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Men and Hedging in American Conversation

This study investigates the purposes for hedging in men's conversation. The stereotypical male verbal behavior includes images of bravado and exaggeration, with little qualification of statements and ideas. On the contrary, though, it has been shown that men have higher frequencies than women in both types of hedging: evidential (level of certainty) and quantifying (level of commitment) stance (Precht, submitted). Patterns in men's use of hedges in different contexts and ages have not yet been adequately investigated. This paper will present examples of the type of hedging that is common in men's speech in different situations (home, family and work), gender groupings (all men vs. mixed conversations), and ages (under 25, between 25-45, or over 45). The corpus for this study was the conversation section of the Longman Corpus of Spoken and Written English.

One common pattern in all-male conversation is for men to strongly hedge their ideas and suggestions: Statements that are made without hedges seem to be fair game for attack by other male interlocutors. In mixed male-female contexts, though, females do not tend to doubt men's statements as vociferously as men doubt each other. Men under 25 in both all-male and mixed conversations use epithets to emphasize certainty or commitment, while male speakers over 25 tend to use epithets only to show attitude or emotion. Overall, men's hedging seems to be largely related to presenting and saving face. Examples of each of these differences in conversation will be provided in the presentation.