

The Pragmatic Role of Hedging and Back-channelling in British TV Shows

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Abstract

This study examines the functional functions of linguistic devices like backchannels and hedges in British talk shows across time periods. Hedges like "maybe," "sort of," and "I think" support politeness, soften statements, and express ambiguity. On the other hand, backchannels like "yes," "oh," and "right" support speakers, keep the conversation moving, and show how the audience is responding. This study uses qualitative discourse analysis to investigate how men and women use these linguistic devices in talk shows on television over a range of decades. The data for this research were collected from interviews in British TV programs according to specific criteria to ensure that they represent the social and cultural diversity in British society. The episodes collected are ten episodes from well-known and popular British programs. Most of the episodes are dialogues with multiple guests from different backgrounds, which allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the conversation. The results show a notable rise in the usage of backchannels and hedges over time, underscoring shifts in audience engagement strategies and conversational dynamics. This study emphasizes how these gadgets have changed over the last ten years and how they affect media communication. along with their importance in fostering interactive conversations between the sexes. Hedging and backstreet communication are also essential for conversational communication in television programs, especially British ones, as they help to soften facial expressions, improve interaction, reduce the intensity of tense situations, and facilitate the exchange of roles between speakers.

Keywords: Media communication, TV series, backchannels, hedges, and pragmatism.

1. Introduction

Backchannels and hedges are examples of pragmatic devices that are used in practically every daily conversation. According to Lakoff (1972), hedges are "words whose job it is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy." Examples of hedges include "maybe," "sort of," and "kind of." These are expressions that indicate that a person does not want to say something directly, either out of shyness or to avoid embarrassment. Speakers usually use them in their talks to make their communication better and more polite.

Back-channeling, on the other hand, refers to the simultaneous operation of two channels in a conversation, where the speaker conveys the main message while the listener provides minimal verbal or non-verbal responses to show engagement and understanding (Yngve 1970). It is used extensively by the listener to make the speaker feel more comfortable during their speech and enhance the listener's understanding of the dialogue. The "main" channel is the one through which the speaker (the person who catches the word) sends messages, while the "back" channel is the one through which the listener (the recipient to whom the speech is addressed) provides information without being asked to speak. Yngve's term "back channel" includes not only conversational items such as "yes" and "uh-huh," but also short comments such as "Oh, I don't believe it" and short questions such as "You've started writing it down then—your question?" (Yngve 1970:574). Backchannels are not only vocal expressions such as yes or uh-huh, but also non-lexical utterances such as aa, Hoo, and nn. (Iwasaki,1997; Maynard, 1993)

The uses of Hedges and Back-channelling have varied over the years between men and women. Those two linguistic devices have been shown to improve the effectiveness of TV programs and enhance communication between the speakers themselves and the way the audience perceives and responds to the dialogue (Holmes, 1995; Tolson, 2001). on TV talk shows. In the context of talk shows, hedges and back-channels play an important role in the dialogue and affect several aspects related to the recipient and the audience through their use, as their use creates an atmosphere of comfort, reduces the feeling of formality in the conversation, and encourages the speaker to continue speaking (Hargie, 2011).Moreover, these linguistic devices contribute to smoother and more engaging interactions between the sexes, allowing speakers to maintain understanding while dealing with controversial or sensitive issues (Shields, 2014; Hargie,2011). For instance, hedging,

such as, maybe, I think, I see that, sort of, softens the tone of opinions, encouraging the speaker to express his views comfortably, while back channels (e.g., yeah, huh, I get that) promote positive communication between the two parties.

1.1. Problem Statement

Past studies have extensively examined the linguistic patterns and use of hedges and backchannels in various contexts (Fraser, 2010; Schegloff, 1982). However, there is still a lack of research on how the use of these two linguistic devices has changed over time. Investigating this temporal development can provide valuable insights into shifts in communication styles and pragmatic strategies across different periods.

The present study addressed the following research questions:

Q1: To what extent do men and women use hedges and back-channels in British talk shows across different periods?

Q2: What pragmatic functions do hedges and backchannels serve for men and women in different periods?

1.2. Aims and Objectives

This research aims to broaden the scope of pragmatics beyond everyday conversations to include corporate communication in the media. It seeks to enhance the understanding of media communication in a world that relies heavily on media. Additionally, it intends to improve communication skills, assisting media professionals in utilizing hedges and backchannels to facilitate better interaction between audiences and speakers. This study concentrates on hedges and backchannels in TV programs, examining their evolution and highlighting the differences in conversations occurring now compared to a decade ago.

2. Literature Review

The study of hedges and back-channeling communication strategies has gained significant attention in the fields of pragmatics and sociolinguistics. These kinds of features are essential for promoting easy communication, upholding civility, and controlling conversational turn-taking. This section examines earlier studies on backchanneling and hedging, emphasizing their definitions, communication roles, and uses in a variety of settings, especially media discourse.

2.1. Definitions and Theoretical Background

Although hedging and back-channeling are essential to conversational pragmatics, different studies have had different conceptualizations of them. Hedges, as defined by Lakoff (1973), are linguistic devices like "sort of," "kind of," and "maybe" that lessen the impact of statements. He adds that hedges are used to convey courtesy or uncertainty. This definition was broadened by Tannen (1990), who contended that hedges are instruments for building rapport and reducing conflict in discussions rather than just indicators of uncertainty. To appear less assertive and give space for different viewpoints, a speaker might use hedges when saying, "I think it might rain later."

On the other hand, Back-channelling refers to verbal and non-verbal cues used by listeners to signal attentiveness or agreement without taking the conversational floor. Examples include utterances like "uh-huh," "I see," and nodding (Yngve, 1970). Yngve was one of the first to explore back-channeling, describing it as a cooperative strategy that supports the speaker's flow. Later, McCarthy (2003) emphasized the pragmatic role of back-channeling in creating interactive and dynamic conversations, highlighting its importance in turn-taking and maintaining conversational harmony.

2.2. Past Studies on Hedges and Back-channeling in Communication

Both hedges and back-channels contribute significantly to the pragmatics of interaction. Studies on hedges have shown that hedges serve multiple pragmatic functions. Brown and Levinson (1987) argued that hedges are part of politeness strategies used to protect the speaker's and listener's face. They state that hedges are used by speakers to mitigate statements. Moreover, Fraser (2010) suggested that hedges enable speakers to navigate conflicting viewpoints without confrontation (Fraser, 2010). In a disagreement, for instance, a speaker might say, "I kind of see your point, but..." to introduce a differing perspective gently.

Conversely, back-channelling is a helpful technique that encourages the speaker to go on by getting affirmative responses from the audience as a sign of comprehension or agreement (Schegloff, 1982). Clancy et al. (1996) also discovered that back-channeling promotes a cooperative conversational environment by signaling active attentiveness. For example, to show interest in a story, a listener may interrupt with "uh-huh" or "really?" (Clancy et al., 1996).

In mediated interactions, like TV shows, interviews, and debates, hedges and back-channeling are especially common and are crucial for controlling the discourse flow. According to Holmes (1995), hedges were commonly employed in interviews to soften criticism or maintain a neutral position. For example, interviewers might say, “*It seems like you’ve faced challenges...*” to frame a potentially sensitive question diplomatically. Regarding back-channeling, Tolson (2001) highlighted its importance in talk shows, where hosts use it to maintain a conversational rhythm and establish rapport with guests. Example: A host might say “*I see*” or “*That’s interesting*” to encourage guests to elaborate further. Despite these insights, Shields also emphasized that gendered communication, including media contexts, shows that women use indirect and more interpersonal strategies such as hedges and back channels (Shields, 2014).

Like others, Aini et al. (2023) studied politeness strategies in the Rosi Talk Show, noticing that women tended to use hedges as question tags and meta-comments, whereas men focused on precision-focused hedging.

In addition, Hargie (2011) acknowledged that there are differences in communication patterns between the sexes, including variations in the use of linguistic devices such as backchannels. These patterns vary depending on the context. All of these findings indicate that women are more likely than men to use hedges and backchannels to reduce conversational tension, show support, and other ways of showing kindness to the other person.

The past studies have examined the use of these linguistic devices in specific periods. However, there is still a lack of studies on the differences in the use of backchannels and hedges between men and women over two periods of time. Therefore, the present study has aimed to bridge the gap by investigating the uses of backchannels and hedges in British TV shows broadcasting in two different periods, that is (1995-2023).

2.3. Classification of Hedges

Hedges are the expressions that make the meaning of utterances uncertain. According to Brown and Levinson (2011), to a great degree, politeness is the main purpose that people want to achieve. Therefore, hedges are considered polite strategies in human communication. The definitions above on hedges are different, but their essence is the same. Speaking,

There exists a large number of words that meet the standards and definition of hedges, such as certain adjectives, adverbs, impersonal phrases, modal verbs, and so on. Zadeh (1972) classifies hedges into two types

Fuzzy Set: *Theoretic Interpretation of Linguistics Hedges*, and it was the first time to decorate fuzzy words directly, such as “very, more or less, much, essentially, slightly, and so on.” Hedges can also be classified into two types according to the words they modify. One type is that they can just modify fuzzy words, such as very good, and to some extent satisfactory to some extent. Zadeh pointed out that the second type includes hedges that can modify vague and precise terms, such as the word "about" in "about 100 people" or "essentially true. So that means they can not only modify fuzzy words but also modify exact words, just like the word about. So far, the most influential classification has been worked out by Prince et al (1982) in terms of pragmatic functions. They hold that hedges can be classified into approximators and shields. To be more detailed, approximators can be classified into adaptors and rounders. Shields can be divided into plausibility shields and attribution shields.

2.4. Application in Media Communication

The review has demonstrated that hedging and back-channeling are essential pragmatic strategies that facilitate effective communication across various contexts. Given that their functions in casual conversations and certain mediated contexts have been studied in the past, little is known about how they work together to affect the dynamics of televised interactions. By examining the pragmatic function of hedges and backchanneling in TV series, this study seeks to close these gaps and advance our knowledge of conversational pragmatics in media discourse.

3. Theoretical Background

One of the foundational theories pertinent to the examination of hedges and backchanneling is Grice's Cooperative Principle (1975). Grice suggested that four conversational maxims—quantity (giving the appropriate amount of information), quality (being truthful), relation (being relevant), and manner (being clear and orderly)—are essential for effective communication. By intentionally breaking these rules, such as by employing evasive or cautious language like hedges, speakers may be hinting at more meanings or reducing the impact of their remarks. For example, using a hedge like "I think," "maybe," or "sort of" frequently suggests that the speaker is attempting to be indirect

or courteous, or is not entirely committed to the truth. Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987) is another important theoretical framework that focuses on how speakers control social relationships and steer clear of face-threatening acts (FTAs) during conversations. This theory holds that everyone has a "positive face," or the desire to be liked and accepted, and a "negative face," or the desire to act freely and without coercion.

Hedges minimize the imposition of a statement and are frequently employed as negative politeness techniques. Saying "I might be wrong, but..." for instance lowers the possibility of coming across as overly assertive. Conversely, back-channeling (e.g., "yeah," "uh-huh," "right") frequently functions as a constructive politeness tactic, demonstrating interest and agreement with the speaker. Understanding the pragmatic roles of hedges and back-channel responses in spoken discourse is made easier by these theories.

4. Methodology

4.1. Research Design

Using a qualitative methodology and discourse analysis, this study examines the practical applications of hedging and back-channeling in British television programs. In particular, it looks at how speakers of different genders employ these linguistic techniques differently over two time periods. A thorough examination of the frequency of occurrences as well as the communication goals of back-channeling (e.g., uh, huh, yeah) and hedges (e.g., I think, maybe, I see) can be conducted using the qualitative method. A thorough analysis of gender-based variation in media discourse within social and conversational contexts is made possible by this dual focus. (Tannen 1984).

The study's data came from a recorded television interview show that featured well-known actors. The conversation took place in a formal media setting, but maintained an informal and interactive tone, with the guests answering questions about their personal lives, careers, and experiences. The interview was chosen because it represents a natural form of oral discourse, rich in pragmatic features such as hedging and back-channeling. The selection of public figures adds an interesting dimension, as their use of language reflects professional image management and engagement in the conversation. The recording was transcribed and analyzed to identify examples of hedging and backchanneling.

4.2. Study Community and Sample

The subjects in this study are from British talk shows that show mixed conversations between the sexes. The selected TV programs were from different periods (from ten years ago to the present). Ten episodes of prominent British television talk shows were selected for analysis, five episodes from one decade (2013-2015) and the other five episodes from more recent years (2023-2024). The sample criteria for choosing these exact TV programs are that they are programs with a variety of conversations between men and women, and also that they have a high viewership rate.

4.3. Data Collection Tools

The data for this research were collected from interviews in British TV programs according to specific criteria to ensure that they represent the social and cultural diversity in British society. The episodes collected are ten episodes from well-known and popular British programs. Most of the episodes are dialogues with multiple guests from different backgrounds, which allows for a more comprehensive analysis of the conversation.

The information was taken from the YouTube transcripts website, where you can find the transcripts of videos on YouTube. To accurately capture the pragmatic functions of the discourse, intonation, pauses, and overlaps were all incorporated into the transcription process.

4.4. Data Analysis

This study used theoretical frameworks and classifications created by eminent pragmatics and discourse analysis scholars to analyze the data from the episodes. Based on Lakoff's (1975) model, which recognized hedges as instruments for expressing politeness and uncertainty, they were categorized. Coates (1996) shed light on how hedge usage varies by gender. The classification of back-channelling responses was based on Yngve (1970). The function of backchanneling in preserving conversational flow was illustrated by Schegloff (1982). The study effectively examined how linguistic strategies in British talk shows have changed, especially with regard to gender and shifts in media discourse, by incorporating these frameworks. The hedge "maybe" in the passage indicates hesitancy when the visitor remarks, "Maybe I died, and it was weird." This can be seen as a negative politeness tactic, enabling the speaker to avoid coming across as overly assertive or arrogant, according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory.

4.5. Classification of Hedges

According to Lakoff (1975) and Coates (1996), hedges fall into one of three primary categories:

- 1- Epistemic Hedges: Phrases that convey hesitancy or uncertainty are included in this category.
- 2- Politeness Hedges – Mitigating Confrontation
- 3- Discourse Hedges – Maintaining Conversation Flow

4.6. Classification of Back-Channelling

Three categories of back-channeling responses are distinguished by Yngve (1970) and Schegloff (1982):

- 1- Continuers – Supporting the Speaker's Flow
- 2- Agreement Markers – Expressing Approval
- 3- Emotional/Surprise Responses – Expressing Reactions

5. Results and Discussion

This chapter offers a coherent interpretation of the study's findings by presenting the findings and incorporating their discussion. With an emphasis on gender disparities and changes in their use over time, the analysis looks at the prevalence and purpose of hedges and back-channeling in British talk shows across time. The findings show a discernible rise in the usage of back-channeling and hedges over time, pointing to a move toward more dynamic and captivating communication methods. According to the data, hedges have a practical purpose by expressing uncertainty, reducing directness, and upholding civility. Typical examples of hedges are:

I think – It's used to express hesitancy or doubt.

Kind of – used to indicate partial agreement or to soften the emphasis.

Maybe – to imply a possibility or to evade a commitment.

Well – it works as a phrase to introduce statements.

These findings are consistent with Coates' (1996) observation that women use hedges more frequently to appear less assertive and Lakoff's (1975) categorization of hedges as instruments for softening speech.

The rise in the use of hedges implies that contemporary talk shows encourage a more adaptable and captivating conversational style, enabling presenters to handle delicate subjects while retaining audience interest.

Similar to this, back-channeling was commonly seen in the talk shows under analysis, which served to both reinforce the speaker's point and guarantee a fluid flow of conversation. The following are the most widely used back-channeling expressions:

Yeah – used to continue speaking and show agreement.

I know – used to indicate interaction and agreement.

Oh – used to express surprise or emotional response.

The purpose of hedges in one of the episodes of the modern dataset (2023–2024) was discovered to be to lessen the impact of statements, particularly in sections that discussed the author's personal experiences or thoughts on movies and characters. Text from the episode in which a woman said:

“I mean, you know, it’s a failed proposal scene.”

Here it is used to present an indirect description and with a less intense tone.

For back-channelling as an example, “yeah, yeah” is used to agree and make the conversation smoother from the speaker, and the word “right, right” is used many times by the broadcaster to emphasize his interaction with the speaker. Text from the episode:

“Yeah, yeah, do you have as much fun shooting these sequels as you had shooting the original....”

“Oxygen deprivation isn’t a good thing, right, right I noticed in some of your movies you passed out halfway through.”

These results support Yngve’s (1970) model of back-channeling as a listener strategy and Schegloff’s (1982) research on its role in maintaining conversational flow. The increase in back-channeling in modern talk shows indicates a shift towards greater audience engagement and dynamic conversational styles, with speakers using more active listening techniques to maintain interaction.

Gender Differences in Hedges and Back-Channelling

The study also reveals clear gender-based differences in the use of these linguistic features. Women were found to use hedges more frequently (e.g., *I think, maybe, kind of*) to soften statements and

appear less assertive, reinforcing the argument that hedging serves as a politeness strategy. However, rather than reducing assertiveness, men tended to use more back-channeling responses (e.g., yeah, uh-huh, right) to help the conversation flow. These findings are consistent with Coates' (1996) study on gendered speech patterns, which found that men prioritize communication efficiency while women are more likely to hedge their remarks to maintain rapport.

Temporal Changes in the Use of Hedges and Back-Channelling

A comparison of talk shows from the past and present reveals a notable rise in back-channeling and hedges.

Hedging and backchanneling were less common in older talk shows (2013–2015), which reflected a more structured and less participatory dialogue style. Modern talk shows (2022–2024), on the other hand, showed higher usage, indicating a trend toward more casual conversational styles and audience engagement.

This change can be linked to shifting media discourse trends and audience expectations, as contemporary talk shows place an emphasis on inclusivity and spontaneity. A more interactive, audience-centered approach to media communication is reflected in the growing use of hedges and backchanneling.

The combined findings show that back-channeling and hedges are important factors in forming contemporary media discourse. While back-channeling guarantees engagement and interaction, hedges help with flexibility and conversational adaptability. The rise in their use over time reflects a changing media environment where speakers place a higher value on audience participation, rapport-building, and conversational spontaneity.

The study's gender-based disparities support the sociolinguistic theory put forth by Coates (1996), which holds that men in Tannen's (1990) observations rely more on back-channelling for conversational continuity, while women employ hedges as politeness strategies. By highlighting the importance of hedges and back-channeling in influencing audience engagement and media interactions, these findings advance our understanding of how linguistic strategies in television talk shows have changed over time.

The number of hedges and back-channeling that are mentioned in the dataset for this study, along with their purposes, are displayed in the table below.

Table 1: hedging and back-channeling frequencies and their purposes in the dataset.

Dataset	No. of Hedges	Hedges Functions	No. of back-channels	Back-channels Functions	Examples
New	6-8	To soften personal opinions	12-15	To show agreement and encourage the speaker	Woo-hoo, sure, I think, I guess
Old	2	To express uncertainty	6	To acknowledge and follow the speaker	I think, sort of oh, yeah, right,uh-huh
New	7-10	To reduce assertiveness in evaluations	15-20	To express surprise and approval	Exactly, oh, huh, maybe, sort of
Old	7-9	To politely introduce personal views	10-12	To maintain flow of the conversation	I mean, you know, no way!, yeah
New	9-11	To avoid direct judgment	12-14	To support the speaker emotionally	Um, I know, sure yeah
Old	6-9	To show uncertainty	8-10	To express minimal agreement	Yes, ok, kind of, you know
New	10	To delay direct opinion	18	To build rapport and engagement	Ooh, sure, you mean, I know
Old	6	To soften criticism	6-7	To acknowledge speaker's ideas	I would, oh, well, kind of

6. Conclusion

According to this study, hedging and back-channeling are essential to dialogue communication in television shows, particularly British ones, because they help to soften facial expressions, improve interaction, defuse tense situations, and make it easier for speakers to switch roles. The study's findings demonstrate how speakers employ hedging and back-channeling to control interaction,

be courteous, and keep the conversation moving, which is consistent with the Cooperative Principle and Politeness Theory.

The findings indicate that the use of hedges has grown over time as speakers employ them more frequently to steer clear of harsh remarks, preserve some privacy, express a range of viewpoints, and engage with the audience more candidly. Back-channelling has also become more prevalent in contemporary dialogues, which improves the character of interaction and conveys the camaraderie between the broadcasters and the program guests. It also makes the dialogue environment more engaging and appealing for viewers.

The findings also showed that men and women use these tools differently, with men depending more on back-channeling to show interaction and keep the conversation moving forward without changing their conversational stance and women using caution tools more frequently. Based on these results, we can conclude that these linguistic tools not only serve a functional role in enhancing dialogue but also reflect cultural and social changes that influence communication in the media over time.

Studying these linguistic phenomena thus contributes to a deeper understanding of how media dialogue strategies have evolved, assisting media professionals and communication specialists in improving their methods of managing discussions and engaging the audience more effectively.

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8. Appendix

Below is a list of TV shows whose scripts were used to extract data for the present study.

1-Her for She (Old)

2-Conan O'Brien (New)

3-The Late Show with Stephen Colbert (New)

4- The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon 2 episodes (Now and before 10 years).

5- Jimmy Kimmel Live (Old)

6- The Ellen Show (New)

7- Late Night with Seth Meyers (New)

8- The Jonathan Ross Show (Old).

9- Team Coco

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