



The Use of Lexical Hedges by the Main Character in the Film Eighth Grade (2018)

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ABSTRACT

This study discusses the use of lexical hedges in the main character's utterances in the film Eighth Grade (2018). This is shown by the frequent uses of lexical hedges by the main character, who has social anxiety and an introverted personality. The purpose of this study is to analyze the types and functions of lexical hedges used by the main character in the film. This study applies Namsaraev's (2010) theory to analyze the types of lexical hedges and Coates' (2013) theory to identify their functions. This research adopts a descriptive qualitative approach. The results show that there are 42 data that can be categorized into four types of lexical hedges, which are modal auxiliary verbs, lexical verbs, adverbs, and fillers. Among these, fillers are the most frequently used type by the main character. In addition, the main character uses hedges to express uncertainty and to search for the right words. Based on the analysis, the most dominant function of hedges is to search for the right words. This study concludes that the use of lexical hedges can be influenced by an individual's social identity.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly advanced digital era, films play an important role in determining the social dynamics of society. As described by Widodo & Ahmad (2024), films play a significant role in conveying messages to society today. Films are not merely a form of entertainment, but also an inseparable part of everyday life, thus functioning as a medium of representation. Through their narratives, characters, and visual elements, films are able to shape viewers' perspectives and perceptions of various social issues. Films consistently influence and shape society through the messages they contain, and this never occurs the other way around (Sobur, 2003).

As a social institution and a medium of mass communication, film presents issues related to social life to be communicated to the general public. These issues may range from social, cultural, and political matters to more specific concerns such as race, gender, and economic class. Furthermore, the problems portrayed in films often originate from various aspects of human life, including the use of language in social contexts. In mass media, language serves as a primary instrument for representing reality (Ramadhan & Herman, 2021). The language used in films can reflect the culture, values, and norms that exist within society.

In conversational interactions, the language used by individuals can be influenced by various social factors. The field of study that addresses this phenomenon is known as sociolinguistics, which examines language in relation to society. Sociolinguistics studies the relationship between language and society (Holmes, 2013). It does not only observe the structural aspects of language use, but also the social, cultural, and situational contexts in which language is used. This includes an understanding of how educational background, social class, gender, and environment can influence an individual's choice of words, intonation, and speaking style.

Among the linguistic variations examined within sociolinguistics, one form that warrants particular attention is lexical hedges. According to Lakoff, hedges indicate a lack of confidence and express uncertainty (Holmes, 2013). Lexical hedges can also be defined as expressions or words used to weaken or reduce the force of a statement, making it sound more tentative and less dominant. Such usage may signal politeness and empathy toward interlocutors or others' viewpoints. Consequently, lexical hedges are examined as they reflect communication strategies employed to convey uncertainty in spoken interaction.

Linguistic features such as lexical hedges can be widely found across various media, particularly in films. The utterances spoken by the characters in a film may contain lexical hedges that are shaped by the character's traits, personalities, and the situations they encounter. As explained by Saleh (2019), language and language use are influenced by social, situational, and cultural factors, which shape language variation in a sociolinguistic context. One element of this variation is the use of lexical hedges, which can be influenced by various factors, including individual identity, which determines how a person communicates in certain social situations. Hedges soften utterances without diminishing the strength of the ideas conveyed, while opening up space for other possibilities without undermining confidence in one's beliefs (Umajjah et al., 2022).

Several previous studies have examined the use of lexical hedges in media discourse, particularly in film dialogue. Unola & Mardijono (2013) analyzed lexical hedges used by the characters Ronnie Miller and Steve Miller in the film *The Last Song* and found that the use of hedges is influenced by social distance, particularly as the relationship between characters becomes closer. Septiarini et al. (2021) analyzed lexical hedges in the movie *Mamma Mia!* and found that hedges are used to express uncertainty and reflect interpersonal relationships. Furthermore, Putri et al. (2022) examined lexical hedges in the film *Sierra*

Burgess Is a Loser and found that female characters tend to use a wider range of lexical hedges, whereas male characters use them less frequently. However, most of these studies focus primarily on identifying the types and functions of lexical hedges without examining their relationship with character personality traits. Therefore, further research is needed to explore how hedging strategies reflect the character personality traits in the story.

This study identifies the use of lexical hedges in the utterances spoken by the main character in the film *Eighth Grade*. The film *Eighth Grade*, directed by Bo Burnham and released in 2018, presents an in-depth portrayal of the life of a teenage girl named Kayla Day who is in her last year of middle school. It offers a realistic and authentic depiction of teenage experiences, especially in dealing with social anxiety and identity formation. Through its dialogue and narrative, the main character's traits and their relationship to the use of lexical hedges can be observed and analyzed.



Figure 1. Film Poster of *Eighth Grade* (2018)

Source: IMDb, 2018

Eighth Grade is a film worth studying in terms of its linguistic features, especially its use of lexical hedges. The film presents phenomena that are both significant and relevant to contemporary social conditions, in which social anxiety is increasingly experienced by teenagers. It is particularly suitable for analyzing lexical hedges, as these features are predominantly used by an introverted main character. The personality of a character who is an introvert can support the reason for the use of lexical hedges in the utterances delivered by that character. According to Dewaele & Furnham (2000), if introverts are more prone to anxiety and have lower stress resilience (Matthew & Deary, 1998), then it can be expected that they will show increased signs of hesitation.

In a study by Astha (2023), Kayla is described as having an introverted personality, as reflected in her shy, quiet, and awkward behavior, as well as her tendency to spend time alone. An individual's introverted personality is often associated with a preference for communicating in calmer settings and a tendency to avoid social situations that are considered stressful or uncomfortable. Individuals with introverted personalities generally have a communication style that tends to be cautious and thoughtful. This disposition may influence how language is used in speech, particularly in relation to the use of lexical

hedges. In the case of introverted or shy and quiet teenagers, the use of lexical hedges can be a way to express social anxiety and lack of confidence about negative judgements from the interlocutor. By incorporating expressions that obscure certainty, speakers can reduce the possibility of being considered too prominent or too bold. This pattern is evident in the film *Eighth Grade*, where Kayla, as the main character, frequently employs lexical hedges in ways that align with her introverted personality.

Based on the background described above, this study aims to analyze the use of lexical hedges in the utterances of the main character in *Eighth Grade*. Specifically, it investigates the types and functions of hedges used in the character's conversations. This study contributes to the field of sociolinguistics by providing insight into how lexical hedges are used in film dialogue in relation to character personality traits. Unlike previous studies that mainly focus on general discourse functions, this research highlights the relationship between introversion, social anxiety, and hedging strategies in spoken interaction, particularly in the context of adolescent experiences.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative descriptive research design. In general, qualitative research is used to explore, describe, identify, and explain the qualities or distinctive characteristics of social phenomena that cannot be measured, explained, or adequately represented using quantitative approaches (Nasution, 2023). This approach is particularly suitable for examining social phenomena due to its in-depth and detailed nature. According to Mantra (2004) as well as Bogdan and Taylor (1975), as cited in Moleong (2007), qualitative methods are research procedures that produce descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words derived from observable people and behaviors (Siyoto & Sodik, 2015). Therefore, the data in this study are presented descriptively in the form of words. This approach is appropriate for discussing and explaining the research findings, particularly the types and functions of lexical hedges found in the film *Eighth Grade*.

The primary data were obtained from the transcript of the film *Eighth Grade* (2018), specifically from utterances containing the use of lexical hedges. The secondary data consisted of theoretical books, academic journals, and previous studies relevant to or associated with the research topic. Data collection was conducted using the observation method (*metode simak*). The observation method is employed to obtain data through careful attention to language use (Muhammad, 2011). This method was applied by observing and examining the transcript of the film *Eighth Grade* (2018) as the primary data source. During the observation process, a note-taking technique was employed. According to Mahsun (2007), the note-taking technique is a follow-up procedure applied after the observation method, involving the recording of data obtained from the data source (as cited in Muhammad, 2011). In the context of this study, the note-taking technique was used to document dialogues containing lexical hedges relevant to the research objectives.

Utterances containing lexical hedges were first categorized based on their types using Namsaraev's (2010) framework. Namsaraev identifies nine types of lexical hedges in his classification (Markkanen & Schröder, 2010), namely: modal auxiliary verbs, lexical verbs, probability adjectives, nouns, adverbs, adverbs of frequency, "if" clause, compound hedges, and fillers.

Each category is defined below:

1. Modal Auxiliary Verbs reflect the speaker's judgement or stance regarding the possibility or necessity of a particular state of affairs. Modal auxiliary verbs can express various types of modalities, such as possibility, probability, necessity,

obligation, and others. Modal verbs used to express assumptions include must, should, and ought, while modal verbs expressing possibility include will, may, might, and could.

2. Lexical Verbs are used to express uncertainty, give opinions, or make suggestions, such as believe, think, suggest, guess, predict, and assume.
3. Probability Adjectives indicate the degree of likelihood between something being true or false. Examples of this type of lexical hedges include possible, likely, unlikely, clear, definite, certain, and probable.
4. Nouns categorized as lexical hedges are nouns that convey meanings of doubt or uncertainty. Common examples include assumption, claim, probability, possibility, estimates, and suggestion.
5. Adverbs used as hedges may serve to weaken or strengthen an utterance, depending on the context. Examples of this type of lexical hedge include practically, presumably, clearly, probably, conversely, possibly, perhaps, and apparently.
6. Adverbs of Frequency are typically used to indicate how often or how accurate certain information is, such as often, occasionally, generally, sometimes, rarely, frequently, and usually.
7. "If" Clause also known as conditional sentences, describe hypothetical situations and their consequences. Conditional if-clauses are considered a type of hedge because they convey uncertainty.
8. Compound Hedges consist of a combination of two or more hedging elements with similar meanings, such as seems reasonable or looks probable.
9. Fillers are discourse markers used by speakers when they are thinking or hesitating during conversation including sort of, well, um, uh, hmm, I mean, yeah, and like.

Following this classification, the categorized utterances were further analyzed based on their functions using Coates' (2013) framework. According to Coates, lexical hedges serve several functions, including expressing doubt and confidence, sensitivity to others' feelings, searching for the right word, and avoiding playing the expert (Coates, 2013). The categorized data were analyzed in relation to the conversational context and situational conditions encountered by the main character.

The analysis began by watching the film *Eighth Grade* (2018) several times to understand the overall context of the dialogue and to ensure the presence of lexical hedges. The film transcript was obtained from an online source and verified by the researcher, and was then examined to identify utterances containing lexical hedges. All relevant utterances produced by the main character were marked and collected, resulting in a total of 42 data instances. These utterances were subsequently classified into types of lexical hedges based on Namsaraev's (2010) framework. Afterward, the data were further analyzed in terms of their functions using Coates' (2013) framework, taking into account the conversational context and situational conditions in the film.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, a total of 42 instances of lexical hedges were identified in the utterances of the main character in *Eighth Grade* (2018). Based on Namsaraev's classification, which consists of nine types of lexical hedges, only four types were found in the data: modal auxiliary verbs, lexical verbs, adverbs, and fillers. In terms of function, the identified lexical hedges primarily serve two purposes, which are expressing doubt and searching for the right word.

Table 1. Frequency of Lexical Hedge Types Used by the Main Character in *Eighth Grade* (2018)

No.	Types of Lexical Hedges	Frequency
1.	Modal Auxiliary Verb	1
2.	Lexical Verb	3
3.	Adverb	3
4.	Fillers	35
Total		42

The table above shows the distribution of lexical hedges used by the main character in *Eighth Grade* (2018). Fillers appear as the most dominant type, with 35 occurrences, followed by lexical verb and adverb with 3 occurrences each. In contrast, modal auxiliary verb is the least frequent, occurring only once. These findings indicate that the main character tends to dominantly use fillers in her speech, which reflects a communication pattern characterized by hesitation and uncertainty.

3.1 Modal Auxiliary Verbs

Context: Kayla is recording a video for her YouTube channel, in which she discusses the topic of “Growing Up.” In the utterance, she explains that growing up is a positive experience because it allows people to change aspects of themselves that they may not like.

(1) Kayla: Okay, so Growing Up can be a little bit scary and weird but it’s also really good because you get to change things that you **might** not like about yourself and that’s good because change is a good thing.

(0:48:05 – 0:48:15)

The lexical hedge identified in the utterance above is the word *might*, which is classified as a modal auxiliary verb. As a modal verb, *might* is commonly used to express possibility rather than certainty. In utterance (1), *might* appears in the middle of the sentence and functions to indicate that the aspects individuals dislike about themselves are not presented as definite, but rather as potential or variable. The use of *might* signals uncertainty and allows Kayla to avoid making a generalized or absolute claim about her audience. Instead of directly asserting that people have things they dislike about themselves, she softens the statement by framing it as a possibility. Therefore, in this context, the hedge *might* clearly functions to express doubt.

From a broader perspective, this usage can be interpreted as part of adolescent communicative behavior, where speakers tend to avoid strong assertions in order to minimize the risk of negative evaluation. Furthermore, this linguistic choice contributes to the construction of Kayla’s identity as a social anxious character. By avoiding certainty and opting for a more cautious expression, she demonstrates an awareness of how her words may be perceived by others.

3.2 Lexical Verb

Context: Kayla is spending time at the mall with Olivia and her friends. Prior to this, Kayla was invited by Olivia via phone to join the group on a trip to the mall. On the way to the mall, Kayla is driven by her father. After Kayla joins Olivia and her friends, one of Olivia’s

friends, Aniyah, notices someone who appears suspiciously to be watching them from a distance. When Kayla looks in the indicated direction, she realizes that the person is her father. This situation makes Kayla feel angry and embarrassed. To handle the situation, Kayla lies by saying that she has forgotten an item. The purpose of this lie is to create an excuse to temporarily leave the group and meet her father without arousing suspicion from her friends.

- (2) Aniyah : Okay, like, don't all look at the same time but like some creepy ass dude has been staring at us for five minutes acting like he's not. I've seen him pass by like four times. DON'T. Don't look obvious. In the shorts.
- (3) Riley : Shorts?
- (4) Trevor : Yeah, I see him. Orange shirt.
- (5) Kayla : I... I **think**, I actually left something in a store by accident. I gotta go get it.
- (6) Olivia : Okay, you want me to come with?
- (7) Kayla : No, thank you.

(0:59:29 – 0:59:46)

The lexical hedge identified in the utterance above is the word *think*, which is categorized as a lexical verb. Although *think* generally expresses belief or opinion, in this context it functions as a hedge that weakens the certainty of the statement. In utterance (5), *think* appears at the beginning of the sentence, signaling hesitation and reducing the assertiveness of Kayla's claim. The statement that she left something in the store is not factual, but rather a fabricated excuse to leave the situation. By using *think*, Kayla avoids presenting the statement as definite, which makes the lie less direct and therefore less likely to be questioned. Thus, the hedge *think* functions to express doubt.

From a pragmatic perspective, this also reflects a strategy of mitigation, particularly in situations that involve potential face-threatening acts. Kayla is attempting to exit an embarrassing situation without drawing attention to herself or creating further discomfort. The hedge allows her to soften the impact of her statement and maintain social harmony within the group. In terms of adolescent communication, this usage highlights a tendency toward indirectness when dealing with socially sensitive situations. In this scene, Kayla's use of *think* also reinforces the portrayal of social anxiety, as she struggles to respond confidently and instead produces a hesitant utterance.

3.3 Adverb

Context: After school, Kayla is called by Kennedy's mother to approach her car. During their conversation, Kayla is invited to attend Kennedy's birthday party. Kennedy is one of the popular students at Kayla's school, in contrast to Kayla herself. Since Kennedy's mother knows Kayla's father, she invites Kayla to her daughter's birthday party as a gesture of gratitude. However, in her response, Kayla expresses uncertainty about attending, considering that she and Kennedy do not have a close relationship.

- (29) Dianne : Hey! Little one! You're Mark's girl, right?
- (30) Kayla : Yeah.
- (31) Dianne : Your dad was such a huge help with the spring fundraiser. Thank him again for me, will you?

- (32) Kayla : I will.
- (33) Dianne : What's your name again?
- (34) Kennedy : Kayla.
- (35) Dianne : Kayla! Yes! Kayla, you know, we just opened our pool... We just opened our pool and we're having our first big pool party of the summer for Kennedy's birthday tomorrow. You should come. Gonna be lots of fun, right Kennedy?
- (36) Kennedy : Yep.
- (37) Dianne : You should come. It's gonna be a blast. Kennedy will send you an invite on Facebook. Right Kennedy?
- (38) Kennedy : Ohmygod.
- (39) Dianne : Can you make it?
- (40) Kayla : Maybe... I **probably** can't. I'll try but I **probably** can't.
- (41) Dianne : Try to make it. You'll have a blast. And say thanks to your dad again for me.
- (42) Kayla : Okay.
- (43) Dianne : Great! See you tomorrow maybe!
- (44) Kayla : Okay maybe, probably not though, thank you.
- (45) Dianne : Say bye, Kennedy.
- (46) Kennedy : Bye.
- (47) Kayla : Bye.

(0:11:20 – 0:12:17)

The lexical hedge identified in the utterance above is *probably*, which is categorized as an adverb. In this context, *probably* is used to indicate a likelihood rather than certainty, thereby weakening the force of the statement. In utterance (40), *probably* appears in the middle of the sentence, alongside with another hedge, *maybe*, creating a layered expression of uncertainty. This combination reflects Kayla's inability to provide a clear or decisive response regarding the invitation. In the context of this conversation, *probably*, as used by Kayla, indicates two possible outcomes: that Kayla may attend Kennedy's birthday party or may not attend it. Instead of accepting or declining directly, she produces a series of hedged expressions that signal hesitation. On one hand, she does not have a close relationship with Kennedy; on the other hand, she feels reluctant to decline the invitation from Kennedy's mother. Therefore, the hedge *probably* functions to express doubt.

From a broader perspective, this reflects a characteristic feature of adolescent communication, particularly in relation to peer dynamics and social hierarchy. Teenagers often employ vague and indirect language to manage uncertainty. In the film, this linguistic behavior contributes to the portrayal of Kayla as socially anxious, as she demonstrates difficulty in making decisions and expressing them clearly.

3.4 Fillers

Context: during the gift-opening session at Kennedy's birthday party, it was time for Kayla's present to be opened. When Kennedy saw the gift, she appeared confused and did not immediately recognize it, as the item was a game that someone like Kennedy might not typically play. Noticing Kennedy's reaction and the ensuing silence, Kayla promptly explained the gift and how to play it in a nervous tone.

- (63) Kennedy : Yessssss. Oh my god, so cute.
(64) Steph : I know you have ones like it.
(65) Kennedy : Not in this color.
(66) Steph : That's what I was thinking.
(67) Dianne : This one is from Kayyyyla.
(68) Kennedy : ... what is it?
(69) Kayla : It's a game, it's really fun. You, you **um**, you take turns - like everyone gets ten cards and then you take turns doing - you'll see. It's like Go Fish but funner...
(70) Kennedy : ... cool.

(0:27:36 – 0:28:33)

The lexical hedge identified in the utterance above is the expression *um*, which is classified as a filler. In spoken discourse, fillers are commonly used to signal hesitation and to provide the speaker with time to organize their thoughts. In utterance (69), *um* appears in the middle of the sentences, indicating that Kayla is experiencing difficulty in producing a fluent explanation, which is how to play the game she gave to Kennedy. The use of *um* allows Kayla to maintain her turn in the conversation while searching for the appropriate words. Therefore, the hedge *um* functions as a strategy for searching for the right word.

From a broader perspective, the use of fillers is a typical feature of natural spoken language, especially among adolescents. However, in this context, the frequency and placement of *um* also signal heightened anxiety and self-consciousness. Kayla is placed in a socially uncomfortable situation where she feels evaluated by her peers, which affects her ability to speak fluently. This aligns with the representation of a social anxiety in the film, where disfluencies such as fillers, pauses, and repetitions function as observable indicators of internal psychological states.

4. CONCLUSION

This research was conducted with the aim of analyzing the types and functions of lexical hedges used by the main character in the film *Eighth Grade* (2018). The results show that there are 42 words or expressions categorized as lexical hedging features. Based on Namsaraev's theory (2010), these words or expressions can be classified into four types of lexical hedges, which are modal auxiliary verbs, lexical verbs, adverbs, and fillers. Among these four types, fillers are the most dominantly used hedges, with a total frequency of 35 occurrences. In terms of function, according to Coates' theory (2013) framework, lexical hedges are primarily used to express doubt and to assist the speaker in searching for the right word, with the latter being the most dominant function.

The findings indicate that the frequent use of lexical hedges, particularly fillers, reflects the main character's tendency toward hesitation, uncertainty, and lack of confidence in social interactions. This pattern suggests that the use of hedging is closely related to the character's psychological state, particularly social anxiety, as depicted in the film. More broadly, this study contributes to sociolinguistic research by demonstrating how lexical hedges function not only as linguistic features but also as tools for constructing social identity. In addition, the findings highlight the role of hedging in film dialogue as a strategy to portray realistic adolescent communication and to represent psychological conditions such as social anxiety. Therefore, the use of lexical hedges in film can be seen as an important device in shaping character representation.

5. AUTHORS' NOTE

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. Authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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