

Comparing the Use of Linguistic Hedging Devices (LHDs) in English and Bahasa Indonesia: Gender and Pedagogical Perspectives

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Abstract

The use of Linguistic Hedging Devices (LHDs) serves a notable function in our daily conversations and thus is thought-provoking to analyze. Although its occurrence tends to be more prominent in spoken communications, the use of this linguistic feature is still frequently apparent in written conversations. Although they do not add much to the proportional content of an utterance, their occurrence remains unique in terms of variations, frequency, and functions across languages. This study examines the use of LHDs by native speakers of English and Bahasa Indonesia in short spontaneous expressions. The data were obtained through Oral Discourse Completion Tasks (ODCTs) involving 40 participants from the two language speakers (20 in English and 20 in Bahasa Indonesia). English respondents expressed their responses in English, while the Indonesian speakers used Bahasa Indonesia in their responses. Each respondent was asked to respond to an apologetic expression from a close friend using a mini-digital tape recording. All responses were transcribed and analyzed, focusing on the number and types of LHDs used by the respondents in their expressions. The results revealed that the two language communities used various LHDs in their responses, mostly intended to show indirectness and reduce threats toward the hearers' negative faces. English respondents were likely to use these linguistic features more frequently and varied in types than their Indonesian counterparts. A remarkable trend in the study is that Indonesian speakers tended to be more direct in their expressions than their English counterparts, challenging previously reversed claims. Teaching English as a Foreign Language in Indonesia is recommended to introduce various types and uses of these markers and emphasize how they can be used appropriately in authentic contexts.

Keywords: English, Bahasa Indonesia, EFL learners, linguistic hedging devices, fillers, cross-cultural pragmatics, spoken interaction

Introduction

This research paper reports on the use of Linguistic Hedging Devices (LHDs) in English (E) and Bahasa Indonesia (BI). It investigates how native speakers of the two languages used LHDs in short expressions, particularly in apology responses. Apart from its main function of showing indirectness, such a linguistic feature is also believed to show personal characters. It reflects a feeling of hesitation as the speakers will likely control their expressions by searching for appropriate words and attempting to avoid face-threatening toward the hearers. The study is worth investigating as such a cross-cultural analysis, contrasting how native speakers of the two languages use LHDs, which has been fairly limited in linguistic studies. This has accounted for the scarcity of information about these speech features' types,

functions, and even socio-pragmatic meanings and their pedagogical implications in second or foreign language teaching. In the context of teaching English as a foreign language, in particular, the information on using such features is undoubtedly essential. This is simply because such a usage displays how the speakers control their expressions in natural contexts while simultaneously trying to mitigate face threats towards the interactants.

Many EFL learners have often found it hard to understand what native speakers say in spontaneous or natural speech situations (Fitriah & Muna, 2019; Hardiyanty et al., 2021; Hoff et al., 2020; Laksana, 2021). This happens because what they hear is often substantially different from what they formally learn at school. In spontaneous situations, most native speakers' speeches, talks, and conversations are characterized by the overwhelming

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use of various discourse markers, including politeness markers or hedging devices, to reduce face threats, maintain harmony, or avoid communication breakdown. These pragma-linguistic features might be absent and have never been introduced by the teachers in the classroom. Despite the lack of exposure to various natural and authentic audio-taped listening materials, the teachers' limited access and experience to the real situations in which native speakers perform standard speeches could be another potential source of the drawback. The use of LHDs, as suggested by (Holmes, 1986), displays roundaboutness, ambiguity, and perhaps anxiety (Holmes, 1986), but Wouk (1999) argues that the use of these politeness markers plays an essential role in daily interactions as they mitigate the threats towards the interlocutors' face.

Statement of Problem

The impetus of the present study is based on the scarcity of cross-cultural politeness features in the two languages in the last few decades. Studies that compare how speech acts are realized and performed in various social aspects in English and Bahasa Indonesia are still lacking and need to be developed. Furthermore, what makes this study more interesting to investigate is the inclusion of a gender perspective as a parameter in the investigation, acknowledging how men and women in the two languages express themselves in showing politeness and solidarity. Finally, the study is expected to provide pedagogical insights for the teaching of both English and Bahasa Indonesia as the information about cross-cultural politeness in the two languages has been relatively limited in the works of literature.

Aims of Study

This paper analyzes the use of LHDs as politeness features expressed by native speakers of English and Bahasa Indonesia and looks at similarities and variances in their usage by the speakers of the two languages. The analysis covers using a few prominent markers such as fillers and hedges. Such markers are integrated into the gender aspect, aiming at comparing men and women in expressing themselves in both languages. Finally, the findings will be expected to shed light on pedagogical perspectives for EFL teaching either at secondary or tertiary levels.

Research Questions

Overall, this research project was urged to the present investigation to examine the extent to which:

1. Is there any specific variance in the use of LHDs between English and Bahasa Indonesia native speakers in their efforts to mitigate face threats towards their interlocutors?
2. Is there any gender-specific variation in using these linguistic features in the two language communities?
3. What is the pedagogical implication of the findings toward Teaching English as a Foreign Language practices in local contexts?

Methodology

This qualitative-descriptive study based data on participants' expressions or responses in a short spoken interaction. As stated by Creswell and Creswell (2018), qualitative research can be employed when the data is based on texts and images that are related to social phenomena. Also, they point out that the qualitative method is characterized by the researcher's interpretation following the data displays and representations. The study also refers partly to Miles et al. (2018), in which the data in participants' expressions are naturally recorded and focused accordingly to answer the research questions. They were then analyzed, classified, tabulated, and interpreted according to the keywords of the expressions.

Yuan's (2001) study employed an Oral Discourse Completion Task (ODCT) technique for data collection. The data were collected from forty respondents in the two language communities (20 in BI and 20 in English), aged 20 to 40. They

were selected based on a purposive principle that suited the study's purpose (Crossman, 2020 & Palsys, 2008). They were requested to express their short responses to an apology from their close friends of equal status in their language. Their responses were audio-tape recorded and transcribed for analysis. For efficiency and simplicity, the analysis follows Adrefiza and Jeremy (2013) and Jeremy and Adrefiza (2017) of transcription, representing word-per-word utterances in which speech features such as overlaps, pauses, and intonations are not included. The recorded expressions were categorized, tabulated, and interpreted accordingly to answer the research questions.

Results

It is evident from the findings that both language communities used a variety of LHDs in their responses. The variations were indicated through the use of several different fillers and hedges which demonstrate both the emotional and linguistic expressions of the speakers. An indication of politeness and indirectness was also obvious as the speech acts of apology and response placed the interlocutors in a face-threatening situation, forcing the speakers to manage their feelings and expressions (Adrefiza & Jeremy, 2013). These linguistic features are said to be effective and appropriate in the speakers' attempt to reduce threats toward the hearer's face (Holmes, 1995). It is apparent in the findings that the use of fillers and hedges indicates a problematic situation in which the hearers' negative face was threatened, so they strived to manage and control their expressions to mitigate the face threats toward the addressees. Tables 1 and 2 presented the use of fillers in both languages.

The Use of Fillers

The use of fillers was frequent in the two languages. There are a total of (708) instances of fillers found in both languages (492) in English and (216) in BI. When gender variable is considered, men used more fillers than women in their expressions, with a ratio of (391: 320). The data shows that 492 fillers were found and used by both men and women in English, while less than half of the incidents occurred in BI (216 instances). The use of fillers in English (see Table 1).

Table 1
The Use of Fillers in English

Type of markers	Man	Woman	Total
OK	11	18	29
So	7	12	19
Well	17	18	35
Um	66	97	163
Hmm	21	30	51
Er	77	16	93
Yeah	76	26	102
Total	275	217	492

As presented in Table 1, a gender-specific variation in using fillers in English is evident. English men were likely to use fillers more frequently than their women counterparts in their responses (275:217). Another significant trend is the fact that filler "um" was found to be the most popular type in use, with a total number of (163) in the data. Filler "so," on the other hand, appeared to be the least frequent, with only 19 instances found in the data. Other fillers, such as "er" and "yeah," were likely to be moderate in rate but seemed more prevalent in men than women. A noticeable gender difference is also obvious in the use of the filler "um," where its usage was more prominent in women than in men's responses, with a ratio of (97:66).

The use of filler in BI shows a slightly different posture. Out of a total of (216) instances, filler "ee" was the highest rate (59), followed by "oh," "aa," and "yah," with a total of less than (40) instances each. Unlike in English, there was no significant difference in rates between men and women in the use of fillers in BI. The use of fillers in BI (see Table 2).

As presented in Table 2, the use of fillers in BI shows an interesting trend. Six types of fillers were popular in use by BI speakers. They include (h) *mm/Emm*; *oh*; *yah*; *ya*; *ee*; and *aa*, - all comprising 216 instances in the data. Its usage is not as varied as that in English, but it still shows a slight gender variation, where men were found to be more frequent than women in using fillers (113:103), at least for the specific linguistic feature given above. Another important phenomenon can be seen in the use of filler “*ee*,” displaying a relatively high rate of use with a total of (59) instances in the data. The use of filler “*aa*” is a bit lower in rate, with only 39 instances. Overall, there seems to be a slight gender difference in the fillers “*ee*” and “*aa*,” where men use them more often than women.

Table 2
The Use of Fillers in Bahasa Indonesia (BI)

Type of markers	Man	Woman	Total
(H)mm/Emm	8	12	20
Oh	15	24	39
Yah	16	21	37
Ya	13	9	22
Ee	34	25	59
Aa	27	12	39
Total	113	103	216

The Use of Linguistic Hedging Devices (LHDs)

The use of LHDs within and between the two languages also shows a few interesting variations. In terms of rates of use, LHDs were more prevalent in English than in BI, with a ratio of (170:103); obviously, the types of LHDs used by English speakers were also more varied compared with those used by Indonesian speakers. A gender-specific difference in the use of such a linguistic device is also noticeable in both languages, where men tended to use them more often than women in their responses. The details can be seen in Tables 3 and 4.

Table 3
The Use of Linguistic Hedging Devices (LHDs) in English

Type of markers	Man	Woman	Total
You know	29	11	40
Kind of	6	7	13
Sort of	6	2	8
I guess	20	8	28
I (don't) think	3	9	12
Probably	7	4	11
Maybe	8	6	14
Like	5	13	18
A (little) bit	10	16	26
Total	94	76	170

It is evident that nine common hedging devices were popular in English, and there were 170 instances in total found in the data (94 in men and 76 in women, see Table 3). A gender variation is evident here, as men used them much more often than women in their interactions. Apart from the gender variable, *you know*, appeared to be the most popular LHDs used in English, with a total of (40 instances). The second most frequently used fell into, *I guess*, with a total of (28 instances). However, the use of hedging devices *sort of*, *I (don't) think*, and *probably* was not prominent in English. *I guess* the use of you know was likely to be more prevalent in men than in women. In contrast, the use of *a (little) bit*, *like*, and *I (don't) think* was likely to be more women's preference in its use. The use of LHDs can be intended to show face threat mitigation towards the interlocutors.

Table 4
The Use of Hedges in Bahasa Indonesia (BI)

Type of markers	Man	Woman	Total
Kayaknya (it seems that)	3	9	12
Nampaknya (it is likely)	1	2	3
Mungkin (maybe/possibly)	26	12	38
Sedikit (a bit)	4	2	6
Jadi (ya/so)	9	9	18
Gimana ya (how can I say)	8	11	19
Agak (rather/a bit)	3	4	7
Total	54	49	103

The use of LHDs in BI appeared to be less varied than in English, with only seven types found in the data. With only a total number of 103 occurrences (54 in men and 49 in women, see Table 4), LHDs in BI were dominated by the use of *mungkin* (maybe/possibly), *jadi (ya/so)*, and *gimana ya* (how can I say). The occurrences of *sepertinya* (it seems like), *sedikit* (a bit), and *agak* (rather/a bit), however, were not popular in rate, while the use of *kayaknya* (it seems that) was likely to be more popular among women (9:3), and *mungkin* (maybe/possibly) was used more by men, with a ratio of (12:26).

When a gender-specific variation is considered, and regardless of language variable, it is noticeable that men tended to be more elaborate in their responses with more frequent LHDs compared with women. In other words, this extra-linguistic feature was more prevalent in men than in women. When the language variable is considered, speakers of English used more LHDs than speakers of BI, and the variations were far greater in English than in BI. English speakers tended to use various hedging devices and used them more frequently in their expressions than Indonesians.

Discussion

The findings and data distributions above reflect an interesting speech phenomenon among the speakers of the two languages. First, the occurrence of LHDs demonstrates the psychological and social conditions of the speakers, where both the interlocutors were in a difficult context of apologetic act and the speakers' faces were threatened following an offense. This forced the speakers to manage their feelings and emotions as well as look for suitable words or expressions to be uttered. Thus, the use of fillers and hedges was inevitable (Adrefiza & Jeremy, 2013; Jeremy & Adrefiza, 2017). In this situation, they were hesitant, nervous, and unprepared for the responses. Finally, they decided to arrange their expressions so that they supported the hearers' negative face and tried to restore the equilibrium and a good relationship with the interlocutors. See the following examples in English.

Example 1: (Woman)

“Um yeah, well, I guess it's OK. It's so disappointing that you didn't turn up last night, yeah, that's fine. I really expected you to come.”

Example 2: (Man)

“How could you forget my birthday? Um OK, well, forget about it and we can make it some other time later.”

In the above examples, it can be seen that the use of fillers *um*, *yeah*, *well*, *OK* signals the speaker's feeling of hesitation. She might stumble on what words to say at the same time search for appropriate responses in that difficult situation. In example 1, the occurrence of “*I guess*” represents a linguistic hedging device (LHD) which shows a face mitigating aspect towards the hearer. The examples below illustrate the situation in BI.

Example 3: (Woman)

Oh *ee* nggak apa-apa. *Ee* mungkin biasa aja ya kelupaan, maklum aja semua pada sibuk. *Mungkin* lain kali bisa dating (Oh *ee* that's OK. *Ee* maybe that's common that we forget things, I understand that everyone is busy. Maybe we can make it again later).

Example 4: (Man)

Ah kamu ini memang begitu. Masa lupa sih? *Yah* mau apa lagi. Saya *agak* kecewa sebenarnya (Ah you are always like that. How could you forget? *Yah*, nothing we can do. I was rather disappointed, actually).

The above examples represent the use of fillers and hedges in BI, where the speakers were hesitant and provided responses with the use of *oh*, *ee*, and *yah*. The use of hedges “*mungkin*” (maybe/possibly) in example (3) and “*agak*” (rather/a bit) in example (4) may be intended to ease the situation, avoid directness and support the hearer’s face.

Also, in the above examples, it can be noticeable that the speakers were attempting to cover their emotions and avoid directness and impulsiveness in their responses. It is likely that the use of fillers and hedges in the above examples did not show the speakers’ lack of confidence and any sort of personal appreciation, as pointed out by a few prior studies such as Coates (2013), Holmes (1995; 2006; 2008), Lakoff (2004; 1975), Mills (2003), and Oishi (2020). Instead, they were likely to be used to show the speakers’ hesitation and psychological feelings or emotions.

Another interesting phenomenon is the fact that there seem to be no specific gender variations in the use of both fillers and hedges in the two languages. Neither men nor women showed specific kinds of these LHDs markers in their expressions. As suggested in previous studies, such as Coates (2013), Holmes (1995; 2008), Mills (2003), and Oishi (2020), women are said to be more indirect and are more likely to use hedges in their speech. The present study does not show a similar trend. This may be affected by a few aspects such as the interaction context, the speakers’ character, and the interactants’ psychological condition.

As seen in Tables 1 and 2, a gender variation in the use of fillers by the speakers in the two languages shows an interesting speech phenomenon. Apart from the speculation of linguistic stereotypes and distinctive features between the two languages, such a trend seems complex. Wouk (1999) states that the use of pragmatic particles is unique and different from language to language in terms of meaning, frequency, and function. At least as the above specific situation of language expressions, it is obvious that men tend to be more linguistically hesitant than women and this trend is evident in both English and BI, although its intensity was more frequent in English compared with BI, where both men and women in English tend to use them much more often than BI speakers. Although it may still be too immature to say, such a trend shows that English speakers are more filler linguistically indecisive than Indonesians in their responses. This may be because English speakers consider using fillers to reveal mitigation to face threats in most interactions (Holmes, 1995). It is also apparent that the use of hesitation fillers is naturally specific (built-in) to the language and its usage is unique from language to language. This is in line with what Wouk (1999) suggests: the use of particles and fillers is complex and remains both a personal and contextual defendant in nature; also, it is a sort of formulaic feature of linguistic expressions, especially in spoken interactions.

Pedagogical Perspectives

Regarding the contribution of the present study to EFL teaching, it is worth considering that the teachers in the classroom should completely introduce the use of LHDs with a variety of types and functions. The findings reveal that the two language communities expressed themselves differently in various ways, especially in attempting to show politeness, solidarity, as well as indirectness. These aspects are rarely introduced and thought of by the teachers in their teaching, and thus the students find it difficult to understand and use these linguistic devices in their natural interactions. As previous studies suggest, the use of these features indicates not only the speaker’s linguistic knowledge but also socio-pragmatic, cultural, and communicative competence. The notion of this phenomenon must be strengthened in teaching and learning.

Teaching English as a second or foreign language should be integrated not only into grammar and vocabulary but also into social and pragmatic aspects of the target language. This has been suggested by Bardovi-Harlig (1999) that pragma-linguistic competence and grammatical competence are quite independent and the learners need to achieve both through explicit instruction, descriptions, explanations, and discussions facilitated by the teachers in the classroom. The teaching should be done in flexible ways through which several interesting classroom activities are

practiced. These include, for instance, controlled communicative activities through role-plays, video streaming and slides, demonstrations, and many other practices. These can be implemented as good examples of a technique that teachers can use to provide recurrent linguistic practices for the learners (Bataneh and Bataneh 2008). A teacher training program on pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence and including socio-pragmatic values and practices in the textbooks is also regarded as a potential help.

Conclusion

Overall, the tendency to use LHDs in English and BI reveals at least two indispensable linguistic phenomena that confront previous claims. First, many theories have suggested that the use of LHDs is connected to the speakers’ efforts to show politeness and indirectness, and the fact that women were more indirect and more polite in their speech, the results of the present study have revealed a slightly reverse phenomenon. It is evident in the data of this study that apart from the language variable, men were found to be more indirect than women in their expressions, as the use of LHDs was more frequent in male expressions. This was indicated by male responses’ overwhelming use of fillers and hedging devices. The use of these linguistic markers reflects their attempts to mitigate face threats towards the addressees while at the same time trying to be indirect in their responses.

Another interesting trend is the fact that the results here display, in general, that Indonesians were found to be more direct than English speakers in their expressions, or English speakers tended to be more filler hesitant than BI speakers, and although this is likely to confront prior claims, such a phenomenon should be seen as a context-dependent nature as the two languages do share an exactly the same filler and hedge vocabulary. It must be admitted that the use LHDs should be regarded as only an indication of the linguistic phenomenon that shows indirectness in men’s interaction. Other factors may also be influencing. Although English speakers were found to use a greater variety of linguistic hedging devices and employed them more frequently than Indonesians, we cannot speculate that they are more linguistically hesitant than BI speakers, as the hesitation can be realized in various ways.

LHDs are often associated with the speakers’ feelings and emotions. Usually, the speakers experience a bad feeling and try to manage it through repetition and hesitation. In the present study, it was apparent that the speakers were hesitant and sought appropriate responses to be expressed in that context. The speakers were presumably facing an uncomfortable situation and thus tried to find suitable words or expressions to ease the situation. Here the use of LHDs can be intended to control face threats toward the addressees.

Furthermore, the use of repetition in the speakers’ responses might emphasize the speaker’s message and intention. Finally, the existence of repetition could also be triggered by data-gathering techniques using ODCTs. In this context, the participants did not have ample time to arrange their expressions but had to respond naturally to the speakers’ expressions thus repetitions and hesitations were unavoidable. An ultimate fact is that differences in the use of LHDs are formulaic and they indicate the uniqueness of speech phenomenon which is “built-in” to the languages and the speakers.

Suggestions

Finally, it is admitted that the present study is limited in a few aspects. First, the number of participants might be too small to make a larger generalization in describing speech phenomena in the two languages. A bigger number of participants with various social parameters such as gender, age, and position may account for different results. Also, as the data was collected through oral discourse completion tasks (OECD), several essential speech features such as intonation, stress, non-verbal expressions, and cues could not be captured. These features may provide an extra meaning and interpretation, which may interest further researchers. Pedagogically, the results of the present study may inspire EFL teachers, especially in Indonesian contexts, to develop

further studies in their relation to student effective learning and communicative skills through cross-cultural approaches and through the implementation of exciting and challenging classroom practices such as role-plays, simulations, and video plays.

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