

A Study of Hedges in American Sitcom *the Big Bang Theory* from the Perspective of Politeness Principle

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Abstract: *The Big Bang Theory*, as an American sitcom, was well received by audiences at home and abroad since its first broadcast. Fuzziness is a basic attribute of natural language, and an indispensable part of human communications. If people cannot use hedges properly in our daily life, they would make more serious communicative failures. In this article, based on the Politeness Principle of Leech, the author studied the hedges from six perspectives by analyzing various factors in American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, such as the plot, personal characters and the context. This article aims to help English lovers have a better understanding of hedges. It also guides the reasonable use of hedges in daily activities, and makes interpersonal relationships more harmonious. At the same time, English learners are able to achieve better cross-cultural communication by thinking about the differences between eastern and western cultures.

Keywords: *The Big Bang Theory*; Politeness Principle; Hedges

1. Introduction

Language, as a bridge for people to communicate, can not only express their feelings, but also eliminate their misunderstandings, shorten psychological distance and enhance mutual understanding. In daily communication, people express their ideas in a direct or indirect way, that is, using clear or fuzzy expressions. Sometimes, they tend to use the hedges to express their opinions since the use of hedges can make their utterances more polite and euphemistic. In other words, they want to achieve Politeness Principle.

Leech (1983) put forward the politeness principle for the first time in his *Pragmatic Principle*^[1]. In this book, he explained the significance of politeness principle in our daily interpersonal communication. He divided politeness principle into six maxims. They are tact maxim, generosity maxim, approbation maxim, modesty maxim, agreement maxim and sympathy maxim. In recent years, lots of scholars have studied the politeness principle and found that the appropriate use of hedges in the communicative conversation was able to make the conversation more tactful and appropriate, which was one of the important means to make the communicative conversation go on smoothly.

As a sitcom, *The Big Bang Theory* told a funny life story about four otaku scientists and a beautiful neighbor. It had been popular among young people with its new subjects and humorous dialogues since 2007. In order to achieve their purpose, the characters in it used a variety of speech arts among which the use of hedges was an important one.

This paper studied the use of hedges in *The Big Bang Theory* from six perspectives of politeness principle, aiming to provide references for audiences and English learners to better understand language and character relations. At the same time, it was pointed out that improper use of hedges fails to maintain politeness and leads to pragmatic failure.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Studies on Politeness Principle

Since 1970s, the research of politeness principle had been paid more attention by a great number of scholars. With the study of politeness principle by scholars in recent years, it was found that the proper use of hedges in communication will make the conversation more tactful and appropriate. It was the most important ways to make the conversation go smoothly. In 1983, Leech expounded the important role of

politeness in linguistic communication in his book *Pragmatics Principles*. His main research results and contributions were as follows: First of all, he gave the basic definition of polite and impolite behavior. Secondly, he defined the relative symmetry and asymmetry of politeness behaviors. In his opinion, the reason why people can get along with each other was that both sides of communication follow a series of pragmatic principles of interpersonal language communication, among which politeness principle was an important one. Leech (1983: 87) divided politeness principle into six categories, each of which includes one maxim and two sub-maxims^[1].

Politeness principle restricts people's language activities, helps to reduce the friction and contradiction between the two sides of communication, and prompts the communicators to use language correctly so that people can achieve the success of communication. Politeness principle is not only applied in our daily life, but also reflected in cross-cultural communication. Although politeness principle is widely used in our daily life, there are great differences in the specific application process because of the different cultural customs. Different nations have different emphases in the understanding and following of politeness principle. Paying attention to those differences is helpful for the communicators to adjust their emphasis on politeness principle and avoid unnecessary pragmatic failures in order to communicate more appropriately in the cross-cultural context.

2.2 Studies on Hedges

In our daily life, there are many examples of people accepting and dealing with vague information. Babies do not recognize their mothers by their shape, size, or clothing. Children can also recognize some of the scribbles. Writers will not only use strict quantitative language and complete three-paragraph style to express artistic conception and shape characters. In daily communication, ambiguity and vagueness are allowed as long as the purpose of communication is achieved. Fuzziness is one of the characteristics of natural language. Meanings of words and semantic fuzziness play an important role in communication. Fuzziness is one of the objective characteristics of human language, which makes language flexible and reliable. It's helpful to keep communication more euphemistic and convincing. Many scholars have devoted themselves to the study of fuzzy phenomenon for a long time, but it is only in the last 20 or 30 years that fuzzy language has been specially studied. As a newly developed subject, fuzzy linguistics is only a semantic subject at the beginning. It aims to study the linguistic category of concepts, which belongs to a branch of Semantics. The fuzzy set theory of professor Zadeh (1965), an expert of cybernetics from the University of California, was the theoretical basis of fuzzy language^[2]. And then linguists began to study all kinds of linguistic phenomenon from a new perspective and lots of new methods.

Hedges belong to a kind of language phenomenon of fuzzy language. George Lakoff was the first linguist to define "hedges". The term hedges first appeared in Lakoff's seminal monograph, *Hedges: A Study in Meaning Criteria and the Logic of Fuzzy Concepts*. He defined hedges as words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy. In 1972, Lakoff (1972: 463) pointed out that "studying some words whose meaning is fuzzy is the most interesting thing to me. These words make things become fuzzy or not too fuzzy, and I will name these words hedges."^[3] He thought that the hedges are the most interesting and worthy study. With the emergence of fuzzy set theory, hedges in language communication gradually receive widespread attention. Skelton (1988) argued that the use of hedges is an important part of pragmatic competence, and the lack of such competence will lead to serious verbal errors^[4]. As a result, the use of hedges is very important to meet the needs of politeness principle.

Bi Jingjing (2017) studied on the pragmatic function of hedges in *How I Met Your Mother* according to politeness principle. She concluded that the appropriate usage of hedges can produce a better communicative effect between speakers and hearers^[5]. Wang Lu and Sun Jiabao (2019) explored the use of hedges by teachers in college English teaching according to politeness principle. They pointed out that by analyzing the use of hedges and its pragmatic function, teachers were able to use hedges appropriately to organize classroom teaching and convey accurate and objective information^[6].

2.3 Studies on the Big Bang Theory

The American sitcom, *The Big Bang Theory*, told the funny life of four otaku scientists and a beautiful neighbor. It was a popular and successful American sitcom. As a famous American TV series, it was very suitable for the corpus of this play. Since its broadcast, many scholars had conducted in-depth research on *The Big Bang Theory* from many aspects.

Zhang Chuanying (2012) took the Relevance Theory of Wilson as the theoretical framework and the

typical irony dialogue in *The Big Bang Theory* as the corpus to make a tentative study, clearly presenting the application of Relevance Theory in the understanding of linguistic phenomenon such as irony^[7]. Using the three principles of Skopostheorie, Yang (2017) made a comparative analysis of the humor of subtitles in *The Big Bang Theory* from the perspective of language and culture, providing references for the translation of humorous factors in subtitle translation^[8]. Sun Chao (2017) studied the metaphorical subtitles in *The Big Bang Theory* according to Relevance Theory^[9]. Wang Nan (2018), from the perspective of pragmatics, explored and analyzes the comedy effect generated by the violation of the principle of conversational cooperation in *The Big Bang Theory*. She found that the ingenious violation of Cooperative Principle can achieve a good humorous effect and enrich the work, and at the same time enrich people's taste for verbal humor and sitcoms^[10].

As shown above, different scholars had done a plenty of research on politeness principle, *The Big Bang Theory* and the usage of hedges from different perspectives. In our real life, the violation of politeness principle is the most common. As a result, few scholars have combined the use of hedges and the realization of politeness principle. The purpose of this paper is to find out how hedges fulfill six maxims of politeness principle, aiming to provide a good reference for English learners, especially those who have no chance to communicate with native speakers.

3. Analysis of Hedges in Light of Six Maxims

Whether from the perspective of linguistics or from the perspective of society, politeness is a common phenomenon. When we communicate with others, politeness principle always reminds us to pay attention to the feelings of others. Thus, in daily life, we always unconsciously abide by politeness principle by using different communicative strategies among which hedges plays an important role. In this part, some examples in the famous American TV series, *The Big Bang Theory*, will be used to illustrate how the six maxims of politeness principle are realized by using hedges.

3.1 Realization of Tact Maxim

Tact maxim includes two categories. One is to minimize cost to other and the other is to maximize benefit to other.

Tact maxim is about how to treat others. Generally speaking, it is used when somebody orders others to do something. The goal of this maxim is to make people to be polite to others, and at the same time, maximize benefit to others. To achieve the maxim, the speaker should observe carefully and judge correctly the feedback of the hearer to his own language information according to the change of the language environment, so as to face calmly and act according to circumstances. This maxim is widely used in our daily life.

Example 1:

Raj: How come you all get to be married and I have to stay single?

Howard: I think that's a question for a licensed professional.

The background of this scene is that Raj's father once introduced him a girlfriend. Raj meets the woman and they are going to get married. Then Raj wants to ask his friends for some suggestions, while his friends think that it is unwise to marry a woman he only met once. As a result, Raj gets a little angry and says those words to Howard. In Howard's answer, the usage of a verbal hedge "think" softens the tone, which embodies the tact maxim.

Example 2:

Mrs. Fowler: No message, no note. Who would do that? What kind of husband ?

Leonard: If you let him talk, you may find out.

Mr. Fowler has been hiding from Mrs. Fowler in Amy and Sheldon's apartment. In seeing Mr. Fowler in Amy's room, Mrs. Fowler becomes angry and shouts at him. Mr. Fowler has no chance to say something. As a neighbor, Leonard says, "If you let him talk, you may find out." Leonard uses the hedge "may" to show his support for Mr. Fowler, but also lowers his voice and tries not to interfere with Mrs. Fowler. What Leonard does is just to give Mrs. Fowler his friendly suggestion, which reflects the tact maxim.

3.2 Realization of Generosity Maxim

According to Leech, there are two aspects of generosity maxim. One is to minimize benefit to self and the other is to maximize cost to self.

Generosity maxim is about how to treat oneself. It is very similar to the tact maxim. The main difference between these two maxims is that the generosity maxim pays more attention to the speaker, while the tact maxim focuses on the hearer. Generosity maxim is used when somebody promises to help others to do something. The aim of generosity maxim is to achieve a harmonious atmosphere. It makes the conversation go more smoothly and achieves a better communicative effect. This maxim is widely used, and it is a virtue we have been pursuing. There are many examples to show this maxim in *The Big Bang Theory*.

Example 3:

Howard: Look! I am so sorry about yesterday.

Howard and Raj are good friends. Raj comes across some problems and Howard gives him some suggestions while Raj gets angry. But the next day, Howard apologizes to Raj. In fact, it isn't Howard's fault. But Howard apologizes voluntarily and uses the hedge "so" to modify "sorry". Through the term "so", we can know that the speaker Howard is genuinely sorry for what he did yesterday. It conforms to the generosity maxim. What Howard did helps maintain their relationship.

Example 4:

Sheldon: Uh, one dumpling left. Who wants it?

Amy: Maybe you should offer it to the pregnant lady.

The background of this dialogue is that Amy, Sheldon and Bernadette are having dinner. At the end of the dinner, there is one dumpling left. Sheldon wants to know who would like to have the last one. Amy suggests that they should give it to Bernadette because she is pregnant. Amy uses the hedges "maybe" and "should" to minimize benefit to self, which conforms to the generosity maxim of politeness principle.

3.3 Realization of Approbation Maxim

Approbation maxim means to minimize dispraise of other and to maximize praise of other.

Approbation maxim means that we should make more praise and less criticism. It is a good way to communicate not only for the speaker but also for the hearer. It meets the need of two speakers. It is part of human nature to like to be praised. Learning to try to praise others is an important social skill. Praise is an important lubricant in interpersonal relationships. All of us would like to get along with people who can give ourselves confidence and sincerely affirm our strengths. The essence of praising others is to respect others. It often stimulates the hearer's sense of pride, from which they can recognize their own strengths. Only in this way can we get along with others harmoniously and get the two sides closer. There are plenty of examples in *The Big Bang Theory*.

Example 5:

Penny: Well, guys. That was very very thought of you!

When Amy and Sheldon return from their honeymoon, they buy several T-shirts as presents for their neighbors at the airport at will and the sizes are wrong. Obviously, their neighbors don't like these gifts. Instead of expressing her real feeling, Penny accepts the gift and says that. By making more praise than criticism, Penny uses "very" to make Amy and Sheldon feel better, and maintains their good and close interpersonal relationship. When they are highly praised by Penny, they feel happy and encouraged and inevitably have a sense of intimacy with them, thus shortening and approaching the psychological distance between them. The approbation maxim of politeness principle is well embodied here.

Example 6:

Bert: I have a bit of scavenger hunt myself last night. I was trying to find the remote. I looked under one of the cushions. Wasn't there. Then I lifted the cushion a little higher. Bingo.

Amy: Riveting.

Amy and Sheldon receive a wedding gift from Leonard and Penny, but both of them have no idea

about what it is and what it can be used for. Therefore, they go to the geologist, Bert, for help. In the beginning, Bert says something that has nothing to do with what they asked. Although Amy is a little impatient, she doesn't show it but uses an adjective hedge "riveting" to praise him. It maximizes praise of other. The usage of this hedge can make the listener feel better.

3.4 Realization of Modesty Maxim

According to Leech, modesty maxim includes two aspects. One is to minimize praise of self and the other is to maximize dispraise of self.

Modesty maxim is very similar to the approbation maxim. It reflects the quality or state of being unassuming or moderate in the estimation of one's ability. There is an old saying in China, modesty makes one progress while pride makes one lag behind. To Chinese people, modesty is a virtue. Too much arrogance is not well welcomed by others. Therefore, this maxim is widely used in our daily life. And also, this maxim applies to Americans. Here are some examples.

Example 7:

Penny: This place is amazing. I can't believe you got us in here.

Anu: Well. It's kind of my job.

Penny and Bernadette want to know more information about Anu, who is a hotel receptionist and the girlfriend of their friend. As a result, they decide to have a dinner together after work. Anu books a restaurant which is difficult to get into. Thus, Penny and Bernadette are surprised. The reply of Anu uses an adverbial hedge "kind of" instead of using an arrogant way. It well conforms the first sub-maxim of the modesty maxim, that is, to minimize praise of self.

Example 8:

Dr. Harris: Amy, I recently read your paper on lesions in the olfactory receptors in the brain. It's inspired.

Amy: Oh, well, I guess it didn't stink.

Dr. Harris compliments Amy on her good paper. Amy uses the verbal hedge "guess" and the adjective hedge "stink" to show her modesty instead of showing off, which conforms to the second sub-maxim of the modesty maxim. It maximizes praise of self.

3.5 Realization of Agreement Maxim

As one of six maxims of politeness principle, agreement maxim means to minimize disagreement between self and other and to maximize agreement between self and other.

Agreement maxim reflects the tendency to avoid disagreeing with somebody. It is very important for people to follow the maxim. Even when sometimes you don't agree with somebody, you do not express what you really think but say it euphemistically in order not to hurt others. Following the maxim can effectively narrow the psychologically distance between the speaker and the hearer. Following are some cases to show how the hedges are adopted to embody politeness principle.

Example 9:

Leonard: The question is would you like to have kids. So yeah, we want kids.

Penny: Yeah, someday.

Leonard and Penny are a couple and they are talking about the question of kids. It is clear that they hold different opinions. Leonard wants a kid while Penny obviously does not. For all that, Penny doesn't refuse him directly but uses the hedge "someday" as the reply. What Penny does minimize disagreement between them. She tries to express her true idea as much as possible without hurting Leonard. It is a good example to show the realization of politeness principle by the usage of the hedges.

Example 10:

Amy: Well, there's a comic book store less than a mile from here.

Sheldon: Perfect, let's go shopping.

Sheldon comes to New Jersey to make a proposal to Amy and she agrees. Then Sheldon is going

home because he has no clothes. Thus, Amy decides to buy some clothes for him. Sheldon uses the adjective hedge “perfect” to show his agreement, which means that he has the same opinion with Amy. It conforms to the second sub-maxim of the agreement maxim, that is, to maximize agreement between self and other.

3.6 Realization of Sympathy Maxim

Sympathy maxim means to minimize antipathy between self and other and to maximize sympathy between self and other. It can be realized through a sincere attitude.

Sympathy maxim shows that you understand and care about one’s problems and you are tolerant in your interactions. It asks the speaker to listen to others and learn to put oneself in others’ shoes. The speaker should give the hearer the opportunity to speak and talk, so that the listener can feel respect, acceptance and encouragement, and open his heart more easily. In our daily life, we inevitably come across something or somebody that we dislike. As the last maxim of politeness principle, this maxim can be regarded as the most important communicative strategy. We can learn this from *The Big Bang Theory*.

Example 11:

Stuart: I was worried about the data. So I got my hair colored to make me feel a little more confident, but that just made me look paler. So I got a spray tan.

Bernadette: Look! It’s only a spray tan. It will fade in couple days.

The conversation happens when Stuart asks Denise out on a date and Denise agrees. Before their date, Stuart had his hair done and got a spray tan in order to make him more charming. However, what he did makes him look terrible. Stuart has no idea what to do next. Thus, he goes to Bernadette’s room for help. Bernadette is amazed and thinks he was funny. But she doesn’t laugh at him. She uses the hedges “only”, “will” and “couple” to show her sympathy for him. It maximizes sympathy between self and other.

Example 12:

Leonard: It’s just Penny hit me with some pretty big news and it’s a lot to process.

Sheldon: And you would like to do that quietly. I respect that.

Leonard: She said she doesn’t want to have kids.

Sheldon: Maybe she didn’t mean it.

Leonard is sad to know that his wife didn’t want to have kids, so he goes to Sheldon for comfort. Sheldon uses the hedges “would”, “maybe” and “mean” to maximize sympathy between them and make him less sad, which conforms to the second sub-maxim of sympathy maxim. In this way, Sheldon not only comforts Leonard, but makes the relationship more harmonious.

All of these examples show how the hedges are used to embody the maxims of politeness principle. From the above examples, we can conclude that the hedges are widely used in our daily life. In order to avoid speaking too dogmatically, speakers often use hedges to express what should be said, what should not be said, what they know and what they do not know, which reflects the flexibility of fuzzy language and achieve the purpose of communication. As the example shows, the use of hedges makes both the speaker and the hearer feel comfortable and allows the conversation to go on smoothly. The usage of hedges, to a large extent, is to achieve the successful communication, making the communicative language more appropriate, that is, to achieve the politeness principle.

4. Conclusions

Politeness is a common social phenomenon and a social norm to establish interpersonal relationships. Briefly speaking, it can be regarded as a modest attitude. It plays an important role in people’s daily life, and is the establishment of interpersonal lubricant, which is able to help us to communicate well with others and create a harmonious atmosphere. In this study, the author studies the usage of hedges in American sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* according to politeness principle. It can be obviously seen that there are lots of hedges in the sitcom. The importance of hedges is self-evident. The author hopes that through this study English learners are able to better understand the use of hedges and learn how to apply them to daily life properly. This section is the last one of this paper, which includes main findings, restriction of the present study and future research suggestions.

4.1 Main findings

In everyday conversation, there are always some words which may do harm to the listener to some extent. At this point, under the guidance of the politeness principle, the speaker should try to make the speech appropriate and polite to protect the interests of the listener so as to ensure that the conversation can go on. Hedges can play a crucial role in this process. By using the hedges, the speaker is able to soften the tone and make the utterances which are originally direct become euphemistic and polite, thus achieving the principle of politeness. There are diverse ways to form the hedges in English. All kinds of words can be hedges or act as hedges, such as adjectives, adverbs, impersonal phrases, modal verbs, sense verbs and so on. Different hedges act in different ways.

Hedges have their unique semantic features and rich pragmatic functions, which can not be replaced by other languages. A comprehensive and in-depth study of hedges is not only of theoretical significance to the further study of semantics and pragmatics, but also of great significance to the proper use of hedges to achieve effective communication.

4.2 Limitations

This paper mainly gives a brief introduction to the usage of hedges in *The Big Bang Theory* from a perspective of politeness principle. Although some simple conclusions have been drawn, there are still many shortcomings for a variety of reasons. The author hopes that in the future these problems can be solved. First of all, from a subjective point, the author's ability is limited. The author has neither read a great number of literature nor made a deep study of pragmatic linguistics. Objectively, because of the restricted time and space, the author doesn't analyze the hedges in detail. The author does not make a detailed classification of hedges. Secondly, the corpus collected in this paper is limited. This paper chooses corpus from the sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*, but whether it is typical or not is unknown. In addition, the author does not compare the use of the hedges between the East and the West. Finally, this paper has no data to back it up, so it is not too convincing. The author doesn't analyze the frequency of hedges in this sitcom.

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