




Original article

## Managing Face: A Discourse Analysis of Hedges and Inclusive Pronouns in a Female Academic's TEDx Talk

Sarah Debbek<sup>1</sup> , Amani Zuweet<sup>2</sup> , Malak Swesi<sup>2</sup> <sup>1</sup>Digital Education and Online Education, Qatar University, Doha, Qatar<sup>2</sup>Department of English Language, Libyan Academy for Postgraduate Studies, Tripoli, LibyaCorresponding email: [albhrdant85@gmail.com](mailto:albhrdant85@gmail.com)

### Abstract

Public speaking involves not only delivering information but also building social relationships, engaging audiences, and maintaining credibility. These functions become particularly important in contexts shaped by cultural expectations and gender dynamics. This study examines how a Libyan female academic employs linguistic strategies to manage face and build solidarity in a TEDx talk delivered to a predominantly male audience. The study adopts a qualitative discourse-analytic approach supported by simple frequency counts and grounded in Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory. The data consist of Hana Saleh's TEDx Misurata talk "How Reading Affects Creativity and Critical Thinking". Findings show that hedges, particularly epistemic verbs such as "I believe," are frequently used to soften claims and reduce directness, while inclusive pronouns such as "we," "our," and "us" help construct solidarity and shared involvement. Together, these linguistic features enable the speaker to balance expertise with politeness and audience engagement. Although the study is limited to a single TEDx talk and relies mainly on transcript analysis, it highlights the role of linguistic choices in constructing interpersonal meaning in spoken discourse.

**Keywords.** *Discourse Analysis, Politeness Theory, Hedging Devices, Inclusive Pronouns, Pragmatics, TEDx Discourse.*

### Introduction

Public speaking is a dynamic process through which speakers share information, foster mutual understanding, and build relationships with their audiences. In communicative contexts, speakers are often required to demonstrate expertise while maintaining audience engagement and interpersonal sensitivity. As a result, linguistic choices play an important role in shaping how speakers present themselves and how their messages are interpreted [1]. These interactions may become particularly sensitive when communication takes place within contexts influenced by cultural expectations and gendered social norms. TEDx talks provide a relevant context for examining such interactional dynamics because they combine information-sharing with persuasion and audience engagement [2].

Speakers are expected to communicate expertise while remaining accessible, engaging, and socially appropriate. Consequently, TEDx discourse offers a valuable setting for exploring how language is used to manage interpersonal relationships in public speaking contexts. This study investigates how a Libyan female academic employs hedges and inclusive pronouns to manage face and build solidarity in a TEDx talk [3]. Observation of the recorded talk suggests that the audience is predominantly male, with only a small number of female participants visible. Within this setting, the speaker presents ideas, offers recommendations, and critiques educational practices while maintaining politeness and fostering a positive relationship with her audience. The study is grounded in Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory [4] and focuses on two linguistic features: hedges and inclusive pronouns.

Although the talk is situated within a broader social and cultural setting, the present study focuses specifically on the linguistic realization and pragmatic functions of these features rather than on wider ideological or social structures. Previous studies have examined politeness strategies and public speaking in a variety of cultural contexts, including Arabic and Middle Eastern discourse (e.g., Al-Khawaldeh & Abu Rahmeh [5]; Farhat [6]). These studies provide valuable insights into pragmatic language use in culturally related settings. However, much of the existing research focuses on written discourse or gives limited attention to public speaking. Consequently, the Libyan context remains underexplored, particularly regarding how a female speaker manages face in a TEDx setting before a predominantly male audience.



### *Aims of the Study*

The present study seeks to investigate the linguistic strategies employed by a Libyan female academic in her TEDx talk, with particular attention to the use of hedges and inclusive pronouns. The analysis focuses on identifying their forms, types, and frequency, thereby providing a systematic account of how these features are deployed in spoken discourse. Beyond their structural characteristics, the study also examines the pragmatic functions of these devices, exploring how they contribute to the management of face and the construction of solidarity within the speaker–audience relationship. In doing so, the research aims to shed light on the intersection of linguistic choice, interpersonal dynamics, and rhetorical effectiveness in academic public speaking.

### *Research Questions*

To address this gap, the present study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. How are hedges and inclusive pronouns linguistically employed in a Libyan female academic's TEDx talk?
2. How do hedges and inclusive pronouns function in managing face and building solidarity in the speaker–audience relationship?

### *Significance of the Study*

This study contributes to discourse analysis and pragmatic research by examining politeness strategies in spoken public discourse within a Libyan context, an area that remains underexplored. It provides a context-sensitive analysis of hedges and inclusive pronouns as interpersonal resources in spoken interaction.

## **Literature Review**

### *Discourse Analysis and Pragmatics*

Language in use is central to understanding how meaning is formed and communicated in real-life contexts. Discourse analysis examines how language functions in context and how speakers use linguistic resources to construct meaning and social relationships [7], a perspective that is particularly relevant to spoken discourse, where meaning is negotiated dynamically between speaker and audience. Closely related to discourse analysis is pragmatics, which focuses on how meaning is conveyed in context and how speakers use language to manage interaction [8]. From this perspective, linguistic choices function as important interpersonal resources through which speakers position themselves and engage their audiences.

### *Hedging as a Pragmatic Resource*

Among the linguistic resources examined in discourse and pragmatic studies, hedging has received considerable attention. Lakoff [9] defines hedges as linguistic devices that make statements less precise or forceful, and in spoken discourse they help speakers soften claims and present ideas cautiously. Common forms include modal verbs, adverbs, and epistemic expressions such as “I think” and “I believe” [10]. Prince et al. [11] proposed a widely used classification that distinguishes between approximators, which modify the propositional content, and shields, which signal the speaker's degree of commitment to the communicated content. This distinction is particularly aligned with the present study, which focuses on epistemic verbs functioning as shields, as these play a central role in expressing stance and negotiating meaning in interaction. Empirical research has consistently demonstrated the importance of hedging as a pragmatic resource in both spoken and written discourse. Corpus-based studies on TED Talks and spoken English have shown that hedges frequently soften assertions, express uncertainty, and facilitate interaction [12,13], although such studies tend to adopt descriptive, corpus-based approaches that offer limited context-sensitive analysis. In written academic contexts, Farhat [6] found that Libyan EFL professors used hedging devices extensively to reduce authorial commitment and avoid criticism, while Jović et al. [14] showed that hedges contribute to persuasion in TED Talks by supporting rhetorical appeals and audience engagement. In Arabic discourse, Al-Khawaldeh and Abu Rahmeh [5] reported that speakers employ a range of politeness and face-saving strategies to express viewpoints, with noticeable gender-based differences in strategy use.



### *Inclusive Pronouns and the Construction of Solidarity*

Beyond hedging, speakers employ other linguistic strategies to manage interaction, including the use of inclusive pronouns such as “we,” “us,” and “our” [15,16]. From a pragmatic perspective, these forms function as interpersonal resources through which speakers construct alignment with their audience and guide the interpretation of meaning in context [17]. By including the audience within the speaker’s perspective, inclusive pronouns reduce social distance, distribute responsibility, and promote a collaborative tone [4], which makes them particularly effective in spoken discourse, where speakers must balance expertise with audience engagement [16]. Taken together, these studies show that hedges and inclusive pronouns play a significant role in politeness and audience-oriented communication. However, limited research has examined their combined role in managing face within a specific spoken-discourse context, particularly within a Libyan TEDx setting involving a female speaker addressing a predominantly male audience.

### *Politeness Theory as an Analytical Framework*

The present study is grounded in Politeness Theory [4], which offers a comprehensive framework for analyzing how speakers manage interpersonal relationships through language. Central to this theory is the concept of face, defined as an individual’s public self-image that participants seek to maintain during interaction. Brown and Levinson [4] distinguish between positive face, the desire to be approved of and appreciated, and negative face, the desire to act freely without imposition. Because speakers often perform acts that may threaten their own face or that of others, known as face-threatening acts (FTAs), they employ politeness strategies to maintain social harmony. Negative politeness minimizes imposition and reduces the force of statements, whereas positive politeness builds solidarity, reduces social distance, and fosters a sense of shared identity [4]. Within this framework, the present study examines how specific linguistic features operate as politeness strategies. Hedges are interpreted as strategies of negative politeness, as they reduce the strength of claims and allow speakers to present ideas tentatively. By using epistemic expressions such as “I think” and “I believe,” a speaker avoids presenting statements as absolute truths, thereby minimizing potential face threats. Inclusive pronouns, by contrast, are analyzed as strategies of positive politeness; by including the audience within the speaker’s perspective, they reduce interpersonal distance, distribute responsibility, and create a collaborative communicative environment. To operationalize the analysis of hedging, the study also draws on Hyland [10], who conceptualizes hedging as a resource for expressing stance and managing the speaker–audience relationship; his model serves as a supporting analytical tool for identifying and interpreting the functional role of hedges in discourse.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative discourse-analytic approach supported by simple frequency counts to examine how meaning is constructed and how interpersonal relationships are managed in spoken discourse. Qualitative discourse analysis is particularly suitable for investigating language use in context, as it enables researchers to explore how speakers employ linguistic resources to achieve communicative purposes and negotiate social relationships [7,18,19]. Consistent with the aims of the study, the analysis focuses on two linguistic features: hedging devices and inclusive pronouns, both central to the speaker–audience relationship in public discourse. The dataset consists of a TEDxMisurata talk entitled “How Reading Affects Creativity and Critical Thinking” delivered by a Libyan female academic in 2015 [3]. The talk was accessed through the official TEDx YouTube platform and manually transcribed by the researcher using repeated viewing and available subtitles. The final transcript contains 1,989 words. A purposive sampling technique was adopted [19] because the selected talk directly aligns with the aims of the study. Data were collected through repeated viewing, and the transcript was reviewed to identify recurring linguistic patterns. Instances of hedging devices were classified using categories informed by Hyland [10], while inclusive pronouns were analyzed in relation to speaker–audience alignment and interpersonal meaning. The identified examples were subsequently interpreted within the framework of Brown and Levinson’s [4] politeness theory. This two-step procedure mirrors the research questions: the first stage addresses the linguistic identification of the selected features (RQ1), while the second interprets their pragmatic functioning in managing face and building solidarity (RQ2).

## Results and Discussion

Through analysis, nine hedging instances and thirty-four inclusive pronoun instances were identified (see Table 1). The following subsections examine how these features are employed to manage face and build solidarity, with attention to how the speaker coordinates positive and negative politeness strategies.

*Table 1. Frequency of Hedging Devices and Inclusive Pronouns*

Linguistic Feature	Category	Frequency
Hedges	Epistemic verbs (I believe, I thought)	4
Hedges	Modal verbs (might)	2
Hedges	Adverbs (perhaps)	2
Hedges	Personal stance markers (personally)	1
<b>Total Hedges</b>	–	<b>9</b>
Inclusive Pronouns	We	24
Inclusive Pronouns	Our	8
Inclusive Pronouns	Us	2
<b>Total Inclusive Pronouns</b>	–	<b>34</b>

### *Hedges and Face Management*

The speaker uses specific linguistic devices to soften her claims, reduce assertiveness, and maintain a balanced relationship with the audience. The data reveal a range of hedging devices, including epistemic verbs (I believe, I thought), modal verbs (might), adverbs (perhaps), and personal stance markers (personally). These nine instances were frequently used in contexts where the speaker critiques educational and cultural practices while maintaining a cautious and non-imposing tone.

*Extract 1: "I was 17 when I finally came back to Libya for good. Growing up in Switzerland, I believe the worst thing that I found really challenging as a kid was how to spell the word 'Switzerland.'"*

The opening anecdote in Extract 1 is used strategically by the speaker. Instead of opening her speech using her credentials, the speaker chose to start by sharing a personal linguistic difficulty, establishing shared common ground with her audience. The hedge "I believe" appears even when she is talking about her childhood, showcasing a recurring theme of epistemic modesty.

*Extract 2: "And I say Libya as a whole because I believe this is an issue that prevails in almost all regions here in Libya: the problem of learning a foreign language and actually using it."*

Extract 2 showcases the face-management function of "I believe." The speaker is making a general claim about the education system in Libya, which could be threatening to any audience who identifies with that system. The hedge here frames the generalization as a personal conviction rather than a fact.

*Extract 3: "Now, personally, I'm not very talented in creating or conducting surveys, but according to my experience teaching creative writing for three years, I believe the dominant topics and themes that I have come across are as follows..."*

Extract 3 shows how two hedging devices work together at a particularly significant moment in the talk, when the speaker presents her data. First, the stance marker "personally" positions her as drawing on experience rather than formal empirical evidence. The hedge "I believe" then further reduces the assertiveness of the claim by framing the presentation as a personal viewpoint rather than an objective fact. More broadly, this extract highlights a tension between two forms of credibility: institutional expertise and experience-based knowledge. By downplaying data-driven expertise while emphasizing experiential knowledge, the speaker shifts the basis of her credibility from formal expertise to personal experience. Pragmatically, this distinction is significant because experience-based credibility is less face-threatening, as it invites audience identification rather than demanding deference.

**Extract 4:** *“Now, some of you might think that this is actually fine given the students’ background. It actually is fine because people tend to write about things that they know truly well.”*

In addition to epistemic verbs, the modal verb “might” introduces possibility and makes the statement less direct. In Extract 4, the speaker anticipates a possible counterargument, acknowledges it as reasonable, and then introduces her own position. This illustrates what may be termed an anticipatory concession; by constructing a hypothetical audience voice (“some of you might think”), validating it (“it actually is fine”), and then shifting to her own position, the speaker creates a brief dialogic exchange within her monologue. This move goes beyond simple hedging because it acknowledges the audience’s perspective as legitimate before redirecting it, managing potential disagreement while preserving the audience’s positive face.

**Extract 5:** *“Now, at that point, I thought I had been an avid reader, and that shouldn’t be a problem for me. But that actually urged me to change my approach towards reading.”*

Likewise, the use of the past “I thought” instead of the present “I think” shows a retrospective stance, indicating that views and opinions could develop and change. The speaker is positioning herself as someone who was mistaken before. This approach has two face-management functions. First, it protects the audience’s positive face by flattering their potential for the same transformation. Second, it shows that the speaker is not speaking from a place of privilege, but rather, she shares a similar student reality. In summary, epistemic verbs are the most frequent hedging category in the dataset (see Table 1), suggesting a clear preference for expressing stance through these forms. “I believe” frames statements as subjective rather than objective, while “I thought” introduces a retrospective stance that suggests the speaker’s views are open to revision. Importantly, these devices are not distributed evenly across the talk. Instead, they cluster around moments of cultural and educational critique rather than in the more personal narrative sections. This selective distribution suggests that hedges are used strategically at points where the potential threat to face is greatest, rather than as a habitual feature of the speaker’s style.

#### ***Inclusive Pronouns and Solidarity***

The speaker employs pronouns such as “we”, “our”, and “us” to construct alignment with the audience and to present ideas collaboratively. These uses are interpreted as pragmatic resources for building solidarity and distributing responsibility. The data show that inclusive pronouns reduce social distance, create a sense of shared identity, and transform individual claims into shared perspectives.

**Extract 6:** *“We need to think outside this cultural box.”*

In this extract, the speaker uses “we” to frame the statement as a collective responsibility rather than an individual directive. Contextually, the speaker encourages a shift in thinking that could potentially sound critical or imposing. However, by using “we”, she avoids positioning herself as someone giving instructions and instead presents the message in a more collaborative manner.

**Extract 7:** *“Our free ticket to escape the limitations of our culture.”*

Here, the possessive pronoun “our” emphasizes shared ownership and collective experience. The speaker discusses cultural constraints that could be sensitive for the audience. By framing these limitations as “our” rather than “your”, she distributes responsibility and avoids direct criticism, positioning herself within the same social group as the audience.

**Extract 8:** *“That’s not an excuse for us not to learn them.”*

In this extract, the use of “us” distributes responsibility between the speaker and the audience. The speaker addresses a potential weakness that could be interpreted as criticism; by including herself within the group, she avoids assigning blame directly to the audience and presents the issue as a shared challenge. Notably, the speaker’s preference for inclusive pronouns in directive and critical contexts corresponds to an avoidance of direct second-person address. Statements such as “we need to think outside this cultural box” and “that’s not an excuse for us not to learn them” could have been formulated with “you.” The strategic absence of “you” in face-threatening contexts is pragmatically

significant since it removes the direct targeting that would make the imposition personal, complementing the solidarity-building function of the inclusive forms.

**Extract 9: "We express ourselves and communicate with each other."**

Here, the speaker uses "we" to describe a shared human experience. This shifts the discourse from instruction to identification, positioning the speaker and audience as participants in the same communicative process. As shown in Table 1, "we" is the most frequent form, indicating a strong preference for constructing meaning through collective reference. While dominant in frequency, "we" serves multiple roles depending on context, including expressing shared obligation, constructing collective experience, and guiding the audience through indirect directives. Overall, inclusive pronouns are used systematically and strategically, with meanings that shift according to context and communicative purpose, allowing the speaker to balance expertise with inclusiveness and collaboration.

**Coordinating Politeness Strategies**

**Extract 10: "And that's perhaps why we need to go to school."**

This extract demonstrates the simultaneous use of hedging and inclusive pronouns. The adverb "perhaps" softens the causal explanation by presenting it as tentative rather than definitive, while the inclusive pronoun "we" presents the statement as a shared responsibility between the speaker and the audience. Together, these features allow the speaker to introduce a directive idea in a more collaborative and less imposing manner.

Collectively, these findings support Brown and Levinson's [4] politeness theory by showing that hedging functions as a form of negative politeness. Through expressions such as "I believe," the speaker presents claims as personal viewpoints rather than unquestionable facts, thereby reducing imposition and respecting the audience's freedom of interpretation. Rather than weakening credibility, hedging allows the speaker to express expertise while maintaining an approachable, non-imposing stance. This interpretation is also consistent with Hyland's [10] notion of stance, according to which speakers position themselves in relation to their claims while remaining sensitive to their audience. The analysis also highlights the role of inclusive pronouns as positive politeness strategies. Through the repeated use of "we", "our", and "us", the speaker constructs a sense of shared identity and collective involvement. Instead of positioning herself above the audience, she presents ideas as common concerns and shared responsibilities, reducing social distance and strengthening solidarity [4].

A particularly significant finding is the interaction between hedges and inclusive pronouns. Rather than functioning independently, these features work together to support face management. Hedges soften the force of claims, while inclusive pronouns distribute responsibility and encourage participation. Their combined use enables the speaker to introduce recommendations and critiques persuasively without appearing imposing. The speaker also uses self-reflective comments and personal experiences to reduce status differences, while the consistent use of inclusive pronouns is accompanied by a notable absence of direct second-person reference "you," which avoids personal targeting. Together, these patterns reinforce a collaborative and audience-sensitive communicative style. Overall, this study contributes to the field in several ways. First, it demonstrates how hedging devices and inclusive pronouns function as complementary strategies for managing face in public speaking contexts. Second, it highlights the importance of examining these linguistic features within a specific cultural and communicative setting. Third, it provides a context-sensitive analysis that emphasizes the interaction between multiple linguistic resources, rather than treating them as isolated features. Fourth, the findings suggest that, in this context, hedges perform communicative roles broadly consistent with those reported for written academic discourse (e.g., Hyland [10]; Farhat [6]); because this observation rests on a single talk, it is offered tentatively.

**Limitations**

This study has some limitations. First, it is based on a single TEDx talk, which limits the generalizability of the findings and offers a context-specific interpretation rather than broad conclusions. Second, the study focuses only on selected hedging devices and inclusive pronouns relevant to the research questions. Third, while the data contain broader social and interactional dimensions such as identity and speaker-audience relations, the study remains limited to the linguistic



identification and pragmatic interpretation of the selected features; wider social practices and ideological dimensions are not examined in depth. Finally, although the study involves a female speaker addressing a predominantly male audience, it does not treat gender as a sociolinguistic variable.

### Conclusion

This study investigated how a Libyan female academic employs hedges and inclusive pronouns to manage face and build solidarity in a TEDx talk. The findings show that hedging devices, particularly epistemic verbs such as “I believe,” play an important role in softening claims and presenting ideas as subjective rather than absolute, while inclusive pronouns, especially “we,” function as important resources for constructing solidarity and presenting ideas as shared responsibilities rather than individual directives. Together, these features enable the speaker to balance expertise with inclusiveness, creating a discourse that is persuasive while remaining interactionally sensitive. Overall, the study contributes to discourse analysis by providing a context-sensitive examination of linguistic strategies in a Libyan TEDx setting. Future research may extend this investigation by examining additional discourse features, speakers, or communicative contexts.

### References

1. Zilles AMS, King K. Self-presentation in sociolinguistic interviews: identities and language variation in Panambi, Brazil. *J Sociolinguistics*. 2005;9:74–94. doi: 10.1111/j.1360-6441.2005.00282.x.
2. Scotto di Carlo G. The role of proximity in online popularizations: the case of TED talks. *Discourse Stud*. 2014;16(5):591–606. doi: 10.1177/1461445614538565.
3. Saleh H. How reading affects creativity and critical thinking [TEDx talk]. TEDxMisurata. YouTube; 2015 [cited 2026 Jun 18]. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T0aMihhwKq4>.
4. Brown P, Levinson SC. *Politeness: some universals in language usage*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1987.
5. Al-Khawaldeh N, Abu Rahmeh L. The communication of viewpoints in Jordanian Arabic: a pragmatic study. *Open Linguistics*. 2022;8:258–278. doi: 10.1515/opli-2022-0191.
6. Farhat FM. A pragmatic study of hedging devices in the research articles of English as a foreign language by Libyan professors. *J Academic Forum (Human Sciences)*. 2024;8(2):2047–2062.
7. Gee JP. *An introduction to discourse analysis: theory and method*. 4th ed. London: Routledge; 2014.
8. Yule G. *Pragmatics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 1996.
9. Lakoff R. Hedges: a study in meaning criteria and the logic of fuzzy concepts. *J Philosophical Logic*. 1973;2(4):458–508. doi: 10.1007/BF00262952.
10. Hyland K. *Hedging in scientific research articles*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins; 1998.
11. Prince EF, Frader J, Bosk C. On hedging in physician–physician discourse. In: Di Pietro RJ, editor. *Linguistics and the professions*. Norwood (NJ): Ablex; 1982. p. 83–97.
12. Nuraniwati T, Permatasari AN. Hedging in TED Talks: a corpus-based pragmatic study. *JEELS*. 2021;8(2):203–227. doi: 10.30762/jeels.v8i2.2969.
13. Leláková E, Praženíková D. Exploring hedging in spoken discourse: insights from corpus analysis. *Arab World English J*. 2024;15(3):270–282. doi: 10.24093/awej/vol15no3.16.
14. Jović M, Kurtiši I, Alfanan MA. The persuasive power of hedges: insights from TED Talks. *World J English Language*. 2023;13(5):200–212. doi: 10.5430/wjel.v13n5p200.
15. Wales K. *Personal pronouns in present-day English*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 1996.
16. Fortanet I. The use of 'we' in university lectures: reference and function. *English for Specific Purposes*. 2004;23(1):45–66. doi: 10.1016/S0889-4906(03)00018-8.
17. Pennycook A. The politics of pronouns. *ELT J*. 1994;48(2):173–178. doi: 10.1093/elt/48.2.173.
18. Creswell JW. *Research design: qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. 4th ed. Thousand Oaks (CA): Sage; 2014.
19. Dörnyei Z. *Research methods in applied linguistics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press; 2007.