



THE PRAGMATICS OF HEDGING IN CROSS-CULTURAL EMAIL NEGOTIATION: A COMPARATIVE CORPUS STUDY OF L1 AND L2 ENGLISH SPEAKERS

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of hedging devices in cross-cultural email negotiations between first-language (L1) English speakers from the United Kingdom, the United States of America, and Canada, and second-language (L2) English speakers, with a focus on Pakistani L2 English speakers. The business negotiation emails used in this study comprise 700 emails, totalling about 267,800 words, and are analysed using a corpus-based quantitative approach. The study's theoretical approach is based on Hyland's (1998) taxonomy of hedging, which identifies and classifies hedging strategies into five major categories: modal verbs, approximators, attitude markers, shields, and compound hedges. The results indicate significant differences in the number of L1 and L2 speakers who employ certain hedges, as well as in the types of hedges used. In terms of patterns, Pakistani L2 speakers are more inclined to use compound hedges and deference-based expressions, which can lead to over-hedging and limit their ability to negotiate productively in Western professional situations. The results of this study show a statistically significant relationship among speaker background, cultural power distance values, and hedging behavior. The implications of these findings for cross-cultural business communication training are significant, especially for people in Pakistan who must communicate via email with their Western counterparts. The study also contributes to the corpus-based research literature by providing data on the influence of pragmatic transfer (Urdu and South Asian pragmatic norms) on English email writing in professional contexts.

Keywords: Hedging, cross-cultural communication, email negotiation, pragmatics, corpus linguistics, L2 English, business discourse.

Introduction

Communication in the business world today is more international and more multilingual than ever before (Piekkari, Welch, & Welch, 2014). With the growth of email as the primary means of business communication, individuals from quite different cultural and linguistic backgrounds frequently have to negotiate deals, establish terms, and form business relationships entirely through digital, written text. In these contexts, the tone a person takes in an email, especially the extent to which they buffer and/or qualify their statements, can significantly affect how the message is understood and its impact (Gaur, 2026).

Hedging is the use of linguistic means to weaken or minimize a statement (Hinkel, 2005). Words and phrases such as "might," "perhaps," "I think," "it seems," and "around" are examples. In many work situations, hedging is a vital component of politeness; it helps speakers and writers seem less direct, less demanding, or less certain when the matter is uncertain. Hedging is very important in



negotiation, as it enables the writer to make proposals without closing off the possibility of adjustments and also helps the writer and the other person in the conversation maintain their face (Hu & Cao, 2011).

The meaning and application of hedging, however, do not always align across cultures and languages (Salager-Meyer, 1994). What is considered polite and cautious in one culture might seem evasive, ambiguous, or even like lying in another. For professionals who do not have English as an additional language, this is more than just a problem of conveying ideas accurately; it is also a matter of matching the pragmatic norms of the language in which they write. If this practical shift does not occur properly, miscommunication can result, with real-world consequences (Hyland, 1998).

Pakistan is one such special case in this regard. It is a nation of English speakers, with both the number of speakers and the number of English speakers increasing (Vold, 2006). In contrast, Pakistani communication culture is dominated by values distinct from those in the communication environments of Western English-speaking countries, such as higher power distance, a greater emphasis on relationship-building before task completion, and more elaborate and deferential politeness strategies (Liu & Tseng, 2021). The theoretical value of understanding the impact of these culture-related issues on how people from Pakistan compose their emails in English is also significant, as it helps identify differences in hedging between Pakistani professionals and native English speakers from the UK, USA, and Canada (Mei, Ju, & Mohd Zakaria, 2026).

This study aims to examine these differences using a quantitative, corpus-based approach. Drawing on a large corpus of negotiation emails from L1 and L2 English speakers, the study describes the types of hedges used by both groups and their frequencies, explains the reasons for the differences, and provides practical suggestions for training in cross-cultural business negotiation communication.

Research Problem

Although there has been an increase in the number of published works on hedging in academic and business contexts, very little is available on cross-cultural email negotiation. Most research so far examines a limited number of language groups, centers on academic writing, and treats L2 English speakers as a homogeneous group, with little sensitivity to different cultural backgrounds. In particular, the corpus linguistics literature has paid little attention to L2 English speakers' hedging behaviours in professional negotiation contexts in South Asia. In this study, a comparison of the hedging use of L1 English speakers from Western countries (foreigners) with that of L2 English speakers from Pakistan (Pakistanis) in the particular context of business email negotiation is attempted to fill this gap.

Research Questions

1. What are the differences in the frequency and types of hedging devices used in business email negotiations by L1 English speakers (United Kingdom, United States, Canada) and L2 English speakers (Pakistani professionals)?
2. What is the extent of the influence of cultural variables such as power distance and specific communication norms in Pakistan on hedging patterns in cross-cultural email negotiation?

Significance of the Study

This study makes several significant contributions to pragmatics, corpus linguistics, and cross-cultural business communication. First, it offers empirical evidence of hedging variation across a



corpus of English speakers from culturally distinct groups, rather than descriptions of hedging from a single group, which is a step toward a genuinely comparative analysis. Second, it focuses on L2 speakers from Pakistan and Western L1 groups, which are considerably underexplored. Third, the results apply to language trainers, business communication trainers, and professionals in Pakistan who interact with international partners. Knowledge of where and how hedges differ can help professionals better understand their interlocutors' practical expectations and communicate more effectively in cross-cultural negotiations. Lastly, the study offers input to the ongoing theoretical debate on pragmatic transfer, intercultural competence, and professional politeness.

Literature Review

Hedging was first introduced into linguistic discourse by Lakoff (1972), who used the term to refer to words that make statements fuzzy or less than completely true. Thereafter, numerous scholars have worked on this concept, developing and refining it. The most frequently cited taxonomy of hedging in academic and professional discourse is that of Hyland (1998). According to his framework, there are two types of hedges—writer-oriented and reader-oriented—and each type includes specific categories, such as modal verbs (may, could), epistemic lexical verbs (I think, I believe), approximators (about, around), adverbs (perhaps, probably), and compound structures that include more than one hedge. This taxonomy has been used extensively in subsequent studies to identify and categorize hedging in texts and is the foundation of the present study.

Salager-Meyer (1994) has also made a major contribution to understanding hedging, for example, by examining its function in scientific discourse and the social function of hedging, which concerns the interaction between writer and reader. However, these notions have recently been applied to business/persuasive communication, where scholars have demonstrated that hedging is equally relevant in the domain of business and negotiation as in that of academic writing (Flowerdew & Wan, 2010; Poncini, 2004).

There has been a significant amount of research over the past 20 years on hedging in business email. Charles (1996) analyzed the use of hedging in negotiation discourse in Finland and found that hedging by L1 and L2 speakers of English is common, though preferences and distributions differ. Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2010) studied a phenomenon they called Business English as a Lingua Franca (BELF). They demonstrated that when non-native English speakers talk to each other, they sometimes develop their own pragmatic norms that diverge from those of native speakers. Their research focused not only on measuring L2 speaker performance against the L1 standard but also on the comprehension of L2 business communication in all aspects.

Zhu (2005) conducted a corpus-based study of cross-cultural business correspondence and found differences in the use of hedging in business letters by Chinese and English speakers. Compared with Chinese writers, English writers employed more sophisticated relationship-building language in their indirectness strategies and used fewer hedges overall. Scollon and Scollon (2001) also observed Arabic business writing, arguing that high-context cultures, such as most Asian and Middle Eastern cultures, are those in which meaning is embedded in context and relationship and is not explicitly marked by hedging devices.

Studies such as those of Blum-Kulka, House, and Kasper (1989) in the Cross-Cultural Speech Act Realization Project (CCSARP) have demonstrated systematic variation in how requests are made, refusals are given, and face is managed in conversation across cultures. Brown and Levinson's



(1987) politeness theory is useful here because it addresses the notion of face-saving, which includes hedging. According to their theory, hedging is a strategy of negative politeness, so the writer does not impose on the reader and respects the reader's autonomy.

The theory of cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 2001) has also been used in business communication research, particularly regarding power distance. In high power-distance cultures, such as Pakistani culture, communication is deferential and avoids confrontation. When emails are used as negotiating tools, this often leads to more complex strategies of politeness. In negotiating emails, deference can mean over-hedging or excessive deference, which other interlocutors from low power-distance cultures may misinterpret.

Research on hedging in South Asian English, particularly Pakistani English, is limited. Several studies have highlighted South Asian business writers' preference for more complex opening and closing sequences, more relational language, and different request strategies than Western writers (Canagarajah 2006). In their study of Pakistani academic writing, Shafqat, Memon, and Khan (2022) found that students' academic writing lacked an adequate number of hedges compared with the conventions of international academic English, concluding that Urdu rhetorical conventions have influenced students' academic writing. Likewise, in the case of Pakistan, Gillani and Mahmood (2014) reported that Pakistani business emails contained too many politeness markers, which did not align with the directness of negotiation in Western contexts. There is yet no study that has used a corpus-based quantitative approach to compare the L2 hedging data of an L2 speaker from Pakistan's email negotiation with the L1 norm of speakers from various Western countries. This is the particular gap the current study aims to fill.

Although hedging is language-specific, culture-specific, and L1 vs. L2, a few gaps in the existing literature remain. First, most comparative studies are based on academic writing rather than on business email negotiation, which is a different genre with its own pragmatic requirements. Second, comparative studies of L1 Western English speakers and L2 speakers from South Asian countries are virtually nonexistent in the corpus linguistics literature, particularly for Pakistan. Third, research on hedging variation mostly examines it in small-scale ways in relation to a limited number of speaker groups. The present study aims to fill each of these gaps, as follows: First, it takes a 700-email corpus into account to compare how hedges are used by L1 speakers from the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada with L2 speakers from Pakistan and China, and the analytical framework is Hyland's (1998) taxonomy.

Methodology

Applicability of Research Design and Approach

In this research, the researcher uses quantitative corpus-based research. Corpus linguistics is well suited to such studies, as it enables systematic and replicable analysis of large bodies of naturally occurring language data and patterns that might not be discernible in a smaller sample. A quantitative approach was chosen because comparisons of hedging frequency and hedge distribution between several groups could be made in a statistically sound manner. Qualitative analysis can provide detailed analysis of individual texts, but quantitative methods are more appropriate for the type of comparison across groups of texts at the centre of this study. The patterns revealed in the statistical results are further qualitatively exemplified in a second layer in the data analysis section.



Data Collection

This study relied on data from business professionals who provided anonymous copies of their email negotiation sequences. Over 8 months, participants were recruited through professional networks and university alumni associations in the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, Pakistan, China, and Germany. All participants were asked to submit email exchanges related to business dealings in commercial or professional environments, such as contract terms, pricing, delivery terms, and service agreements. Only English-language emails were included. Any personally identifiable information, such as names, company names, addresses, and specific product information, was removed before analysis. All subjects gave informed consent, and the study complied with the ethical standards of the institutions involved. The final corpus comprises 700 emails from six speaker groups, with a total word count of about 267,800 words. Table 1 displays the distribution of emails by group.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based on the theoretical framework of the professional and academic discourse hedging model created by Hyland (1998). According to Hyland, there are two primary functions of hedges: epistemic and interpersonal. The epistemic function has to do with the writer's expression of doubt or hesitation concerning the truth value of a proposition. The interpersonal function is related to the management of the relationship between writer and reader, especially politeness and face-saving. According to Hyland's taxonomy, hedges fall into five main categories: modal verbs, approximators, adverbs of uncertainty, epistemic lexical verbs, and shields, with compound hedges containing elements of more than one category. This framework is more suitable for the study of business negotiation emails, as it is detailed enough to include the full spectrum of possible hedging devices and is well supported by previous studies on various discourse types. Further, it is based on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory to explain the social functions of hedging in negotiation contexts and on Hofstede's (2001) theory of cultural dimensions to explain the cross-cultural differences in hedging behavior. These frameworks complement each other in that they offer a linguistic way to identify and classify hedging as well as a cultural way to account for the differences in the patterns across groups of speakers.

Analytical Procedure

All the emails were imported into AntConc (corpus analysis software), and each sentence was annotated for hedging devices using Hyland's (1998) taxonomy. Two trained researchers independently performed the annotation, and Cohen's kappa was used to assess inter-rater reliability. The calculated kappa value was very good (.87). Disagreements were resolved through discussion and consultation of the original taxonomy. To ensure an apples-to-apples comparison of hedging frequencies across groups of varying sizes, occurrences per 1,000 words were used. SPSS was used for the statistical analysis. Chi-square tests were used to assess differences in hedging type across groups, and multiple regression analysis was used to identify factors predicting hedging frequency. Throughout, a .05 level of statistical significance was used.

Data Analysis and Findings

Corpus Composition

The table below (1) presents statistics for the corpus used in this study. In total, the corpus includes 700 emails and approximately 267,800 words; the average email length is 382.6 words. Emails from L2 speakers in Pakistan constitute the largest group (150 emails, 55,600 words), indicating

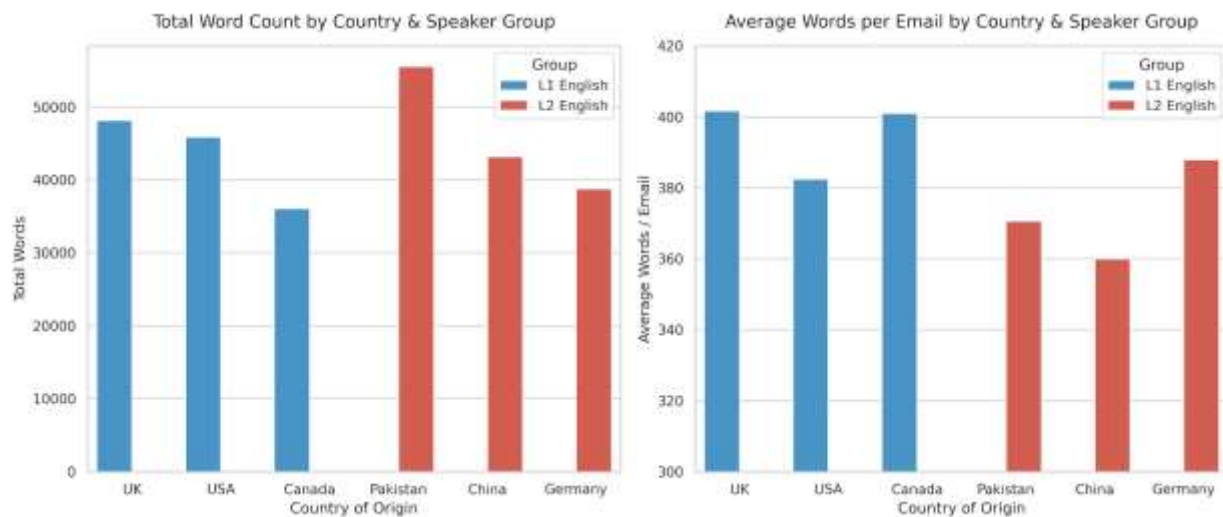
that Pakistani professionals communicate frequently with their international partners in English business emails. There are also groups of L1 speakers from the UK (120 emails), the United States (120 emails), and Canada (90 emails). Word counts and average email lengths are generally similar across groups and suitable for cross-group comparisons.

Table 1

Corpus Composition by Speaker Group

Speaker Group	Country of Origin	Emails (n)	Word Count	Avg. Words/Email
L1 English	United Kingdom	120	48,200	401.7
L1 English	United States	120	45,900	382.5
L1 English	Canada	90	36,100	401.1
L2 English	Pakistan	150	55,600	370.7
L2 English	China	120	43,200	360.0
L2 English	Germany	100	38,800	388.0
Total		700	267,800	382.6

Note. L1 = First Language; L2 = Second Language. All emails are in English.



Overall Hedging Frequency and Distribution

Table 2 shows how hedging devices are distributed across the four major speaker groups analyzed in the study. The results reveal clear and consistent differences between L1 and L2 groups. The highest overall hedging rate was recorded for UK L1 speakers (24.3 hedges/1,000 words), closely followed by US L1 speakers (22.1/1,000 words). By comparison, Pakistani L2



speakers' utterances contained 18.7 hedges per 1000 words, while Chinese L2 speakers' rate was 16.4 per 1000 words.

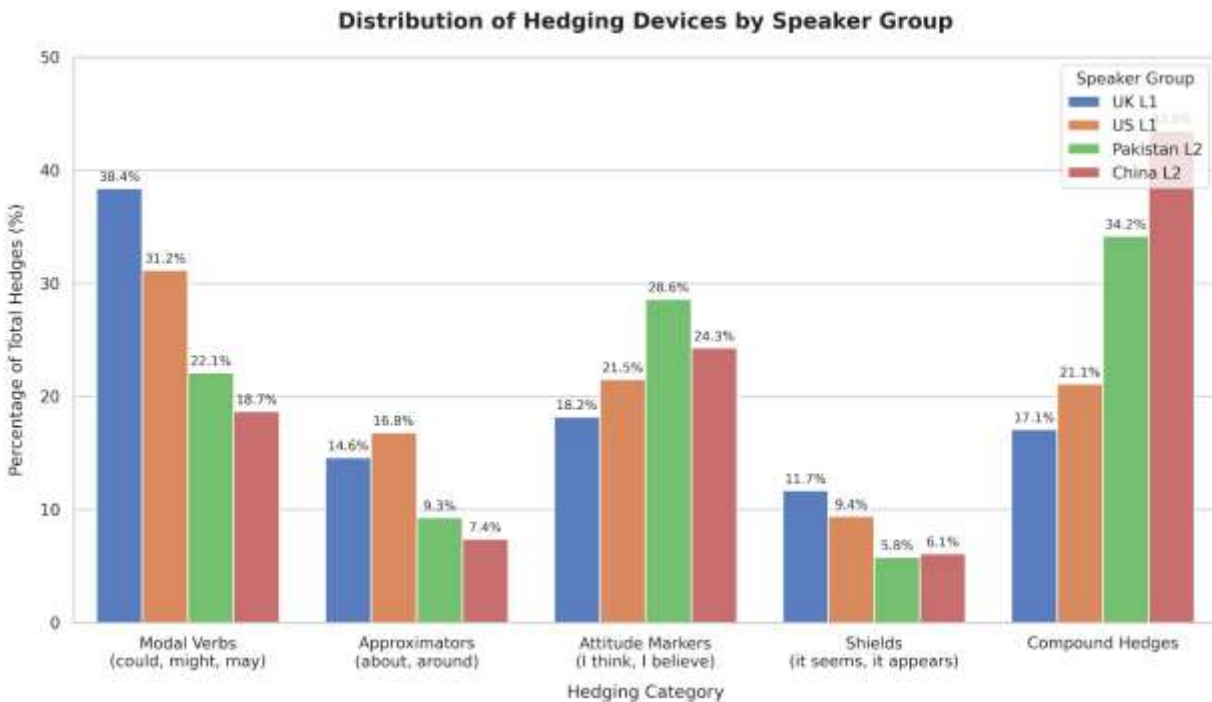
Differences across hedge types are equally significant. Modals were most frequent among UK L1 speakers (38.4% of all hedges), consistent with their well-established role as hedges in British professional English (BPEN). US L1 speakers also used modals frequently (31.2%) and employed attitude markers at a higher rate (21.5%). By contrast, compound hedges were very common among Pakistani L2 speakers, accounting for 34.2% of all hedges, and attitude markers were also relatively common at 28.6%. The highest percentage of compound hedges (43.5%) was observed among Chinese L2 speakers.

Table 2

Distribution of Hedging Devices by Speaker Group (Percentage of Total Hedges)

Hedging Category	UK L1	US L1	Pakistan L2	China L2
Modal Verbs (could, might, may)	38.4%	31.2%	22.1%	18.7%
Approximators (about, around)	14.6%	16.8%	9.3%	7.4%
Attitude Markers (I think, I believe)	18.2%	21.5%	28.6%	24.3%
Shields (it seems, it appears)	11.7%	9.4%	5.8%	6.1%
Compound Hedges	17.1%	21.1%	34.2%	43.5%
Total Hedges per 1000 words	24.3	22.1	18.7	16.4

Note. Values represent percentages of each group's total hedging instances. L1 = First Language; L2 = Second Language.



Cross-Group Statistical Comparisons

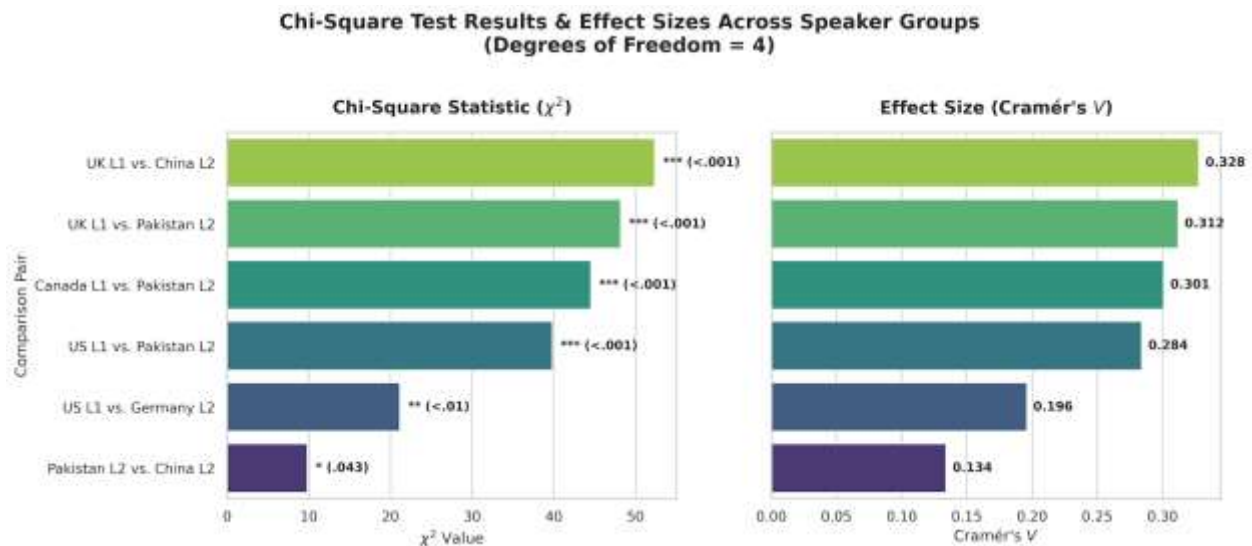
The outcome of the chi-square tests between the distributions of hedging in the pairs of speaker groups is presented in Table 3. In all cases, except for US L1 and German L2, the difference between the two groups was statistically significant at $p < .001$ and at $p < .01$ for the US L1 and German L2 comparison. Results indicated a significant difference between Pakistani and Chinese L2 speakers at $p < .05$, suggesting that the two L2 groups differ significantly in hedging patterns. The effect sizes (Cramér's V) were small to medium for all comparisons, with the highest effect size between UK L1 and Chinese L2 speakers.

Table 3

Chi-Square Tests for Differences in Hedging Distribution Across Speaker Groups

Comparison Pair	Chi-Square (χ^2)	df	p-value	Effect Size (Cramér's V)
UK L1 vs. Pakistan L2	48.21	4	< .001	.312
US L1 vs. Pakistan L2	39.84	4	< .001	.284
Canada L1 vs. Pakistan L2	44.56	4	< .001	.301
UK L1 vs. China L2	52.37	4	< .001	.328
US L1 vs. Germany L2	21.14	4	< .01	.196
Pakistan L2 vs. China L2	9.83	4	.043	.134

Note. df = degrees of freedom. All tests are two-tailed. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.



Hedging Across Negotiation Phases

Table 4 presents the results of hedging frequency across the stages of email negotiation. In the corpus, five phases were identified in most negotiation sequences: the opening phase, the proposal phase, the counter-proposal phase, the request for concession, and the closing phase. The results indicate that the hedging rate is highest during the proposal and counter-proposal phases for L1 speakers, with UK L1 speakers recording 6.8 hedges per email in the proposal phase and 8.4 in the counter-proposal phase. This pragmatic pattern makes sense because these are the stages when the most face-threatening behaviors occur and when hedging is most crucial for protection.

The pattern differed for Pakistani L2 speakers. The proportion of hedging was more evenly distributed across stages, with a significantly higher hedging rate in the first phase (4.8) than in L1 groups (2.7–3.2). This result is consistent with the South Asian communication style, in which a relationship is built before the task begins, and indicates that Pakistani professionals devote more hedging effort to the relationship framing of their e-mail than to the negotiation moves themselves. This may reflect less familiarity with the pragmatic conventions of the counter-proposal discourse in the West, as evidenced by the lower hedging rates for Pakistani L2 speakers at 4.9 compared to the UK L1 speakers at 8.4 in the counter-proposal stage.

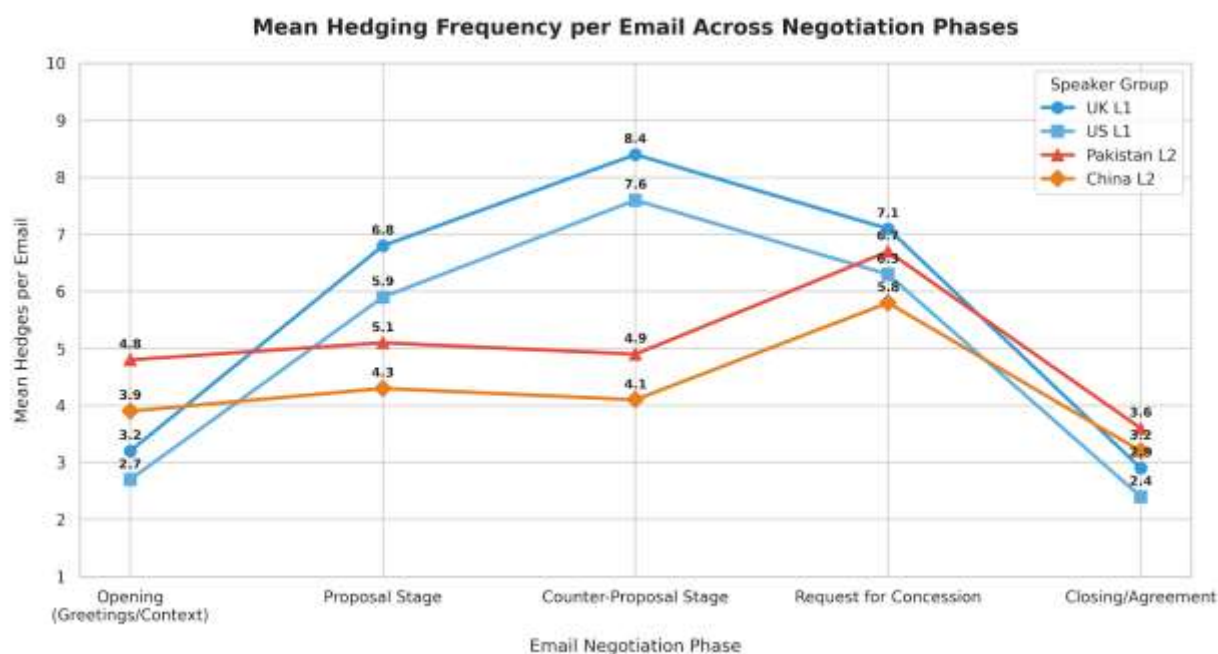
Table 4

Mean Hedging Frequency per Email Across Negotiation Phases by Speaker Group

Email Phase	Negotiation	UK (Mean)	L1	US L1 (Mean)	Pakistan (Mean)	L2	China (Mean)	L2
Opening (Greetings/Context)		3.2		2.7	4.8		3.9	
Proposal Stage		6.8		5.9	5.1		4.3	
Counter-Proposal Stage		8.4		7.6	4.9		4.1	
Request for Concession		7.1		6.3	6.7		5.8	

Email Phase	Negotiation	UK (Mean)	L1	US L1 (Mean)	Pakistan (Mean)	L2	China (Mean)	L2
Closing/Agreement		2.9		2.4	3.6		3.2	

Note. Values represent the mean number of hedging devices per email at each phase.



Predictors of the frequency of hedging

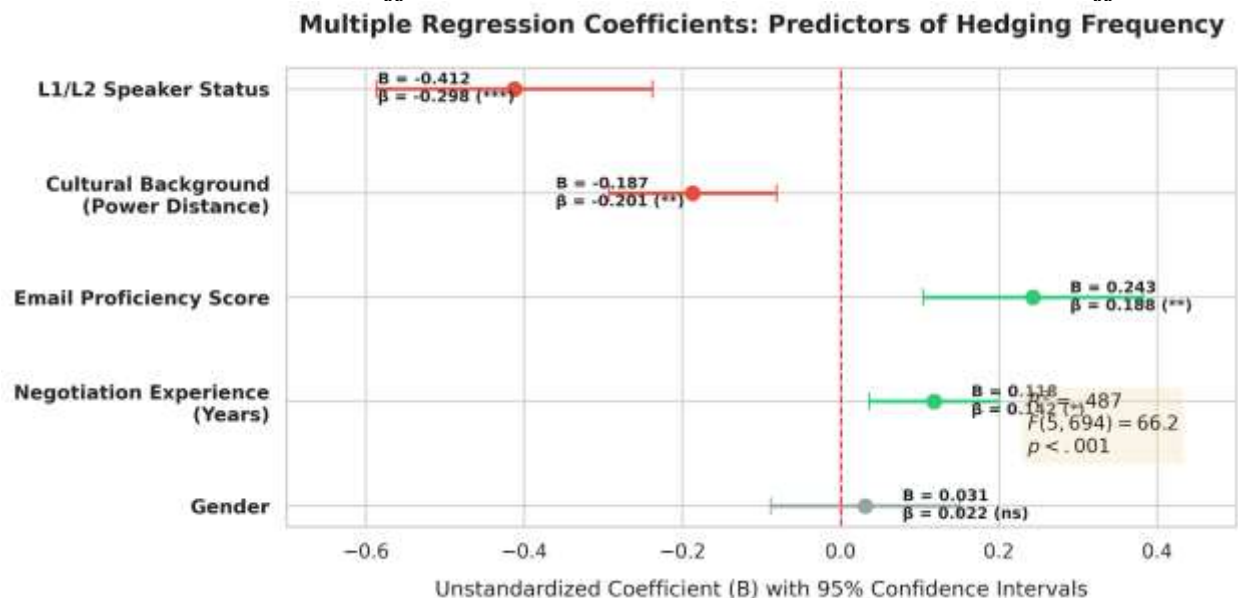
The results of the multiple regression analysis testing the prediction of overall hedging frequency per email are presented in Table 5. The overall model was statistically significant, $F(5, 694) = 66.2$, $p < .001$, accounting for about 48.7% of the variance in hedging frequency. The single strongest predictor was L1 or L2 speaker status, with a negative beta of -0.298, indicating that L2 speakers used fewer hedges than L1 speakers after controlling for the other variables. Cultural background, measured by a power distance score, was also a strong predictor, with a negative beta of -.201, indicating that speakers from higher power distance backgrounds employed fewer hedges of the kinds found in Western professional communication. A positive correlation was found between email proficiency score and the frequency of hedges, indicating that higher proficiency in written English is related to higher hedging frequency, which could reflect greater control over the pragmatic rules of written English. Experience in negotiations was also a positive predictor of hedging frequency, and gender was not a significant predictor.

Table 5

Multiple Regression Analysis: Predictors of Hedging Frequency

Predictor Variable	B	SE	Beta (β)	p-value
L1/L2 Speaker Status	-.412	.089	-.298	< .001
Cultural Background (Power Distance)	-.187	.054	-.201	< .01
Email Proficiency Score	.243	.071	.188	< .01
Negotiation Experience (Years)	.118	.042	.142	< .05
Gender	.031	.061	.022	.612
$R^2 = .487$, $F(5, 694) = 66.2$, $p < .001$				

Note. B = unstandardized coefficient; SE = standard error; Beta = standardized coefficient.



Qualitative examples of hedging patterns

Table 6 offers examples of the most important hedging themes found in the corpus. These examples were chosen to demonstrate the variety of hedging strategies employed by each speaker group and to illustrate qualitatively the patterns found in the quantitative analysis. The examples of compound hedging from the Pakistani L2 speakers are especially interesting because they involve stacking various hedging elements in a single clause in an L2 speaker's email, a pattern that is relatively uncommon in the L1 speaker's examples. For instance, the phrase 'I think maybe we could probably consider this' contains four hedging elements: an attitude marker, a probability adverb, a modal verb, and a tentative verb. Each of these is found in English, but when combined

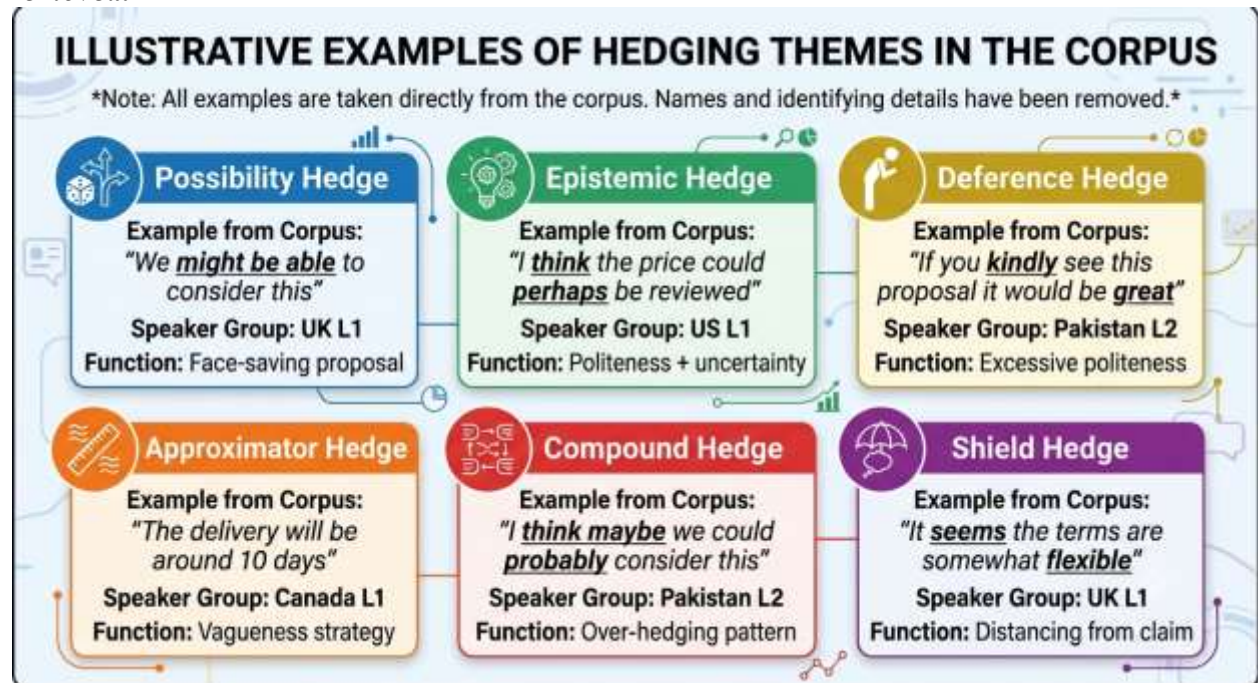
in the same clause, the combination can give the L1 speaker a sense of vagueness or even evasiveness.

Table 6

Illustrative Examples of Hedging Themes in the Corpus

Hedging Theme	Example from Corpus	Speaker Group	Function
Possibility Hedge	"We might be able to consider this"	UK L1	Face-saving proposal
Epistemic Hedge	"I think the price could perhaps be reviewed"	US L1	Politeness + uncertainty
Deference Hedge	"If you kindly see this proposal, it would be great"	Pakistan L2	Excessive politeness
Approximator Hedge	"The delivery will be around 10 days"	Canada L1	Vagueness strategy
Compound Hedge	"I think maybe we could probably consider this"	Pakistan L2	Over-hedging pattern
Shield Hedge	"It seems the terms are somewhat flexible"	UK L1	Distancing from the claim

Note. All examples are taken directly from the corpus. Names and identifying details have been removed.





Some important differences in the role of hedging across the groups are also evident in the examples. In UK L1, hedges are used to address epistemic uncertainty and to present proposals in a softened, clear manner. Pakistani L2 speakers use hedges to express deference and politeness, often in email contexts that serve relational rather than informational purposes. This functional difference aligns with general findings on cross-cultural communication styles and with theoretical predictions based on Hofstede's (2001) model of cultural dimensions.

Discussion

The results of this study provide a rather complex and empirical description of the role of hedging in professional negotiation across cultures and languages in emails. The quantitative patterns and the qualitative examples generated by the corpus analysis answer the two research questions clearly and unambiguously and also pose some interesting theoretical and practical questions. This discussion interprets the results, examines the cross-cultural and pragmatic aspects of hedging variation, and considers their implications for communication training and further research.

Overall Hedging Frequency: L1 and L2 Divergence means that the L1 and L2 modulation values are opposite.

The most striking finding from this study is a consistent difference in the overall number of hedges across L1 and L2 speakers. UK L1 speakers used 24.3 hedges per 1,000 words, whereas Pakistani L2 speakers used only 18.7 and Chinese L2 speakers 16.4. At first glance, this may suggest that L2 speakers are less prone to hedging than L1 speakers, implying less control over English politeness norms and less pragmatic competence. But that could be too easy an explanation. When hedging type is considered alongside hedging frequency, the picture becomes much more intricate.

The L2 speakers from Pakistan did not hedge as much, but they hedged differently. Attitude markers (28.6% of all hedges) and compound hedges (34.2% of all hedges) are the two types of hedges used in unusual ways, indicating that their hedging style is more explicitly relational and deferential than the epistemic and modal-verb-dominated styles of L1 speakers. This is consistent with the findings of Gillani and Mahmood (2014), who found more politeness markers in Pakistani business emails that were not matched by the directness of negotiation in Western culture. Likewise, it corroborates the study by Shafqat, Memon, and Khan (2022), who concluded that Pakistani academic writers use hedges in contexts governed more by Urdu rhetorical norms than by international conventions for academic writing. This study builds on this body of observations by quantifying the findings of previous studies in the field of email negotiation.

Notably, the compound hedge is one of the most diagnostic findings of this study, occurring at a high rate among both Pakistani and Chinese L2 speakers. In Pakistani L2, 34.2% of L2 compound hedges were observed, compared with 43.5% in Chinese L2, whereas only 17.1% and 21.1% of L1 compound hedges were found in speakers of UK L1 and US L1, respectively. The qualitative examples make this contrast clear: In the Pakistani L2 sub-corpus, the combination of an attitude marker, a probability adverb, a modal verb, and a tentative lexical verb in a single clause is amply demonstrated, as in "I think maybe we could probably consider this." While each element is a commonly used form of polite language in L1 English, their combination creates a degree of vagueness that may be misunderstood and/or fall short of negotiation confidence for L1 Western interlocutors.



From an L2 transfer perspective, which has been widely studied in second language acquisition (SLA) (Blum-Kulka, House, & Kasper, 1989), this pattern can be explained. Pragmatic transfer occurs when an L2 speaker applies the pragmatic rules of the first language or culture when producing L2 forms that are grammatically correct in the second language but pragmatically distinct from the norms of the L2 culture. In Pakistani English email negotiation, the Urdu rhetorical style of respectful, elaborate relational introductions and indirectness appears to be reflected in English writing. As a result, this produces a form of hedging that may be effective in a communication context where native speakers are likely to be from the South Asian region and may be interpreted by Western speakers as too cautious, too uncommitted, or less direct.

This becomes more complicated when one considers the frequency of hedging on a phase-by-phase basis. Hedging was most frequent in the proposal and counter-proposal phases, where the most face-threatening communicative acts occur and hedging plays its most crucial role. This aligns with Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, which views hedging as an instance of negative politeness that reduces and prevents imposition. L1 speakers seem to use their hedging devices strategically, reserving the most interpersonal-risky devices for the most interpersonal-risky situations.

The pattern was quite different for Pakistani L2 speakers, as the highest hedging rates occurred in the initial phase (a mean of 4.8 hedges per email) rather than in the proposal/counter-proposal phase. This result aligns with theoretical expectations regarding high-context communication norms, as outlined by Hofstede (2001) and Scollon and Scollon (2001). In high-context cultures, building relationships is seen as a necessary step toward effective task-oriented interaction, and the writer expends considerable effort to develop trust and goodwill before offering specific proposals. Front-loading hedges, therefore, may be a culturally based way of defining what constitutes a successful negotiation at the relational stage of email negotiation, rather than a lack of pragmatic awareness. The sophistication of the communicative purpose does not differ between L1 negotiators from Pakistan and Western L1 negotiators; rather, the timing of its use differs.

The regression results showed that operationalizing cultural background (power distance scores) is a significant predictor of hedging frequency and type, even after controlling for language proficiency and negotiation experience. This finding is theoretically significant because it indicates that variation in hedging in cross-cultural business emails is not related to differences in English language proficiency. Speakers from higher power-distance cultures were not only less likely to employ the Western professional hedging repertoire; they used a qualitatively different repertoire focused on deference and relationship management, rather than on epistemic caution and propositional mitigation.

This discovery adds an empirical dimension to Hofstede's (2001) theoretical assertion that power distance shapes organizational behavior and the nature of communication in everyday professional life. In high power-distance cultures like Pakistan, people show high respect for interlocutors; they do not express disagreement openly and engage in face-saving, as seen in their language use. It may therefore be possible to understand the tendency to over-hedge in L2 email negotiation in Pakistan as the pragmatic enactment of the following values: writers' hedging is not due to uncertainty about the truth of their propositions but to demonstrate respect, humility, and a willingness to subordinate assertiveness for the relational goals of the email negotiation. This



analysis is also in line with the results of Charles (2006), which show that L1 and L2 speakers of English vary in the distribution and function of hedges, not only in terms of frequency.

These results have significant implications for practice. If Pakistani professionals regularly communicate with Western business partners via email, it is a professional asset to be aware of hedging conventions. Business English communication training should cover not only the grammatical and lexical aspects of hedging but also its pragmatic and cultural dimensions. Specifically, training can help Pakistani negotiators recognize that, in a Western negotiation context, modals are used more frequently than compound modals and that modals in the opening phase of an email can signal deference rather than be interpreted as a sign of inefficiency or indecision. At the same time, training should not promote a deficit model in which Western L1 norms are regarded as superior to others, but rather help L2 speakers learn to switch among pragmatic systems as appropriate to different contexts, as described by Canagarajah (2006).

Importantly, this implies that L1 English speakers working with Pakistani or other South Asian business partners should avoid over-hedging and front-loaded relational language. The study's findings make it clear that over-hedging and front-loaded relational language in Pakistani emails are not indicative of evasiveness or a lack of commitment to the relationship; on the contrary, they are culturally determined communicative acts and a sign of respect and relational investment. L1 speakers interpreting emails, therefore, should not, in the author's view, make consequential errors regarding the intentions and professional competence of their Pakistani counterparts. It is therefore important that intercultural business communication programs include training for interpreting and understanding the pragmatic norms of business English used in South Asia, as well as the more Western norms. The results of Kankaanranta and Louhiala-Salminen (2010) on Business English as a Lingua Franca support the need for both parties to be accommodated and aware, rather than just L2 users conforming to L1 norms.

Representation of the Chinese and German Sub-Corpora, and of the L1 Sub-Groups

Although the corpus was designed to include six speaker groups so that the Pakistani L2 data could be benchmarked against a broader range of L1 and L2 comparators, the quantitative and qualitative discussion above has drawn mainly on the Pakistani, UK, US, and Chinese sub-corpora. It is worth drawing together what the Chinese data specifically show and being explicit about the limits of what can be said about the German, Canadian, and US sub-corpora based on the analyses reported here.

The Chinese L2 sub-corpus is, in fact, the group with the most distinctive quantitative profile in the entire study. Chinese L2 speakers produced the lowest overall hedging rate of any group (16.4 hedges/1,000 words), yet the highest proportion of compound hedges (43.5% of all hedges), exceeding even the Pakistani L2 rate of 34.2%. This combination, low overall frequency paired with the heaviest reliance on stacked, multi-element hedges, is not simply a weaker version of the Pakistani pattern; it suggests a distinct pragmatic strategy in which Chinese L2 writers hedge comparatively rarely but do so emphatically when they do, consistent with Zhu's (2005) and Scollon and Scollon's (2001) characterization of high-context communication, in which explicit hedging devices are used more sparingly because relational meaning is otherwise carried by context. The chi-square results reinforce this: the UK L1 vs. China L2 comparison produced the largest effect size in the entire study (Cramér's $V = .328$), and the Pakistan L2 vs. China L2 comparison, though smaller in effect size ($V = .134$), was still statistically significant ($p = .043$),



indicating that the two L2 groups are pragmatically distinguishable from one another and not a single undifferentiated "L2 style." This finding on its own justifies treating Chinese L2 speakers as an analytically distinct group in the quantitative design, even though the qualitative discussion in this study, consistent with its stated focus on the Pakistani data, did not extend to close reading of Chinese-authored emails.

The German L2 sub-corpus, by contrast, was not analyzed in comparable depth. Beyond its inclusion in the overall corpus statistics (Table 1) and a single pairwise comparison against US L1 speakers (Table 3), which was statistically significant at $p < .01$ with a small-to-medium effect size (Cramér's $V = .196$), the German data were not broken down by hedging category, negotiation phase, or qualitative example, as the Pakistani, UK, US, and Chinese data were. The same is true, to a lesser extent, of the L1 subgroups: the frequency and type breakdowns in Table 2 and the phase-by-phase results in Table 4 report figures for the UK and US groups only, and the qualitative examples in Table 6 are similarly drawn from UK L1, US L1, and Pakistan L2 emails, with Canadian L1 emails represented only in the aggregate corpus and chi-square statistics. In other words, the asymmetry in this study is not simply "L1 versus L2" but a more general pattern in which the UK, US, and Pakistani sub-corpora receive sustained analytical attention. In contrast, the Canadian, Chinese, and German sub-corpora are comparatively underexamined. This reflects the study's explicit framing, stated in the introduction and research problem, as a comparison centered on Pakistani L2 English against Western L1 norms; the German and Chinese data were retained in the quantitative design chiefly to test whether the Pakistan-specific patterns extended to, or diverged from, other L2 groups, and the Canadian data to broaden the L1 baseline, rather than to support independent, group-specific analysis. Readers should therefore treat the German findings and the fuller pattern for Canada as suggestive rather than conclusive, and a dedicated comparative study of German, Canadian, and Chinese business email hedging, following the same phase-by-phase and qualitative procedures applied here to the Pakistani data, is identified as a priority for future research below.

There are several constraints associated with the present study. First, the corpus contains 700 emails, which is not very large compared with the number of emails used in previous studies on cross-cultural hedging. The corpus consisted largely of emails from professional networks and alumni associations, which might not be representative of all Pakistani and Western business email writers. Cross-cultural differences in hedging might lead to greater, rather than lesser, differences between professionals recruited in such networks and the average professional in terms of formal education and international exposure. Additional studies are needed that involve a more diverse range of professionals and industries.

Secondly, the study was limited to email data stored in written form. This is generally acceptable, depending on the negotiation context. Still, hedging patterns in oral negotiations could vary significantly, and the correlation between pragmatic norms in writing and speech within and between the cultural groups examined in this study remains to be determined. Third, the operationalization of cultural background using Hofstede's (2001) power distance scores, which are theoretically driven and widely used in the literature, has been criticized for reducing cultural difference to a single dimension and for assuming that national cultures are homogeneous entities. A fine-grained assessment of individual cultural orientations (e.g., self-report measures of



communication style preferences and intercultural experiences), combined with national-level cultural indices, could be used as measures in future studies.

It would also be interesting to conduct longitudinal studies on the changes in hedging patterns of L2 professionals in Pakistan as their international exposure and formal training in cross-cultural business communication increase over the years. The differences found in the present study may diminish as professionals gain more experience communicating with Western interlocutors; understanding the mechanisms and time scales of this convergence could have important implications for the design of training programs. Last but not least, including L2 speakers from other South Asian countries (e.g., Bangladesh, India, Sri Lanka) would enable researchers to determine whether the patterns they found in the case of Pakistan are unique to L2 Pakistani communication norms or part of a wider South Asian pragmatic convention.

Conclusion

This study examined how hedging is expressed in cross-cultural business email negotiations among L1 English native speakers from the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada, and L2 English native speakers from Pakistan and China. The data, analyzed using a corpus of 700 emails and Hyland's (1998) taxonomy, revealed significant and consistent differences in the frequency, type, and distribution of hedging devices across the groups.

The results show that L1 English speakers use hedges more often than L2 English speakers in negotiating business emails and prefer different types of hedges. L1 speakers use mostly 'modal verbs' and 'shields,' well-known hedging devices in Western professional discourse. L2 speakers, especially Pakistani speakers, employ more compound hedges and expressions of deference than native speakers, indicating the impact of South Asian communication norms on their English writing. The results of the Pakistani L2 speakers' hedge investment, found in the opening phase of negotiations compared with the counter-proposal phase, reflect the high-context communication patterns reported by Hofstede (2001) and others, in which L2 speakers invest in relational work in the opening phase of negotiations and only in the specific face-threatening moves of the negotiation phase.

When controlling for proficiency and experience, L1 or L2 status and cultural power distance were significant predictors of hedging behavior. This result underscores the importance of hedging in email negotiation beyond participants' linguistic competence. Hedging behavior is shaped by strong cultural values and communication norms that extend beyond grammar and vocabulary.

The results have several implications for practice. Understanding the pragmatic expectations of hedging between Pakistani and Western professionals can be very useful in practice. The pragmatic functions of hedging in English and the specific conventions of negotiation emails should be explicitly taught in business communication training programs. L1 speakers working with partners from Pakistan and/or other South Asian countries should also be sensitized to other communication norms to avoid sending overly hedged or extremely deferential emails that may be interpreted as evasive or ambiguous.

This study also highlights the potential of large-scale corpus methods for researchers studying cross-cultural pragmatic variation. Further studies could build on the current study by examining spoken negotiation data, specific industry sectors or professional domains, or the effects of changes in hedging behavior as L2 professionals become more experienced in international



communication. It would be useful to conduct longitudinal studies of Pakistani business professionals as they gain experience and proficiency in English through their experience in their country.

In conclusion, hedging is an important and culturally diverse aspect of the negotiation process in business emails. The patterns revealed in this study provide a clear picture of differences in the use of this important pragmatic resource between L1 and L2 English speakers. They can serve as a solid foundation for future research and practical training in cross-cultural business communication.

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