

Maybe I Like It Here: Pragmatic Functions of Hedging in Indirect Refusals in Teenage Informal Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the pragmatic functions of hedging in indirect refusal strategies within teenage informal discourse represented in a contemporary high school-themed film. Refusals potentially create interpersonal discomfort, and speakers often soften their response to reduce tension through linguistic mitigation. One of this mitigation devices is hedging, which allows speakers to express uncertainty and soften the force of disagreement or rejection. Using a descriptive qualitative method, this study analyzes six dialogues containing refusal-related interactions between teenage characters. The data were identified and classified according to types of hedging expressions and their pragmatic roles in the refusal context. The findings show that hedging functions to defuse disagreement, express epistemic uncertainty, negotiate interpersonal decisions, and soften the force of refusals. These functions show how hedging contributes to maintaining interpersonal harmony in informal interaction.

Keywords: *Hedging, Pragmatics Functions, Indirect Refusal, Politeness, Teenage Informal Discourse*

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal communication is rarely neutral, speakers constantly manage relational harmony, especially when producing speech acts that have the potential to cause conflict, such as refusal and disagreement. In pragmatic research on disagreement, these acts are related to contextual variables (e.g., power, distance, and degree of imposition) that shape how speakers choose their strategies (Khammari, 2021). In face-based politeness theory, refusal can be understood as a face-threatening act because it can reject the interlocutor's wishes and disrupt relationship maintenance (Brown & Levinson, 1987). To avoid this risk, the speakers tend to use mitigation and indirectness. This tendency towards indirectness can be accounted for by Grice's Cooperative Principle, in which the speakers can use implicatures to convey the message without making the expression explicit (Grice, 1975).

Hedging is one key source of mitigation. Studies on interpersonal communication highlight that hedging is a core mechanism of vague language and aids in producing non-factual statements which benefits smooth interaction (Vlasyan, 2019). Specifically, Lakoff's core definition defines hedges broadly as words that function to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy, enabling speakers to lessen categorical commitment and avoid sounding absolute. (Vlasyan, 2019). The ambivalence function has to be seen in the refusal context because by using this function speaker will be able to refuse, disagree or postpone without being categorical and aggressive.

Other studies have investigated the use of hedging in different contexts of communication. For example, in interpersonal communication, hedging is discussed in relation to how it is used to avoid conflict, reduce actions that threaten dignity, and reduce tension in communication, making it effective and polite (Vlasyan, 2019). In a study of disagreement in American English, speakers were reported to rely heavily on hedging to defuse their disagreements

in power relationships (Khammari, 2021). In mediated discourse, film dialogue studies show that hedging often appears in disagreement and can signify politeness (towards oneself), political behavior, and identity-related work (Kavgić, 2018). In persuasive oral discourse (TED Talks), hedges are also associated with pragmatic competence and are used to balance assertiveness and credibility by avoiding exaggerated statements (Jovic et al., 2023). Finally, research on politeness in the context of digital education shows that mitigating language and indirect speech acts are used to maintain polite interactions, indicating that mitigation remains relevant in mediated communication (Bustam et al., 2024).

Although extensive research has been conducted on hedging, two gaps remain relevant to this study. First, much research emphasizes the interpersonal or institutional context in general rather than focusing on teenager-centered refusal (Vlasyan, 2019). Second, research on film dialogue often analyzes disagreement in general and highlights hedging as a mitigation strategy and identity marker (Kavgić, 2018), but little attention is given to how hedging specifically operates as an indirect refusal strategy in informal teenage interactions—where peer solidarity, emotional negotiation, and face management are particularly prominent. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by analyzing hedging devices and their pragmatic functions in the selected dialogues among teenage characters in *High School Musical 3: Senior Year* (in this film-based data), focusing on refusal-related interaction.

This study focuses on hedging in refusal-related interaction (rejecting suggestions, mitigating disagreements, negotiating decision-making, and softening admission) among adolescent characters in the selected dialogues. This study answers two research questions: what types of hedging devices are used in teenage refusal-related interaction, and what pragmatic functions do these hedging devices perform. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to identify the types of hedging used and explain their pragmatic functions as mitigation, uncertainty marking, face saving, and negotiation (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on conflict management shows that effective communication strategies support relationship adaptation and reduce escalation (Guo, 2025). Relationship conflicts are associated with intense communication and emotional issues, and mitigation often involves respectful communication to prevent escalation (Szamburski & Bodarski, 2023). This is in line with the treatment of rejection as a response that is sensitive to conflict, where the speaker purposely aims to reduce friction.

In communication, Grice's Cooperative Principle is followed, and that means that the speaker makes the communication relevant to the purpose of the communication (Grice, 1975). In real communication, the speakers do not necessarily say what they mean. Instead, they do so indirectly and allow the other person to interpret what the speaker means. This is particularly important in refusal communication, as direct refusal can sometimes sound too harsh. Thus, there is the possibility that hedging can work together with indirectness, whereby the speaker reduces their commitment through hedging and allows the communication to be interpreted indirectly.

Speech act theory treats spoken words as something that is activated during interaction (Khammari, 2021). In general, disagreement or refusal is an act that threatens dignity and is subject to indirect management and mitigation (Khammari, 2021). This accords with the idea that acts endangering dignity are what generates politeness strategies and corrective behaviors (Brown & Levinson 1987).

Hedging is commonly treated as an important feature of vague language and non-categorical communication (Vlasyan, 2019). 19). As defined by Lakoff, hedges are words that make things fuzzier or less fuzzy. This definition focuses on gradation and reduction of categorical force (Vlasyan, 2019). Pragmatic classification of hedges is further distinguished into approximators and protectors, with the observation that pragmatic hedges usually involve the speaker's intention rather than changing the circumstances of propositional truth (TANG, 2013). This classification enables the systematic classification of various markers such as maybe (probability), I guess (attitude/possibility), seemed (perceptual shield), something (simplifier), as well as minimizers like a little (intensity reducer).

According to the theory of politeness, refusal is sensitive to face because it has the potential to threaten the face needs of the listener and the speaker (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Contemporary discussions of politeness also revisit Brown and Levinson's framework and emphasize the importance of positive/negative face and politeness strategies as a system of organization for face work (Fathi, 2024).

In addition, Leech's Politeness Principle provides a widely used framework for explaining why speakers soften their speech. In research on WhatsApp group interactions, politeness was analyzed through Leech's framework, which is described through six principles (tact, generosity, agreement, humility, agreement, and empathy) (Bustam et al., 2024). Similarly, research on politeness principles finds that hedges help maintain a better communication environment, save face, make expressions polite or euphemistic, and increase acceptance (Liu, 2020). These perspectives support the interpretation of hedging as a mitigation tool that reduces the threat to Oface caused by rejection while maintaining interpersonal harmony.

Film dialogue research shows that hedging often appears in disputes as a source of mitigation and can serve as an identity marker (Kavgić, 2018). More stylistic research provides grounds for the study of the choices in the discourse of the narrative because of the linguistic features involved (Sarfraz, 2022).

METHODOLOGY

The present study applies descriptive qualitative method because the main purpose is not to measure variables statistically, but rather describe and interpret the contextualized functions of hedging. A qualitative orientation to text and discourse makes sense when researchers are trying to relate linguistic forms (actual words and expressions) with pragmatic meaning (what speakers do socially in interaction) (Alejandro & Zhao, 2024).

The data source is a movie, *High School Musical 3: Senior Year*. A total of six dialogues containing hedging expressions in refusal-related interactions were selected as the data of this study. The dialogues were chosen intentionally from movie lines that involve interaction in refusals, based on the occurrence of hedging expressions used to mitigate rejection. The movie was used as it is rich in communication among teenagers, who usually engage in interactions that involve negotiating disagreement, managing interpersonal tension, and maintaining relational harmony.

Data were collected via repeated viewing of the film and an orthographic transcription in which original wording and order of turns were preserved, as the structure of turn-taking is important to interpreting refusal and mitigation in interaction. Each chosen clip was then organized into an analysis table consisting of: (1) situational context, (2) full dialogue, (3) type of hedging, (4) type of refusal and (5) stylistic reformulation. The use of a table format ensured analytical transparency by connecting linguistic evidence with interpretation. Data selection follows a purposive sampling approach: only those clips with identifiable hedging and the actual refusal interaction are selected for inclusion, ensuring an informative database for pragmatic analysis (Alejandro & Zhao, 2024).

Data analysis was done using codes based on theory. First, hedging was identified based on the assumption that hedging is used to make categorical commitment "fuzzier or less fuzzy" (Vlasyan, 2019). Secondly, hedging was coded based on pragmatic descriptions that consider hedging a form of communication that expresses the speaker's position and intention (TANG, 2013). Lastly, each quotation was analyzed based on its rejection function and interpersonal effect, where rejection was considered a potential face-threatening act that would likely be mitigated and include face work (Brown & Levinson, 1987). The analysis of each quotation was also informed by research on politeness principles, where hedges are considered tools for creating a better communication environment, saving face, and becoming more acceptable in communication (Liu, 2020).

DISCUSSION

Hedging plays an important role in shaping how speakers perform refusal in interpersonal communication. Hedging in normal conversation helps speakers keep things flowing and efficient. Hedging functions are conflict avoidance, self-esteem equilibrium balanced conditions and burdening reduction. This is also in line with Grice's notion that speakers can communicate indirectly by means of implicatures, when direct clarity might create tension (Grice 1975). In the current data, hedging increases this indirectness by making the refusal less categorical: a speaker is able to refuse without coming across as entirely confrontational. The classification of hedging types and their corresponding refusal functions is summarized in Table 1:

Table 1. Selected Data of Hedging

No	Data	Type of Hedging	Refusal Type	Stylistic Reconfiguration
1	Duration: 59:01 -59:20 Context: Taylor advised Gabriella, who was unsure whether to enroll in the Stanford program early or not. Taylor: "Girl, your future is calling loud and clear. You have to grab it while you can." Gabriella: "Taylor, will you stop being my mom for a second and just be my friend. You know, <i>maybe</i> I like it here ..."	Probability Marker	Indirect Refusal / Mitigating Disagreement	Turn statements of rejection into "possibilities" to reduce tension with the other party
2	Duration: 1:07:26 - 1:07:49 Context: Gabriella is explaining to Troy that she feels tired of constantly saying goodbye because she moves around so often. Troy: "We're going to graduate. That's going to happen. Nothing is going to slow down." Gabriella: "<i>I guess</i> my heart just doesn't know it's in high school." Troy: Well ... Gabriella: "Shh. Troy, you don't have to say anything else. I'm a lot better at saying goodbye than you. I've had a ton of practice."	Probability Marker	Indirect Refusal/ Expressing Uncertainty / Self-Reflection	Using subjective verbs (guessing) to change factual statements into fragile personal opinions (subjectivization)
3	Duration: 23:52 - 23:56 Context: Sharpay is accusing Troy of pretending not to know about the Juilliard scholarship, but Ryan tries to defend Troy. Sharpay: "That puppy dog Troy Bolton only pretended to know nothing about Juilliard. Give me a break." Ryan: "He <i>seemed</i> surprised to me."	Probability Marker	Indirect Refusal/ Mitigating Disagreement	Shifting the focus from objective facts ("He was surprised") to subjective perceptions ("He seemed surprised") to avoid debate (protecting)

4	Duration: 59:26 -59:34 Context: Gabriella is talking to Taylor about her plan to go to Stanford early for the <u>honors</u> program, but she feels uncertain. Taylor: Stay in Albuquerque? That makes no sense. Gabriella: Why do I always have to make sense? I'll still go to Stanford, just <i>maybe in a year</i>.	Epistemic Verb	Modal	Softening Refusal / Negotiation	Using hedging to delay decisions ("not now" becomes "maybe later") so that rejection does not feel absolute (minimizing negativity)
5	Duration: 08:36 - 08:4 Context: Jimmy (<u>Rocketman</u>) invites Troy to hang out so they can get to know each other better. Jimmy: Dude, we should hang out tonight, man. Get to know each other <i>or something</i>. Troy: Yeah, sure. I just <u>gotta</u> grab the championship trophy, I left it in my truck. Jimmy: "Oh, dude! Don't sweat it! I'm on it!" Troy: "Oh, okay."	Approximator		Face-Saving Act / Politeness	Using general conjunctions ("or something") to make the invitation sound vague, so that if it is rejected, embarrassment can be minimized
6	Duration: 37:15 - 37:29 Context: Troy confesses to Gabriella that admitting his love for <u>theater</u> is difficult to do in front of his father. Gabriella: I watch you in rehearsals, Troy. You love it. Why is that so hard for you to admit? Troy: It isn't, to you. But to my dad? To Chad? Yeah, it's <i>a little</i> hard. Gabriella: It shouldn't be.	Downtoner		Softening Admission	Using mitigating words to reduce the intensity of the complaint, so that Troy still appears strong in front of Gabriella

Source: authors' work

Data 1

Context of the situation:

At minutes 59:01 – 59:20, Taylor is advising Gabriella, who is still undecided about joining the Stanford program early. Taylor is encouraging Gabriella strongly. Gabriella tells Taylor not to be like her "mom" and instead be like her friend. Gabriella is showing hesitation by toning down the statement and saying that maybe she likes where she is.

Analysis:

In the conversation, Gabriella uses the word "maybe" as a probability marker. In the given conversation, Gabriella does not deny Taylor's suggestion. Instead, she transforms her denial into a possibility. This indicates that the overall message is soft and not confrontational. This is in accordance with the assumption that reductive markers minimize the impact of speech acts that threaten face. This is also in accordance with Lakoff's assumption that reductive intensifiers minimize the impact of speech acts that threaten face as uncertainty markers. This is an interpersonal approach to the conversation that is in accordance with the function of reductive intensifiers. It is to avoid conflict and save face. Gabriella can deny the suggestion while maintaining a comfortable relationship.

Data 2

Context of the situation:

At minutes 1:07:26 – 1:07:49, Gabriella told Troy that she was tired of constantly saying goodbye since she moved around a lot. However, Troy was confident and told her that she would graduate and that nothing would prevent her from doing so. Gabriella then got emotional and told Troy that she thought her heart had not realized she was still in high school. When Troy was about to respond, Gabriella told him that he didn't have to say anything else and that she had more experience in saying goodbye than he had.

Analysis:

The "I guess" in this case represents uncertainty and reflection. Gabriella does not counter the ideas of Troy. Instead, she directs the attention towards herself. This is in line with the function of hedging in a conversation, which is to avoid absolute statements and minimize the possibility of disagreement. This is in line with the overall argument that hedging is used to sustain and regulate the relationship between the communicators and make the communication process successful. In this case, Gabriella uses hedging in order to avoid confrontation in the conversation.

Data 3

Context of the situation:

At minutes 23:52 – 23:56, Sharpay accused Troy of pretending not to know about the Juilliard scholarship, implying that Troy was deliberately feigning ignorance. However, Ryan attempted to defend Troy. Instead of directly confronting Sharpay, Ryan gave a reaction that was actually a statement of opinion when he said that Troy looked surprised to see him.

Analysis:

In this conversation, Ryan uses the word "seemed" in order to mitigate his disagreement. Instead of stating that Sharpay is wrong, Ryan states his defense as a matter of how he perceived it. This is less confrontational because it is difficult to argue with someone's perception. This is in line with studies of conversations in films, in which it was found that using softening words in disagreement is a mitigation strategy. Therefore, Ryan's use of softening words prevents disagreement from becoming conflict.

Data 4

Context of the situation:

At minutes 59:26 – 59:34, Gabriella spoke to Taylor about her plans to get into the honors program at Stanford a year earlier. Gabriella was still unsure about her decision. Taylor was not very positive about it. According to Taylor, it didn't make sense for Gabriella to stay in Albuquerque. Gabriella got defensive about it and asked why she always had to be sensible. Gabriella then offered a compromise of going to Stanford but maybe a year later.

Analysis:

In this interaction, Gabriella employs a hedging strategy in her attempt at negotiation, as opposed to refusals. She is keeping her goal, but is prolonging her time frame ("maybe in a year"). This is in keeping with the assumption that

hedge/approximator strategies diminish illocutionary force in speech acts. From a politeness point of view, it is better to defer than to refuse, as it preserves the relationship.

Data 5

Context of the situation:

At minutes 08:36 – 08:45, Jimmy, known as Rocketman, invites Troy to hang out so that they can get to know each other better. Rocketman's invitation is casual since he uses "or whatever." Troy agrees to hang out with Rocketman but claims that he needs to get his championship trophy from his truck. Rocketman offers to help immediately and claims that he will take care of it.

Analysis:

In this conversation, "or something" is an intensifier, which is a general modifier. Rocketman uses this vague invitation to make it sound lighter and not so urgent. This is an attempt to save face since if the invitation is not accepted, the level of embarrassment is reduced. This is similar to the hedging function in conversation, which is an attempt to save face or reduce burden. Therefore, hedging supports Rocketman's politeness and protects his face.

Data 6

Context of the situation:

At minutes 37:15 – 37:29, Troy confessed to Gabriella that it was difficult for him to openly admit his love for theater in front of his father and friends. Gabriella said she had seen him during rehearsals and believed he truly loved theater, then asked why it was so difficult for him to admit it. Troy replied that it wasn't difficult for him to admit it to Gabriella, but it was difficult with his father and Chad, and he softened his admission by saying it was "a little" difficult. Gabriella responded by saying that it shouldn't be that way.

Analysis:

In this interaction, Troy uses the expression "a little" as a minimizer to soften his admission about the difficulty of expressing his feelings in front of his father and Chad. Instead of stating that it is "very difficult," he reduces the intensity of his emotional struggle. This mitigation allows Troy to present his vulnerability in a controlled way, particularly in a sensitive context involving masculinity and expectations from significant others. By doing so, he maintains his self image while still acknowledging his internal conflict.

Furthermore, the use of the minimizer reflects the pragmatic function of hedging as a strategy to mitigate potentially face threatening acts. Admitting emotional difficulty, especially in front of peers or authority figures, can threaten the speaker's self image. Therefore, by using "a little," Troy avoids sounding overly emotional or weak. This aligns with the notion that hedging serves to reduce the force of an utterance and helps maintain interpersonal comfort by minimizing the risk of negative evaluation in interaction (Liu, 2020). From a politeness perspective, this can also be seen as a negative politeness strategy, where the speaker reduces imposition and avoids strong self-disclosure, thereby maintaining relational harmony in emotionally sensitive situations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

This study concludes that hedging is a significant form of communication in the rejection interactions of adolescent characters in the film "High School Musical 3: Senior Year." This study, based on the selected dialogues of the film, revealed that adolescent characters in the film prefer softer rejection. This study supports the notion that hedging is used by speakers to create non-categorical statements in order to sustain harmonious interactions. In the selected dialogues of the film, probability markers and epistemic expressions (such as "maybe," "I think") are used by the adolescent characters in the film in order to express doubt and personal attitudes in such a way that rejection will not be absolute. Moreover, estimation markers (such as "or something") and intensity reducers (such as "a little") are used by the adolescent characters in the film in order to reduce the pressure of the invitation and the acknowledgment in such a way that the character will be protected from embarrassment and will be able to sustain a confident image of himself.

From the politeness point of view, these functions are of interest since rejection may be seen as a threatening action to the dignity of the speaker, and therefore speakers are motivated to reduce the conflict and preserve the dignity of both themselves and their hearers (Brown & Levinson, 1987). This is also in line with Leech's view of politeness, in which speakers soften their expressions to keep communication acceptable and maintain a better communication environment (Leech, 1983; Liu, 2020). Furthermore, these findings support Grice's explanation of indirectness: speakers may rely on implicatures when direct statements may cause tension (Grice, 1975), and hedging supports this indirectness by reducing categorical force.

For future research, it is recommended to expand the dataset by analyzing additional teen movies or different genres to determine whether similar hedging patterns emerge consistently. Future research could also compare film dialogue with natural teenage conversations to test whether the same pragmatic functions of hedging occur in real-life interactions. Finally, future researchers could incorporate a more diverse range of refusal contexts (e.g., refusal of requests, invitations, or accusations) to strengthen our understanding of how hedging operates as an interpersonal strategy in teenage communication.

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