views and opportunities (White, 2003). Hedges are one of the sub-categories among five interactional resources (Hyland, 2005; Thompson & Thetela, 1995). Hedges can be described and studied from the perspective of Ken Hyland which he mentioned in his book “Metadiscourse: Exploring Interaction in Writing” as part of interactional resources (Hyland, 2005, p. 52).

Hedges are words or devices such as ‘perhaps’, ‘might’, and ‘possibly’ that expresses the writer’s decision to recognize viewpoints and alternative voices so that complete commitment to a proposition could be withheld. According to Hyland, hedges lay great emphasis on the subjectivity of a position held by an individual and allow him to present an opinion rather than facts. It is mandatory for the writers to calculate how much weight they should give to an assertion, the degree of precision or reliability for carrying the process, and further claiming protection in case of eventual overthrow (Hyland, 1998).

## Research Methodology

We used Ken Hyland's (1998) model of hedges, which is used in the analysis of hedging in different writing, as a theoretical framework for the study. We used Ken Hyland's model since this model focuses on the use of hedging in writing and provides guidelines in the analysis of hedges employed by male and female writers. Hyland proposed a model of hedges in which he categorized hedges into different types on the basis of their function in discourse. First, he divided hedges into two main categories i.e. content-oriented and reader-oriented. The former kind of hedge is related to the propositional content while the latter discusses a writer’s assertiveness (writer’s opinion). Further, he divides content-oriented hedges into the following two sub-categories: accuracy-oriented and writer-oriented hedges. The former discusses propositional content whereas the latter discusses commitment towards propositional content. The author further divides accuracy-oriented into reliability and attribute hedges where reliability hedges demonstrate the uncertainty of accuracy and attribute hedges express precision in the expression. The writer further emphasizes the usage of hedges for some particular fields, for example, accuracy-oriented hedges are used for scientific writing whereas reader and writer-oriented are used primarily for writings in social sciences, particularly for those whose aims are driven by social goals and strategies.

**Figure 1.** *Hyland (1998) Model of Hedges*



The Hyland model may serve as a theoretical framework in the context of a study exploring gender differences in the use of hedges in Pakistani newspapers. Further, this model helps the researchers to uncover how male and female writers employ lexical and modal hedges at both epistemic and rhetorical levels, shedding light on the role of gender in shaping linguistic expression in journalistic writing. The model depicts the use of hedges in different writing and this usage is influenced by different factors like audience expectations, disciplinary conventions, and the writer's rhetorical purpose. The application of this model is promising on the epistemological and ontological basis for the study because it helps us to gain insights into how writers negotiate their stances, authority, and argumentative positions within a given discourse community.

Corpus-based mixed method research was used for the study. A mixed methods research design is a procedure for collecting, analyzing, and “mixing” both quantitative and qualitative methods in a single study or a series of studies to understand a research problem (Creswell et al., 2011). The study has employed a mixed-methods approach, with a quantitative method used for the "what and who" aspects and a qualitative method utilized for the "how" aspect. This approach expedites a systematic and smooth progression of steps and the application of statistical tools for data analysis. The population of this study constitutes all the opinion articles published in ‘The Express Tribune’ and ‘The Dawn’ newspapers from 2018 to 2020. The selection of the articles was based on purposive sampling, also known as selective, judgment, or subjective sampling. The articles were selected for specific purposes (Anderson & Arsenault 1998, p.124) in order to enable the researchers to exercise their own judgment for the selection of members of the population on the basis of particular characteristics required for the study (Cohen et al., 2007). The study was limited to:

- Male and female Pakistani newspaper writers.
- The Opinion articles of ‘The Dawn’ and ‘The Express Tribune’ newspapers.
- Opinion articles that were written from 2018 to 2020 were chosen for the study.

To find out who uses more hedges, what hedges they use, and how they use these hedges in the opinion articles of The Express Tribune and The Dawn Newspaper individually and collectively, a corpus of 28 articles was compiled which was composed of 24,601 on different topics from The Express Tribune and The Dawn Newspaper and seven male and female writers were selected from each newspaper respectively. Raw data (metadata), composed of 28 articles were cleaned and converted into text files. The text file of each article was uploaded to Metapak; afterwards, hedges were selected in the Metapak category tab. Then, the search tab was pressed which produced a list of hedges used in the single article. Finally, the

list of hedges used in each article was saved as a raw list and then refined by eliminating undesired words.

## Analysis and Discussion

The analysis of quantitative data was entailed the following steps:

- Hedges were identified in each file by using software (Metapak)
- Frequency of hedges was calculated separately by using Metapak and Microsoft Excel
- Hedges used by female writers in The Express Tribune and The Dawn newspapers were calculated respectively
- Hedges used by male writers in the Express Tribune and The Dawn newspaper was calculated respectively

Finally, a comparison of hedges was conducted between male and female newspaper writers. To explore the usage of hedges in each file, the software Metapak was employed. First, the text file of each article was uploaded to Metapak. Then, hedges were selected in the categories tab of Metapak and ultimately, the search tab was pressed which produced a list of hedges employed in the single article. The list of hedges used in each article was saved as a raw list and then pasted on Excel Sheet for refinement which entailed removing undesired words. In their articles, male and female writers used forty-eight hedges out of one hundred and thirty-three hedges given in the list, which was formulated by Hyland and these include the following: quite, often, suggested, may, almost, could, perhaps, appeared, possible, about, felt, relatively, usually, claim, likely, might, seems, sometimes, supposed, would, around, feel, indicates, apparently, appears, apparent, claimed, largely, indicated, mainly, uncertain, argue, tends to, suspects, fairly, indicate, doubt, probably, approximately, estimated, argued, generally, mostly, unlikely, assume, assumed, probable and appear.

To investigate the frequency of hedges in each file was, the text file of each article was uploaded to Metapak, hedges were selected in the categories tab of Metapak and ultimately, the search tab function produced a list of hedges with their frequency used in each article. The list of hedges along with their frequencies was saved and then transferred to Excel sheet. Finally, the frequency of each file was calculated by applying the statistical formula in the Excel sheet. By adding the frequency of each article, the total frequency of forty-eight hedges was calculated, which was three hundred and twenty-nine.

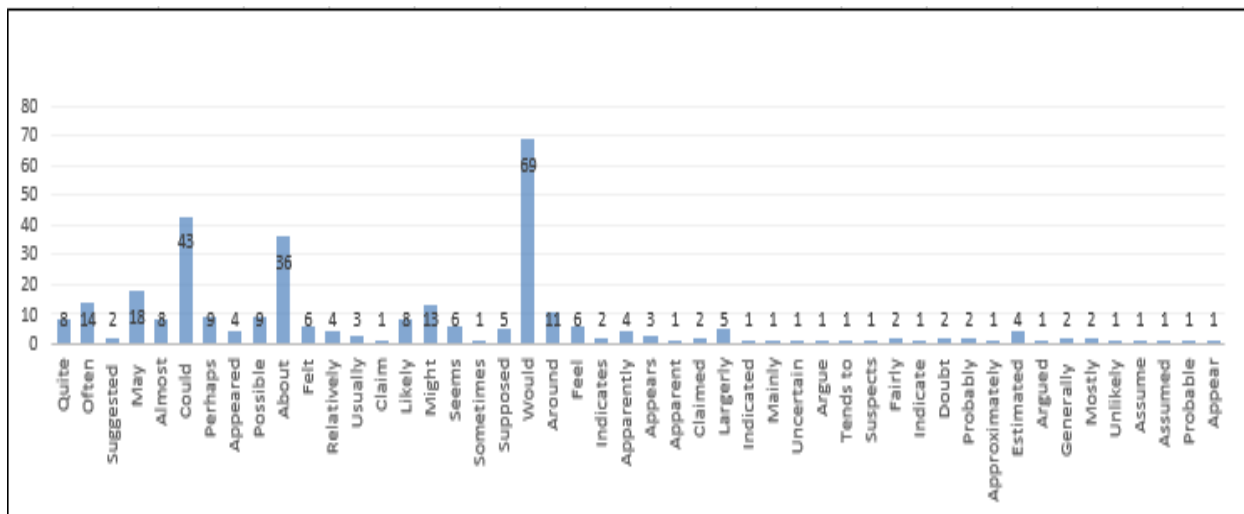
**Table 1**

*Total Frequency of each Hedge*

Hedges	F	Hedges	F	Hedges	F	Hedges	F
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Quite	8	Usually	3	Appears	3	Indicate	1
Often	14	Claim	1	Apparent	1	Doubt	2
Suggested	2	Likely	8	Claimed	2	Probably	2
May	18	Might	13	Largely	5	Approximately	1
Almost	8	Seems	6	Indicated	1	Estimated	4
Could	43	Sometimes	1	Mainly	1	Argued	1
Perhaps	9	Supposed	5	Uncertain	1	Generally	2
Appeared	4	Would	69	Argue	1	Mostly	2
Possible	9	Around	11	Appear	1	Unlikely	1
About	36	Feel	6	Tends to	1	Assume	1
Felt	6	Indicates	2	Suspects	1	Assumed	1
Relatively	4	Apparently	4	Fairly	2	Probable	1
<b>Sub-total</b>	<b>161</b>		<b>129</b>		<b>20</b>		<b>19</b>
<b>Total</b>				<b>329</b>			

**Figure 2.** Graphical Representation of Hedge Frequency



a) Hedges used by female writers in the Express Tribune and the Dawn newspaper were calculated respectively

The frequency of hedges used by the female writers was determined separately for each newspaper (The Dawn and The Express Tribune). Female writers of The Express Tribune used 56 hedges, whereas those of The Dawn used 99. The data shows that the Dawn's female writers have evinced a higher degree of uncertainty than that of the Express Tribune's in their writings.

**Table 2**

*Frequency of Hedges Used by Female Writers*

<b>Newspaper Writers</b>	<b>Hedges</b>
ETO Female	56
DO Female	99
<b>Total Hedges</b>	<b>155</b>

**a) Hedges used by male writers in the Express Tribune and the Dawn newspaper was calculated respectively**

The frequency of hedges used by the male writers was calculated for each newspaper separately (the Dawn and the Express Tribune). The male writers of the Express Tribune used eighty hedges in total whereas the female writers of the Dawn newspaper used ninety-four hedges in total. The data shows that the Dawn Newspaper male writers displayed a higher degree of uncertainty than the Express Tribune's male writers in their writing.

**Table 3**

*Frequency of Hedges Used by Male Writers*

<b>Newspaper Writers</b>	<b>Hedges</b>
ETO male	80
DO male	94
<b>Total Hedges</b>	<b>174</b>

**a) Comparison of Hedges between Male and Female Newspaper Writers**

The comparison was made between male and female newspaper writers on the basis of frequencies calculated individually and collectively. The analysis reveals that male writers in both newspapers use more hedges than female writers in their writings. This finding contradicts Lakoff's (1973) assumption, which



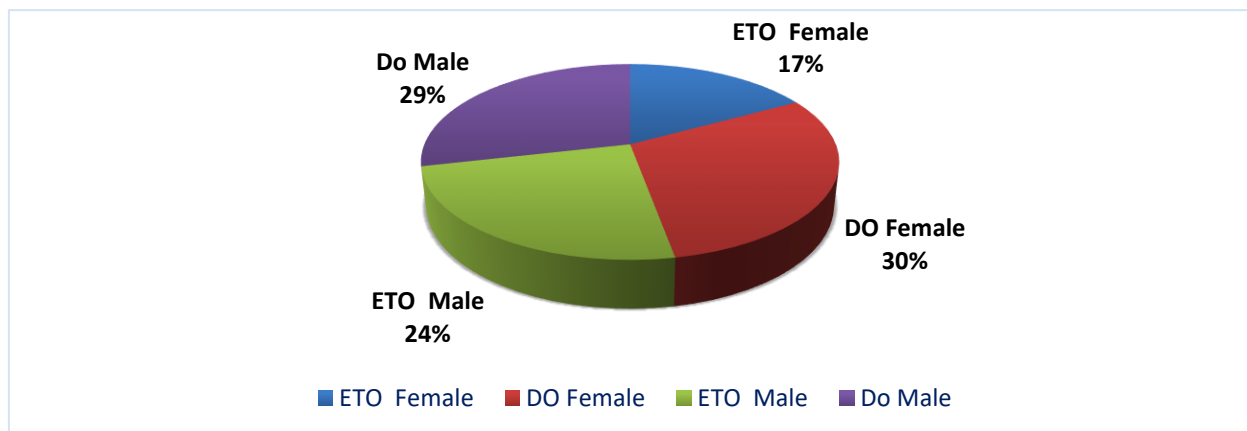
highlights that women’s language is characterized by greater use of hedges, reflecting tentativeness and lack of assertiveness. Contrary to the view that hedging is predominantly a gendered trait, the present study argues that it functions as a rhetorical strategy employed by male writers to soften claims, negotiate their stance, or engage readers more effectively. This perspective aligns with recent scholarship (e.g., Holmes, 1982; Hyland, 1998) that conceptualizes hedging as a context-dependent communicative resource for managing interaction, rather than solely as an indicator of gendered speech.

**Table 4**

*Comparison of Hedges between Male and Female Newspaper Writers*

<b>Newspaper Writers</b>	TO Female	DO Female	TO male	DO male
<b>Hedges</b>	<b>56</b>	<b>99</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>94</b>
<b>Total</b>	<b>155</b>		<b>174</b>	

**Figure 3.** *Visual Representation of Hedges Used by the Male and Female Writers of the Express Tribune and the Dawn Newspaper*



Data was analyzed qualitatively in the second part of the study. Qualitative data was analyzed by studying each hedge in the context, and the data indicates that reader-oriented and writer-oriented hedges were used by both newspaper writers. “Reader-oriented hedges hedge writer assertiveness” whereas “writer-oriented hedges hedge a writer’s commitment toward propositional content” (Koutsantoni 2007, p. 115). The assertiveness of the writer exhibits consideration of respect for other’s feelings, thoughts, and beliefs. Whereas propositional content the writer’s consideration of other’s opinions. Various examples

were drawn from the data to exemplify the qualitative analysis of data.

The writer in the article ‘Where the Money Goes’ expresses tentativeness by using the modal verb ‘may’:

*“What the World Bank is going to do **may** determine the course of aid in this century.”*

The word ‘**may**’ be used as a hedge in the above-stated sentence that indicates uncertainty or possibility of aid provisioning by the World Bank. Further, the use of ‘**may**’ introduces a level of caution and acknowledges that there are other factors that could influence the outcome.

In the article ‘Voting for Children’ the writer shows tentativeness by using the verb ‘appears’. The use of the word ‘appear’ depicts that statement based on observation or perception. Additionally, this word introduces a degree of uncertainty in the sentence that child sexual abuse is based on an initial impression or assessment rather than an absolute fact.

*“It **appears** that Pakistan has finally chosen to confront the problem of child sexual abuse that had been festering for decades.”*

The modal verb ‘could’ expresses the writer’s uncertainty in the article ‘Captain for Corona’:

*“The government is not preparing us for what **could** possibly lie ahead, and it is not communicating how it plans to deal with the crisis if it amplifies in the coming weeks and months”*

The writer in the article ‘Pakistani’s Taliban Future’ expresses uncertainty by using the modal verb ‘would’:

*“If true, these media reports could be interpreted in several ways. Distancing themselves from TTP groups **would** be a challenge for the Afghan Taliban.”*

The writer expresses tentativeness through the use of ‘possible’ in the article ‘Woman and Violence’:

*“Protection from the aggressors is the foremost step which can only be **possible** with improved laws and legislation.”*

The writer expresses assertiveness in the article ‘Global Politics of Race and Birth Rates’ through the use of the verb ‘felt’

*“Personally, I **felt** that the Christchurch attack was a dead giveaway.”*

## Conclusion

The study explores the use of hedges by male and female writers in The Express Tribune and The Dawn Newspaper metadiscourse, guided by the following research question: Who uses more hedges, male or female writers? What specific hedges are used by male or female writers, and how do male and female writers employ hedges? Metadiscourse as a significant element of written discourse has gained worldwide recognition, exhibiting its pragmatic utility. Writing is considered a social communication in which writers

present themselves through discourse, employing linguistic expressions called metadiscourse (Hyland, 2004). Within n metadiscourse, writers employ various interpersonal devices such as hedges and boosters to reshape different claims to achieve persuasion (Hyland, 2000; Vazquez & Giner, 2009). Robin Lakoff in her book “Language and Woman’s Place” propounded that women in their speech employ more hedges than men or demonstrate greater uncertainty owing to their role in a male-dominated society (Lakoff, 1973). However, another study conducted on the use of hedges by male and female speakers in various academic disciplines in MICASE exhibited variation among disciplines in the use of hedges, and was independent of gender differences among speakers (Poos and Simpson, 2002). The present study revealed that male and female writers employed forty-eight hedges out of one hundred and thirty-three hedges from the given list formulated by Hyland.

It was revealed in the study that male writers utilized more hedges than female writers, and the writers of the Dawn Newspaper used more hedges than the Express Tribune’s. The findings contradict previous studies which consistently reported higher degree of usage of hedges by females. Several factors contribute to the production of different results, including cultural differences, the avoidance of absolute claims, limited access to information and facts. Furthermore, this research work concluded that both writer-oriented and reader-oriented hedges were used by the writers in their articles, thereby exhibiting the complex nature of meta-discourse usage. The study is limited by its small sample size and focus on only two newspapers, and suggests exploring broader research across larger datasets and diverse media outlets to attain a more in-depth understanding of the use of hedges in written discourse.

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