

A GENDER PERSPECTIVE ON HEDGES: PRAGMATIC FUNCTIONS IN LITERARY DIALOGUES

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Abstract: *Hedges constitute important pragmatic resources in conversational discourse. They are not always simple indicators of uncertainty, but are often employed to soften claims, manage interpersonal relations, communicate epistemic caution, and support the co-construction of the conversation between speakers. The present study examines the gendered use of hedges in Dan Brown's *Inferno*. The research adopts a qualitative discourse-analytic method to explore the dialogues between the main characters (men and women), particularly the forms and functions of hedging devices. The analysis views hedges as context-specific and situated speech acts influenced by interpersonal relationships. The results suggest that the female characters in the novel use hedges to soften claims and propositions, whereas the male characters use hedges to convey uncertainty and lack of knowledge. This confirms that hedges have multifunctional pragmatic uses beyond gender stereotypes. The study concludes that hedging patterns in literary discourse are influenced by the inherent gender differences, as well as character roles, communicative intentions, and contextual factors.*

Keywords: *hedges, gender, mitigation, degree of commitment, literary dialogue*

Introduction

Hedges play a significant role within the field of gender studies and language. Early theoretical approaches, particularly those advanced by Lakoff (1975) and Tannen (1990), proposed that women are socialized to adopt more tentative communicative styles. Lakoff argued that women's speech is characterized by greater politeness and frequent use of hedging devices, interpreting these features as reflections of women's social inferiority. Similarly, Tannen's influential work proposed the existence of distinct male and female "genderlects" characterized by

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contrasting conversational norms, such as women's greater use of tag questions and men's preference for more direct declarative forms. However, these claims were later challenged by scholars. Research conducted by Janet Holmes (1987) found no substantial gender difference in overall hedge frequency. Instead, Holmes demonstrated that women often use hedges as facilitative strategies to encourage listeners' participation and maintain interactional support, whereas men more commonly use hedges to signal uncertainty or doubt.

More recent studies, including those of Cameron (2005), Eckert & McConnell-Ginet (2003), and Coates (2013), view gender as a socially constructed concept. From this perspective, linguistic variations, including hedging, are perceived as context-driven, shaped by factors such as social roles and interactional goals. Consequently, hedging cannot be regarded as inherently "female" or "male"; rather, it is employed in different ways across varying social and discursive contexts.

The article provides a review of the relevant literature, a description of the methodology, hypothetical findings, and a discussion of gendered patterns in the use of hedges.

By relating the findings to established theoretical frameworks, the paper aims to demonstrate that hedges in Dan Brown's *Inferno* (2013) primarily function as pragmatic resources shaped by gender characteristics, social roles, situational contexts, and other factors.

The paper examines the use of hedges within a particular literary context, namely, as already mentioned, in *Inferno*. A qualitative analysis of selected dialogues is undertaken. Adopting a gender-oriented perspective, the study addresses the following research questions:

How do male and female characters use hedges pragmatically?

What interpersonal functions do these hedges perform?

Literature review

Researchers generally define hedging as linguistic expressions that soften the force of the statement or reduce the speaker's commitment to the truth of the utterance. Hyland describes hedges as markers of "tentativeness and possibility," particularly in academic discourse (Hyland, 1996, p. 433). In spoken interaction, hedges enable speakers to appear more polite and non-imposing. From a pragmatic standpoint, hedges may carry out several important communicative functions. They can protect the speaker and the hearer's face in accordance with the politeness framework proposed by Brown & Levinson (1987). They may also facilitate smooth turn-taking and express the degree of certainty. Hedges can function in a variety of

ways, including linguistic forms, lexical items, modal verbs, tag questions, and intonation cues.

Robin Lakoff (1975) put forward one of the foundational models in language and gender studies, identifying a set of features associated with women's speech, including hedges, tag questions, and empty adjectives. She attributed these features to women's social subordination, describing them as patterns of women's language. Although many of Lakoff's statements were intuitive, her work proved highly influential and stimulated research. In this regard, Tannen (1990, p. 91) developed the "difference" model, suggesting that men and women have distinct conversational styles with different communicative goals. Within this model, men are more likely to maintain independence and status, whereas women tend to use language to build rapport and relationships. Such differing orientations were proposed to highlight recurring conversational contrasts.

In contrast, dominance theorists, such as Spender (1980, p. 21-27), interpreted gendered linguistic differences as reflecting unequal relations. More recent social constructionist approaches by researchers such as Eckert & McConnell-Ginet and Cameron, highlighted the performative nature of gender within specific contexts (Eckert & McConnell-Ginet, 2003; Cameron, 2005). Additionally, Cameron challenged the binary models of male and female language theories, suggesting that linguistic practices play a significant role in constructing multiple gender identities. Similarly, Coates (2013) suggested that the features once attributed to women can be situational and individual. Therefore, it can be emphasized that any gender difference in hedging should be understood within situational factors.

Early experimental studies and small-corpus investigations reported that women used hedges more often than men (McMillan et al., 1977; Mulac & Lundell, 1986), which supported the idea that women's speech was more tentative and indirect.

However, large-scale corpus studies yield mixed results, showing the variability of gender effects. Li's analysis of the Switchboard Corpus, consisting of 1155 telephone conversations, identified only minor gender differences: women produced more conversational turns, but no gender difference in hedging (Li, 2025). In contrast to the aforementioned statement, Newman et al. (2008) in writing-focused studies posited that women used hedges more frequently for politeness purposes. In their study of a TED Talks corpus, Hassani & Dastjani Farahani (2014) showed that male speakers used more hedging devices, whereas Du (2021) claimed that female speakers used more hedges in British English, emphasizing significant gender differences in the distribution of certain types of hedges.

Such contradictory results suggest that factors such as speaker role, genre, interactional context, and data classification play a significant role. Comparative

studies also suggest that the use of hedges is higher in spontaneous speech compared to written documents.

Methods

The approach to this study was a qualitative discourse-analytic design to investigate the pragmatic functions of hedges in the selected dialogues of *Inferno*. This was an interpretive study and aimed to understand how hedging devices function in the natural course of literary interactions, rather than counting their use statistically. Special emphasis was placed on the use of hedges to convey uncertainty, mitigate assertions, manage relationships, and enable cooperative discourse. The main source of data was the published 2013 edition of *Inferno*. Dialogic excerpts featuring possible hedging devices were pinpointed and assembled, implementing a purpose-built annotated file. The data included some discussions between the main male and female characters in situations of tension, negotiation, explanation, disagreement, or uncertainty, since these were deemed likely to involve pragmatic mitigation. A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify passages in which hedges were prominent. Scenes were selected if they contained linguistic forms typically used for hedging, such as modal verbs, introductory phrases, approximators, tag questions, and mitigated statements. The selected extracts were closely examined and interpreted, rather than being considered merely as lexical items; the use of hedges was examined in relation to the broader environmental context and in relation to other pragmatic clues.

Results and discussion

The qualitative study of selected dialogues from *Inferno* shows that hedging is a multifunctional pragmatic resource dependent on contextual factors such as situational needs, character types, and narrative setting. Women characters appear to use hedges more often in situations of relationship management, politeness, and circumvention of potential face-threatening acts. By contrast, male characters show greater tendencies to use hedges when assessing uncertain information, expressing uncertainty, or signaling risk in uncertain situations. A detailed analysis of the selected textual extracts is presented below.

For Langdon, the entire scenario felt incongruous. “That’s impossible. First of all, how would I get this chunk of metal through airport security?” “Maybe you flew in on a private jet? Or maybe it was given to you when you arrived in Italy?” “Sienna, I need to call the consulate. Right away.” “You don’t think we should open it first? (Chapter 6)

The current conversation takes place during a tense exchange in which Langdon questions the plausibility of an object's presence, while Sienna offers speculative alternatives and gently challenges his urgency. *The entire scenario felt incongruous* frames Langdon's reaction as subjective perception rather than fact, softening his judgment through cognitive evaluation. Such commitment allows him to express doubt without full rejection. From a gender perspective, it positions the male character as uncertain and reflective, moving away from stereotypical male decisiveness. *That's impossible. First of all, how would I get this chunk of metal through airport security?* combines an absolute claim with an interrogative that mitigates its force. The question functions as an indirect challenge, reducing confrontation by inviting reasoning. This strategy aligns with face-saving interaction and shows Langdon relying on questioning rather than authority, a shift from traditional masculine directness. *Maybe you flew in on a private jet? Or maybe it was given to you when you arrived in Italy?* uses the adverb *maybe* repetitively to signal speculation and openness. These modal adverbs express possibility and keep the discussion exploratory. From a gender perspective, this strongly aligns with female speech patterns that favor tentative suggestions. *Sienna, I need to call the consulate. Right away.* stands out as unhedged and urgent, signaling a brief return to direct, traditionally masculine command under pressure. *You don't think we should open it first?* uses a negative interrogative to propose action indirectly, inviting agreement rather than asserting control. This reflects a cooperative, facilitative style often associated with female speech. Overall, modal adverbs and interrogative framing dominate the passage, highlighting a gendered contrast between Sienna's consistent use of tentative, collaborative hedging and Langdon's oscillation between uncertainty and direct authority as tension increases.

*Sienna retrieved a fresh washcloth and squirted it with antibacterial soap. "You **may** want to look away." "It's fine. I'm not bothered by—" Sienna began scrubbing violently, and white-hot pain shot up Langdon's arm. He clenched his jaw to prevent himself from shouting out in protest. "You don't want an infection," she said, scrubbing harder now. "Besides, if you're going to call the authorities, you'll want to be more alert than you are now. Nothing activates adrenaline production like pain." (Chapter 6)*

The scene occurs while Sienna treats Langdon's wound in her kitchen, warning him about the painful cleaning process while he tries to maintain composure and control of the situation. In the sentence *You may want to look away* the modal verb *may* is used to tone down the imperative, which is now couched as a suggestion instead of an order. In terms of speech act, it is meant to tone down

the imperative quality of telling someone what to do. In terms of gender, this is similar to what is expected from a female speaker, who is expected to be less direct and instead uses mitigation to convey authority. Based on Holmes's classification, this is an instance of affective politeness, which is meant to preserve interpersonal comfort (Holmes, 1987). In *You don't want an infection* the negative form of the construction is used, making the warning less direct. Instead of directly instructing Langdon to endure the pain, Sienna uses the negative form that promotes agreement without using direct authority. This is a mild form of an epistemic hedge, as the consequence is suggested rather than explicitly stated. From the pragmatic point of view, the negative form reduces the illocutionary force of the instruction, which is comparable to the speech act hedge. From a gender standpoint, the construction promotes the cooperative nature of Sienna's communication. In *If you're going to call the authorities, you'll want to be more alert than you are now*, the conditional form is used, hypothetically promoting the argument. The text uses modal verbs and conditional reasoning almost exclusively to mitigate the instructions, making them sound more like cooperative suggestions. Hedging helps the character maintain authority in the context of the story without making her sound authoritarian.

From a gender standpoint, the female character uses hedging throughout the text to guide the interaction indirectly. She uses modal verbs to suggest, which helps maintain relational balance. Langdon, the male character, does not use any hedging in this text. His role is physical rather than linguistic. However, this is an instance of the gender character's management of the interaction through indirect guidance, while the male character takes on the passive, vulnerable role.

*"Whatever's inside that tube," Sienna said, "**probably** has an ID code, an agency sticker, a phone number, something. You need information. I need information! Your government killed my friend!" The pain in Sienna's voice shook Langdon from his thoughts, and he nodded, knowing she was correct. "Yes, I'm ... very sorry." Langdon cringed, hearing those words again. He turned to the canister on the table, wondering what answers **might** be hidden inside. "It **could** be incredibly dangerous to open this." (Chapter 12)*

The current scene takes place in Sienna's apartment, where she and Langdon are discussing the mysterious tube that may contain dangerous material while trying to understand why authorities are pursuing them. The sentence *probably has an ID code, an agency sticker, a phone number, something* contains the adverb *probably*, which is used as a hedge to express the probability of the information

given. The hedge is used to make the assertion less forceful while at the same time continuing with the argument that the tube contains identifying information. Another hedge is observed in Langdon's sentence, *It could be incredibly dangerous to open this*. The modal verb used is *could*, which indicates possibility, not certainty. It reduces the strength of the sentence so that it becomes a warning, not a prediction. From a gender perspective, the hedging strategies employed by the two characters have different communicational goals. Sienna's probable hedging is used when she is emotionally arguing that they should check the container. In this case, she is able to discuss the issue while sounding rational and cooperative. Langdon's use of hedging, on the other hand, is meant to caution the characters about the danger. He is trying to sound less authoritative by hedging on the certainty of the danger. Overall, the primary hedging techniques used in the text include the use of probabilities and modal verbs that show the characters' state of uncertainty. Gender-wise, the female character employs hedging techniques to facilitate speculative reasoning and move the conversation towards action, despite the lack of information. The male character employs hedging techniques in a defensive manner, expressing the content of the statement in terms of risk and caution, and justifying the state of hesitation. This shows the difference between the hedging techniques used by the male and female characters, even though the hedging techniques used are the same; the female character employs hedging techniques to facilitate the construction of persuasive reasoning in an emotionally charged conversation, while the male character employs hedging techniques to facilitate moderation in the decision-making process and the potential consequences of the actions taken.

"We should go," she said. "It won't take long for them to figure out we're not in the costume gallery." Langdon stood up with her. "Yes, but go ... where?" "Vatican City?" "I beg your pardon?" "I finally figured out what you meant before ... what Vatican City has in common with the Boboli Gardens." She motioned in the direction of the little gray door. "That's the entrance, right?" (Chapter 30)

The present conversation takes place as Langdon and Sienna are fleeing through the Palazzo Pitti, with Sienna having just made a breakthrough realization about the connection between Vatican City and the Boboli Gardens, urging Langdon to follow her through a hidden passage. The first hedge appears in Sienna's opening line: *It won't take long for them to figure out we're not in the costume gallery*. While this sentence appears to be assertive, the use of *won't take long* is a temporal approximator. Instead of specifying the amount of time they have, Sienna

hedges by downplaying the level of specificity in the timeframe. Another hedge is observed in Langdon's fragmented question, *Yes, but go...where?* The hesitation in this utterance is particularly interesting, as it is an actual form of linguistic hedging. The broken nature of the utterance is reminiscent of the state of Langdon's mind, as he is not in a position to project his course of action. This hesitation is an implicit form of hedging, which is inviting collaborative completion of the utterance by the other speaker, opening the floor for Sienna to take the initiative in the discourse. An evident hedge is found in the following statement by Sienna: *I finally figured out what you meant before.* The phrase *what you meant before* is hedged in a way that it is not presented as her original thought but is attributed to Langdon. One more hedging device is found in the final questioning of the statement made by Sienna, *That's the entrance, right?* This tag question, with the addition of *right?* to the end of the sentence, acts as a hedge because of the way the sentence is altered to become a question rather than a declarative sentence. In terms of gender, the language in this excerpt displays an interesting change in the interlocutor relationship between the two characters. Not only does Sienna take the more active role in the conversation, advancing the discussion with new information and guiding Langdon towards action, but even in the process of doing so, she employs hedging strategies as cooperative and face-saving devices, which maintain the cooperative nature of the conversation. Langdon's hedging, conversely, is driven by genuine cognitive uncertainty and incompleteness, as he hesitates and speaks in fragments rather than hedging in the form of cooperative hedging. This reversal of the expected gender roles, in which the female character is the one advancing the conversation and hedging cooperatively, and the male character is the one who is uncertain and hedging out of genuine cognitive incompleteness, speaks to the broader interactional process of the novel in which Sienna consistently displays intellectual agency and Langdon is in a state of disorientation and incomplete knowledge.

"Any other ideas?" Sienna said. Langdon thought for a long moment and finally nodded. "There's a site just around the corner where Dante enthusiasts gather. I bet someone there has a copy we can borrow." "It's probably closed, too," Sienna warned. "Almost every place in town moves the Sabbath away from Sunday." "This place wouldn't dream of doing such a thing," Langdon replied with a smile. "It's a church." (Chapter 7)

The conversation occurs as Langdon and Sienna search for Dante's book, with Langdon suggesting they look for it at the nearby church, a suggestion Sienna questions. The lexical hedge in Langdon's utterance is *bet*, in the following

sentence, *I bet someone there has a copy we can borrow*. According to Salager-Meyer, the use of the lexical verb *bet* indicates the speaker's degree of commitment to the truth of the utterance (Salager-Meyer, 1994). However, Holmes (1987) indicates that the use of the lexical hedge in the utterance is associated with cooperative communicative strategies, which encourage the hearer to participate in the discussion rather than giving directives.

Sienna's response features a probability marker hedge, as indicated in the following extract: *It's probably closed, too*. The hedge in the utterance mitigates the discouraging nature in response to Langdon's suggestion. An evident example is the hedging device in the following statement: *This place wouldn't dream of doing such a thing*. The modal verb *wouldn't* is combined with the expression *dream of*, and this is a strongly hedged negation, suggesting certainty through the use of an emphatic but metaphorical construction. From a gender perspective, it is noticeable that both characters use hedges, but with differing communicational aims. Langdon, in this case, uses hedges with a view to persuading, while Sienna uses hedges with a view to being cautious. What makes this passage particularly interesting is the fact that, despite the similarity in the hedges used by both characters, they are used with contrary aims by Langdon, who seeks to persuade, while Sienna seeks to caution.

"That's what it said, yes." "Okay ... I guess that beats 'I am Vishnu, destroyer of worlds.'" The young woman had just quoted Robert Oppenheimer at the moment he tested the first atomic bomb. "And this beak-nosed ... green-eyed mask?" Sienna said, looking puzzled. "Do you have any idea why your mind might have conjured that image?" "No idea at all, but that style of mask was quite common in the Middle Ages." Langdon paused. "It's called a plague mask." (Chapter 22)

The analysis of the scene shows that Langdon and Sienna are engaged in a dialogue about the images that emerge from Langdon's vision, as Sienna attempts to make sense of the symbolic elements and Langdon takes a measured approach to the historical components. The text *Okay ... I guess that beats "I am Vishnu, destroyer of worlds."* contains the epistemic marker *I guess*, which lessens the degree of certainty of the comment. From a gender point of view, the use of the tentative marker is typically associated with women's interactional style, in which opinions are toned down to maintain the interaction. The sentence *Do you have any idea why your mind might have conjured that image?* uses the modal verb *might* instead, which is used for possibilities, not certainties. Sienna uses it to ask about the possible reason for that image. Pragmatically, it is important to note that this

sentence is already softening the question, which is an example of a speech act hedge. It is notable that, again, the female speaker is careful with how she poses her question. *No idea at all* is an utterance that reveals absolute ignorance, thus limiting the epistemic commitment of the speaker. This is an utterance that reveals the speaker's admission of ignorance, thus acting as a hedge. The admission of ignorance by Langdon is not in keeping with the assertive nature of the masculine gender; however, it is in keeping with the state of confusion that he is in.

The primary hedging devices used in the passage are the introductory phrases used to indicate the writer's point of view and the modal verbs used to indicate possibilities. These strategies help the characters discuss their interpretations in a way that does not lead to any conclusion. From a gender perspective, the hedging strategies used in the passage show some differences in the way the female character and the male character communicate. While the female character uses hedging strategies to discuss her speculation in a way that keeps the communication collaborative, the hedging strategies used by the male character seem limited and are used only to indicate his lack of knowledge or his uncertainty about certain facts. Therefore, although both speakers make use of hedging to some extent, the female speaker's use of hedging is more adaptive.

Conclusion

The current study suggests that hedging in *Inferno* is not a rigid signifier of essential gendered difference, but a situational pragmatic resource that is shaped by tensions in the narrative, role of the speaker, etc. In the dialogues examined, both male and female characters use hedges to express uncertainty, to weaken their assertions, and to maintain harmonious interpersonal relations; however, their overall communicative styles vary considerably. The female characters, especially Sienna, tend to employ more hedging devices to promote collaboration, mitigate directives, align with conversation patterns, and direct interaction subtly. Hedging among female characters may be more a matter of relational skill rather than uncertainty. Male characters, particularly Langdon, use hedges more often to indicate incomplete knowledge, cognitive uncertainty, hesitation, or risk in situations. In such instances, hedges serve not as politeness strategies but rather as epistemic hedging and vulnerability markers. This finding implies that men's use of hedging in the novel is more related to uncertainty and risk-taking in decision-making than politeness.

Significantly, the study contradicts essentialist views that link hedging with either female language use or tentativeness. On the contrary, the analysis is in line with recent sociolinguistic research that views gendered language use as

contextualized, role-specific, and negotiated. In *Inferno*, the use of hedging is affected by gendered characteristics, as well as speaker power, emotionality, narrative context, and communicative intentions. In conclusion, the results contribute to the disciplines of literary pragmatics and gender linguistics by showing how the dialogue of fiction can be used to gain insight into the linguistic representation of gendered styles of communication. This work may be furthered by examining larger corpora, comparing multiple novels, or adopting mixed methods of both qualitative and quantitative analysis of hedging frequency and selection.

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Ն. Հարությունյան – Թերասությունների գենդերային հայեցակետը. Գործաբանական գործառույթները գրական երկխոսություններում. – Խոսակցական դիսկուրսում թերասությունները համարվում են գործաբանական կարևոր ռազմավարություն: Դրանց կիրառությունը պայմանավորված է ոչ միայն խոսքին անորոշություն հաղորդելու, այլ նաև պնդումները մեղմելու, միջանձնային հարաբերությունները կարգավորելու, խոսքին զգուշավորություն հաղորդելու և հաղորդակցության ընթացքում գրուցակիցների միջև երկխոսության համատեղ կառուցմանը նպաստելու նպատակով:

Սույն աշխատանքում ուսումնասիրվում է թերասությունների գենդերային կիրառությունը Դեն Բրաունի «*Բնֆենն*» վեպում: Հետազոտությունն իրականացվել է որակական դիսկուրս-վերլուծական մեթոդաբանության շրջանակում՝ նպատակ ունենալով քննության առնել գլխավոր հերոսների (տղամարդ և կին կերպարների) երկխոսություններում կիրառվող թերասությունների ձևերն ու գործառույթները: Վերլուծության ընթացքում թերասությունները դիտարկվում են որպես համատեքստային առանձնահատկություններով պայմանավորված և միջանձնային հարաբերությունների ազդեցությամբ ձևավորվող խոսքային գործողություններ:

Արդյունքները ցույց են տալիս, որ վեպի կին կերպարները թերասություններն առավելապես կիրառում են պնդումներն ու տեսակետները մեղմելու նպատակով, մինչդեռ տղամարդ կերպարները դրանք հաճախ կիրառում են անորոշություն, գիտելիքի անբավարարություն կամ տեղեկատվական ոչ լիարժեքություն արտահայտելու համար: Մա հաստատում է այն դրույթը, որ թերասությունները գործաբանական բազմագործառույթային միավորներ են, որոնց կիրառությունը գերազանցում է գենդերային կարծրատիպային մեկնաբանությունները: Հետազոտության արդյունքում վեր է հանվում այն գաղափարը, որ գրական դիսկուրսում թերասությունների կիրառման օրինաչափությունները պայմանավորված են ոչ միայն գենդերային տարբերություններով, այլև կերպարների դերերով, հաղորդակցական նպատակներով և համատեքստային գործոններով:

Բանալի բառեր՝ թերասություններ, գենդեր, սեղմացում, հանձնարարյան աստիճան, գրական երկխոսություն

Н. Арутюнян – Гендерный аспект использования хеджей: прагматические функции в литературном диалоге. – Хеджи (средства коммуникативного смягчения) представляют собой важный прагматический ресурс в разговорном дискурсе. Они не всегда являются простыми индикаторами неуверенности; зачастую их используют для смягчения утверждений, регулирования межличностных отношений, выражения эпистемической осторожности и поддержки совместного построения диалога между собеседниками.

В данной работе рассматривается гендерный аспект использования хеджей в романе Дэна Брауна «Инферно». В исследовании применяется метод качественного дискурс-анализа для изучения диалогов между главными героями (мужчинами и женщинами), в частности - форм и функций средств хеджирования. Анализ трактует хеджи как контекстуально-зависимые и ситуативные речевые акты, на которые влияют межличностные отношения.

Результаты исследования показывают, что женские персонажи в романе используют хеджи для смягчения утверждений и суждений, в то время как мужские персонажи применяют их для передачи неуверенности и нехватки знаний. Это подтверждает, что хеджи обладают многофункциональным прагматическим потенциалом, выходящим за рамки гендерных стереотипов. В исследовании делается вывод, что на модели хеджирования в литературном дискурсе влияют как гендерные различия, так и роли персонажей, их коммуникативные намерения и контекстуальные факторы.

Ключевые слова: хеджи, гендер, митигация (смягчение), степень уверенности, литературный диалог