Capítulo 11. Hedging through time and language: a corpus study of English and French film subtitles

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Abstract: This study investigates the diachronic evolution of hedging strategies in English and French subtitle corpora across five decades (1970s-2010s). Using normalised frequency data per 10,000 tokens, the analysis distinguishes epistemic marks such as *I think, maybe, je pense* or *peut-être* from interactional and discourse-pragmatic hedges such as *well, oh, uh, ah, bon, ben* and *euh*. The results show that English maintains a stable epistemic baseline while progressively increasing interactional hedges, peaking in the 1990s and 2000s, with items such as *well* and *oh*. French, by contrast, consistently privileges interactional particles, culminating in the 2010s with high frequencies for *ah, bon* and *bah*. Both languages exhibit a convergent trend towards conversational authenticity, marked by greater use of interjections and pause fillers, though the timing and preferred forms differ. These findings highlight subtitles as a sensitive record of evolving pragmatic norms and highlight the interplay between linguistic tradition and cinematic dialogue practices.

Keywords: hedging, subtitles, english, french, corpora

1. INTRODUCTION

The present study investigates the diachronic evolution of hedging expressions in English and French, drawing on film subtitles as a corpus-based representation of spoken interaction. As explained by many authors (Álvarez-Gil, 2024; Halliday, 1973, 1979; Halliday & Hasan, 1985) hedges are linguistic devices that allow speakers to modulate commitment, express varying degrees of certainty and negotiate social relations in discourse. They constitute a central element of interpersonal communication, shaping how speakers position themselves with respect to their propositions and to their interlocutors. Although hedging has been widely studied in naturally occurring speech, its development in semi-scripted dialogue, and particularly in audiovisual media, has remained comparatively underexplored (di Studi Linguistici Letterari et al., 2022; Hilton, 2022; Kachramanian, 2022; Siripachanah, 2022; Surya et al., n.d.). Film subtitles, despite their written form, offer a valuable approximation of spoken language because they are designed to reflect naturalistic dialogue while remaining concise enough to be processed visually.

Subtitles represent a hybrid communicative medium. They are constrained by time and spatial limits, yet they must preserve the pragmatics of the original interaction, including hesitation, mitigation, interpersonal stance and evaluative nuances. In this sense, they operate as a mediated but highly informative record of the communicative norms that film scriptwriters, translators and cultural industries deem believable and representative of spoken behaviour. As cinematic dialogue has increasingly favoured authenticity and

conversational realism over the past decades, subtitles became an especially revealing site for tracking changes in pragmatic resources such as hedging.

To investigate these developments, the study analyses English and French subtitle corpora from the 1970s to the 2010s. The comparison between English and French is particularly fruitful because the two languages differ systematically in how they encode stance and uncertainty, despite sharing many structural similarities. English frequently relies on explicit epistemic expressions that refer directly to the speaker's mental state, such as *I think, I guess, or maybe.* French, meanwhile, tends to rely more heavily on pragmatic particles and interjections, such as *ah, ben, bon, eh* or *peut-être,* which embed stance implicitly within the flow of discourse. Examining both languages across parallel time periods therefore illuminates how deeply rooted linguistic preferences intersect with shifting cinematic conventions.

The study is grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), which conceptualises language as a meaning-making resource shaped by social and cultural context. Within SFL, hedging belongs to the interpersonal metafunction, specifically to the systems of mood and modality that regulate how speakers enact relationships and negotiate certainty (Banks, 2019; Cheng, 2023; Eggins, 2007; Martin, 2016). Combining SFL with corpus techniques allows hedging to be examined both as a linguistic phenomenon and as a culturally situated communicative strategy. The diachronic focus makes it possible to observe how hedging evolves over time in response to broader cultural tendencies, including increasing informality, changes in politeness norms, shifts in cinematic style and evolving expectations for conversational realism.

2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The study is structured around three central research questions, each addressing a complementary aspect of diachronic and cross-linguistic variation. The first question concerns how hedging expressions in English and French subtitles change over the five decades included in the corpus, from the 1970s through the 2010s. This encompasses not only differences in frequency but also shifts in the balance between epistemic and interactional hedging strategies. The second question investigates whether both languages show a diachronic movement from more formal or epistemically oriented hedges towards more informal and discourse-oriented ones, reflecting broader cultural changes in how interpersonal stance is expressed. The third question addresses cross-linguistic differences by examining how hedging patterns in English and French compare over time and whether the two languages converge, diverge or maintain stable differences in their preferred hedging strategies.

These questions collectively aim to reveal both the local, language-specific tendencies of English and French and the broader communicative shifts that are shared across cinematic discourse. Together, they provide a coherent framework for analysing how hedging is realised in mediated spoken interaction and how such realisation changes across time.

3. METHOD

3.1. Approach

The methodological approach is corpus-based and draws on the theoretical principles of SFL. The corpus approach allows for the systematic and quantitative examination of

hedging expressions across large sets of textual data, while the SFL framework provides the interpretive tools for understanding how hedges function within the interpersonal metafunction of language. A key fact is that hedging is not merely a lexical phenomenon but a contextual one, as many expressions may or may not function as hedges depending on the pragmatic environment in which they occur. For this reason, the study combines quantitative procedures such as frequency counts and concordance searches with qualitative interpretation of concordance lines.

In addition, subtitles provide a suitable dataset because they capture spontaneous-like dialogue that has been filtered through scriptwriting, performance and translation practices. This mediated nature does not invalidate the analysis but rather adds another layer of interest, as subtitles reveal the linguistic conventions that filmmakers and translators rely on to construct culturally recognizable representations of speech.

3.2. Instruments

All computational analysis was conducted using *LancsBox X*, a corpus analysis tool designed for linguistic research. *LancsBox X* enables frequency searches, concordance generation, collocation analysis and the division of corpora into subcorpora for diachronic comparison. It was used to retrieve all candidate hedging expressions and to examine their distribution across the five decades. The tool's KWIC (Key Word in Context) concordances were essential for disambiguating cases where a word could be either a hedge or not, such as in the case of *bon* in French, as it could mean *good* rather than functioning as a discourse particle, as well as *well* in English that may function adverbially rather than as a marker of hesitation.

3.3. Participants

As this is a corpus-based study, the research does not involve human participants in the traditional sense, as the linguistic data derives entirely from film subtitles written and edited by professionals in the audiovisual industry. The "participants" can therefore be understood as the scriptwriters, directors and subtitlers whose linguistic output is represented in the corpus. Their identities are not individually examined; rather, their collective output is taken as a reflection of widely accepted conventions for naturalistic dialogue within their cultural and linguistic communities.

3.4. Procedure

The procedure followed several steps. The first involved compiling the corpus from the *OpenSubtitles* database, selecting five films per decade from the 1970s to the 2010s for each language. The selection was based on popularity and richness of both the film itself and its dialogue to ensure that the subtitles represented a diverse yet culturally central sample of cinematic communication. The English corpus is composed of the films *The Godfather* (1972), *Taxi Driver* (1976), *Rocky* (1976), *Annie Hall* (1977) and *Grease* (1978) in the 70s subcorpus; *E.T. The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982), *Tootsie* (1982), *Back to The Future* (1985), *The Breakfast Club* (1985) and *When Harry Met Sally* (1989) from the 80s subcorpus; *Pretty Woman* (1990), *Forrest Gump* (1994), *Pulp Fiction* (1994), *Clueless* (1995) and *Notting Hill* (1999) in the 90s subcorpus; *Bridget Jones Diary* (2001), *Love Actually* (2003), *Eternal Sunshine of The Spotless Mind* (2004), *Mean Girls* (2004)

and *The Devil Wears Prada* (2006) in the 2000s subcorpus; *The Social Network* (2010), *The King's Speech* (2010), *La La Land* (2016), *Lady Bird* (2017) and *Marriage Story* (2019) from the 2010s subcorpus. On the other hand, the French corpus is composed of *Les Choses de la Vie* (1970), *Les Valseuses* (1974), *Cousin, Cousine* (1975), *Laile ou la Cuisse* (1976) and *Un éléphant ça trompe énormément* (1976) from the 70s subcorpus; *La Boum* (1980), *L'as des as* (1982), *Le père noël est une ordure !* (1982), *Subway* (1985) and *Le Grand Chemin* (1987) in the 80s subcorpus ; *Les Visiteurs* (1993), *La Haine* (1995), *Un Indien Dans la Ville* (1994), *Ridicule* (1996) and *Le Dîner de Cons* (1998) from the 90s subcorpus ; *Le Fabuleux Destin d'Amélie Poulain* (2001), *Tanguy* (2001), *Les Choristes* (2004), *De Battre Mon Cœur S'est Arrêté* (2005) and *Bienvenue Chez les Ch'tis* (2008) in the 2000s subcorpus ; *Intouchables* (2011), *Le Prénom* (2012), *La Famille Bélier* (2014), *Qu'est-ce qu'on a Fait au Bon Dieu* (2014) and *Demain Tout Commence* (2016) in the 2010s subcorpus. These films span a wide range of genres, ensuring that the linguistic data reflect mainstream cinematic discourse rather than genre-specific idiosyncrasies.

Regarding the token count, these varied across decades and per corpora and subcorpora, as the films and hence, the film scripts themselves, differ in length and dialogue intensity. Specifically, the English corpus comprises 461,691 tokens divided into 83,741 for the 70s subcorpus, 77,631 for the 80s, 106,295 for the 90s, 92,103 for the 2000s and 10,921 for the 2010s. The French corpus consists of 330,812 tokens divided into 54,441 tokens for the 70s subcorpus, 49,881 for the 80s, 66,297 for the 90s, 74,187 for the 2000s and 86,006 tokens for the 2010s. The difference in token numbers is very clear both between subcorpora and corpora, hence, the second step of the process was to normalise the raw results per 10,000 tokens to provide reliable comparisons.

The third step involved establishing a predefined list of 15 hedging terms and expressions per language based on frequently attested items in English and French. This list included epistemic markers (French: *je pense, je crois, je suppose, peut-être, en quelque sorte, genre;* English: *I think, I guess, I suppose, maybe, perhaps, kind of, sort of*), discourse particles (French: *bon, bah, ben, eh, tu sais;* English: *well, you know, erm)* and interjections (French: *oh, ah, euh, hmm;* English: *oh, ah, uh, um, hmm)*.

In forth place, the extraction of all occurrences of these expressions using *LancsBox X* took place. Once the data were obtained, each occurrence was examined manually to determine whether it actually functioned as a hedge, as for instance, *bon* in the French corpus was inspected to distinguish between its use as an adjective meaning good and its use as a discourse particle. Similarly, English items such as *well* or *oh* required contextual verification. Finally, the last step involved the analysis of distributions per decade and comparing between them and between the English and French patterns both quantitatively and qualitatively; the normalised frequency tables were complemented by contextual interpretation based on the context.

4. RESULTS

The following section presents the diachronic results for English and French in detail. In order to facilitate verification and cross-checking and as almost mandatory that it is in corpus studies, all the patterns described below are presented from the normalised results of both corpora normalised per 10,000 tokens.

4.1. English Corpus

First of all, as a slight overview, it must be said that the English corpus portrays two broad behaviours across the five decades. Firstly, the epistemic hedges remain stable, even if there are moderate fluctuations. Secondly, the discourse markers such as *well* or *oh* and pause fillers rose sharply from the 1970s to the 2000s, slightly decreasing in the 2010s. That said, in the following subsections, the description organised by decade is presented to give a more detailed picture.

4.1.1. 1970s

Beginning with the subcorpus representing the oldest data, it is due to this that it is useful to have it as a baseline for comparison with the rest, but in addition, it is even more relevant because both epistemic and interactional hedges are present, with the latter especially prominent. As can be seen in Table 1, *well* and *oh* each show 12.54, indicating that discourse management and expressive interjections are already salient. In addition, pause fillers are present, with 3.94 for *uh*, while *um* and *hmm* have no occurrences at all. However, *erm* appears a few times (0.84) suggesting that hesitation markers are not that absent in this decade.

Regarding the epistemic markers, *I think* shows 3.94 occurrences per 10,000 words, *maybe* 3.82, *perhaps* 0.24, *I guess* 0.72 and *I suppose* 0.48. These values show an epistemic abundance, leading with *I think* and *maybe*. Other epistemic markers are less prominent, such as *kind of* 0.48 and *sort of* with 0.12 occurrences per 10,000 words. On another note the discourse particle *you know* appears with a frequency of 7.28, an very high concentration that foreshadows its stability in the other decades.

4.1.2. 1980s

The next decade in the corpus shows growth in both the interactional and epistemic domains but especially in the former, as *well* increases to 17.65 and *oh* to 24.09, almost doubling the value for *oh* from the 1970s. Interjections change, as *uh* dips to 0.26, *um* and *hmm* remain at 0 and *erm* drops to 0 as well, despite this, the overall interaction frequencies increase due to *well* and *oh* as well as due to the high frequency of the discourse particle *you know* at 7.08.

Epistemically, *I think* peaks for the period at 8.12 occurrences per 10,000 words, which actually is its highest value across all decades. Furthermore, *maybe* rises to 4.64, *perhaps* is 0.26, *I guess* increases to 2.45 and *I suppose* is at 0.39, to name a few.

4.1.3. 1990s

The 1990s consolidate the interactional profile, with major increases in the discourse particles *well* (27.09) and *you know* (6.49) even if *erm* remains at 0.00 in this decade. In addition, we can see the arrival of more robust interjections like *uh* 8.37, *um* 2.54 and *hmm* 3.20, which all increase more than in prior decades and *oh* maintains a high level (24.18).

Regarding epistemic markers, these are somewhat steady but lower that in the 1980s: *I think* occurs 6.59 times per 10,000 words, *maybe* 4.50, *perhaps* 0.28, *I guess* 0.94 and *I suppose* 0.47, while the approximators continue to stay limited with 0.66 occurrences per 10,000 words for *kind of* and 1.13 for *sort of.* Hence, this decade highlights the importance of *well* and the strong emergence of interjections, shaping a clearly conversational cadence.

4.1.4. 2000s

The second to last decade in the corpus registers the highest value for *oh* with 43.43 normalized occurrences, being this the largest decade-specific value among the main interactional items in English. *Well* remains high 23.56 and interjections continue to be important: *uh* 8.36, *um* 3.36, *hmm* 1.63 and an increase in *erm* to 4.43, its highest value across the timeline. *You know* rises to 9.01, making it its highest value in the entire corpus.

The epistemic markers remain stable to slightly higher than the 1990s with occurrences per 10,000 words of 7.60 for *I think*, 4.78 for *maybe*, 0.76 for *perhaps*, 1.85 for *I guess* and 0.98 for *I suppose*, while the approximators *kind of* and *sort* of show their highest decade values here, with frequencies of 1.19 and 0.87 respectively.

4.1.5. 2010s

The last decade in the corpus shows a partial decrease in the interjectional and discourse particle spike, as *oh* falls to a frequency of 20.41, *well* to 19.33, *uh* to 3.53, *um* to 2.75, *hmm* to 0.98 and *erm* returns to 0.00. However, *you know* stays at 8.93, essentially equal to the 2000s.

The epistemic markers once again remain steady, with frequencies of 7.36 for *I think*, 6.38 for *maybe* (being this its highest value), 0.88 for *perhaps* (also its highest value), 2.94 (once again its highest value) and *I suppose* that actually drops completely to 0.00. In the same line, *kind of* and *sort of* remain low with frequencies of 0.49 and 0.69 respectively.

4.1.6. Summary

As a very brief summary, regarding the discourse markers and interjections, *well* is especially relevant as it increases from a frequency of 12.54 to 27.09 and stays high and *oh* peaks in the 2000s with a frequency of 43.43. Moreover, *uh* and *um* are characteristic of the 1990s and 2000s, but they then decline in the 2010s even if they remain present. Finally, *you know* is very clearly consistently used in all decades, but with a slight increase in the last two.

Regarding the epistemic markers, *kind of* and *sort* of remain peripheral across all periods. *I think* and *maybe* stay steady across all decades, with *maybe* achieving its maximum in the 2010s. *I suppose* however drops to 0.00 by the 2010s and *I guess* is variable but ends at its maximum in the 2010s.

4.2. French Corpus

Continuing with the French corpus, the main aspect that is to be highlighted is as it has a clear interactional profile, as compared to the English corpus, the French one shows lower frequencies for explicit epistemic terms and consistently higher frequencies of interjections and discourse particles. However, the diachronic evolution of the terms determines particularly strong values in the 2010s for several epistemic markers.

As with English, a decade-by-decade account of the normalised per 10,000 words results are presented as well as a final summary.

4.2.1. 1970s

The first decade of the corpus already shows interactional prominence, as *ah* is very high at 17.82 occurrences per 10,000 words, *bon* at 6.8, *oh* 9.56 and *euh* at 1.65. *Ben* has 4.41, *bah* 0.18 and *eh* 1.65. This indicates that interjections and discourse particles are clearly central hedging strategies in the 1970s subtitle subcorpus.

On the other hand, the epistemic marker numbers are much more modest with *je pense* at 0.18, *je crois* at 1.1, *je suppose* 0.18 and *peut-être* 2.94. These numbers are already low, but even more striking is the complete absence of *genre* and *quelque sorte.*

4.2.2. 1980s

The 1980s sustain and in some cases increase the interactional numbers, as *bon* rises to 7.82 and *oh* is 6.82. *Ah* dips to 10.83, lower than the 1970s but still high, *euh* is 2.00 and *ben* increases to its highest value in the French corpus with 10.63 occurrences pero 10,000 words. *Bah* records no uses in this decade while *eh* increases to 3.61. *Tu sais* maintains an almost similar number to the 1970s with a value of 1.40.

The epistemic markers remain on the lower side, with 0.60 occurrences per 10,000 words for *je pense* (which is its highest value), none for *je crois*, *genre* and *en quelque sorte* and 0.20 for *je suppose*. *Peut-être* remains similar to the 1970s with a frequency of 2.81.

4.2.3. 1990s

In the 1990s, several interactional items dropped, with frequencies of 7.09 for *ah*, 2.11 for *bon*, 2.56 for *oh,* 0.45 for *euh*, 0.75 for *ben,* 0.91 for *eh* or 0.00 for *bah.* Despite this reduction, discourse particles and interjections remained present.

Similarly, epistemic markers also remain low but continuous, with 0.15 occurrences per 10,000 words for *je pense*, 0.91 *je crois*, 0.15 *je suppose* and *peut-être* lowers to 1.97. overall, the 1990s represent a valley for interactional, contrasting with English where international rose sharply in this decade.

4.2.4. 2000s

For the second to last decade, the 2000s, this decade brings a strong resurgence of the interactional hedges, as *ah* returns to 17.66, *bon* to 8.22, *oh* to 10.65, *euh* to 1.62. *Bah* appears at 1.75 after two decades of zeros and *ben* rises to 5.12. *Tu sais* is 1.35, *eh* 3.5 and *hmm* remains at 0.

Epistemic markers remain low with 0.14 for *je pense*, 0.67 *je crois* and 0 for *je suppose*. *Peut-être* peaks at 4.45, which is its highest number, indicating that probabilistic lexical hedging is present but does not dominate relative to the interactional terms.

4.2.5. 2010s

Finally, the last decade concentrates high values in the interactional domain, as *ah* peaks at 21.51 (its highest value across all decades), *bon* reaches 10.93, also its highest, *oh* continues high at 11.98, *euh* grows to 3.26 (its highest value). *Bah* jumps 9.19 from 1.75 in the 2000s. *Ben* is 6.51 (higher than the 1990s and 2000s but below its peak in the 1980s). Finally, *eh* is 2.33 and *hmm* 1.05.

Epistemic markers remain minimal 0.35 for *je pense*, 0.47 *je crois*, 0.12 *je suppose* or 2.21 *peut-être*, resulting in a cumulative effect of a rich interactional aspect once again.

4.2.6. Summary

As a summary for the French corpus, interjections and discourse particles are the clearest anchors, peaking in the 2010s: *ah* from 17.82 to 21.51 and *bon* 6.8 to 10.93. *Oh* and *euh* also end high in the 2010s and *bah* shows a late and substantial rise, while *ben* peaks in the 1980s but remains relevant thereafter and *eh* fluctuates within a moderate range.

For the epistemic markers, *je pense, je crois* and *je suppose* remain low in all decades, but *peut-être* is the most frequent lexical item of them all, peaking in the 2000s.

5. DISCUSSIONS

5.1. Epistemic versus Interactional Profiles

The English corpus consistently features epistemic hedges, especially *I think* and *maybe* at stable rates across all decades, while simultaneously developing a strong interactional layer with pause fillers and discourse particles that peal in the 1990s and 2000s. The French corpus, in contrast, in consistently interactional: *ah, bon, ben, bah, eh, oh* and *euh* dominate every decade, with epistemic lexical markers (*je pense, je crois, je suppose, peut-être)* remaining secondary. This contrast indicated different preferred manners of hedging across the two languages within subtitles cinematic dialogue, as English often frames stance explicitly, while French more commonly encodes hedging within the flow of turn management and expressive particles.

5.2. Diachronic Trend Towards Conversational Texture

Both languages show a diachronic movement towards interactional hedging. In English, this is visible in the 1990s spike for *well* and the consolidation of *oh* and filler pauses in the 2000s (with *oh* peaking at 43.43). In French, a wide set of interactionals reach high values in the 2010s (*ah* 21.51m *bon* 10.93, *oh* 11.98, *euh* 3.26 and *bah* 9.19). These shifts suggest that subtitles dialogue increasingly accommodates hesitation, interjections and particles critical to realistic spoken-like texts. Although the timing of peaks differ, as English does so earlier than French, the direction of change is similar.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The diachronic analysis of English and French subtitle corpora demonstrates that hedging is not only persistent but also adaptive, reflecting broader shifts in cinematic dialogue towards conversational realism (Nuraniwati & Permatasari, 2022; Nwike & Ngozi, 2024; Schneider, 2024). While English retains a strong epistemic core anchored by items such as *I think* and *maybe*, its most notable change lies in the expansion of interactional hedges, particularly discourse markers and interjections, which peak in the 1990s and 200s. French conversely, exhibits a consistently interactional orientation, with interjections and pragmatic particles forming the backbone of hedging and reaching their highest frequencies in the 2010s. These contrasting profiles highlight language-specific strategies for mitigating stance (Guillot, 2020; Imani & Jalali, 2023; Qadees et al., 2025), specifically, English tends towards explicit cognitive framing while French favours implicit turn taking cues.

Finally, despite these differences, both languages converge in their diachronic trajectory, increasingly incorporating features associated with spontaneous speech, which suggests that subtitles, far from being a mere written representation, function as a pragmatic mirror of evolving norms in audiovisual discourse.

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