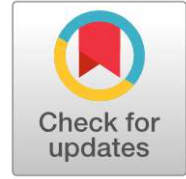


HEDGES AND BOOSTERS IN 19TH CENTURY BRITISH FICTION

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Abstract

Hedges and boosters are two important sources of linguistic devices to express tentative evaluations and to mitigate solidarity with readers. Men and women have different tendencies of using these linguistic devices. Women are usually considered to follow a personal and polite style whereas men are more competitive and assertive. Hence, gender-preferential features of women and men are one of the prerequisites of understanding the functions of hedges and boosters. One relatively neglected aspect of gender-based studies of these linguistic devices is fiction. In this paper, we explored male and female English writers' use of hedges and boosters in HUM19UK Corpus, a corpus of 19th century British fiction. We calculated a statistically significant overuse in the deployment of hedges and boosters by female writers in the 19th century, which is an indication of a new writing style adapted by the female writers in that era. However, the most common items of hedges and boosters were identical in both corpora.

Keywords: hedges, boosters, gender, literature, fiction, nineteenth century

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Linguistics devices utilized to reflect feelings and evaluations play a critical role in the maintenance of spoken and written discourse. To be able to identify these devices, we need to look at the context in which they occur (Hyland, 2005). Among these linguistic devices, hedges and boosters as sub-categories of metadiscourse can convey many different kinds of evaluations. Hyland (2000) states that hedges like *might*, *probably* and *seem* indicate a tentative assessment of referential information while boosters such as *clearly*, *obviously*, and *of course* enable writers to reflect conviction and to display their involvement and solidarity with listeners or readers.

A number of factors such as gender, genre, and register may shape the deployment of hedges and boosters and the main concern of the present study is to reveal the effect of gender on the employment of these two linguistic devices in fiction. In his influential study, R. Lakoff (1973) identifies the features of women's speech. Attitudes and referential meanings are conveyed by the way we use language. The marginality and powerlessness of women can be understood by how they are expected to speak and how they are spoken. Women's speech is closely associated with euphemisms due to their dependent roles to men. Their personal identity is traced by the use of lexicon and syntax. This is supplemented by R. Lakoff (1973) when he identifies several linguistic features specifically attributed to women. These features are the indicators of women's social role as reflected through their linguistic behavior (pp. 53-57). Indeed, several studies complement the fact that gender differences are important delimiters in linguistic adoptions in language. To explicate, Ehrlich (1990) studies a handful of canonical writers in utilization of authorial style in their explication of point of view. Though not particularly focusing on gender of the analyzed authors, she concludes that "Woolf's texts display a greater variety of cohesive devices than Hemingway's and James' do" (p. 103). Yet, Livia (2003, p. 156), in contrast, assumes that "no convincing linguistic evidence has yet been provided to indicate the stylistic characteristics of each". This is a slippery and much debated ground. Hence, G. Lakoff (1973, p. 471) seems quite right when he uses the word 'fuzzy' for his newly coined linguistic device 'hedges' - "whose meaning implicitly involves fuzziness words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy". Based on this definition, it can be understood that hedges refer to the modification of words within propositional content.

Investigating hedges and boosters as two important linguistic devices of discourse in women's and men's speech, Holmes (1990, p. 201) identifies pragmatic functions of particular items "*tag questions, you know, sort of, I think and of course*" and finds that these items convey different functions serving as verbal fillers, "devices which facilitate the smooth flow of the discourse by providing the speaker with planning time, or as conversational lubricants in interaction, encouraging easy turn-taking between participants". Women use hedges to reflect their comments confidently or to mitigate solidarity with the listeners. Contrary to R. Lakoff (1973), women do not employ them to express uncertainty. She defines boosters as assertive strategies putting pressure on conversations, so they should be excluded from any discourse analysis between women and men.

A tremendous amount of previous research has been done on hedges and boosters in different academic contexts. As for Hyland (2000), hedges and boosters are the reflections of doubt and certainty of writers about their evaluations and arguments. Hedges are the reflections of toning down potentially risky claims for readers to be rejected and boosters highlight what writers consider to be correct. Variations regarding the employment of these two devices have been studied by many scholars in research articles (Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2016; Farrokhi & Emami, 2008; Hyland, 1998) in postgraduate genres (Akbaş & Hardman, 2018; Taymaz, 2021) and in undergraduate essays (Alward et al., 2012; Serholt, 2012).

Recently, scholars have examined metadiscourse in literary texts. Sadeghi and Esmaili (2012) observed metadiscourse in two original English novels and in their simplified versions and found no significant difference between them regarding the use of metadiscursive items. Boroujeni (2012) showed that metadiscourse was scarce in translated novels compared to their original ones. In a corpus of short stories written by three American writers, AlJazrawi and AlJazrawi (2019) analyzed metadiscursive items and revealed two functions of these items: coherence and persuasion.

Although the use of hedges and boosters have been examined in several academic contexts and in some limited literary texts following corpus-based approaches, scholars have understudied the employment of these two devices in fiction. Questions have been raised by G. Lakoff (1973); R. Lakoff (1973) and Holmes (1990), but very little is currently known about the use of these devices in literary genres. Thus, this paper attempts to examine the employment of hedges and boosters by women and men writers of English

in the novels in the 19th century and how hedges and boosters words could be utilized in the automatic classification of the authors' genders. Since we have ample data from 19th century novels written by English native speakers, we are in a good position to investigate the use of hedges and boosters in fiction, as well as how gender influences the use of these linguistic devices. The following research questions constituted the essence of the study:

1. What are the distributions of hedges and boosters used by male and female writers of English in the 19th century?
 - 1.a. Is there a statistically significant difference between male and female writers of English in the 19th century regarding the employment of hedges and boosters?
2. What are the 10 most common of hedges and boosters used by male and female writers of English in the 19th century?
3. Can a machine learning (ML) algorithm automatically identify the gender of an author when trained with hedges and boosters words labelled with the gender information both with unsupervised and supervised classification methods?

Methodology

Corpus

Given the research purpose of examining the deployment of interactional metadiscourse in fiction, HUM19UK Corpus (2019) was chosen as the corpus for its accessibility, and representativeness. Created between 2016-2019 as a collaborative project between the University of Huddersfield (UK), Utrecht University (the Netherlands), and University College Roosevelt in Middelburg (the Netherlands), HUM19UK (19th Century British Fiction Corpus) available at <https://www.linguisticsathuddersfield.com/hum19uk-corpus> covers 100 novels written by different writers in the 19th century. Totaling 13.590.557 million words, it consists of novels written by 50 female and 50 male writers. To maintain the representativeness of 19-century British fiction, one text per year was added to the corpus roughly. The published version of the corpus consisted of machine-readable versions of the novels which contain all the sections of the novels but some parts such as prefaces by the author, epigraphs, content pages were enclosed in angle brackets (i.e. < >) so that they can be ignored by the corpus tools but can be found if required. In the original corpus, the file name of the text was represented by the year of its publication.

Livia (2003) proposes three methodologies to examine gender issue in literary texts. The first one includes a comparison of fiction written by men and women and identification of men's and women's writing styles. The second approach concerns linguistic gender system of different languages and their influence on literary texts. The third approach is pertinent to language and gender in fiction provided by translators and translation theorists.

In the present study, we adapted the first approach suggested by Livia (2003). In the same vein, since we also assume that "there are conventions of masculine and feminine style which any sophisticated writer, whether male or female, can follow" (Livia, 2003, p. 156), the ultimate objective is to prove this point from another microscopic viewpoint of two linguist features. Since the present study aims to examine the influence of gender on the use of hedges and boosters in fiction, the corpus was subdivided into two specialized corpora: female and male subsets. At this point, the tags for the authors' gender helped us for this division. The female subset included 6.845.815 million words while the male subset has 6.744.742 words. The coding of the corpus in this study was arranged as the year of the publication, the gender, and the place of the text in the corpus. To illustrate, 1805-M-1 represented the first text in the male subset written in 1805.

Data Analysis

As an instrument to analyze hedges and boosters in the corpus, we adopted Hyland's taxonomy (2005) of metadiscourse. The taxonomy suggests two types of metadiscourse: interactive and interactional. The first one is related to organizing the propositional content based on the readers' expectations while the second one is mainly associated with the ways of engaging readers in texts and mitigating authorial stance. Interactional metadiscourse has 5 sub-categories: hedges, boosters, attitude markers, self-mentions, and engagement markers. In this study, we focused on hedges and boosters.

In the first phase of the study, the frequency counts of 80 items of hedges and 48 items of boosters were calculated using AntConc, a text analysis and concordance program by Anthony (2022). All cases were manually checked to ensure that they had a metadiscursive function, and a sample was double-checked by a colleague working independently. The occurrences that were not functioning metadiscursively were excluded. The frequencies of the overall and ten most common items in each corpus were

normalized to 1000 words. Log-likelihood (LL) statistics were applied to analyze whether there was a statistical difference between these two corpora.

In the second phase, to support the findings of the previous phase, we computed the Cosine-Delta scores of (Evert et al., 2017) all hedges and boosters words in the corpus and labelled the resulting document-term matrix with abbreviations F (for female) and M (for Male). Next, we plotted the corpus with MDS (Multi-Dimensional Scaling), an unsupervised classification method to observe whether the hedges and boosters utilization of the authors can be distinctively mapped in the visualization. Finally, we run supervised classification, a machine learning technique that involves training a model to classify input data into predefined categories based on labeled training data. For the purpose, we employed SVM (Support-Vector Machine), Naïve-Bayes, and Logistic Regression algorithms to find out if gender classification is salient from machine learning perspective. The second phase jobs were carried out with the relevant libraries (*stylo()* package (Eder et al., 2016)) of R statistical computing language.

Results and Discussion

The table below illustrates the total number of occurrences of hedges and boosters in the two corpora. Female writers employed more hedges (16.2) and boosters (12.5) than male writers. In the male corpus, hedges and boosters were found 13.9 and 11.2 times, respectively. The Log-likelihood analysis also proved an overuse of hedges and boosters in the female corpus. The observed value of +1232.75 and +965.91 showed a significant difference in the deployment of hedges and boosters in the female subset.

Table 1

Hedges and boosters in the corpus

	F		M	
	n	n/1000	n	n/1000
Hedges	111.522	16.2	94.084	13.9
Boosters	861.46	12.5	72.592	11.2

n: raw frequency of hedges and boosters

n /1000: frequency of hedges and boosters per 1000 words

Hedges and boosters were clearly overused by female writers in the 19 the century but were they simply the sign of uncertainty as R. Lakoff (1973) claimed? Holmes (1990, p. 202) reports that these devices are “used by women to assert their views with confidence, or as positive politeness devices signaling solidarity with the addressee”. As Kennedy (2017)

explains, the Victorian Era witnessed a tremendous change in literature perspectives presented through various forms and styles. Easley (2004) draws our attention to the contribution of women writers to British literature. In this era, women chose a new path as writers in a male-dominant world. They constructed their identity and influenced literature culture. Some women writers preferred anonymous publication to decrease feminine voice and identity. Apparently, women writers in this era had the opportunities to express themselves in new ways more freely in fiction. In this new era, where the feminist style is distinct, female characters are portrayed as assertive and self-confident.

Our findings are evidence of this shift from the passive female presence to a more conscious presence of female writers. The overuse of hedges and boosters concerns the new ways of female writers to communicate their doubts and certainties. In other words, they are linguistic devices of women writer's consciousness strategy for presenting their stance and characters in the novels. Secondly, they seem to be a politeness strategy for pending acceptance by the readers. To receive the approval of the readers, women writers might create a space for them in their novels with the use overuse of hedges and boosters.

The second concern of the study was to identify the 10 most common items of hedges and boosters in the two corpora. As shown in Table 2, *would* and *could* as hedging items were the most frequently observed items in both subsets. Apparently, modals got the highest ranks in the table. The other items, which were mostly adverbs, were found at low frequencies. Although we observed an overuse of hedges and boosters in the female corpus, the most common 10 hedges were identical in the two corpora.

Table 2

Ten most used hedges

Items	F n/1000		M n/1000
would	3.4	would	2.9
could	2.6	could	2.1
should	1.6	should	1.4
might	1.2	may	1.0
may	0.9	might	1.0
quite	0.6	quite	0.5
perhaps	0.5	perhaps	0.5
rather x	0.5	almost	0.4
almost	0.4	appear	0.4
appear	0,3	rather x	0.4

In English, modals are commonly applied to express modality, which displays the speaker's or writer's opinion towards the propositional content. They are non-factual utterances, and they indicate the speaker or writer's comment on the truth of the propositional content (Hardjanto, 2016). For Hyland (1994), modals are the most typical means of hedging. Going back to the 19th century, our case, the abundant use of epistemic modality (e.g. it could be seen) are one of new tools of the feminist style Livia (2003). The extracts below, drawn from the two corpora of the present study, indicated subjective possibilities stated by the characters which fall outside the propositional content of the utterance with the use of modals. Boicu (2007, p. 18) states that modals like *can*, *may*, *must*, and *should* show "potential existence or occurrence of events, acts or circumstances." The first three examples displayed potentiality that did not exist in the actual world. Suffice that, the use of *should* in the extract (4) limited the hearer's freedom of action implicitly, which is an example of negative politeness. The speaker here wanted his/her decision to be accepted.

(1) Had I done more than my duty in that," replied Thaddeus, "such words from your majesty *would have been* a reward adequate to any privation; but, alas! no...

(Female subset)

(2) She had loved him, passionately loved him, and he was certain she *could not be* so utterly changed.

(Female subset)

(3) Living apart from her husband, she *could not be* expected to forswear society, and doubtless she would see Milvain pretty often.

(Male subset)

(4) But whether the banquet was to be given by the bride's grandfather or by himself,-he was determined that there *should be* a banquet,...

(Male subset)

A quick glance at Table 3 shows us that, verbs as boosters were mostly preferred by both groups of the writers. Sharing the same frequency counts of 1.6 per 1000 words, know was the most common item in both corpora, followed by never. Think, must, and find were the other frequently applied items at above 1.0 occurrences. Similar to the employment of common hedging items, the 10 items of common boosters were typical in both subsets.

Table 3*Ten most used boosters*

Items	F		M
	n/1000		n/1000
know	1.6	know	1.6
never	1.6	never	1.3
think	1.5	must	1.2
must	1.4	think	1.1
find	1.0	find	1.0
always	0.7	indeed	0.5
believe	0.5	always	0.4
sure	0.5	believe	0.4
indeed	0.4	show	0.3
really	0.3	sure	0.3

Broadly speaking, boosters are the reflection of speaker or writer's confidence towards the truth of the content. We may discover how they function in our corpora by concentrating on some examples. In (5), the speaker believed that what he/she said was a fact. It is an example of assertive speech act suggested by Searle (1979), which binds the speaker to truth of utterance. In the next example, the speaker established a point of equilibrium between the assertivity of the truth of the content and his/her personal thought with the use of know as a booster and difficult as an attitude marker. In a way, the speaker made the message perspicuous. The item never was common in both corpora as illustrated in (7) and (8). The employment of the item did not let the hearers to negotiate the speaker's assertions. In the two corpora, we observed a frequent use of the item with modals in both the present and the past form.

(5) You *must know* that I am a wandering beggar-girl, without home, parents, or friends...

(Male subset)

(6) It was difficult to *know* what to do for the best for Mary.

(Female subset)

(7) Now the Diamond could *never* have been in our house, where it was lost, if it had not been made a present of to my lady's daughter; and my lady's daughter would *never* have been in existence to have the present, if it had not been for my lady who (with pain and travail) produced her into the world.

(Male subset)

(8) We shall *never* be able to take a reasonable view of this question till we get rid of that ridiculous phrase...

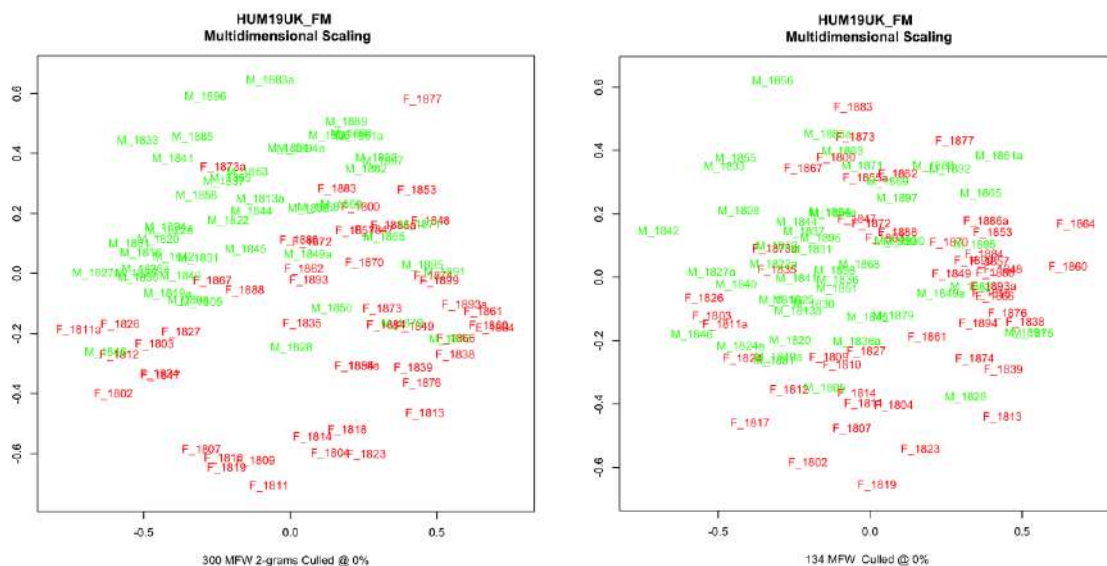
(Female subset)

In the final analysis where we make both unsupervised and supervised automatic classification of gender based on aforementioned features, it is seen that the results are quite consistent with the findings in the previous step. In fact, the previous research on the linguistic differences of gender in language production is further supplemented with our findings. Figure 1 shows the unsupervised MDS classification of the corpus in which a rough stylistic comparison of 300 most frequent (MFW) bigram features is made on both subsets (in the visual on the left) and another comparison of hedges and boosters usage by both genders (in the visual on the right) is given. See how gender distribution in both plots is roughly consistent with each other.

Indeed, gender specific language is not a myth. While a general comparison of an even unrefined stylistic choice clearly indicates the authenticity of this myth, it is further supported with the roughly similar distribution of hedges and boosters features in the corpus in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Multidimensional Scaling (MDS) visualization of general stylistic choice and hedges and boosters distribution



The separation is not perfect in line with Livia’s argument that linguistic choices might have been copied by any skilled author. Yet, we can safely generalize that different linguistic choice by different genders is a general tendency in this limited case of fictional language. The case should ideally be supported by the supervised classification as well in which gender labelled corpus is fed into three state-of-the-art machine learning algorithms (SVM, Naïve-Bayes, Logistic Regression). Theoretically, these algorithms learn

the associated labels in vector space by looking at the Cosine Delta scores and later, tries to blindly identify to which label the features belong. Table 4 gives the classification results of each supervised classification method on two different sets of features with the best performing methods highlighted.

Table 4

Supervised classification results

	Evaluation Metrics					
	300 MFW Bigram Features			Hedges And Boosters Features		
	CA	Precision	Recall	CA	Precision	Recall
SVM	0.840	0.842	0.840	0.680	0.681	0.680
Naive Bayes	0.800	0.800	0.800	0.680	0.680	0.680
Logistic Regression	0.780	0.784	0.780	0.630	0.630	0.630

The metrics used to evaluate the performance of the machine learning models in this study include classification accuracy (CA), precision, and recall. When the 300 most frequent word bigrams were used as features, the SVM model achieved the highest classification accuracy at 0.84 (by percentage), followed by Naive Bayes at 0.80, and Logistic Regression at 0.78. However, when Hedges and Boosters features were used, all models performed slightly worse, with SVM achieving the highest classification accuracy at 0.68, followed by Naive Bayes at 0.68, and Logistic Regression at 0.63. Whether this gap between 84% and 68% accuracy is due to the limited size of the corpus needs further scrutiny with a more comprehensive and refined corpus. The reduced result for hedges and boosters is not surprising considering the very low number of items analyzed compared to more than 300 bigram features for general stylistic mark. Anyhow, we can conclude that hedges and boosters are salient features in determining the authorial gender of fictional language. The porosity of distribution and distance might be attributed to the general feminine tendency both in thematic and linguistic planes in Victorian literary landscape. It is well known that the 19th century literary actors are prominent in their high regard for sensational, serialized literature and epistolary form. Thus, a general utilization of hedges and boosters as the defining elements of the period literature might illustrate the power mechanisms from which the oppressed parties tried to overcome through their distinctive linguistic choices. Truly, the certainty, doubt, assertiveness and confidence or lack thereof can be the significant factors affecting the use of salient metadiscursive features.

Taken together, we found that female writers of the 19th century in our case created a new writing style. Hedges and boosters are prominent features of this style. The overuse of them in the female subset enabled us to claim that women writers in the 19th century were more assertive in their convictions than male writers were. They also attempted to view consensus with their readers by the use of hedges. However, both female and male writers made use of similar items of hedging and boosting.

Conclusion

In both oral and written discourse, we are surrounded by linguistic conventions, the usage of which convey different communicative functions. Hedges and boosters are two prominent metadiscursive items. Hedges are the tools of negotiating the state of the claims and evaluations of knowledge with the readers while boosters highlight the commitment of the writers to their claims as well as showing solidarity with the readers. Previous studies about the employment of hedges and boosters have been limited to academic contexts. Undertaken from a gender-based perspective, the present paper dealt with the employment of hedges and boosters by English female and male writers in the 19th century. We adapted corpus-based approach supported with machine learning methodology and used HUM19UK Corpus (2019) to examine hedges and boosters in the 19th century.

The 19th century English Literature is specifically called as the Victorian Era. In this era, there was a shift from masculine dominant literature to a more feminine one. Women writers some of whom are considered to be the milestones of the 19th century English novels were welcomed by the English society. The professional writing of female novelists led to a change in the literary style. Drawing on our analysis, we found that one of the main features of this style is the more frequent employment of hedges and boosters by female writers. Although we observed a statistically significant overuse of hedges and boosters by female writers, the common items of hedges and boosters used by female and male writers were identical, which might be explained by the new construal of the feminine dominant literary style.

The findings of this study revealed the importance of genre-based studies in understanding the use of hedges and boosters as a key aspect of showing solidarity and tentativeness of the thoughts. However, this study offers some insight into the use of these devices in a limited literary era with a limited size of hypothetically representative corpus

of fiction whose authors are gender-labeled. Hence, wider-scope diachronic analysis of hedges and boosters or other linguistic devices is essential to reveal the gradual changes in the English literary community.

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