ABSTRACT

Hedges as proposed by George Lakoff (1972) are words or phrases "whose job it is to make things fuzzier". This paper studies the usage of hedges in Singapore Mandarin, a linguistic phenomenon yet to be discussed. The study shows that the hedges present in Singapore Mandarin fall neatly into the classifications of Prince et al (1982), namely Approximators (subcategorized into Adaptors and Rounders) and Shields (subcategorized into Plausibility and Attribution). The findings reveal that in most instances, Approximators not only exhibit pragmatic functions similar to that of Shields, i.e. reflecting the speaker's attitude, they also appear in more sophisticated forms, sometimes with two or more hedges in a sentence.

Hedges are predominantly employed as part of a communicative strategy in Singapore Mandarin. In the case of Approximators, they appear most commonly in the form of single or multiple adverbs of degree that modify the predicate (usually an adjective). A variation of this form, the negation of the adverb of degree and adjective, is another prevalent tactic fairly unique to Singapore Mandarin. Shields often involve expressions that indicate
speculation on the part of the speaker, hence reducing his responsibility towards the truth of the proposition to a minimum. A combination of Approximators and Shields can also be used to express a greater level of uncertainty and soften evaluations, a trademark of hedges.

Politeness is found to be one main motivation for Chinese Singaporeans to hedge in verbal interactions. The Modesty and Approbation maxims of Leech’s (1983) Politeness Principles appear to be suitable explanations for the use of hedges in Singapore Mandarin. Politeness has become conventionalized in the Singapore Chinese culture, accounting for the widespread usage of hedges in daily interactions. Hedging is also observed as a common self-defence strategy where the speaker executes “face-saving”, as proposed by Brown and Levinson (1978). However, their theory which views hedges primarily as a form of “negative politeness” is less applicable to Chinese Singaporeans, where the apparent emphasis lies in “positive politeness” instead.