

On the Gender Differences in the Use of Hedges from a Pragmatic Perspective—Taking *Friends* as an Example

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Abstract

Based on the gender differences between male and female, the languages that the two genders use, such as the selection of words, sentence styles and moods unavoidably differ from each other. The same condition applies to the use of hedges. There are many causes to this phenomenon, such as biological, social and psychological factors. However, due to the fact that men and women are the same species, the language they use also share something in common. Based on the examples taken from TV series *Friends*, from the pragmatic perspective (mainly focusing on Speech Act Theory and Cooperative Principle), and through exploring the male and female use of hedges as well as the reasons leading to the discrepancies, this thesis aims to make its contribution to the study of the gender differences in the use of hedges, as well as the extent to which the gender difference influences hedge usage. This dissertation will especially relate to the pragmatics point of view.

Keywords: hedge, gender differences, pragmatics

1. Introduction

1.1 Hedge, a Vital Tool in Communication

According to a survey, in average, a person says five to eight thousand words every day. And among the words, a large portion are used to show uncertainty, which is achieved mostly by hedges. As a vital component of human language, hedges play a series of roles such as softening demand, conveying uncertainty and hesitation.

Hedges are often used purposely by the speaker, in order to make his/her statement clearer or less clear, depending on the content of his/her words.

Under this circumstance, hedges do not affect the original meaning of the utterance so the speaker can choose not to use hedges. However, using hedges makes the speaker gentler, and makes it easier for the listener to accept.

On the other hand, hedges can sometimes be used because of the requirement of conveying the speaker's meaning accurately. Under this circumstance, hedges play a vital role in speaking. If they were removed, the meaning of the sentence would be changed, and the utterance used to be correct would become wrong. Besides, using hedges effectively avoids

the chances of providing the wrong information. No matter whether it is the requirement of conveying accurate information, or the choice of the speaker in order to softening demand, hedge is an important tool in daily communication. Besides, based on the biological differences between two genders, men and women tend to use different hedges during conversation. Through the research of the use of hedges in male and female language, one can get to know more about the two varieties of language, know about the importance of the use of hedges, understand their features as well as functions, and learn how to use the hedges more properly, which will promote the smooth progress of communication. What is more, the learning of gender difference on the use of hedges will help one to better understand the real meaning of his/her counterpart, and reduce misunderstanding and unintentional offence, promoting the cross-gender communication. Besides, a deeper study of hedges will benefit the study in semantics and pragmatics.

1.2 The Definition of Hedges

Ordinarily, a word has a dictionary meaning and an extended meaning. According to the dictionary, the word *hedge* means “a row of bushes or small trees, usually along the edge of a garden, field, or road; a way of protecting sb against the loss of something.” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s English- Chinese Dictionary 8th ed., 2004). When it is used as a verb, it is used to surround or limit something. (Oxford Advanced Learner’s English- Chinese Dictionary 8th ed., 2004) Besides, in people’s daily conversation, hedges are often used, under which circumstance the word “hedge” carries its extended meaning, that is, to say something in a vague or unclear way in order to avoid answering a question directly or making a strong promise of supporting an idea. For example, it can be used in a sentence like “He hedges every time his friends ask him about his marriage”. American linguist G. Lakoff raised the conception of “hedges” for the first time in 1972 in his dissertation *Hedges: A Study in Meaning Criteria and the Logic of Fuzzy Concepts*, defining hedges as “words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy” (Lakoff, 1972). This dissertation focuses on this meaning of “hedge”, that is, certain kind of words people use during conversation to avoid giving direct and affirmative answer to a question. When people use hedges in their talk, it gives a signal that

whether they are not absolutely sure about what they are saying, or they intentionally want to make their words unasserted, to avoid taking responsibility or telling the truth. Similarly, when someone is sensed to use hedges, he would give a feeling of unwilling to answering the question, unsure about the answer, or even sometimes, dishonest.

1.3 The Classification of Hedges

According to their semantic features and pragmatic functions, hedges can be divided into approximators and shields (Prince et al., 1982: 83-97).

1.3.1 Approximators

Approximators refer to those words which gives a change to the discourse. In actual conversations, the addressor uses this kind of hedge based on the actual situation, in the intention of altering the original meaning of his words and reaching his aim. This kind of hedge changes the structure or form of the utterances directly. Such kind of hedges can be further divided into two varieties.

a. Adaptors

Adaptors refer to those that can suggest the extent to which the utterance is true. When using adaptors, the addressor adds words or phrases to the original sentence to make it less affirmative, and to avoid his uncertainty. To be detailed, this kind of hedge includes words such as “almost, a little bit, kind of, sort of, somewhat, to some extent, more or less”, etc. Through the use of adaptors, the utterances that used to be nearly, but not one hundred percent true come nearer to the truth and become more polite. Following is an example:

- (1) The movie reveals the cruel thing that Nazi did to Jews during WWII.
- (2) To some extent, the movie reveals the cruel things that Nazi did to Jews during WWII. In example (1), no hedge or adaptor is used. As a result, the sentence sounds assertive, and it suggests that the one saying that sentence is absolutely sure about the content, and on the other side, the movie must have revealed the cruelty of Nazi clearly and obviously. Even though the revelation may not be the only theme of that movie, it must be an important one in it. On the other hand, in example (2), with the adaptor “to some extent”, the sentence sounds less certain, and it gives a signal that the speaker himself is not completely sure about what he is

saying. Besides, it also shows that the movie may not be talking about the revelation of Nazi's cruelty in most of the time, to the contrary, it might just touch upon this field, and mainly talks about something else. Through the two examples, a clear contrast can be found. With the adaptor, the extent of certainty drops and that of uncertainty rises, and the utterance becomes more objective.

b. Rounders

When the addressors do not want to make his utterance entirely certain so that it would deviate from the fact, or they cannot give a certain figure for a short while, rounders are their choice. Rounders refer to the words and phrases that gives restriction to the range of understanding. Through the use of rounders, the listener is given a range, within which he can understand the utterance from his own perspective and based on the experience of his own, instead of being given a spot, through which he can only understand the utterance in one way. Rounders include such phrases as "around, approximately, somewhere between a and b, or so, less than", etc. In daily communication, rounders are usually used together with actual numbers. For example:

(3) Considering his height, normal weight for him should be seventy-five kilos.

(4) Considering his height, the normal weight for him should be about somewhere between seventy to eighty kilos.

It is obvious that in the two examples, example (3) is more certain and assertive than example (4). Example (3) expresses that his normal weight should be just seventy-five kilos, not seventy-four nor seventy-six. There is no room for altering or adjusting, asserting that any weight except seventy-five kilos is abnormal. While example (4) gives a range within which the figure can alter, which makes the utterance less exact, and gives room to the listener for his own understanding. It can be seen from the two examples that with the use of rounders, the mood of the utterance can become less powerful and aggressive, and sometimes makes it easier for listener to accept.

1.3.2 Shields

Contrary to approximators, whose use changes the original meaning of the utterance, the use of shields does not change the basic meaning of it. Using a shield amounts to adding an illustration

to the sentence, often in order to make it less firm, sometimes to ease the situation up. Like approximators, this kind of hedge also fall into two categories.

a. Plausibility shields

Plausibility shield means the words or phrases that convey the speaker's hesitation or doubt toward the utterance. It is used when the speaker himself is not entirely sure about the reliability of what he said, to make the tone less positive. Phrases such as "I think, I suppose, I guess, probably, I'm afraid" are all members of plausibility shields. For example:

(5) He has arrived home at this time.

(6) I assume he has arrived home at this time.

According to the examples, it is clear that the extent of certainty of example (5) is less than example (6). Without plausibility shield, example (5) is telling a truth, while after added the plausibility shield "I assume", example (6) gives a feeling of telling a deduction based on some factors the speaker has observed. However, the basic meaning of him being at home at present remains the same. In conclusion, plausibility shields serve as an instruction that makes the mood of utterance less positive.

b. Attribution shields

Similar to plausibility shields, attribution shields are also used to suggest the speaker's uncertainty. However, compared with plausibility shields, which usually start with the subject "I" to express the speaker's own opinion, attribution shields suggest speaker's uncertainty indirectly by quoting other's opinion. That is to say, the difference between plausibility and attribution shields lies in that the former suggests speaker's doubt directly, while the latter makes the utterance more objective by giving the statement an origin, that is, a third-party perspective. Under some circumstances, attribution shields are also used to avoid taking responsibility from making incorrect statement. Such kind of hedge includes words and phrases like "according to ..., it is said that..., it is estimated that..., it is well known that...", etc. following is an example:

(7) There are one hundred people overall at the meeting.

(8) According to the report, there are one hundred people overall at the meeting.

The readers can assume from the two examples

that the speaker of example (7) is stating his own opinion, while speaker of example (8) is relating someone else's idea. Due to the use of attribution shield "according to the report", example (8) becomes obviously not so asserted as example (7). According to the analysis and contrasts listed above, hedges can be split into two main categories: approximators and shields, which can separately be further divided into two smaller varieties. Besides, it should also be noted that based on communicating needs, there can be more than one hedge in a sentence, and they may belong to different hedge categories. For example, in the statement "It is said that he arrived at San Francisco at around six o'clock or so", three hedges appear (it is said that, around, or so), and they fall into two categories (attribution shield and rounder). Besides, according to He Ziran (1988: 159), some hedges can belong to more than one category, and one should decide their kind based on the context.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Existent Studies of Cross-Gender Communication

To define "cross-gender communication", one should first clarify the difference between "sex" and "gender". Sex does not equal gender. Sex is more concerned with a person's biological aspect and is determined by genetic codes. In respect of sex, human is normally divided into "male" and "female", while based on gender, human can be divided into "masculine" and "feminine". A person can only be male or female, but can be both "masculine" and "feminine". That is to say, everyone is born with a "sex" and it cannot be changed with one's mind. On the other hand, "gender" deals more with cultural elements, and can be considered to be a feature that carries more social meaning. Linguists believe that "cross-gender communication is a form of intercultural communication" (Song Xiujuan, 2004). Because as a tool of communicating, language itself belongs to a part of the culture. Intercultural communication (also called cross-cultural communication) refers to the process where a native speaker communicates with a non-native speaker, or any situation when two speakers from different cultural background come together and have conversations. Due to their different cultural background, diversity in understanding would occur, thus appears the circumstance of "cultural transfer". Similarly, men and women can be considered as two groups from different social language

sub-cultural groups, so it is natural that the language they use would be different.

The systematic study of language concerning gender difference begins late, and did not reach its turning point until 1970s, when researchers like Robin Lakoff (professor of linguistics at University of California, Berkeley) gave a detailed description on the features of female language in her book *Language and Women's Place*. Structuralist Jacobson put forward framework of language function: referential function, poetic function, emotive function, conative function, phatic function and metalingual function (Hu Zhuanglin, 2002). According to the researches on the condition during men and women communicating made by sociolinguists, the differences can be observed as for the aspect of language function. Through choosing different language styles, the function preferences for men and women are different during communicating. Besides, as for the content of communication, men and women tend to prefer different communicating contents. American female writer Deborah Tannen (2000) holds that the content of communicating can be divided into two kinds: report talk and rapport talk. Due to some psychological factors, female creates more rapport talks in daily communication while male uses more report talks. Women tend to more often use sentences starting with "I feel...", "I think...", which are members of the family of hedges.

To conclude, cross-gender communication is also a member of the family of cross-cultural communication, and because of the cultural difference, gender differences naturally occur.

2.2 The Existent Studies on Hedges

Based on the Fuzzy Sets Theory of professor at University of California, L.A. Zadeh, Fuzzy Linguistics became a newly developed branch of linguistics. Among the members in the fuzzy language family, hedge is one of the most typical and wide-spread one. American linguist G. Lakoff raised the conception of "hedges" for the first time in 1972 in his dissertation *Hedges: A Study in Meaning Criteria and the Logic of Fuzzy Concepts*, defining hedges as "words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy", and it marked the beginning of study on this kind of fuzziness in the field of linguistics. It was not until the middle of 1980s that some preliminary study on some functions of hedges appeared in China. With the development of

economy and the frequency of cross-country communication, the study of fuzziness and hedges starts to deepen, and some researchers begin to combine this kind of study with that of gender difference, trying to study this kind of linguistic phenomenon from a broader perspective.

2.3 The Significance of the Existent Research

During the years, the discrepancy between men and women, whether biological or psychological, has always been a concerning issue for many researchers. Sociolinguists pay much attention to the gender difference in language use and have concluded a series of features for male and female. For example, in general, women always uses more color words, more tag questions in daily life, and their language are basically more standard than men's, while men tend to use more imperative sentences. There are lots of factors contributing to this diversity, such as men's intention to show their masculinity and women's desire of being valued. Most of the research on the language difference between the two genders in the past mainly focused on the form differences and paid more attention to the biological and psychological issues.

However, from a pragmatic point of view, the use of hedges also shows great discrepancy between two different genders. And rather than pure biological reasons, such differences may be resulted more from the social factors. Living in a patriarchal society, men always holds more power than women, so when it comes to communicating, they tend to use more powerful words and make their statements sound more assertive.

During the 17th and the 18th century, some scholars found that men and women would use different language form in communication and started their research on language and gender. Linguists, sociologists and psychologists began to conduct research in this field. On the other hand, due to its abundant pragmatic functions, hedge has gradually become the focus of research. Especially in the field of foreign language teaching, hedges take up an important status. The research conducted so far gives a detailed description of the gender differences in communicating as well as the use of hedge separately, however, the crossing point of these two kinds of study – gender difference in the use of hedges are relatively mentioned less. This thesis will be based on the pragmatic points of

view, take American TV series *Friends* as an example, to explore the influence of gender difference in the use of hedges.

3. Hedge Studies in Pragmatics

3.1 The Relation Between Hedges and Pragmatics

The definition of pragmatics includes two aspects: 1) The study of language in use or language communication; the study of the use of context to make inference about meaning. 2) The study of how speakers of a language use sentence to effect successful communication (Hu Zhuanglin, 2002). It explores a series of factors, including language features in communication, context, and the meaning of utterance. Contrary to semantics, which studies the literal meaning of sentence, pragmatic studies the intended meaning of a speaker, that is to say, rather than considering an independent sentence, it is dependent on context. Based on this idea, the use of hedges relates to the study of pragmatics to a great degree. In actual language use, the speakers need to organize their statements according to the situation at the time, and the use of hedges reflects speaker's caution to the meaning that he wants to convey by his words during communicating. In this circumstance, what the speaker thinks about is not the literal meaning of his words, but the meaning they convey when put into a certain context. Using hedges or not may not influence the literal meaning of a sentence, but just alters the mood or tone in actual communication. Thus, hedges play a vital role in expressing some tiny meaning differences, which is very common in the study of pragmatics. According to Verschueren (1999: 193), hedges play a direct role in modifying the propositional content, more specifically, from the aspects of attitude, cognition and evidence. In daily conversations, hedges have a variety of pragmatic functions:

1) Making communications more effective

In actual communication, entirely clear expression might not be able to fully express the real meaning, so people need hedges to make their words correct. For example, in the sentence "Can you come to my office at your convenience?", the speaker did not give an accurate time, instead, he used the phrase "at your convenience", suggesting that he did not have an exact time in mind as to when should the listener come to his office. Now he uses fuzzy expression to better express his meaning.

2) Making the statements more objective and

reliable

When a speaker is asked a question, and he does not know the answer for sure, but just has a general idea in mind, he would use hedges to show his uncertainty, to avoid giving a wrong answer due to his lack of information, and sometimes to suggest the listener to ask for someone else's information. For example, in the sentence "The school is about six kilometers from her home.", the word "about" serves as a hedge. It shows that the speaker is not completely sure about the distance between "the school" and "her home". Just as what He Ziran (1985: 153-155) concluded as "loose talk": the words that convey ambiguous, fuzzy or vague meaning. If the speaker did not use the word "about", the listener would misunderstand that "the school" is just six kilometers away from "her home".

3) Making utterances more flexible

In daily conversation, statements that are too asserted may sound rigid and not flexible. Not everything is absolute, and there is always a middle ground. And when it comes to figures, not everything can be given an exact number, so the speaker needs the tool of hedge. For example, when a doctor says to his patient that "Just take a rest for a few days.", rather than giving an exact number, he is using the hedge "a few" to make his words more flexible.

4) Making statements more polite

As American linguist G. Leech puts forward in his book *Principle of Pragmatics* (1983), in daily communication, the speaker should try to make himself/herself benefit the least or suffers the most, in order to make sure that the listener benefits the most and suffers the least. According to Leech's opinion, the speaker should try his best to make his expression polite, mild and euphemistic. And one of the hedge's most important functions is to make the utterance less aggressive. Compare the two sentences: "I'm afraid I cannot help you" and "I cannot help you", one can easily feel that the former is more polite, and the reason is that the former carries a hedge "I'm afraid". Besides, in some declarative sentences, not using hedges would possibly make the utterance sound like a demand, or even offensive.

5) Protecting oneself and avoiding responsibilities

Nash points out in *Meaning in Interaction* (1990),

the main aim of using hedges is to protect the reputation of speaker. When the speaker does not know the accurate answer for one question, he could use hedges to broaden the range of meaning that his statement covers, so that he does not need to give a wrong answer nor seem impolite because of refusing to answer the question.

Above are the main pragmatic functions of hedge, and when it comes to the differences between men and women who use it, women tend to use hedges to show their uncertainty more often. While the hedges used by men in their languages are more often out of the purpose of making their statements more objective.

3.2 An Analysis of Hedges Based on Speech Act Theory

In the late 1950s, the British philosopher John Austin put forward a theory called Speech Act Theory, which is a philosophical explanation of the nature of linguistic communication. According to this theory, people are performing various kinds of acts when they are speaking. (Hu Zhuangling, 2002: 169). According to the Speech Act Theory, when speaking, a speaker might be performing three Acts simultaneously:

1) Locutionary act

It is the act of uttering words, phrases, clauses (Hu Zhuanglin, 2002: 171). Through the locutionary act, the literal meaning of the utterance is conveyed by means of syntax, lexicon and phonology. The locutionary is concerned with the literal meaning of sentence, which belongs to the field of semantics. Within this field, hedges are not used so often.

2) Illocutionary act

It is the act of expressing the speaker's intention; it is the act performed in saying something (Hu Zhunaglin, 2002: 172). This act touches upon the intended meaning of an utterance, and the use of hedge has the same function. For example, if someone says, "It is a little cold with the window open", his intended meaning might be asking his friend to close the window. Under this circumstance, he could also add a plausibility shield in the utterance to make his meaning clearer and more polite. For example, he could say "I think it is a little cold with the door open?". So, one can conclude that the use of hedges can promote the performing of illocutionary act.

3) Perlocutionary act

It is the act performed by or resulting from saying something; it is the consequence of, or the change brought about by the utterance. When the speaker says, "It is a little cold with the window open", and his friend goes to close the window, the perlocutionary act is performed. During the performing of this act, hedge plays less role than in illocutionary act. However, during the performing of this act, when the listener wants to answer the speaker, he may use hedges. For example, if A says, "It is a little cold with the window open", but B does not want to close the window, then he could say, "I think it is okay". Through this answer, he could stop the consequence of speaker's utterance, and thus stops the performing of perlocutionary act. But instead of saying "It is not cold", using a hedge makes his tone milder, and make it easier for his counterpart to accept. From this one can see that hedge can a role in stopping the performing of perlocutionary act.

To summarize, the use of hedges can promote the performing of illocutionary act and make it easier to stop the performing of perlocutionary act. As to gender difference, with the total amount of hedges used by people with the two different genders staying the same, women prefer to use hedges to perform illocutionary act. And when it comes to stopping the performing of perlocutionary act, that is, refusing someone else's request, women tend to use more hedges in order to make their utterance sound less powerful.

3.3 An Analysis of Hedges Based on Cooperative Principle

In his speech at Oxford University in 1967, Grice suggested that Cooperative Principle is about the regularity in conversation, which requests the speakers to "make your conversational contribution such as is required at the stage at which it occurs by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged".

There are four maxims under it:

1) The maxim of quantity: It means the utterance should:

- i. be as informative as required;
- ii. do not be more informative than is required.

2) The maxim of quality: It means the utterance is not opposed to:

- i. say what the speaker believes to be false;
- ii. say that for which the speaker lacks adequate evidence.

3) The maxim of relation: It means the utterance need to be relevant.

4) The maxim of manner: It means the utterance should:

- i. avoid obscurity of expression;
- ii. avoid ambiguity;
- iii. be brief;
- iv. be orderly.

According to the second and fourth maxims of Cooperative Principle, one's utterance should be as concise and accurate as possible, and speaker should avoid using more word than it needs when convey the complete meaning. And according to Grice, the violation of Cooperative Principle would lead to misunderstanding, and when the speaker purposely violates the Cooperative Principle, he may be covering something intentionally. Based on this view, the use of hedges seems to conflict with the Cooperative Principle. However, when the speaker lacks enough information, he would have to use hedges to make his statement more accurate, which should not be counted as a violation of the maxim of manner. The maxim of and quality and manner suggest speaker to say as much as he knows and be as accurate as possible, that is, there is a prerequisite in avoiding ambiguity. Assume that when an addressor is not one hundred percent confident about the information he gives, but in order to "follow" the maxim of manner, he intentionally gives up using a hedge, then he can be seen as giving the information for which he lacks enough evidence, and that would be a violation of Cooperative Principle.

Besides, it should be noted that there is another theory in the field of pragmatics called politeness principle, which is put forward by Leech in his book *Principles of Pragmatics*. Cooperative Principle, together with politeness principle, serves as two principles that should be followed when using language in daily life. The use of hedges is one of the key points in following the politeness principle. Hedges make the utterance more decent and more polite, especially when refusing. Compare the two examples:

(1) *I cannot help you on your work.*

(2) *I am afraid that I cannot help you on your work.*

It is obvious that due to the use of the hedge “I am afraid that”, example (2) becomes more polite than example (1). Both sentences express the meaning of refusing, but the second one is easier to accept. This is an example of following the politeness principle.

To conclude, the use of hedges presents speaker’s desire to follow the politeness principle, and it is sometimes necessary to use hedges to avoid the violation of Cooperative Principle.

4. Gender Differences in Using Hedges in Daily Communications

Hedges are frequently used in people’s oral conversations, and the frequency and selection of hedge use by men and women are different. This chapter will give a detailed study on

gender difference in using hedges in daily communication. To make the statement clearer and simpler, it will take American sitcom *Friends* as an example.

4.1 The Use of Hedges Between Male and Female

This paper will take conversations among the six main characters in American sitcom *Friends* (first season) as example and make a detailed comparison on the gender influence on the use of hedges. There are totally 832,08 words in this season. This study will follow the classification of hedges mentioned in chapter 1. All the hedges the actors and actresses used will be divided into four groups: adaptors, rounders, plausibility shields and attribution shields, and take three typical hedges under each group as example. Compare the number of each group of hedges used in the series by women and men separately. The results are as following.

Table 1. Numbers of adaptors used by six main characters in *Friends* (Season 1)

Characters	Adaptors			Total
	kind of	sort of	almost	
Monica (F)	1	1	2	4
Rachel (F)	1	2	2	5
Phoebe (F)	2	0	2	4
Ross (M)	4	2	2	8
Chandler (M)	2	0	1	3
Joey (M)	1	0	0	1

Table 1 shows that the difference in the total amount of adaptors used by male characters and female characters is small, but the specific word chosen by men and women are different. Table 1 shows that the adaptor mostly used by female

characters is “almost” while for male characters, it is “kind of”. But taking the six characters as a whole, the adaptor used most frequently is “kind of”.

Table 2. Numbers of rounders used by six main characters in *Friends* (season 1)

Characters	Rounders			Total
	about	around	more than	
Monica (F)	2	4	2	7
Rachel (F)	2	5	4	7
Phoebe (F)	0	5	6	5

Ross (M)	3	7	2	12
Chandler (M)	7	3	0	10
Joey (M)	1	3	3	7

According to Table 2, male and female use relatively the same amount of rounders. However, Table 2 demonstrates that Chandler himself says “about” for seven times, which makes the total amount of hedges used by men

similar to that by women. Aside from this point, the rounders used by women outnumbered that used by men by eight. So, under the group of rounders, women use rounders a little more than men.

Table 3. Numbers of plausibility shields used by six main characters in *Friends* (Season 1)

Characters	Plausibility shields			Total
	I think	I guess	probably	
Monica (F)	13	1	5	19
Rachel (F)	13	5	2	20
Phoebe (F)	12	1	2	15
Ross (M)	26	2	7	35
Chandler (M)	11	3	2	16
Joey (M)	7	2	4	13

According to Table 3, the amount of plausibility shields used by male is bigger than female, and the number is ten. Taking the six characters as a whole, the plausibility shield “I think” is used

much more than the other two, and it is followed by “probably”. Besides, for both male and female, “I guess” is used the least.

Table 4. Numbers of attribution shields used by six main character in *Friends* (Season 1)

Characters	Attribution shields			Total
	would be	he/ she says	it's said	
Monica (F)	2	4	3	9
Rachel (F)	8	5	6	19
Phoebe (F)	4	3	2	9
Ross (M)	8	6	4	18
Chandler (M)	5	3	4	12
Joey (M)	2	4	2	8

According to Table 4, the frequency of attribution shields used for men and women are roughly the same, and both men and women use the attribution shield “would be” most frequently, “it's said” least frequently.

4.2 An Analysis of Gender Differences in Using Hedges

From the analysis, the following conclusion can be reached:

- 1) No matter men or women, they all use a great

number of hedges in daily conversations. Under most circumstances, they use hedges to show their uncertainty. For example, in Episode 4, when Chandler says "Listen, it's kind of an emergency. Well, I guess you know that, or we'd be in the predicament room" to the receptionist, he uses the plausibility shield "I guess" to show that it is his own opinion, and he does not know for sure whether the receptionist knows he is talking about an emergency.

2) On the whole, no matter men or women, the chances when they use shields (includes plausibility shields and attribution shields) are far more than that when they use approximators, within which the most frequently used type is plausibility shield, with "I think" being the most popular, being used for 82 times totally.

3) Generally speaking, there is no significant difference between men and women in the use of hedges, and the time used by men slightly outnumbers women, with the numbers being 143 and 134. However, in respect to the choice of types of hedges, men and women differs relatively great. Specifically speaking, women tend to use more adaptors and rounders, which belong to approximators, while men prefer to use more plausibility shields and attribution shields, which belong to shields.

4.3 The Causes of Gender Differences in Using Hedges

With the analyses above, it can be concluded that the influence of gender difference does not mainly exist in affecting the total number of hedges used, but in the choice of the type of hedges.

The major function of hedges is to make things fuzzier, in other words, to suggest speaker's uncertainty. Based on this function, both men and women need hedges to show their uncertainty in daily conversations, so they both use a great number of hedges when speaking. Thus, the total amount of hedge used by men and women differs little. However, compared to shields, approximators can convey the feeling of uncertainty more directly, and due to the psychological and biological features of women, they pay more attention to the emotional dimension of their words, thus, they choose to use more approximators to make their statements sound less asserted, and easier to be accepted.

Besides, according to the pragmatics and the Cooperative Principle introduced in chapter

three, one's word should be as accurate and concise as possible. Functions that hedges play in society and the social culture also contribute to the discrepancy between men and women in the choice of the type hedges. Living in a patriarchal society, men seem to have more power and higher social status than women. Normally, they are more confident to express their thoughts, so they would want to use plausibility shields, such as "I think", "I suspect", more often. On the other hand, women want to make their voice be heard, but because of the importance they take to other's feeling, they do not want to put too much pressure to their audience by giving a direct and too asserted utterance, they would choose to use more words like "about", "kind of", etc., which belong to the family of approximators.

5. Conclusion

Scholars in pragmatics and sociolinguistics have found that men and women differ greatly when it comes to the use of language, and there are a series of factors that contribute to the difference, which involve biological, psychological, social and cultural aspects, and cannot be generalized in a few words. Through the research on the influence of gender difference on the use of hedges, a mutual correspondence between language and identity can be seen. On the one hand, people with different identities use different languages, and the identity of being a man or woman continuously influences the language they use. On the choice of the type of hedges, the choices of men and women root deeply in the society they live in, and the culture which helps mold their identity. On the other hand, the language people use tells a lot about the users' identity, and during the use of such kind of language, the user's feeling of a specific identity is constantly deepened.

Besides, a deep study in the gender difference in the use of hedges, and in the use of language can also help with the language, especially second language teaching. Firstly, teachers can adjust their teaching methods, or make them more personalized to fit different varieties of students based on the kind of language that are easier to accept for students. Secondly, teachers can get to understand their students better if they understand the real meaning underlying students' words. However, due to the fact that this dissertation only took data from the American sitcom *Friends*, it is inevitable that there are some limitations in the results. Besides,

American sitcom *Friends* is shot during the 1990s, and the dialogues in it, which may be affected by the social and cultural background, unavoidably carry some language features, of that certain period. So, the research result may alter slightly when another TV series is taken as example. The result is not absolute due to the time and space restrictions and can also be further perfected during the improvement of research means. A further study on the gender differences in the use of hedges is still much expected. However, it can be certain that gender difference can be a vital factor that influences the use of hedges in daily communications.

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