

REVIEW

submitted by Zhivka Stefanova Koleva-Zlateva, DSc,
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on a PhD thesis,
submitted for the award of the educational and scientific degree PhD
in the area of higher education 2. Humanities, professional field 2.1. Philology,
doctoral program “Germanic Languages: English Language”

Author: Polina Nikolaeva Petkova

Title: *Hedging in academic writing: explorations into English and Bulgarian research articles*

Thesis Advisor: without a thesis advisor

1. General description of the submitted documents

By order No. ПД-21-233/ 06.02.2023 of the Rector of Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv (PU), I have been appointed as a member of the Academic Board to conduct the procedure for the defence of the PhD thesis, entitled *Hedging in academic writing: explorations into English and Bulgarian research articles* for the award of the educational and scientific degree PhD in the area of higher education 2. Humanities, professional field 2.1. Philology, doctoral program “Germanic Languages: English Language”

The author of the thesis is Polina Nikolaeva Petkova, self-directed PhD student at the Department of English Philology at the Faculty of Philology of Paisii Hilendarski University, without a thesis advisor

The list of paper documents, submitted by PhD student Polina Petkova complies with Art. 36 (1) of the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff at Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv and includes the following documents: an application to the Rector of PU to start the procedure for the defence of the PhD thesis; a Curriculum Vitae in European format; the minutes from the Department meeting during which the readiness to start the procedure was reported and the preliminary discussion of the thesis was held; PhD thesis; PhD thesis abstract; a list of scholarly publications on the topic of the thesis; copies of the scholarly publications; a declaration of originality and authenticity of the attached documents.

The doctoral candidate has submitted three articles on the topic of the thesis, which together with the PhD thesis, have earned her the necessary 80 points, meeting the minimum national requirements for obtaining the educational and scientific degree PhD.

2. A brief biographical note

In 2011, Polina Petkova obtained a Bachelor's degree in English Philology from Paisii Hilendarski University. Part of her education (from February to June 2011) was carried out through the Erasmus+ program at the University of Loughborough in England. In 2012, she received a Master's degree in Translation and Business Communication also from Paisii Hilendarski University. From 2019 to 2022, she was a self-directed PhD student at the Department of English Philology at the Faculty of Philology of Paisii Hilendarski University. As a doctoral student, she specialized under the Fulbright program at Georgetown University in Washington, USA.

Polina Petkova started her academic career at the Department of English Philology at Paisii Hilendarski University in 2011 as an honorary assistant. Later on, she held the positions of "assistant" (2014-2018) and "lecturer" (from 2018 to the present).

3. Relevance of the topic and appropriateness of the set goals and objectives

The topic of the doctoral thesis is relevant and occupies an important place in the field of contemporary macro-linguistic and applied research, focusing not only on the language itself, but also on its use and the factors that condition it.

The issue of hedging in academic texts is not sufficiently studied, despite having a 50-year history. Clarification is needed regarding the means through which it is realized, the conditions under which they serve specifically for hedging, the achieved impact on recipients of academic texts, as well as the definition of the phenomenon. Not all languages have attracted the attention of researchers to the same extent on this issue. Studies on English and German academic texts predominate. As a whole, the Bulgarian academic discourse has attracted little research interest from linguists, including with respect to how the author presents their attitude towards the reliability of the scientific facts presented. It should be noted that publications on the Bulgarian language are in English, and for this reason, an established terminology for the study of the phenomenon does not exist in the Bulgarian linguistic tradition. I agree with the author that in order to build a coherent theory on the research topic, comparative studies across different languages are necessary (p. 13). In this sense, this thesis contributes to theorising hedging in academic discourse in general and to forming systematic knowledge about the manifestations of this phenomenon in Bulgarian academic texts.

To achieve these two main objectives, the doctoral candidate undertakes a comparative study of two corpora of scientific texts, written in American English and Bulgarian, respectively, each

comprising six research articles. She sets the following specific tasks: to examine the Bulgarian language linguistic means that have the potential for hedging, a question that has not been extensively and thoroughly studied in previous studies by other authors; to seek an explanation for the reasons why researchers resort to hedging in their scholarly texts; to trace the ways in which American and Bulgarian scholars hedge; and to reveal how hedging is distributed in different parts of the research articles (introduction, discussion, conclusion) in both languages. These tasks are well thought out and serve to achieve the set goals.

4. Awareness of the issue at hand

The author has in-depth knowledge of research issues. This is clearly evident from the tracing of the research on hedging – from the formation of the first ideas about the role of linguistic devices for expression in texts of varying degrees of certainty to the accumulation of knowledge about the linguistic inventory used for this purpose, revealing the scope and limits of the registered linguistic phenomenon known as "hedging." It is impressive how well the PhD student is familiar with scientific literature and skillfully cites it. The presented work steps on scholarly publications on the studied phenomenon in texts of various languages, not only academic but also media, political, and economic. Relevant questions that have importance for understanding the concept of "hedging", its genesis and limits, have also been taken into account. The PhD student skillfully and reasonably comments on the scientific statements examined and seeks a way to shed light on unresolved issues.

5. Research methodology

The chosen research methodology is adequate and allows for drawing conclusions regarding the investigated linguistic phenomenon in relation to the set objectives. The performed comparative analysis leads to a clarification of knowledge about hedging in general (the path of knowledge goes through comparison!) and the establishment of systematised knowledge regarding insufficiently researched hedging in Bulgarian scholarly discourse. The high degree of research on hedging in English-language materials provides guidelines for investigating Bulgarian-language materials. At the same time, it also entails the impossibility of equally parallel research on texts in both languages. While automated inventorying of the linguistic resources used for hedging in English-language scholarly texts is possible through the electronic program "hedge-o-matic," the recognition of Bulgarian-language markers of hedging is performed "manually," as noted by the doctoral candidate (p. 57).

An important merit of the thesis is the aim for a comprehensive investigation of hedging, including its focus (whether it is on the accuracy of the discourse as a whole, on the author, on their tendency towards cautiousness, or on the reader from whom the author aims to receive approval),

the language means used, and the place of hedging in the overall text (introduction, discussion, conclusion). Typological peculiarities of the researched languages have also been taken into account.

6. Description and evaluation of the thesis

The thesis demonstrates a coherent and logical structure that meets the strictest requirements for academic research. In the introduction, the relevance of the topic is established, research objectives are identified, and the rationale for the chosen structure is clearly articulated. The second chapter presents an analytical review of the literature on hedging. The nature of research articles is commented on, as the conclusions regarding hedging in scholarly texts in both American and Bulgarian research articles are based on an analysis of these articles. The controversial nature of the problem and the presence of unresolved issues are noted. The third chapter is methodologically oriented. The analysed corpora of scientific texts are discussed, and the research procedure is justified. The following two chapters present the results of the study on both languages. Chapter six presents a comparative analysis of the obtained results. Similarities are noted, such as the highest percentage of hedging in the discussion section and the highest percentage of author-oriented hedging from a pragmatic point of view. Differences are also identified, such as the frequent use of passive constructions for hedging in Bulgarian academic texts as opposed to English texts, and the very rare use of first person plural pronouns in English texts compared to Bulgarian texts. The author of the doctoral thesis suggests that this difference may be due to the stereotypical characteristics of the academic writing that favors the use of first person plural pronouns in Bulgarian.

In the concluding section (Chapter Seven), the findings of the study are presented. A definition of the concept of hedging in academic discourse is proposed. Unlike many opinions that associate hedging primarily with caution on the part of authors of scholarly research, the doctoral candidate offers a broader understanding of the concept. The overall research presented in the doctoral thesis leads to such a broader understanding. It can be assumed that through hedging, the author of a scientific text says exactly what they want to say, regardless of whether they strive for precision in their speech, whether there is a lack of evidence for a more categorical statement, whether they do not want to commit to their statement due to uncertainty or protect themselves from future refutations. In general, through hedging, the author makes their claims more acceptable to the scientific community.

The appropriateness of using the term *хеджинг* in Bulgarian academic discourse and the impossibility of replacing it with other terms such as *оценъчни изрази*, *завоалирани изрази*, *модификатори*, proposed by other authors or used in connection with similar phenomena has also been commented on.

An important clarification has been made regarding the strong contextual dependence of hedging, and the possibility of using the same expressions for both hedging and other purposes, which makes it difficult to recognize the phenomenon based on formal criteria alone. Therefore, processing large volumes of texts using electronic tools does not lead to very reliable results.

An important advantage of the presented conclusions is that they are not only presented as a final result, but as a process in which the author's reasoning leading to their formulation is visible. In these arguments, various conditions and limitations are taken into account, determining the reliability of the conclusions.

7. Contributions and significance of the doctoral thesis from the theoretical and practical point of view

Undoubtedly, the doctoral thesis has made a contribution to contemporary linguistics. As noted above, important conclusions have been drawn of both theoretical nature and regarding Bulgarian academic texts, where the phenomenon of hedging has received little attention. The conclusions drawn also have practical value for the education of young researchers with respect to the production of academic texts.

8. Evaluation of the publications on the topic of the doctoral thesis

As mentioned earlier, the doctoral candidate has submitted three articles on the topic of her thesis. These articles were written in English and have been published in reputable collections that are included in the National Reference List of Contemporary Bulgarian Scientific Publications with peer review.

9. Original contribution of the doctoral candidate

I have no grounds to doubt that the presented study is the personal work of the doctoral candidate. In her thesis, she demonstrates the ability to correctly cite opinions of other researchers, compare and contrast them, make generalizations, build on previously researched and proven work, to present and prove her own statements, and to draw comparisons between the results obtained in her study and those of other researchers. Additionally, the candidate herself has declared that the results and contributions to scientific production presented in the procedure are original and not borrowed from studies or publications in which she has not participated.

10. Abstract

The abstract is prepared accurately and reflects the structure, content, and main results achieved in the doctoral thesis.

11. Critical remarks and recommendations

Rather than critical remarks, I would like to share with the author of the PhD thesis some ideas for future research that have arisen from reading her work. With regard to the Bulgarian language and the expression of certainty, interesting results could be obtained by examining the possibilities offered by the grammatical category of evidentiality.

The linguacultural aspect can also be a fruitful area for research. Bulgarian linguaculture can be classified as a collectivist culture, in contrast to the individualistic cultures of the West. Collectivist cultures tend to have an external locus of control and undervalue the role of the individual, while Western cultures assign greater importance to the individual's role in events. Inevitably, this is reflected in scientific texts, where the author is assigned a more modest position, and they must be very brave to write in the first person singular.

In Bulgarian-language scientific texts, it is highly likely that the legacy of totalitarian language finds reflection, whose main goal, in the words of V. Klemperer, is depersonalisation, 'the suppression of personality in humans, depriving them of individuality'. In fact, the author of the doctoral thesis suggests that Bulgarian scientific discourse is a legacy of the socialist regime (pp. 41-42). Certainly, it has been strongly influenced by the Russian scientific style, where the authorial "we" (*ми*) is the norm.

In this case, the question arises to what extent and under what conditions the use of the Bulgarian personal pronoun for 1st person plural and verb forms for 1st person plural, as well as passive constructions, can be considered as hedging if the pronoun for 1st person singular and verb forms for 1st person singular are not recommended for Bulgarian academic style.

12. Personal impressions

I do not have personal impressions of Polina Petkova. Her PhD thesis and publications portray her as an erudite and promising scholar.

13. Recommendations for future use of the doctoral thesis contributions and results

I recommend that the PhD thesis be published as a monographic study. It addresses a current and insufficiently researched issue in contemporary linguistics, and especially in Bulgarian studies.

CONCLUSION

The PhD thesis comprises scientific and scientific-applied results, which represent an original contribution to scholarly research and meet all the requirements of the Act for the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for the Implementation of the ADASRB and the corresponding Regulations of Paisii Hilendarski University of Plovdiv. The the-

sis testifies to the fact that doctoral student Polina Nikolaeva Petkova possesses in-depth theoretical knowledge and professional skills in the scientific specialty “Germanic Languages: English Language” as well as competencies and skills for carrying out original scholarly research.

Due to the mentioned above, I confidently give my positive assessment of the conducted research, presented in the PhD thesis, and will vote for awarding the educational and scientific degree PhD to Polina Nikolaeva Petkova in the area of higher education 2. Humanities, professional field 2.1 Philology, doctoral program "Germanic languages: English language".

24 February 2023

Reviewer:

(prof. Zhivka Koleva-Zlateva, DSc)