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"I MUST ADMIT I AM RATHER DISAPPOINTED...": HEDGES AND BOOSTERS IN MANAGERIAL RESPONSES TO NEGATIVE ONLINE REVIEWS

Abstract

Extensive literature recognises the important roles of hedges and boosters in effective (academic) writing and demonstrates that writers' linguistic and cultural backgrounds influence their use, hence the stimulus for this corpus-based study. It examines modifiers in managerial responses to negative customer reviews posted on Tripadvisor by comparing lexical expressions of hedging and boosting in a corpus of 456 English-written responses from hotels located in the UK and Serbia. The nuanced insights gained through my analysis provide further evidence of genre-specific effects on the use of modifying expressions in written texts. A key finding is a blurring of the distinctions between texts produced in the L1- and L2-speaking environments. The differences, mostly minor ones, lie in the rates at which grammatical (sub-)classes of lexical items are used for hedging/boosting. The findings also reveal considerable similarities in the extent to which managers from the two countries resort to hedges/boosters and in the repertoires of lexical items they rely on. This may suggest that the modifiers-related distinctions between L1 and L2 writing tend to decrease with increasing degrees of conventionality, whereas they rise with increasing degrees of creativity.

Key words

Tripadvisor, managerial responses, hedges, boosters, comparative analysis.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Introduced in formal semantics some fifty years ago as an umbrella term for "words whose meaning implicitly includes fuzziness" (Lakoff, 1973: 471) and exemplified by, among others, *sort of* and *very*, hedges have been arousing great interest spanning several linguistic fields. As the area of study has grown, the term has evolved far beyond its original conception bringing about a diversity of approaches to the study of hedges (for a detailed overview, see Clemen, 1997; Varttala, 2001). Of particular note here is the narrowing of the scope of hedges down to those words "whose job is to make things fuzzier", thereby distinguishing them from those words that "make things less fuzzy" (Lakoff, 1973: 471),[1] namely boosters. Seemingly opposing functions notwithstanding, hedges and boosters are essentially "the items writers use to modify their claims" (Hyland, 2000: 179).

Given the primacy attached to hedges/hedging, as evidenced by the volume of scholarly work, including book-length publications (e.g., Hyland, 1998b; Kaltenböck et al., 2010; Markkanen & Schröder, 1997), more recent studies have increasingly focused exclusively on boosters (e.g., Bondi, 2008; Carrió-Pastor & Calderón, 2015) or, like this one, have set out to examine boosters and hedges simultaneously (e.g., Dheskali, 2017; Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2016; Hu & Cao, 2011).

A substantial, and still burgeoning, body of literature is devoted to academic discourse. An overwhelming majority of research centres on research articles (e.g., Bondi, 2008; Hyland, 1998a, 1998b, 2005; Limnios, 2022; Markkanen & Schröder, 1997; Radovanović & Vuković Vojnović, 2023; Varttala, 2001), or specific sections within them, for instance, abstracts (e.g., Hu & Cao, 2011), illuminating the ways modifiers contribute to the rhetorical and interactive dimensions of this knowledge-making genre and highlighting disciplinary variations. Other academic texts have also been subjected to closer scrutiny (e.g., student essays, see Hinkel, 2005; Hyland, & Milton, 1997). The roles modifiers have in the production of specialised professional-oriented texts/discourses have likewise garnered growing attention (e.g., product instructions, see Trbojević Milošević, 2012; business emails, see Carrió-Pastor & Calderón, 2015; Yue & Wang, 2014; news articles, see Dheskali, 2017). The present study extends this research strand to online service encounters and addresses modifiers in managerial hotel responses to customer reviews posted on Tripadvisor. Thus far, they have been tangentially addressed in a few recent studies (Ho, 2018, 2020) which, anchored in Hyland's (2005) framework, have treated hedges and boosters as two categories of interactional metadiscourse.

Since its inception in 2000, Tripadvisor has been continually gaining in popularity, establishing itself as "the most prominent online travel review platform in terms of use and content available" (Gretzel & Yoo, 2008: 38) that boasts over a billion of customer reviews (www.tripadvisor.com). As is commonly known, Tripadvisor reviews are rated on a five-point scale (from *excellent* to *terrible*).

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[1] Originally, the constituents of Lakoff's (1973) definition of hedges.

Tourism marketing and management literature regards them as very influential electronic word-of-mouth publicity, providing ample evidence on the increasingly important role this consumer-generated content has as a source of information in travel planning and decision-making processes (see Gretzel & Yoo, 2008; O'Connor, 2010). Consequently, the feedback businesses (opt to) provide through The Management Response feature can impact their brand image and reputation and ultimately lead to a gain or loss in profits (Sparks & Bradley, 2017). To cope with this, companies need to continuously engage in a dialogue with the customer (O'Connor, 2010) by attending to reviews with due care so as to maximise the benefits of favourable comments and minimise the impact of critical ones. This is particularly so with reviews which are predominantly critical and disapproving, due to their "potentially damaging effect" (Levy et al., 2013: 50). Responding to complaining customers promptly and effectively has the potential to improve customer satisfaction, strengthen customer loyalty and repeat business (see Levy et al., 2013; Sparks & Bradley, 2017). However, this has turned out to be quite challenging (Sparks & Bradley, 2017), which is why linguists' work can be highly beneficial to webcare.

First tackled only relatively recently by Zhang and Vásquez (2014), this specific form of online interaction with customers has become a fruitful area of linguistic enquiry. Needless to say, interest in handling complaints has far exceeded that shown in responding to positive reviews (Cenni & Goethals, 2021). Continuing this trend, this study focuses on managerial responses (hereafter MRs) to negative reviews, taking them, as in Ho (2017, 2018, 2020), to be those rated as *terrible*, *poor*, and *average*. Zhang and Vásquez's (2014) analysis and subsequent move-based explorations (Cenni & Goethals, 2020; Ho, 2017; Morrow & Yamanouchi, 2020; Napolitano, 2018) have mapped the prototypical structural organisation of this digital genre [2] and identified major "chunks of discourse that have a unified micro-purpose" (Biber & Conrad, 2019: 163), i.e., moves and the steps used within them. In sum, the authors have shown that in terms of rhetorical organisation, the review response genre (Ho, 2017) bears strong similarities to its conventional off-Web cousin, a response-to-complaint letter. Based on Ho's (2020) work, the following rhetorical moves constitute this genre: Acknowledging Problem, Agreeing with Reviewer, Continuing Relationship, Expressing Feelings, Offering Assistance, Recognising Reviewer's or Comment's Value, Thanking Reviewer, Accusing Reviewer, Denying Problem, and Self-promoting. Beyond genre theory, other theoretical and conceptual frameworks have also been used successfully to shed additional light on the characteristics of the discourse produced and features of language use, most notably speech acts theory (e.g., Guzzo & Gallo, 2019; Hopkinson, 2017, 2021; Morrow & Yamanouchi, 2020), rapport management theory (e.g., Cenni & Goethals, 2020; Ho, 2020), and above-mentioned metadiscourse.

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[2] For an extensive elaboration on the use of digital genre as a term and concept, see Guillén-Galve & Vela Tafalla (2023).

Given the dominance of English as the lingua franca of travel and tourism, most analyses have delved into responses written in English, not infrequently for comparative ends. Contrastive studies (e.g., Cenni & Goethals, 2020; Guzzo & Gallo, 2019; Morrow & Yamanouchi, 2020; Napolitano, 2018) have empirically demonstrated cross-linguistic differences between responses in terms of their textual realisations (the frequency of moves) and the linguistic resources managers exploit. More to the point, Hopkinson's (2017, 2021) research on English data indicates that the lexico-grammatical patterning of moves may vary depending on sociocultural contexts. Comparing responses from restaurants in the UK and the Czech Republic, Hopkinson (2017) finds that speakers from the two settings show different preferences concerning the typical linguistic realisations and strategies used in the apologies. Considering that researchers have consistently shown that authors' linguistic and cultural backgrounds impinge on the way they employ modifiers in academic writing (e.g., Dontcheva-Navratilova, 2016; Hinkel, 2005; Hu & Cao, 2011; Hyland & Milton, 1997; Radovanović & Vuković Vojnović, 2023), it would be interesting to explore the potential impact of the L1 versus L2 distinction on hedging and boosting in MRs.

The present study, therefore, seeks to investigate modifiers in English-written MRs by comparing lexical expressions[3] of hedging and boosting in 456 responses from hotels located in the UK and Serbia, an L1- and an L2-speaking environment respectively. Accordingly, the following research questions will be addressed:

RQ1: What lexical expressions do hotel employees use to modify their utterances when responding to negative online reviews in English?

RQ2: Are there any differences/similarities in the items used for hedging and boosting and their occurrence rates between the responses posted by hotels in the UK and Serbia?

The next section outlines the conceptual underpinnings of the study.

2. UNTANGLING THE CONCEPTS OF HEDGES AND BOOSTERS

As has long been noted (e.g., Clemen, 1997; Hyland, 1998b), the lack of a universally accepted definition can make exploring hedges problematic. What we find instead are conceptual positions that vary widely depending on the linguist's objective and adopted theoretical framework. One may, for instance, following Lakoff (1973), consider both weakeners and strengtheners as hedges (e.g., Brown & Levinson, 1987) or, opting for a narrow view, include only the "items that primarily

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[3] Comprising single words and "multi-word lexical units", i.e., lexicalised sequences of word forms (e.g., *sort of*) (Biber et al., 1999: 58).

mark imprecision or estimation […] such as *kind of*" (Biber et al., 1999: 556). A further difficulty arises from an array of terms applied to more or less overlapping notions.

The prevailing view among applied linguists is that the realm of epistemic modality lies at the heart of hedges and boosters. As Coates (1983: 18) points out, "[i]t is concerned with the speaker's assumptions or assessment of possibilities and, in most cases, it indicates the speaker's confidence (or lack of confidence)." Thus, epistemic modality markers express varying "degrees of certainty" (Holmes, 1982: 9) that occupy different positions on the scale whose poles are confidence and doubt (Coates, 1983: 18). Associated with confidence, or epistemic certainty, boosters include, for example, *clearly*, *definitely*, and *of course.* Their opposites, hedges, relate to doubt, i.e., epistemic uncertainty, (im)probability, (im)possibility, comprising items like *possible*, *might*, and *about*. But while "[e]pistemic modality is always a hedge" (Coates, 1983: 49), root modality markers may well acquire hedging interpretation in proper contexts (Hyland, 1998b). Hedges and boosters apparently fall under epistemic stance markers, signalling "certainty (or doubt), actuality, precision, or limitation; or […] the source of knowledge or the perspective from which the information is given" (Biber et al., 1999: 972). Embracing the viewpoint of metadiscourse, hedges and boosters are salient interactional resources: the former "withhold commitment and open dialogue", whereas the letter "emphasize certainty or close dialogue" (Hyland, 2005: 49). Boosters allow writers to make strong claims by asserting a proposition with confidence, whereas hedges are useful means for weakening of a claim through an explicit qualification of the writer's commitment (Hyland, 1998a: 350-351).

From the pragmatic standpoint, the items signalling the level of the writer's commitment may also serve to modify the illocutionary force of speech acts (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Holmes, 1982) by "increasing or decreasing the strength with which the illocutionary point is presented" (Holmes, 1984: 347). Subsumed under a more general concept of modification (Holmes, 1984), hedges and boosters are seen in terms of two counteracting mechanisms related to the concept of mitigation (Fraser, 1980) – attenuation and reinforcement respectively (Fraser, 2010; Holmes, 1984). Hedges soften or tentativise the writer's commitment to the semantic value of a particular expression or the force of a speech act being conveyed, whereas boosters increase it. In so doing, they also "express aspects of affective or communicative meaning" (Holmes, 1982: 11), which makes them important means operating at an interpersonal level. In academic texts, they are salient communicative strategies whereby the writer signals their attitude towards the audience (readers) (Hyland, 1998a). Even here, as Myers (1989) suggests, hedges are inextricably tied up with the face maintenance and thus effectively viewed as features contributing to politeness.

The approach adopted in this study and used in the analysis is customised and based on the insights from a preliminarily inspection of 50 randomly selected MRs. Following the above considerations, hedges and boosters are broadly understood

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here as the modifiers of the degree of the writer's commitment to lexical items, to propositions and to illocutionary forces. As such, hedges comprise the items elsewhere termed downtoners, minimizers, understaters, while boosters include those treated under the rubrics of emphatics, amplifiers, maximizers (e.g., Bondi, 2008; Quirk et al., 1985).

Lexical hedges and boosters have been shown to be of essentially the same substance, thus comprising items of the same central grammatical classes (e.g., Holmes, 1982; Hu & Cao, 2011; Hyland & Milton, 1997). Modifiers are thus classified into auxiliary verbs, lexical verbs, adverbials, adjectives, and nouns. Inspired by Varttala's (2001) study, these classes (except for nouns) are further sub-divided on semantic grounds, relying on the author's terms or, if those were deemed inapplicable or less suitable, borrowing the ones from widely acclaimed English grammars (Biber et al., 1999; Quirk et al., 1985). Hyland's (1998a, 2005; Hyland & Milton, 1997) theoretical positions, along with the lists of items potentially performing hedging/boosting function, have been successfully applied in related research (e.g., Carrió-Pastor & Calderón, 2015; Ho, 2018, 2020), hence the appropriate point of departure. Yet, while ideally suited to the study of texts comprising representatives[4] mainly, they may not be fully effective in analysing MRs due to a greater variety of speech acts, or "speech events" (Leech, 2014) contained in them. Thus, taking a more pragmatics-oriented tack might prove fruitful.

For the sake of illustration, a cursory glance at the example from my corpus quoted in the title (*I must admit I am rather disappointed* ...) reveals that the modal *must* cannot be understood as a booster, the role it is invariably assigned, since it is not used to "express conviction and assert a proposition with confidence" (Hyland, 1998a: 350). Rather, we should take into account hedged performatives, i.e., the combinations of modal verbs preceding performative verbs which soften the illocutionary force of the speech act denoted by the performative, wherein modals are considered as hedges (Fraser, 2010: 18). These structures are typical of the acts "expected to produce an unwelcome effect to the hearer" (Fraser, 1980: 342), and, concerning politeness, constitute a threat to the hearer's face (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Admittedly, our example may not produce such obvious unwelcome effects on the reader, but *must* is considered a hedge because the intended effect of hedging is face-saving of either the reader or the writer, or both (Myers, 1989) and admission is face-threatening to the writer. Not all instances of modals co-occurring with performatives are hedges inasmuch as both hedges and boosters are used to modify positively and negatively affective speech acts from any speech act type (Holmes, 1984). The utterance with the verb *thank* used performatively (*I must thank you for* ...) is a good case in point. Stressing the writer's obligation to express their gratitude, *must* reinforces thanking (Aijmer, 2014: 38), thus serving its typical function.

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[4] Adhering to Searle's (1976) taxonomy, the types of illocutionary acts are: representatives or assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations.

This elucidates that in making coding decisions, due consideration is given to the illocutionary act type and its anticipated effects. In this regard, Leech's (2014) difference between neg- and pos-politeness is specially relevant since in the case of neg-politeness, the degree of (pragmalinguistic) politeness is increased by diminishing or softening the expression of (negative) value, while with pos-politeness, it is achieved by magnifying or strengthening the expression of (positive) value (Leech, 2014: 12). Basically, then, the approach, customised to cater to the particularities of analysed texts, straddles applied linguistics and pragmatics.

3. DATA AND METHODS

The corpus was created by downloading responses from Tripadvisor, making an effort to design the specialised corpus sufficiently representative within realistic constraints. Since the presence of Serbian hotels on the platform is incomparably smaller than that of British ones, the SrMRs sub-corpus was deemed determinative of the corpus size and structure. All available MRs from the 3-, 4-, and 5-star hotels located in three urban tourism destinations in Serbia (Belgrade, Novi Sad, and Niš), posted until 31 March 2022, were manually searched.[5] To avoid potential distortion in the findings caused by an individual's preferences for specific expressions, I retrieved three responses at most, each to a review of a different rating, given by a responding employee, selecting the first, i.e., latest, three ones.[6] The responses given by an employee who, judging from their name, might be an L1 speaker were disregarded. This procedure yielded the SrMRs sub-corpus made up of 228 MRs, structured as shown in Table 1.

To create the EnMRs sub-corpus, I retrieved responses from London-based hotels applying the same selecting criteria. For the sake of variety, I restricted the maximum number of MRs per hotel to ten and allowed for only one hotel from a hotel chain. The number of responses that EnMRs consists of directly matches that forming SrMRs by type and hotel category (see Table 1), which makes the sub-corpora closely comparable. The difference in the time span (2012-2022 and 2016-2022 respectively) was regarded as irrelevant. The extraneous content (opening and closing salutations, signatures, and contact details) was eliminated.

Sub-corpus	HOTELS			MANAGERIAL RESPONSES				RUNNING WORDS
	Category	Location	No. of hotels	Terrible	Poor	Average	Total	

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[5] The earliest one was written in 2012.

[6] The employee's identity was established based on the signature or the details in the *Response from…* section. Impersonal signatures (e.g., *Team*, *Hotel Manager*) were taken as belonging to one particular individual.

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SrMRs	5-star	Belgrade	4	11	13	18	50	25,954
		Novi Sad	2	1	4	3		
	4-star	Belgrade	32	40	39	60	151	
		Novi Sad	4	1	4	5		
		Niš	1	/	1	1		
	3-star	Belgrade	8	7	7	10	27	
		Novi Sad	1	2	/	1		
EnMRs	5-star	London	6	12	17	21	50	26,469
	4-star		36	41	44	66	151	
	3-star		9	9	7	11	27	

Table 1. Corpus details

The analysis involved the combination of approaches (top-down and bottom-up) and methods (software-assisted and manual), commonplace in similar research. Once I analysed the corpus using the concordance software AntConc (Anthony, 2018), searching for every item in Hyland's (1998a, 2005; Hyland & Milton, 1997) lists and scrutinising every occurrence in the wider context to determine whether it serves as a modifier and if so, the function it performs, I carefully scanned the corpus manually to ensure that no relevant item had been overlooked. Finally, I classified and combined the identified occurrences, normalising raw (RF) to frequencies per 1,000 words (NF).

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4. FINDINGS

The findings are presented in succeeding subsections pertaining to the above-listed grammatical classes, and then summarised and discussed in greater detail in Section 5.

4.1. Auxiliary verbs

With 1,027 occurrences in the data (19.59)[7], auxiliary verbs, itemised in Table 2, are fairly prominent modifying expressions in MRs.
 In my corpus, 12 modal auxiliaries, nine central modals and three semi-modals (*dare*, *have to*, and *be supposed to*),[8] are used as modifiers. As seen in Table 2, volitional modals (*will*, *shall*, *would*) are by far the most common.

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[7] Throughout the paper, the figures in parentheses show the respective normalised frequencies. When referring to sub-corpora, they correspond to the tabular representation (EnMRs, SrMRs).
[8] Semi-modals are extremely infrequent, six occurrences altogether.

Auxiliaries		**HEDGES**				**BOOSTERS**			
		EnMRs		SrMRs		EnMRs		SrMRs	
		RF	NF	RF	NF	RF	NF	RF	NF
Modal auxiliaries	volitional modals	125	4.72	99	3.81	227	8.58	243	9.36
	necessity modals	18	0.68	17	0.65	7	0.26	6	0.23
	possibility modals	60	2.27	42	1.62	25	0.94	7	0.27
Primary auxiliaries	*do*	/	/	/	/	104	3.93	47	1.81
	Total	203	7.67	158	6.08	363	13.71	303	11.67

Table 2. Auxiliaries used as modifiers

The preponderance of *will* over other modals could be expected considering the texts' clear orientation towards future actions on the part of either hotel employees or reviewers. *Will* reinforces the utterances by projecting a sense of certainty, just as *shall* does. That, for example, is the case with commissive utterances like (1) realising the Recognising Reviewer's or Comment's Value move.[9] Unlike these two modals, *would* predominantly takes the role of a hedge, most obviously when softening the force of face-threatening acts such as requests (example 2) tied to the Continuing Relationship move. When occurring in positively affective speech acts, principally expressive illocutions such as apologies and thanks, hypothetical *would* can increase the strength of the utterance, functioning as a booster. Volitional modals used for hedging occur slightly more frequently in the EnMRs sub-corpus (4.72, 3.81) and those acting as boosters are a bit more common in SrMRs (8.58, 9.36).

> (1) I *will* certainly pass on your comments about the team … (EnMRs_196)

> (2) In conclusion, I *would* kindly ask you to contact me directly on my email address … (SrMRs_28)

Necessity modals (*must*, *have to*, *should*) are the least frequent semantic class of modals. Examples like (3), with the modal communicating the highest degree of commitment the manager attaches to their proposition, are exceptionally rare. *Must* and *have to* tend to strengthen the force of (explicit) apologies, a constituent step of the Acknowledging Problem move, and expressions of gratitude, i.e., the Thanking Reviewer move, in much the same way as *would* does (e.g., *I/we have to/must/would like to apologise/thank*). As explicated above, *must* can function as a hedge, and so can *have to*. Modal *should* differs, then, since "tentative should" (Quirk et al., 1985:

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[9] The examples remain as written in the original. The names of hotels have been left out.

1097) is only used to achieve a hedging effect, mainly to tone down offers and invitations such as in (4) signalling the Continuing Relationship move.

> (3) It *must* be exhausting experience to travel 10 hours with no air conditioning. (SrMRs_187)

> (4) Please, feel free to contact me *should* you need any assistance ... (SrMRs_12)

While necessity modals occur as either type of modifiers at remarkably similar rates, possibility modals (*can*, *could*, *may*, *might*) are more commonly used in EnMRs for both hedging (2.27, 1.62) and boosting (0.94, 0.27). Quite predictably, the hedging function prevails and is identified with the modals conveying epistemic possibility, or the meaning balancing between epistemic and root modality, illustrated respectively by *might* and *can* in (5). Serving as "content-oriented downtoners" (Holmes, 1984), as *might* does here, epistemic *might* and epistemic *may* help managers convey their reservations regarding the offence expressed in the proposition and thus attenuate the apologetic force of the illocution. The role of hedges is also assigned to *could*, *can* and *may*, just as to *would* in example (2) above, used as devices of indirectness to soften the force of directives. Worth mentioning is that *can* also serves as a booster. Specifically, this interpretation seems plausible for *can* functioning as an "emphasiser/empathiser", set forth by Kjellmer (2003), when it co-occurs with performatives (*(re)assure*, *confirm*, *apologise*, *guarantee*) (see Radovanović, 2022: 116).

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> (5) As a popular hotel in central London things *can* get a bit hectic, and I apologize for any frustrations you *might* have had with your checkin experience. (EnMRs_170)

Besides modals, "emphatic do" (Biber et al., 1999) is a common modifier in MRs, two times more frequent in EnMRs (3.93, 1.81). *Do* boosts the force of the utterances expressing the author's feelings, such as regret (e.g., *I/We do apologise ...*) or hoping/wishing, like in (6), associated with the moves of Expressing Feelings and Continuing Relationship.

> (6) I *do* sincerely hope that you will come back to stay with us ... (EnMRs_123)

Also, it is used to stress the propositional content of favourable representations of hotels, typically those expected to be positively valued by guests such as the qualities of the establishment (e.g., *We do have/provide ...*), linked to the Self-promoting move, or the actions undertaken by employees (e.g., *We did try ...*), typically associated with the Acknowledging Problem move. Occasionally, *do* occurs in "persuasive imperatives" (Quirk et al., 1985: 133) constituting requests, invitations or offers, predominantly reflecting the Continuing Relationship move.

4.2. Lexical verbs

The analysis has revealed 37 lexical verbs functioning as modifiers[10] with a total of 310 occurrences (5.91), grouped into four categories shown in Table 3.

Lexical verbs	HEDGES				BOOSTERS			
	EnMRs		SrMRs		EnMRs		SrMRs	
	RF	NF	RF	NF	RF	NF	RF	NF
Epistemic copular verbs	5	0.18	2	0.07	/	/	/	/
Mental verbs	38	1.43	24	0.92	13	0.49	17	0.65
Communication verbs	8	0.30	22	0.84	42	1.58	30	1.15
Other	50	1.88	53	2.04	2	0.07	4	0.15
Total	101	3.79	101	3.87	57	2.14	51	1.95

Table 3. Lexical verbs used as modifiers

Epistemic copular verbs (*seem*, *appear*), used to tone down representative illocutions, appear extremely rarely (0.18, 0.07). Hotel managers resort more often (1.43, 0.92) to mental verbs, specifically those of cognition (e.g., *understand*, *believe*, *appreciate*), to qualify categorical commitment, as in (7) realising the Acknowledging Problem move. While these two are more frequent in EnMRs, SrMRs contains more mental verbs functioning as boosters (0.49, 0.65). Besides the verbs conveying a sense of certainty (e.g., *know*, *realise*), they comprise emotive verbs (e.g., *wish*, *want*), which, unlike cognitive verbs, modify expressive illocutions only. By explicitly referring to the writer's emotions, they serve as the means of reinforcing the force of off-record apologies such as in (8) or of thanks.

(7) … but from your review I *believe* you encountered some extra charges afterwards. (EnMRs_189)

(8) I therefore *wish* to extend to you my most sincere apologies. (EnMRs_7)

Communication verbs mostly comprise performative verbs. Those associated with non-factivity (e.g., *inform*, *say*), which present a tentative view of reported information (hedges), as in (9), are slightly more common in SrMRs (0.30, 0.84), while EnMRs contains more verbs related to factivity (*assure*, *confirm*) which present the asserted proposition as true (boosters) (1.58, 1.15).

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[10] A list of identified modifiers is provided in the Appendix. For practical reasons, I have included only the base forms of verbs.

(9) *Allow* me to *inform* you that corrective measures have already been taken. (SrMRs_167)

The verb *allow* in (9) is also seen as a modifier here and included under the rubric of *Other*. Namely, permissive verbs (*let*, *allow*) preceding expressive verbs and communication verbs used performatively frame illocutions as polite requests, thereby modifying the force of utterances in a much similar way as modals used in the same contexts do. Besides these, this subclass includes the verbs of trying (*strive*, *try*, *seek*) used to present a favourable portrayal of the hotel establishment less categorically in the utterances such as (10) linked to the Self-promoting move.

(10) Here at __, we continuously *strive* to meet your needs and expectations. (EnMRs_226)

They occur more often in SrMRs both as hedges (1.88, 2.04) and as boosters (0.07, 0.15).

4.3. Adverbials

Comprising 77 identified items occurring 1,406 times (26.82), adverbials are the principal means managers use to modify their utterances and primarily have a boosting function, as Table 4 shows.

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Adverbials	**HEDGES**				**BOOSTERS**			
	EnMRs		SrMRs		EnMRs		SrMRs	
	RF	NF	RF	NF	RF	NF	RF	NF
Doubt/certainty adverbials	4	0.15	13	0.50	68	2.57	48	1.85
Frequency adverbials	20	0.76	14	0.54	58	2.19	78	3.01
Adverbials of degree and extent	22	0.83	30	1.16	354	13.37	470	18.11
Politeness adverbs	120	4.53	107	4.12	/	/	/	/
Total	166	6.27	164	6.32	480	18.13	596	22.97

Table 4. Adverbials used as modifiers

Adverbials indicating the degrees of likelihood (doubt/certainty) are the least frequent subcategory, with those conveying probability and possibility (e.g., *maybe*, *perhaps*) (hedges) being far less prominent (0.15, 0.50) than those which, like *certainly* in (1) above, by expressing conviction boost the force of the utterances (2.57, 1.85). Likewise, frequency adverbials in hedging use (e.g., *usually*, *sometimes*) are more than four times less frequent (0.76, 0.54) than those used as boosters (e.g., *always*, *never*) (2.19, 3.01). The adverbs of "continuous/ continual/ universal

frequency" (Quirk et al., 1985: 543) are included under the latter for they seem as useful means for increasing the strength of the utterances such as (10) above. While frequency adverbials used for hedging occur more often in EnMRs, those used to boost illocutions are more common in SrMRs, and vice versa in the case of doubt/certainty adverbials.

When looking at Table 4, the great preponderance of the adverbials broadly associated with degree and extent is evident. They, in fact, constitute the most frequent grammatical subclass (16.72). Overall, degree adverbs functioning as hedges, diminishers or downtoners (e.g., *just*, *a bit*), are outnumbered (0.83, 1.16) by those used as boosters by a ratio of almost 16:1, the latter being exceptionally prominent in SrMRs (13.37, 18.11). Besides intensifiers (e.g., *very*, *so*, *extremely*), the most prototypical adverb boosters, the corpus also offers various manner adverbs (e.g., *truly*, *sincerely*) which can likewise increase the intensity of the lexical item they premodify. Since "saying sorry" may not imply that regret is really felt, *sorry* commonly appears with various premodifying adverbs that boost the force of apologies. Similarly, they can make the expressions of gratitude, i.e., the Thanking Reviewer move, seem warm or enthusiastic enough, as (11) illustrates.

(11) Thank you *ever so kindly* for sharing your experience at … (EnMRs_186)

Again, we notice pragmatic polyfunctionality. While *kindly* serves as a booster in the contexts associated with pos-politeness (Leech, 2014) like in (11), it is regarded as a hedge when occurring in utterances involving neg-politeness (Leech, 2014), such as (2) above. Together with the standard politeness marker *please*, *kindly* forms here a distinct subclass (*Politeness adverbs*). Significantly outnumbering *kindly*, *please* mitigates the imposition inherent in directives such as (4) above, including the ones embedding apologies like in (12). *Please* is generally used in contexts where formal politeness is needed (Aijmer, 2014: 166), which may account for the highest frequency of politeness adverbs (4.53, 4.12) among adverbial hedges.

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(12) *Please* accept our deepest apology for every inconvenience … (SrMRs_149).

4.4. Adjectives

Except for politeness adverbs, most of the adverbials serving as hedges/boosters have the adjectival counterparts that can also lend themselves readily to being used as modifiers. Thirty-six are found in my corpus occurring 227 times (4.33). Table 5 presents frequencies.

Adjectives	HEDGES				BOOSTERS			
	EnMRs		SrMRs		EnMRs		SrMRs	
	RF	NF	RF	NF	RF	NF	RF	NF
Doubt/certainty adjectives	14	0.53	12	0.46	63	2.38	39	1.50
Frequency adjectives	9	0.34	9	0.81	/	/	/	/
Adjectives of degree and extent	5	0.18	4	0.15	45	1.70	27	1.04
Total	28	1.05	25	1.42	108	4.08	66	2.54

Table 5. Adjectives used as modifiers

Despite the wide discrepancy in their frequency, the hedging/boosting use of adjectives is closely analogous to that of adverbials. Again, boosting function is central (4.08, 2.54). Frequency adjectives (e.g., *usual*, *normal*) which indicate managers' reservations regarding the expressed states of affairs (hedges), are somewhat more frequent in SrMRs (0.34, 0.81). Doubt adjectives (e.g., *possible*, *indicative*) are used at close rates (0.53, 0.46) and overall less frequent than certainty adjectives (e.g., *assured*, *confident*, *sure*) that are more common in EnMRs (2.38, 1.50). The adjectives of degree and extent used for hedging (e.g., *little*) are less common (0.18, 0.15) than those acting as boosters (e.g., *sincere*, *absolute*) (1.70, 1.04), the former being used almost equally and the latter being slightly more frequent in EnMRs.

4.5. Nouns

Noun modifiers are only marginally represented, with just six items employed in as few as 18 examples (0.34). Basically, nouns have functions corresponding to those of the abovementioned lexical verbs and adjectives they derive from. For instance, we find example (13) with a mental state noun serving as a hedge. There are more noun hedges in SrMRs (0.07, 0.23) and more noun boosters in EnMRs (0.26, 0.11).

(13) My *understanding* is that there is going to be a __ hotel opening in 2023. (EnMRs_146)

5. DISCUSSION

The summary information, including the frequencies and the percentage distribution of each grammatical class, presented in Table 6, clearly points to an especially prominent role modifiers have in MRs – 2,988 modifiers altogether, used at an

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extremely high rate of nearly 57 times per 1,000 words. Consistent with some previous studies (e.g., Hyland, 1998b), the findings suggest that auxiliaries and adverbials are overwhelmingly preferred modifying expressions, while nouns are of practically no significance. Due to differing approaches, my findings are not directly comparable to those of previous research (e.g., Carrió-Pastor & Calderón, 2015; Ho, 2018, 2020; Hyland, 1998a; Yue & Wang, 2014); still some tentative observations could be made.

Grammatical class	HEDGES						BOOSTERS					
	EnMRs			SrMRs			EnMRs			SrMRs		
	RF	NF	%	RF	NF	%	RF	NF	%	RF	NF	%
Auxiliaries	203	7.67	40.60	158	6.08	34.80	363	13.71	35.76	303	11.67	29.74
Lexical verbs	101	3.79	20.20	101	3.87	22.25	57	2.14	5.62	51	1.95	5.00
Adverbials	166	6.27	33.20	164	6.32	36.12	480	18.13	47.29	596	22.97	58.49
Adjectives	28	1.05	5.60	25	1.42	5.51	108	4.08	10.64	66	2.54	6.48
Nouns	2	0.07	0.40	6	0.23	1.32	7	0.26	0.69	3	0.11	0.29
TOTAL	500	18.85	100	454	17.92	100	1,015	38.32	100	1,019	39.24	100

Table 6. Grammatical classes of modifiers

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Averaging at almost seven occurrences per response, about one every 18 words, modifiers are far more prevalent in MRs than in academic texts (e.g., Hyland, 1998a). Another distinction lies in the preponderance of boosters, having more than twice the frequency of hedges in both sub-corpora. In addition, the items my analysis has revealed (see Appendix) differ substantially from those previously identified, even in the analysis of similar genres (e.g., Carrió-Pastor & Calderón, 2015; Yue & Wang, 2014). While the differences in frameworks may account for these distinctions, they could quite plausibly be seen as direct reflections of the different purposes and situational contexts of the analysed genres/registers (see Biber & Conrad, 2019).

Although addressed to specific individuals, MRs are readily available to virtually anyone interested. Given managers' major objectives of retaining complaining customers and attracting new ones, general persuasive purposes may easily be recognised, the enactments of which are hedges and boosters (Hyland, 2005). Yet, compared to other inherently persuasive texts, such as academic ones, interpersonal relations are of far greater concern, principally because the requirement to attend to face needs is heightened. Accordingly, addressee-orientation (Coates, 1983) of modal items usage is foregrounded. The identified items tend to convey affective meanings predominantly, allowing managers to express deference and solidarity with reviewers. This explains the rare occurrence of some prototypical hedges (e.g., *seem*, *tend*, *possibly*, *possible*), or lack thereof, in MRs.

Ho (2017, 2018, 2020) shows that service recovery, the genre's communicative purpose, can be achieved through the moves that contribute to enhancing the rapport between the hotel management and reviewers. Of the 10 moves Ho (2020) has identified, seven (Acknowledging Problem, Agreeing with Reviewer, Continuing Relationship, Expressing Feelings, Offering Assistance, Recognising Reviewer's or Comment's Value, and Thanking Reviewer) serve to attend to the face wants, sociality rights, and interactional goals of the reviewers, or to indicate the hotel's fulfilment of its obligations, which makes them rapport-enhancing. Three of these are obligatory (Thanking Reviewer, Acknowledging Problem, Expressing Feelings),[11] all of which are direct or indirect expressive speech acts related to pos-politeness, and as such especially prone to modifications (Leech, 2014). The foregoing suggests that managers resort to various items (modals, auxiliary *do*, emotive lexical verbs, adverbials/adjectives of degree and extent) in the attempts to make their apologies (Acknowledging Problem), more profound and genuine. The above findings pertinent to expressions of gratitude (Thanking Reviewer) run parallel to these. Besides these recurrent and rather "formulaic" expressions (Aijmer, 2014), other rapport-enhancing moves may well appear intensified, as shown by examples (1) and (6). The heavy use of boosters, then, is not much of a surprise. In addition, boosters are common in the utterances such as (10) that realise the most frequent rapport-challenging move, that of Self-promoting, aimed at saving the manager's, or rather the company's, face. A similar motive can be found behind hedging, as the use of *might/may* in apologies like (5) indicates. Examples also show that tentativeness and deference tend to underlie the use of hedges (e.g., (7) and (9) – Acknowledging Problem; (2), (4), and (6) – Continuing Relationship). Acting in a synergetic fashion, hedges and boosters contribute to the effectiveness of a response (Ho, 2018), hence are easily combined, as in (8) and (12). Underpinned by managers' attempts to foster and maintain a harmonious relationship with a reviewer, the use of modifiers is integral to the communication style that is likely to be positively evaluated by customers, which in turn may help the business enhance future brand perceptions (see Sparks & Bradley, 2017). Therefore, high frequencies could be expected.

Contrary to prior comparative research mentioned in the Introduction, revealing that L1 and L2 writing significantly differs in the occurrence rates of hedges/boosters, the figures in Tables 2 through 6 do not indicate any substantial variation across the sub-corpora. Moreover, the frequency figures summarised in Table 6 are stunningly similar; British hotel managers employ hedges slightly more frequently (18.85, 17.92), while boosters are somewhat more characteristic of the responses given by their Serbian counterparts (38.32, 39.24). Yet, the dissimilarities are far less marked than was initially expected considering that indirectness and politeness are more strongly favoured in British than in Serbian culture (see Trbojević Milošević, 2012), the reflections of which emerge in the analysis of

<div style="margin-right:0;text-align:right">64</div>

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[11] The first two have been unanimously recognised as necessary in webcare (Cenni & Goethals, 2020).

research articles (e.g., Radovanović & Vuković Vojnović, 2023). Interestingly, the differences almost perfectly supplement each other (around 0.9 per 1,000 words in either case), thus indicating the same levels of writers' awareness of the need to modify their utterances.

Nonetheless, there are differences in the classes of items the managers from L1 and L2 environments opt for. The point of greatest dissimilarity concerns the modifications realised through auxiliaries, which account for a larger proportion of both hedging (40.60, 34.80) and boosting (35.76, 29.74) in MRs from British hotels. While auxiliaries are the most preferred hedges by employees of British hotels (40.60), they come second to adverbials in SrMRs (34.80 vs. 36.12). In both sub-corpora, the bulk of boosters are adverbials, yet significantly less so in EnMRs (47.29, 58.49), which may indicate that adverbials tend to be used in place of auxiliaries in MRs from the L2-speaking environment.

Another noteworthy finding concerns the distinction in a range of modifiers. Of the total of 168 items listed in the Appendix, 126 are found in the responses from London hotels, whereas 133 are used by managers of Serbian hotels. Again, this is surprising in the context of prior research reporting a greater variety of hedging/boosting devices in L1 writing (e.g., Hinkel, 2005).

There are two likely reasons, I believe, why my findings deviate from prior ones. We can postulate that the observed similarities are explainable by the fact that hotel personnel hardly is a nationally and culturally monolithic group (Hopkinson, 2017, 2021; Zhang & Vásquez, 2014), which might lead to blurred L1/L2 distinctions. More plausible, however, is that the textual features have an impact. In MRs, the realisations of hedges/boosters mainly are highly routinised ways of tailoring the effects of texts to the readers. Compared to academic genres, MRs are created in far more conventionalised and formalised ways, largely following pre-established patterns, and including formulaic elements to a significantly greater extent. This indicates that modifiers-related differences between L1 and L2 writing tend to decrease with increasing degrees of conventionality, whereas they rise with increasing degrees of creativity.

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6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Overall, this study has shown that modifiers are pervasive in MRs and provided a nuanced account of the items under scrutiny, revealing both similarities and differences in how hotel employees from the UK and Serbia use hedges and boosters to negotiate a harmonious relationship with a complaining customer. The study provides further evidence of genre-specific effects on the use of modifying expressions in written texts. There are, however, methodological objections one might raise. As lexical expressions acquire hedging/boosting quality in contexts only, analyses tend to be fraught with difficulties related to the problems of identification and demarcation of specific functions. This means that a degree of subjectivity is

necessarily involved, so one may disagree with some of my coding decisions. In the same vein, an important constraint is the lack of any second-rater.

That said, the study may bear practical relevance, particularly considering the role of authenticity in ESP (see García-Ostbye & Martínez-Sáez, 2023 for a recent overview). Hedging (and, for that matter, boosting) is an important aspect of pragmatic competence (Fraser, 2010) proven to be notoriously problematic to students (Fraser, 2010; Holmes, 1982; Hyland, 2000; Hyland & Milton, 1997). Hence, linguistic enquiries typically carry important implications for the teaching of ESP writing. This study may benefit the instruction for professional workplace contexts involving written business communication, above all, that for tourism and/or hospitality undergraduates.

The findings could be fruitfully applied to the design of teaching/learning materials and in-class activities intended to foster students' awareness of pragmalinguistic features in replies to written complaints. Authentic materials from Tripadvisor could be used to expose students to a broad range of the options they can make to accomplish the intended rhetorical purposes, explicitly drawing their attention to relevant items and providing pertinent metapragmatic information as the need arises. A well-suited awareness-raising task might involve rewriting a response to a complaint stripped of modifiers followed by a discussion of students' preferences. As Afzali and Rezapoorian (2014) demonstrate, expressive speech acts are insufficiently covered in the ESP textbooks for tourism which reflects on students' weaker performance of these acts. It is, therefore, useful to encourage students to compare the multitude of ways apologies and thanks are phrased in MRs, reflecting on their appropriateness in spoken responses to complaints, and paying attention to the subtle pragmatic effects modifiers produce. The implementation of such activities should improve students' business-writing skills while concomitantly developing their illocutionary competence, thereby equipping them to cope effectively with the interactional demands of their prospective workplaces.

From an ESP teacher perspective, it could be useful to investigate pragmalinguistic choices in tourism students' responses to complaints and other types of business writing as this would indicate the areas, if any, calling for pragmatic intervention. Considering the massive changes technology has brought to professions, online service encounters provide promising avenues for future work that could enhance ESP teaching making it more up-to-date.

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Appendix

Hedges and boosters in managerial responses

a bit	certain	extremely	likely	probably	suggest
a little	certainly	fact	mainly	quite	super
a lot	characteristic	far	major	rather	suppose
absolute	claim	feel	may	real	sure
absolutely	clear	find	maybe	realise	surely
actually	clearly	for sure	might	really	tell
admit	common	fully	most	reasonable	terribly
almost	complete	generally	mostly	reassure	think
alternative	completely	greatly	much	recognise	thoroughly
alternatively	confident	guarantee	must	regularly	too
always	confirm	have to	naturally	reiterate	top
apparent	consider	heartfelt	never	right	totally
apparently	consistently	highly	normal	say	true
appear	constantly	honestly	note	seem	truly
appreciate	continually	imagine	noticeable	shall	trust
assume	continuously	impossible	obvious	should	typically
assumption	convinced	impression	obviously	simply	understand
assure	could	in fact	occasionally	sincere	understanding
assured	dare	in general	often	sincerely	upmost
at all	deep	incredibly	particularly	slightly	usual
at least	deeply	indeed	perhaps	so	usually
at times	definitely	indicate	please	sometimes	utmost
attempt n.	disputable	indicative	point out	sort of	very
attempt v.	emphasise	inform	possibility	state	vitally
aware	enough	just	possible	stress	want
be supposed to	entirely	kindly	potential	strive	will
believe	ever so	know	presumably	strongly	wish
can	extreme	largely	primary	sufficiently	would

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