Degree Project, Bachelor's Thesis

Hedging Rule Discussions

A study on hedging and emoticons in an online board game discussion forum

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Abstract:

In everyday language, people tend to speak in a non-committing fashion when making claims, either to save their own face or to save another person's face. In linguistics, this is called *hedging*, with common words and expressions such as *probably*, *assume* and *I don't know* often revealing that a hedging speech act has been performed. In computer-mediated communication, Skovholt et al. (2014) discovered that emoticons, rather than signaling the sender's emotions, were used to hedge. This study aims to further investigate the matter by looking at how users on a board game forum hedge when speaking about board games' complexity with the research question "do more complex games involve more hedge usage on the board game forum Boardgamegeek?" as the point of departure. Data was taken from forum posts tagged with *rules*. The results showed that complexity barely increases the likelihood of hedging, with a slight edge given to simpler games.

Key words:

Hedging, hedge, politeness theory, computer-mediated communication, cmc, pragmatics

Contents

1. Introduction

Upon performing the act of communicating, language users generally tend to consider a set of rules before producing language. These rules or maxims, as coined and developed by Grice (1989), shape what we want to say so that the recipient understands the intention behind our words, exactly how we intended the words to be understood, so that our language production is coherent with what we hold to be true and know, but also so that it is coherent with the topic at hand, and that just the right amount of information is communicated. In short, when producing and respecting the maxims, the language production is not only ultimately coherent but it also heeds the recipient's face (Goffman 1967); nobody should feel distress in a communicative exchange or risk losing face. These maxims apply not only to spoken communication but to computer-mediated communication as well, such as message boards and forums.

As the date on the cited sources reveals, hedging and politeness are not new phenomena. Tentative discourse and hedging have been thoroughly researched and especially in the area of how scientists and researchers hedge their claims in their research articles (Hyland 1996). This is due to the fact that hedging one's claims is essential in research, since nothing can be known about the results before testing the claim. Since the manner in which hedging and tentative discourse in academic writing have been researched is comprehensive, to say the least, this essay is left with little room in that particular area. Therefore, this essay aims to focus on texts that are not very academic at all, i.e., hedge usage on a board game forum.

The point of departure is as follows: hedges, while also used outside of academia, tend to reveal a certain prevalence of uncertainty in the communicator (Hyland 1997). Board games have varying degrees of complexity; meaning that the rules of a game can be harder to grasp and be fully followed each play-through or that they are easier to grasp, probably coming with a shorter rules pamphlet and may require no more than one read-through. This leads to board gamers turning to their peers on the board game forum asking for clarification of the rules. The hypothesis is that board gamers discussing the rules of a more complex game use hedges more than those discussing the rules of a less complex game, because the more complex the rules, the wider are the possibilities of personal interpretations of a given rule set, and the more complex the rules, the more would a forum user hedge because of their own semantic uncertainty of the rule set. This boils down to the following research questions:

1. Do more complex games involve more hedge usage compared to less complex games on the board game forum Boardgamegeek?

2. Are hedges from a certain part of speech more likely to be used than those from other parts of speech?

3. How are emoticons used in the discussion about rules on the discussion forum Boardgamegeek?

4. Is there a difference in emoticon usage between users discussing complex games and users discussing less complex games?

2. Theoretical Background

This study has made references to authors and, more importantly, their relevantly cited works to provide background information for certain terms that were used, even though the works themselves from a modern standpoint may seem dated. Essentially, however, those works are not the works this study builds its theory upon, but merely used to further the point of departure and used as an understanding for where the essay is coming from. Hyland provides most of the contemporary literature and theories which this study bases itself on, alongside other works and authors. However, Skovholt, Grønning and Kankaanranta (2014) provide the theoretical framework for identifying emoticons' functions in utterances, and Scher et al. (1997) provide background and support for the apology speech act, which did not occur in Skovholt et al.'s (2014) study but occurred in the present study. The population investigated in Hyland's study consists of British students in England and Chinese students of English language in Hong Kong. In the conclusion, Hyland asserts that while the results speak only for this particular population, his own literature review revealed to him that his results correspond with other similar studies with different populations. What can be read in Hyland's earlier article (1996) is that hedges are essential in science, as nothing can be known before having tested the claim. Based on this, the present study makes two assumptions of the data in a similar vein, namely that hedging tendencies do not decrease with age but remain constant; in the literature this seems to be a yet unexplored area of pragmatics. It also makes the assumption that people outside of the academic sphere hedge claims. The literature review suggests that most research on hedges is meta-research, i.e. investigating hedge usage in the

academia. A significant portion seems to focus on gendered hedge usage as well. So while the approach angles mentioned above are of no particular interest to this study, assumptions have been made that *normal* people hedge correspondingly. A list of hedge expressions searched for in this study has been compiled based on the hedges previously identified almost all the authors cited. Both Lakoff and Hyland provide the most extensive lists.

2.1 Lexical Hedges

The most common method of hedging is through lexicality (as opposed to through emoticons). Hedging as a feature of English has been researched and thereof evolved since Goffman's theory of face (1967), from which it sprung. Lakoff expanded on Goffman by inventing the term and defining it as "fuzzy words or expressions" (Lakoff 1973, 471) and Grice (1989) put down a set of rules people subconsciously follow; the present study mainly mentions Grice's maxim of Quality, which, in an abridged and interpreted form, states that people always want to say truths, and even when they do not, they may use certain words to steel themselves against repercussions. In appendix A, a list of hedging words and expressions can be found which contain both lexical and emoticonic hedges.

Lexical hedges, as they are brought up in this study, come in the form of adverbs, modal verbs, lexical verbs, adjectives and phrases. Some examples of these hedges, in the order of categories just previously listed, are *likely, may, probably, appear* and *sort of.* These hedges work to make an utterance seemingly absolutely certain, to make an utterance a half-truth or to reduce the speaker's commitment to

their utterance. Naturally, hedging is a continuously subconscious process, and they give a possibility to decode an utterance which says one thing but may mean something else entirely. The Gricean maxim of Quality is defined as "try to make your contribution one that is true" (Grice 1989, 27) and comes with two submaxims: "do not say what you believe to be false" (27) and "do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence" (27). Suppose that a setting is observed in which one person is eating an apple and one is watching the apple-eater. The apple-eater states: "I am eating an apple", respecting the Quality maxim in all aspects: The eating of the apple is a true fact; the apple-eater, most likely, believes themselves to be eating the apple and adequate evidence is literally held. While this is simply a simulation of the simplest realisation of the maxim, it can be realised in another way which will be explored in this text from hereon out: namely, with hedging. Lakoff, who coined the term, defines these hedges as "words whose meaning implicitly involve fuzziness – words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy" (Lakoff 471). Suppose again that an apple-eater is eating an apple. Instead of just stating "I am eating an apple", the apple-eater says "I am sort of eating an apple". Now, depending on the context, this statement has the potential to be entirely different from the original, hedge-less statement. Is the apple-eater sure they are actually eating an apple? Are they hedging their apple-eating to, in a less brutal manner, deny a request which takes away the possibility of finishing the apple? In any case, the apple-eater is not entirely sure what action they are taking, so by using the hedge expression *sort of* the Quality maxim is respected.

2.2 Emoticonic Hedges

Hedges have traditionally been expressed with words and expressions, but Skovholt et al. (2014) claim that emoticons may also have a hedging function. While they themselves felt that the possible smorgasbord of emoticons was limited in their data, the present study's data contains a prosperous amount of them, which, when used as a hedge, will see itself featured in the end results. These occurrences of emoticons will have to be qualitatively investigated, as emoticons per se are not hedges. In certain cases, they may soften a potential face-threatening act, and in other cases they may strengthen utterances made with regard to the recipient's positive face. Skovholt et al. (2014) found that the use of emoticons as hedges in their corpus was first to soften the directive speech act of requesting, such as adding an emoticon to a question posed; directive speech acts are face-threatening acts, so adding an emoticon to one such speech act mitigates the potential harm. Second, emoticons were used to soften rejections, another directive speech act. By adding an emoticon to one's negation the face-threatening act is softened. The third speech act Skovholt et al. (2014) bring up that involves emoticons as hedges are corrections in the directive speech acts. Corrections are made when the first turn in a conversation contains wrong information about the recipient or about something the recipient knows to be wrong, so by use of an emoticon together with the actual correction, the act is softened, and the wrong-doer's face may be saved. A fourth function was to soften complaints. When making complaints there might be a need to save both the recipient's and the original speaker's face, as there, supposedly, is a desire to not want anybody to be offended by the complaint while at the same time wanting to manage your own

face by not being too stingy. By adding an emoticon to a complaint, a communicator can assure everyone that spirits are high. to strengthen the expressive act of thanking. By adding an emoticon to an expression of gratitude, one may increase their gratitude even further. In addition they are used to strengthen greetings, to strengthen wishes, to strengthen appraisals, to strengthen promises and to strengthen admissions, such as admitting one's own error.

Using emoticons in connection with the speech acts above reveals how the emoticons strengthen or soften the force a turn in a conversation may have. They signal that the original sender is sincere and truthful with their utterances (such as when thanking or greeting), that they are cooperative (such as when admitting, promising or complaining) and that they are supportive (such as when sending wishes and appraisals). These speech acts can in turn be related to Grice's Quality maxim: "Try to make your contribution one that is true" and its submaxim "do not say what you believe to be false" (Grice 1989, 27), by signaling the above-mentioned sincerity, cooperation and support.

3. Data and Method

The data consists of threads on the board game forum https://boardgamegeek.com (from hereon shortened to Boardgamegeek), which in turn consists of an original post and replies to the original post or replies to a reply in the thread. On browsing the website, one can search for whichever board game one would like to read about it, to see other users' uploaded pictures of things surrounding the game,

watch and read reviews, browse its market place and/or participate in the forum for that board game.

On browsing the forum category of a board game's page, the opportunity to filter forum threads according to their category is given. One may filter by *review*, *news* and *strategy,* and for this study only threads that were categorised as *rules* were investigated. The data was subsequently put into AntConc[1] (2019). This allows for the searching of possible hedges and emoticons used as hedges; while some emoticons on Boardgamegeek may be converted into emojis[2] when posted in a thread, they are coded with either a word or an emoticon, and this code is what is shown in text in AntConc. The laughing emoji 😆 on the website is represented by the code *laugh*, for example. The smiling emoticons however, stay an emoticon when posted. Because of this, the data will largely have to be manually investigated to detect the nature of the expressions; a hedge expression may be just that in one context but may be used in a different way in another. *I don't know* is an example of a unique hedge expression which is entirely context-based; a single reply containing only *I don't know* would not suffice as a hedge as it probably is a reply to something the speaker knows nothing about (Weatherall, 2011). Many times, however, *I don't know* serves as a hedge, especially when something instantly contradicting the statement comes after it.

Each board game on Boardgamegeek has a complexity rating based on users' submissions on the board game's complexity. The complexity rating goes from 1

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to 5, where games closer to 1 are easier to learn and play, the playing time is usually sub one hour and resolving your strategy is a secondary matter, while games closer to 5 are the opposite: the rules are complex, setting off to play the game for the first time may prove difficult despite knowing the rules, the playing time regularly exceeds several hours, and finding the way you want to play in this particular game takes up a significant amount of time during the playing time. In order to answer the research question, the study needs to investigate hedge usage in both complex games and simpler games. Seven forums for games categorised as less complex with a complexity rating of 1 to 2 were chosen. The choice of games, amongst thousands of games, was made with regard to their popularity rating and preference. The choice was not made based on a clear-cut top-one hundred list of popular games, but rather the game had to be somewhat familiar to the author of the present study while at the same time being enjoyed by many people. A game with a complexity rating of 1 to 2 and a low popularity rating would not be a good pick for this study because there would be the possibility of the game lacking players, and hence lacking discussion on the appropriate forum. The games being familiar to the present author were an important aspect of the choice, as board game language may be niched and hard-to-understand, and that, in turn, could serve a stymie when analysing the utterances containing emoticons. The values in parenthesis are their complexity rating as of the date 2019-03-21[3].   The forums investigated were for the games *Bang!* (1.64), *Carcassonne* (1.93), *Codenames* (1.31), *Mysterium* (1.91), *Splendor* (1.82), *Sushi Go!* (1.16) and *The Resistance* (1.62). From the forums for the more complex games, those with a complexity

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[3] The date is mentioned because the complexity rating may fluctuate as users' submit lighter or heavier ratings

rating of 4 to 5 were collected from the game forums for *Advanced Squad Leader* (4.71), *Food Chain Magnate* (4.19), *Gaia Project* (4.30), *Lisboa* (4.52), *Mage Knight* (4.26), *The Gallerist* (4.28) and *Through the Ages* (4.37). From the *rules* section of the forum for each game, the text, users comments in particular, from about 80 threads were used, resulting in 560 threads each for the less complex and more complex games respectively. The decision to limit to 80 threads per game was based on the actuality of the threads. By picking the 80 most recent threads in the *rules* sections the data could be guaranteed to not take threads before the year 2016, keeping the data relatively recent. The 1,120 threads resulted in 423,976 words for the level 1-2 games and 365,946 words for the games at 4-5 level of games, making a total of 789,922 words.

After the data was gathered, the lexical hedges were put into tables for quantitative analysis, while the emoticonic hedges were qualitatively analysed. The framework for decoding their functions is provided by Skovholt et al. (2014) who conducted similar research on workplace e-mails. The decoding process involves looking at the text preceding the emoticon, and categorising the emoticon using speech act theory and lastly decide what the emoticon does to the utterance. It may or may not change the speech act of the utterance, it may be used as a hedge in its own right and it might signal that an utterance is to be taken as a joke or satire. When the emoticon is functioning as a hedge, it may modify the following 13 speech acts: requests, corrections, rejections, complaints, thanks, greetings, wishes, appraisals, promises, admissives and apologies. When the emoticon follows the first four speech acts it functions as a softener, meaning it is used to mitigate the potential harm those face-threatening speech acts may cause. In essence, it makes

the speech act less harsh. When the emoticon follows the last seven speech acts, it functions as a strengthener, meaning it is used to signal the commitment the utterer has to their utterance. The names of the speech acts reveal how to decode the utterance: for example, a requesting speech act is most commonly a question, and it may or may not involve a question mark; examples of this are given in example 2 and 3 under 4.1. An appraising speech act involves praise of some sort, as can be seen in example 20 under 4.1. An admissive speech act involves the admitting of something, with an example in number 25 under 4.1.

In the results, each individual hedge expression will not be counted, but rather categorised with its part of speech as per Hyland (1997). Not every occurrence of emoticons will be se observable in the results by limiting the examples to one per speech act; hence, the first example will be of a requesting act in the 1-2 complexity range, the second example will be of a correcting act in the 4-5 complexity range and the third example will be of a rejecting act in the 1-2 complexity range, a zigzag pattern which will continue until all speech acts and their analysis are represented in the results. The remaining occurrences of emoticons will be observable in the appendices. The list of hedges, appendix A, was compiled with hedges used in Hyland (1997), Brown et al. (1987) and Lakoff (1973). The list of emoticons was provided by Skovholt et al. (2014), but modified for the purpose of this study by adding =*)* and =*(.*

4. Results

In Table 1 the total number of occurrences of hedges in the data can be seen and it can be seen that forum users in the forums of less complex games have a slightly

higher hedge occurrence. However, on looking at Table 1, it can be seen that the
more complex games has a slightly higher relative frequency. The combined data
sets contain a total of 18,426 hedges and takes up 2.3% of the total words.

Table 1. Hedging frequency totals for each category

Data set	Hedge occurrences	Word count	Frequency
Complexity 1-2	9,402	423,976	2.2%
Complexity 4-5	9,024	365,946	2.5%
Total	18,426	789,922	2.3%

The statistics in Table 1 show that hedging may be slightly more frequent in the
discussion forums for rule discussions on the more complex games, even though
the difference is not great.

Table 2. Total amount of occurrences of hedging in the data categorised by part of
speech

	Complexity 1-2		Complexity 4-5		Total
Hedge categories & occurrences	Number of occurrences	Frequency per 100,000 words	Number of occurrences	Frequency per 100,000 words	
Adverbs	1,870	441	2,577	704	4,447
Modal verbs	3,801	896	3,359	918	7,160
Adjectives	437	103	460	126	897
Lexical verbs	3,024	713	2,497	682	5,521

Phrases	238	56	239	65	477
Emoticons	15	4	16	4	31
Total	9,402	2,213	9,024	2,499	18,426

The statistics in Table 2 show that there is a rather even distribution of hedges from the different parts of speech with the exception of adverbs which were much more frequent in the forum discussions for the more complex games. All other categories were the same for both the simple and complex game forums, except for lexical hedges, which was the only category used more frequently in the forums for the less complex games.

As each category had more occurrences of hedges from at least one part of speech than the other, in this case lexical hedges for the 1-2 category and adverbial hedges for the 4-5 category, this paragraph will present some examples from each groups most commonly used hedge expressions. The hedges are highlighted in boldface.

(1) Magic Portal and Flier won't work for claiming a Castle. They can be used to take features on a specific tile, but the Castle is not on any one specific tile. I don't **think** an empty Castle can be claimed later.

(2) The first is how the publisher intended, even if the wording is ambiguous. But playing the other way doesn't **seem** like a real problem.

The first example holds the most commonly used lexical hedge in the 1-2 category, *think* and the second example the second-most used lexical hedge in the

1-2 category, *seem*. These two examples show the users' uncertainty in their statements with clarity, especially when reworking the utterances: "An empty Castle cannot be claimed later" and "but playing the other way is not a problem" show no uncertainty.

(3) Runaway leader isn't **really** a problem with FCM. There aren't a ton of catch-up mechanisms, so if someone has the game in hand, just end it early and give them the victory.

(4) 183 is an excellent score for a first completed game. For a typical 5/8 solo conquest, an experienced player would **probably** expect 200+ or even more but the exact number is just a guess.

As the examples of lexical hedging from the 1-2 category reveal uncertainty so do the examples of adverbial hedges from the 4-5 category. The third example holds the most commonly used hedge in the 4-5 category, *really*, and the fourth example the second-most used, *probably*. The use of *really* in the third example show that the user does not believe that *runaway leader* completely equals *a problem* in Food Chain Magnate, so it just might be one. The fourth example has a use of *probably* but where the user later on in the sentence emphasises their uncertainty with *just a guess*; these mirror each other in such a way that they do not have to exist together. "An experienced player would probably except 200+ or even more" and "an experienced player would expect 200+ or even more but the exact number is just a guess" seem to mean the exact same thing.

4.1 Analysis of emoticons

Table 3. Emoticons categorised by speech act

Speech Act	Complexity 1-2	Complexity 4-5	Total
Requests	2	1	3
Corrections	2	1	3
Rejections	2	2	4
Complaints	3		3
Thanks	1	4	5
Greetings		1	1
Wishes			
Appraisals	2	2	4
Promises			
Admissives	1	1	2
Jokes/irony	1	6	7
Signatures			
Apologies		1	1
Undefined strengtheners	1	3	4
Undefined softeners	1		1
Total number of emoticons	16	22	38
Total emoticon hedges	15	16	31

In table 3 the emoticons can be seen as they are categorised by speech act based on the decoding done. There were no occurrences of complaining speech acts followed by an emoticon in the complexity 4-5 category, a speech act which had three occurrences in the 1-2 category. With five occurrences of thanking speech acts in the data, the complexity 4-5 category had four of them. The ironic speech act, i.e. one of the two non-hedging acts here, had seven occurrences total in the data with six of them belonging to the complexity 4-5 category. There was one occurrence of an apologising speech act in the complexity 4-5 category. Some speech acts were unidentified, however the function of the emoticon could still be identified, with three unidentified strengtheners in the 4-5 category and one in the 1-2 category, and one unidentified softener in the 1-2 category. There were no occurrences of wishes, promises or signatures. In total 38 emoticons were found, with 16 belonging to the 1-2 category and 22 to the 4-5 category. In total, 31 hedging emoticons were found, with 15 belonging to the 1-2 category and 16 to the 4-5 category. Following this paragraph are some examples of occurrences of emoticons in the data. Examples 1, 3, 4, 7, 10 and 11 are from the complexity 1-2 category and encompassing requesting, rejecting, complaining and appraising speech acts, with two examples from two undefined speech acts where the first example's emoticon function as a strengthener and the second example's emoticon function as a softener. Examples 2, 5, 6, 8 and 9 are from the complexity 4-5 category and encompassing correcting, thanking, greeting, admitting and apologising speech acts. The examples are sequenced as per table 3. In this part, the jokes/irony category of speech acts have been omitted as the emoticons in those utterances do not function as hedges, but rather as signals of sarcasm; these ironic utterances, however, can still be viewed in appendix B.

(5) Shared vision question, need answer quick please! :)

The first example of this part of this study involves a requesting speech act and mitigation of the potential addressee's negative faces. Here, the original poster posts a thread regarding a rule in the game *Mysterium*, searching for the right information, simply. This question is followed by a smiling emoticon, the smiley, serving to reduce the force of the sender's face-threatening act; it is hence revealed that the function of the smiley in this context is to soften the preceding utterance, which may result in more users chiming in on the question than it would have without the addition of the smiley. In other words, this emoticon serves as a hedge.

(6) It's a game. Everything about it is an abstraction. :)

A corrective speech act softened by the smiley. The original poster claims that a certain area in the game is an abstraction, whereby this user corrects the original poster with this statement.

(7) We play rather cut-throat, so if someone plays a Bang and then after realises he's not within range, then tough luck, the card is already played. Having a rule saying you can only play Bang AFTER checking for range would ruin that part :)

The smiley is here used as a softener. This user is playing with a custom ruling regarding sequencing of cards played, essentially saying that if card A is played and accepted before the realisation that card A could not affect the targeted player,

the effect of card A should happen anyways. What has been done is that a custom rule has been invented to counter a situation that is not mentioned in the official rulebook. The user might then feel the need to soften their utterance, as this may be frowned upon by the community. The speech act preceding the smiley is a rejection, as the user rejects clarity in the rules to allow for homebrewed rules.

(8) Heh, remember the good 'ole days before Z-man started writing Carcassonne rules :0)

This user comments on the fact that the rule book of Carcassonne became hazier after they switched publisher in 2012. The comment is a face-threatening complaint, and so the user is softening their utterance with a smiley.

(9) Thanks, I intended to add the link once I got to a computer, but you beat me to it =)

Example 9 presents an expressive speech act of thanking. The decoding of this speech act is definitive with little room for error, as it contains the key word *thanks*. The smiley in examples 5 carries the function of strengthener, to signal the sincerity of the poster.

(10) Nice! Welcome back :-)

This can most likely be properly categorised as a greeting speech act. The user is welcoming a player to the *Advanced Squad Leader* community, a player who has

been gone from it for an extended period of time. In this case, the smiley strengthens the utterance.

(11) So this thread was useful for something after all =)

An occurrence of a strengthening, expressive act of appraising. In previous turns it was discussed whether one was allowed to use numbers in general, such as imaginary, counting or natural, or if only integers were allowed. The consensus was that the game master, in the game *Codenames* the "spymaster", has the final word. The poster expresses their appraisal that the thread was useful, not because of the initial question posed but because of the knowledge gained by another that clues given may be zero.

(12) P.S.- I should have read the response above :-) I totally agree with it

Example 12 presents an utterance which could potentially be both a strengthener and a softener. At a first glance it would seem this utterance is a representative speech act of admission, functioning as a strengthener; the user is admitting a fault of theirs, or here rather the redundancy of their contribution, having previously written a lengthy post on a rule question, when another user had written an almost equal reply before this user had posted theirs. The utterance could also function as a softening, directive speech act of correction; having personally not read the previous replies, it seems the user both corrected themselves and saved their own face. The implication is that the user made a contribution to the rule question, but after having read previous replies, realises that they are wrong, hence correcting

themselves. That being said, example 12 has to be a strengthener in the representative admissive speech act, based on previous contribution in the thread.

(13) Sorry to hear they did not ask for permission =(

An expressive, apologising speech act in Scher et al.'s definition. The thread discussed a web-implemented version of *Gaia Project*, with the game designer declaring in the thread that they had to take it down due to copyright infringement, as the web version of the game never had the right to license it. The user in (35) reacts to this by apologising, probably because the user feels disappointment both in knowing they cannot use the web client anymore and in the creators of the web client not ensure copyright. Hence, the frowny is used as a strengthener.

(14) Hi, yes it works! ;-)

Skovholt et al. (2014) declare that the winking face is used to indicate a joke rather than signaling emotion and Thompson and Filik (2016) in their study presents further proof that the winking face is an indicator of sarcasm. In example 14, a question was posed prior to this and suitably answered by another user and then when the answer proves helpful, the user replies. It is wholly evident that this user did not intend for the winking face to convey a facetious or sarcastic tone in their reply, because they are being truthful. It does, indeed, work. So, while the speech act is left unidentified, this winky is used to strengthen the committal the user has to the utterance.

(15) If anything I would strip out some text rather than add more, but since I'm not interested in what people like myself would do to the rulebook that's kind of irrelevant =)

This user softens their own negative comment directed at themselves. The controversy, and so the need for softening, lies in the fact that the comment is also directed at others.

5. Discussion

The results suggest that users discussing more complex games are slightly more inclined to hedge. The results show that 2.5% of all the words in the complexity 4-5 dataset can be categorized as hedges while 2.2% of all the words in the complexity 1-2 dataset can be categorised hedges. In total, 2.3% of all the words in the datasets combined belong to hedges. However, the differences here are so small it is difficult know whether or not the results are due to chance or there is a tendency for more hedges to be used in the discussion forums for more complex games.

One observation from the results presented in table 3 is that users' texts from the complexity 4-5 category have much more occurrences of irony markers than the users from the complexity 1-2 category have. This is not to say that the 1-2 category users do not joke or use satire, but they do not mark it with emoticons as much. However, that data was not normalized due to tracking total amount of ironic remarks or jokes made was a near impossible endeavor. One other

interesting fact to point out is that 67% of all the emoticons in the 1-2 category function as softeners, i.e. modifying requests, corrections, rejections and complaints, while only 25% of the emoticons in the 4-5 category function as softeners. Going by this, the users in the 4-5 category either do not commit as many face-threatening acts, or that they do not attach emoticons to face-threatening acts in the same degree as users in the 1-2 category do. However, the sample size of the emoticons is still rather small, and compared against a larger sample size, the results may appear differently.

6. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to examine whether or not more hedging was used in discussion forums about rules for board games of different complexity, to examine if there is an inclination for certain hedges belonging to specific parts of speech based on the data set being from the more or less complex games' forums and to examine how emoticons are used on Boardgamegeek. The hypothesis was that the more complex the game the more are users inclined to hedge. What was found was that hedge usage is similar but the more complex games dataset had a slightly higher frequency of 2.5% hedges compared to 2.2% for the less complex games. As for the parts of speech, they were quite similar for both levels of complexity, except for adverbs which were used much more frequently in the discussions for complex games. As an answer for questions 1 and 2, the results show that there may be a difference in the frequency and the perhaps even the type of hedge used depending on the complexity of the game.

Emoticons were rare in both the simple and complex game level discussion forums. While not a particularly large sample size, the most obvious difference in the emoticon usage is that the more complex games have 86% of all the occurrences of emoticons functioning as irony markers.

As a conclusion, then, board game complexity may correlate hedge usage in that users discussing more complex games are more inclined to use adverbial hedge expressions compared to users discussing less complex games and users discussing less complex games are slightly more inclined to use lexical verb hedge expressions compared to users discussing more complex games. Category 4-5 users may be more likely to use emoticons to mark irony than category 1-2, and category 1-2 seems to attach more emoticons when committing face-threatening speech acts than category 4-5 does. These are the biggest differences in emoticon usage between the two complexity categories on Boardgamegeek. All but five emoticons could be properly attached to speech acts. However, the emoticons of those five utterances could still be identified as being either strengtheners or softeners. With that, users discussing rules on Boardgamegeek seem to largely use emoticons to hedge their utterances with a smaller part using emoticons to signal irony.

7. Possible Limitations of the Study

The first limitation of this study was predicted, as per concerns expressed by Skovholt et al. (2014), in that the qualitative analysis of this study was carried out by only one researcher. Input from the discussion forum users about their data

might have had impact on how the a researcher understands an utterance, as mentioned by Skovholt et al. (2014). However, a detailed interview with the users was not possible within the scope of this study.

The second limitation concerns the data. Collecting these large amounts of data to form some sort of corpus is very time-consuming as opposed to using an established corpus. The problem of normalising the occurrences was also obvious, as "noise" was spread throughout the data, making for a somewhat inaccurate word count. The normalising process involved copying every single comment from the 1,120 threads and putting them into a browser-based word-counter.

A third, possible limitation touches on the subject of users in the data. Overly active users may skew the data, as their style of language might be to hedge more than other users. One user who had contributed with a total of 159 comments in the forums for *Codenames* and *Mage Knight*, i.e. one game from the 1-2 category and one game from the 4-5 category, stood out in particular. Another user had 94 comments in the game *Bang!* alone, i.e. the 1-2 category. Nevertheless, these two users were the only two who had such a high number of contributions, and while there is no standard baseline for what is defined as a high or low amount of contribution, at a quick glance these two are definitely abnormal, and considering the total amount of words in the dataset, these users would not skew the results in any particular way.

8. Further Research

While this study solely looks into the use of emoticons, further studies may benefit from looking at the use of emojis as well. While having continually glanced over the material over the course of the study, it has been noticed that there are several occurrences of emojis (probably more than emoticons). Furthermore, emojis have branched from the area of iconising facial and emotional expression to the area of expressing with emojis depicting otherwise inanimate objects such as fire, peaches, eggplants and beer. It could then, indeed, be informative to look more closely at these, using research such as Weissman (2019) and Thomson, Kluftinger and Wentland (2018).

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10. Appendices

Appendix A

Adverbs

actually, almost, apparently, approximately, around, certainly, clearly, definitely, doubtless, essentially, evidently, generally, in fact, largely, likely, normally, obviously, of course, perhaps, possibly, presumably, probably, quite, really, relatively, roughly, surely, undoubtedly, usually

Modal verbs

could, couldn't, may, might, should, shouldn't, would, wouldn't

Adjectives

apparent, certain, a certain extent, clear, evident, possible, probably

Lexical verbs

appear, assume, believe, claim, doubt, estimate, indicate, know, presume, seem, suppose, tend, think

Phrases

in a way, in a manner of speaking, technically speaking, can be viewed as, more or less, strictly speaking, in one sense, I don't know, as far as I know, afaik[4], if I recall correctly, iirc[5], I mean, I think, isn't it, innit[6] (Algeo 1990), sort of, kind of

Emoticons

:), :-), =), :(, :-(, =(, ;), ;-), :P, :-P

Appendix B

(1) Shared vision question, need answer quick please! :)

The first example of this part of this study involves a requesting speech act and mitigation of the potential addressee's negative faces. Here, the original poster posts a thread regarding a rule in the game *Mysterium*, searching for the right information, simply. This question is followed by a smiling emoticon, the smiley, serving to reduce the force of the sender's face-threatening act; it is hence revealed that the function of the smiley in this context is to soften the preceding utterance, which may result in more users chiming in on the question than it would have without the addition of the smiley. In other words, this emoticon serves as a hedge.

(2) That sounds horribly terrible. What was the point of making the spies not know each other? :P

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[4] *As far as I know* abbreviated
[5] *If I recall correctly* abbreviated
[6] British English slang for *isn't it*

A controversial post with a direct attack on another user's face. It starts out with a complaining act into a requesting act, both face-threatening speech acts. The poster in (15) softens their utterances with a teasing face, revealing that they are being facetious. Although, focusing only on the utterance directly preceding the hedge, the teasing face is softening the request.

(3) So, beside the aforementioned team, don't forget to hurrah the translator as well :-)

While not blatantly a request as no question marks are involved, it is a kind of request since the user makes a demand of the original poster. The smiley serves to soften that request.

(4)
A: In your original question you said different colours?!
B: yes, that was another question....sorry :-)

The sixth example is rather ambiguous. Suppose that the smiley would be placed directly before the "sorry", making it more clearly a corrective speech act. User B corrects user A's misunderstanding. However, the smiley is placed directly after the "sorry"; this may or may not change its function. In this case it seems it does not, as if the "sorry" and the smiley share the same function; that of softening the correcting speech act. The "sorry" serves to transfer the burden of blame towards user B, implying the error was theirs, even though it might not have been.

(5) The reserve cards being discussed are the ones you take when you take the action to reserve a card to your hand (hand limit 3) and take a gold token; not when you purchase a card to add to your rows. =)

This is a corrective speech act. The user is quite literally correcting or notifying another poster of their misunderstanding, which is a potentially face-threatening act. The smiley serves to soften the utterance.

(6) It's a game. Everything about it is an abstraction. :)

A corrective speech act softened by the smiley. The original poster claims that a certain area in the game is an abstraction, whereby this user corrects the original poster with this statement.

(7)
A: Very plainly, I see the issue as the same as arguing over the concept of *hidden vs visible trackable information,* such as a player's money: the only true answer is that it merely follows whatever the participating players agree upon.
B: Except when you are in a competitive environment and one of the participants states in a declamatory manner, "Show me where it says it in the rules." :)

In this second example, the first turn in this exchange proclaims that when something is not explicitly stated in the rule booklet, players themselves have to agree upon proper action. The replier, however, seems to be committing a rejecting

speech act here, as they declare that what the first turn wrote can not be true in all cases. A rejection is a face-threatening act, and by adding a smiley at the end of the utterance, the reply is softened.

(8) I also think that the tech track works better from a theme perspective too - for some factions the cult tracks did makes sense too, but not for all :-)

The discussion regarding what is thematic in *Gaia Project* goes back and forth. It seems this user rejects a previous poster's standpoint that the "cult tracks" make sense thematically for all factions, so the user wants to soften the critical tone of the rejection.

(9) Rating spells is much more controversial than you make it out to be :-)

This user ultimately rejects the original poster's standpoint regarding his rated tier system of how good individual spells are in *Mage Knight*. So while the original poster proclaims that the spell card *Time Bending* is useless, this user rejects the claim, all the while making a counterclaim that *Time Bending* is useful, also adding that the poster should be cautious with rating spells. A rejecting speech act with the smiley functioning to soften the utterance.

(10) We play rather cut-throat, so if someone plays a Bang and then after realizes he's not within range, then tough luck, the card is already played. Having a rule saying you can only play Bang AFTER checking for range would ruin that part :)

The smiley is here used as a softener. This user is playing with a custom ruling regarding sequencing of cards played, essentially saying that if card A is played and accepted before the realization that card A could not affect the targeted player, the effect of card A should happen anyways. What has been done is that a custom rule has been invented to counter a situation that is not mentioned in the official rulebook. The user might then feel the need to soften their utterance, as this may be frowned upon by the community. The speech act preceding the smiley is a rejection, as the user rejects clarity in the rules to allow for homebrewed rules.

(11) Heh, remember the good 'ole days before Z-man started writing Carcassonne rules :0)

This user comments on the fact that the rulebook of Carcassonne became hazier after they switched publisher in 2012. The comment is a face-threatening complaint, and so the user is softening their utterance with a smiley.

(12) Interesting! I don't normally use any extensions in the app, but I should try this out. Shows how confusing the rules still are. :-(

(13) It's a mystery in mysterium for me :-(

Examples 11 and 12 contain complaining speech acts with frowning emoticons attached. Skovholt et al. (2014) categorised emoticons used with complaints as carrying softening functions, but it can hardly be said of this example; if anything,

the frowny is strengthening the user's utterance, further signaling and making their discontent sincere. This was unreported by Skovholt et al. (2014,), most likely because they did not have the chance to investigate the use.

(14) An odd question, I know. Thanks for your help :-)

(15)

Thanks

And the link is really helpful too (I know where should I put those dividers now :)

(16) Thanks for the insight, I will try to use it :)

(17) Thanks to the people who got my back =)

(18) Thanks, I intended to add the link once I got to a computer, but you beat me to it =)

Examples 13-17 all present expressive speech acts of thanking. The decoding of these speech acts is definitive with little room for error, as they all contain the key word *thanks*. The smilies in examples 13-17 all carry the function of strengtheners, to signal the sincerity of the poster.

(19) Nice! Welcome back :-)

This can most likely be properly categorised as a greeting speech act. The user is welcoming a player to the *Advanced Squad Leader* community, a player who has been gone from it for an extended period of time. In this case, the smiley strengthens the utterance.

(20) So this thread was useful for something after all =)

An occurrence of a strengthening, expressive act of appraising. In previous turns it was discussed whether one was allowed to use numbers in general, such as imaginary, counting or natural, or if only integers were allowed. The consensus was that the game master, in the game *Codenames* the "spymaster", has the final word. The poster expresses their appraisal that the thread was useful, not because of the initial question posed but because of the knowledge gained by another that clues given may be zero.

(21) This was the whole crux of my question =)

This user provides positive feedback to a user and can be interpreted as an appraising act. The smiley seems to emphasise the statement in such a way that the poster is saying "Yes! THIS was the whole crux of my question =)", giving praise to the one user among many who seems to understand the question asked by the original poster.

(22) I like the way you think and overall I like what you did here :-)

An expressive, appraising speech act, which is strengthened by the smiley. Of course, this utterance without a smiley is still an appraisal, however the addition of the smiley reveals that the user is sincere rather than sarcastic with their comment.

(23) (For the benefit of future readers: A very important question about Infiltration and CC) :)

This user does the original poster of a thread a service, as the original poster continues on an old discussion in a new thread without mention or linking to the previous thread. For other users, who might be unaware of what the original poster is commenting, the linking to the older thread served helpful to nurture the discussion. The user in (19) lauds the original poster for the important question, and so the speech act is an appraisal with the smiley functioning as a strengthener.

(24) P.S.- I should have read the response above :-) I totally agree with it

Example 24 presents an utterance which could potentially be both a strengthener and a softener. At a first glance it would seem this utterance is a representative speech act of admission, functioning as a strengthener; the user is admitting a fault of theirs, or here rather the redundancy of their contribution, having previously written a lengthy post on a rule question, when another user had written an almost equal reply before this user had posted theirs.

The utterance could also function as a softening, directive speech act of correction; having personally not read the previous replies, it seems the user both corrected

themselves and saved their own face. The implication is that the user made a contribution to the rule question, but after having read previous replies, realises that they are wrong, hence correcting themselves. That being said, this example has to be a strengthener in the representative admissive speech act, based on previous contribution in the thread.

(25) Either way, I don't think moving pieces around would break anything :)

This smiley works in conjunction with the "I don't think" in the utterance, which also hedges the claim. The poster is not completely sure of their claim and the smiley helps strengthening the admissive speech act, while it at the same time softening the user's opinion as a whole.

(26) I know it's already been answered...but yes. I accidentally do this to myself all the time in the app. Drives me insane. :)

In the third example can be seen an example of a non-hedging smiley. What this poster does is marking their utterance as a joke, intending to signal positive attitude. The poster is, most likely, not literally driven insane, and the smiley works to intensify the joking mood.

(27) To design number 8001? :-)

This smiley is used to signal irony. The user makes a joke regarding the number of scenarios another player has played in *Advanced Squad Leader*, and that to design

their own scenarios is redundant with the sheer number of pre-fabricated scenarios already available.

(28) If you want a ketchup mechanic, it will be available with the expansion! :-)

This user is using a smiley to signal that the utterance is a joke. *Ketchup* is word play on *catch up*, which was discussed in the thread. The discussion was centered around if players who are falling behind in the game have any chance of catching up to the players in the top. The choice of *ketchup* is intentional and appropriate as it is the game *Food Chain Magnate* that is being discussed.

(29) Ah, the leader of the game just crushed my civilization :-).

(30) For your next date night, make it a Mage Knight! :p

(31) And yes, the CFO is "the rich get richer." That is literally the entire card. :p

(32) Last turn, I had a revolution and implemented Republic, but I think I am now in real trouble :-).

Examples 28-31 show more occurrences of emoticons attached to ironic or otherwise facetious utterances.

(33) Sorry to hear they did not ask for permission =(

An expressive, apologising speech act in Scher et al.'s definition. The thread discussed a web-implemented version of *Gaia Project*, with the game designer declaring in the thread that they had to take it down due to copyright infringement, as the web version of the game never had the right to license it. The user in (35) reacts to this by apologising, probably because the user feels disappointment both in knowing they can not use the web client anymore and in the creators of the web client not ensuring copyright. Hence, the frowny is used as a strengthener.

(34) Hi, yes it works! ;-)

Skovholt et al. (2014) declares that the winking face is used to indicate a joke rather than signaling emotion and Thompson and Filik (2016) in their study presents further proof that the winking face is an indicator of sarcasm. In example 34 a question was posed and suitably answered by the user in (34). It is wholly evident that the user did not intend for the winking face to convey a facetious or sarcastic tone in their reply, because they are being truthful. It does, indeed, work. So, while the speech act is left unidentified, this winky is used to strengthen the committal the user has to the utterance.

(35) They are reshuffled when the active stack runs out ;-)

This winky is used to strengthen the commitment the poster has to their claim. This study has yet to observe a winky face used to signal irony or satire, and it is believed that the winky in (36) might as well be switched out for a smiley, for example, to grant the same effect.

(36) With some very basic cards there's so many possibilities to explore and to evaluate :-)

(37) Theres always one stack to play cards to and in addition to that the active stack :-)

36 and 37 function in the same way as 34 and 35.

(38) If anything I would strip out some text rather than add more, but since I'm not interested in what people like myself would do to the rulebook that's kind of irrelevant =)

This user softens their own negative comment directed at themselves. The controversy, and so the need for softening, lies in the fact that the comment is also directed at others.