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Towards a taxonomy of hedging devices in Standard German



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Abstract

The present thesis deals with hedging devices, aiming to develop a working definition and proposing a taxonomy of hedging for standard German. The thesis is following a theoretical approach, taking into account different views on hedging, both for classification and delimitation, as well as for the possible functional aspects behind hedging. As the concept of hedging has over time become rather convoluted, this thesis is aiming to clear up some of these fuzzy boundaries and make them more clear, as well as to construct a rather strict definition and taxonomy for standard German, focusing on the core of what hedging is. The resulting taxonomy shows that there are certain forms that are frequently used in standard German to express hedging content, but that it is highly important to always view these devices in context in order to judge whether they are instances of hedging or not. Subsequently, examples derived from corpora by the *Datenbank für Gesprochenes Deutsch* (data bank for spoken German, DGD) are used to illustrate the use of these devices in context further.

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1 Introduction

- (1) a. Ich hatte früher **so gut wie nie** was mit der Stasi zu tun.
'Back then I **pretty much** never had anything to do with the Stasi.'
- b. Man kann **eh**er sagen, dass wir Hochdeutsch sprechen.
'One could **rather** say that we speak standard German.'
- c. **Vielleicht** wird' s gar nicht so schlimm
'**Maybe** it won't be that bad. '

These examples illustrate a phenomenon linguists refer to as hedging, in this case regarding the German language.

Hedging refers to expressions and constructions that express a certain ambiguity in category membership or make statements and language in general more imprecise, or "fuzzier", using a term Zadeh (1965) first used when writing about "fuzzy sets" in language, and Lakoff (1972) later adapted when he published the first papers dedicated to the concept of hedging.

Hedging, while first coined in the context of prototype theory, is not strictly limited to the field of category membership, though it certainly plays a large part in it, but rather functions as a linguistic tool in many different areas of language use. Thus, linguists have also researched how hedging devices are used in areas such as discourse analysis and have developed a multitude of terms to further divide hedges into sub-classifications - an endeavour with rather little standardization or consensus, resulting in many terms being used interchangeably.

Once a clear-cut and easy to distinguish concept, over the years and through many publications with different approaches, the idea of Lakoff's fuzzy language has thus in itself become rather fuzzy, with not quite strict borders distinguishing it from other, similar concepts. Therefore, the term hedging is often used in a quite inflationary way and used in contexts that have little to do with its original idea anymore.

To avoid contributing to this rather fuzzy approach on hedging, the working definition and taxonomy that will be developed in this thesis will be more restrictive than other definitions explored in this thesis.

Furthermore, as the majority of research regarding this topic has been conducted focused on the English language, to contribute to further understanding of hedging across languages, this thesis will be instead concerned with how hedging is used in the German language. Additionally, many publications, concerning English as well as German, have been rather focused on scientific language, analysing for instance the usage of hedging devices in scientific research papers. For this thesis the area of focus will instead be German standard language, using corpora provided by the DGD to draw examples from to illustrate our findings.

This thesis will approach the topic of hedging on a rather theoretical level, focusing on understanding all aspects of the phenomenon as thoroughly as possible instead of focusing on conducting empirical research. Its goal is to develop a conclusive working definition of the term hedging, as well as a taxonomy for German standard language, using examples from colloquial German. For this purpose, this paper is divided roughly into three parts.

The first part is dedicated to analysing how the concept of hedging was first introduced, how it developed and broadened over the years, and what kind of research is being conducted in this field in more recent years, analysing the different approaches different scholars had to the phenomenon. Furthermore, the functional aspects of hedging devices, such as hedging against the background of politeness theory or hedging to express epistemic modality, will be introduced.

Using the theoretical knowledge gained by weighing all these approaches against one another, the second part of this thesis will then be concerned with developing the aforementioned working definition and taxonomy for standard German. This proposed taxonomy, showing how I classify types of hedges, and which forms are frequently used to express these types will be summarized in a chart and then further elaborated on and illustrated using examples drawn from the corpus of the DGD.

2 History and Development of the Term

The purpose of this first section is not to simply give a historic overview and retell how the concept of hedging was developed, but it will rather function as an analysis of existing research and different approaches regarding the topic to function as a basis for our own research.

Especially with a term as imprecise as this one, it is important to look at how it was originally defined and then broadened over time, how linguists sub-classified the concept, and what they view to be part of hedging and what not. Only then, after understanding these different approaches, is it possible to grasp the core concept at hand in contrast to its fringes and construct a definition and taxonomy that will be as broad as necessary while being as precise as possible.

It is important to note that for this first part of the thesis I have decided to use English examples for the concepts we will introduce, even though the thesis is concerned with hedging in German. The reason for this is that the authors we will discuss and whose approaches we will follow all wrote about hedging in English and illustrated their findings with examples taken from the English language. Thus, to first properly understand their approaches, we will also use the language they published in, before taking the next step and transferring these concepts to the German language in the later part of this thesis, where German examples will be used.

2.1 Lakoff's Fuzzy Concepts and Propositional Hedging

Although Lakoff is often quoted in literature to have first introduced the concept of hedging in linguistics, this is only partially true. Lakoff's publications on the topic were certainly more in depth than anything seen before, but there was in fact previous research already existing at the time, that Lakoff expanded on.

One of the authors who first explored the phenomenon was Zadeh, a logician and mathematician, who in 1965 posed the idea of **fuzzy sets** and **fuzzy logic**, claiming that categories that were thought to have strict criteria of whether something can be a member of said category or not, rather have a "continuum of grades of membership". (1965, 339). The actual term hedging was first used in this context by Weinreich (1966) in the following year, who spoke about **metalinguistic operators** such as *real*, *strictly speaking*, and *like*, that give instructions on how loosely or strictly these criteria for category membership have to be interpreted.

It is undeniably true though that Lakoff's research and publications on the topic of hedging were what had the largest impact on popularizing it and inspiring further research. Lakoff wrote about vagueness and ambiguity in 1970 already, and then published his much-quoted paper "Hedges: a study in meaning criteria and the logic of fuzzy concepts" in 1972 - a publication that formed the basis of today's understanding of hedging.

In it, he argues that the view of logicians that statements in languages are always either true, false, or nonsensical, gives the false impression of sharp, clear-cut boundaries that do not actually exist in natural language. Rather, he argues, are these boundaries vaguely defined, and any attempts to force language into the three categories of true, false, and nonsensical, will distort it (1972, 458).

He applies this to the concept of category membership. Lakoff argues for instance that categories such as *tallness* are rather relative concepts, with no clear distinction of when someone is considered tall and when someone is not. As logicians have proposed before him already, concepts like these are better expressed in an algebraic function, with values such as 5'3" at one end, standing for *not tall at all*, and values like 6'3" at the other end standing for *definitely tall*, with intermediate values in between.

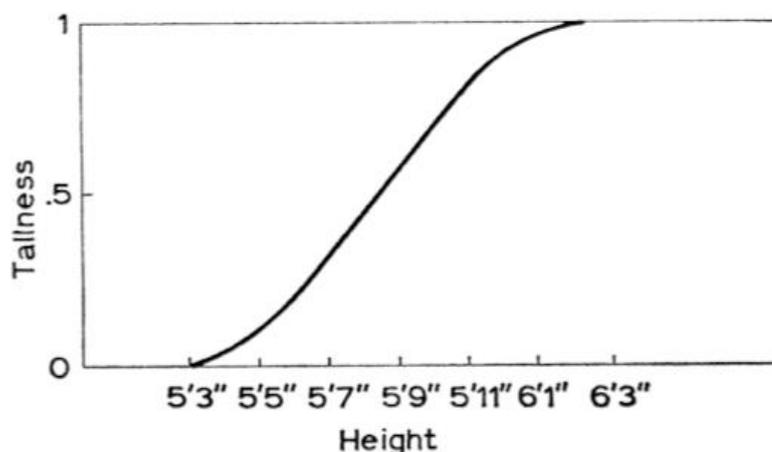


Figure 1: Continuous algebraic function for tallness (Lakoff 1972, 462)

Here, category membership is thus a continuous function made up of an infinite number of values assigned to the concept of height. Since it is impossible though for humans to actually distinguish between infinite values, there is rather a low-level finite number of actually perceived distinctions, as visualized in the following chart.

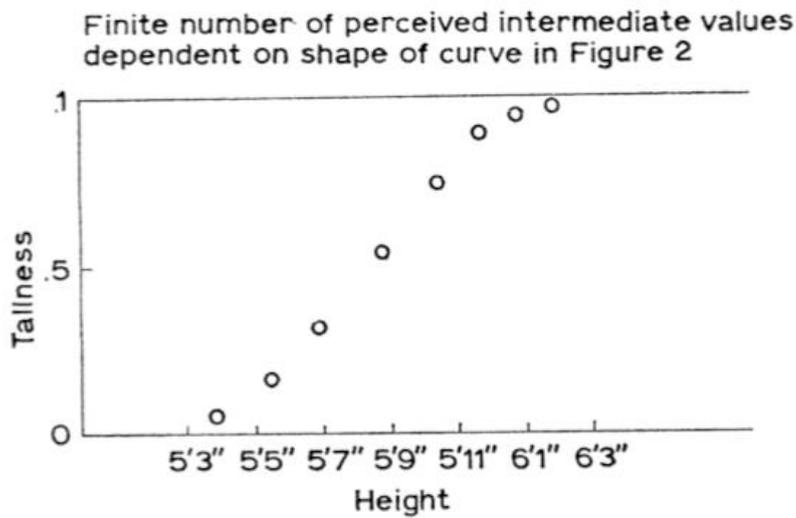


Figure 2: Algebraic function for perceived distinctions of tallness (Lakoff 1972, 463)

It becomes interesting though, when certain metalinguistic operators, such as those Weinreich (1966) wrote about, are applied to these algebraic functions.

Take for instance the operator *kind of*. The algebraic functions for *tall* and for *sort of tall* would look vastly different, since a person measuring in at 6'3" by all means fits the criteria for being *tall*, but does not fit the criteria for being *sort of tall*. The function is thus distorted to prefer intermediate values while having a sharp decline at the end, instead of continually rising such as the chart for *tall* would.

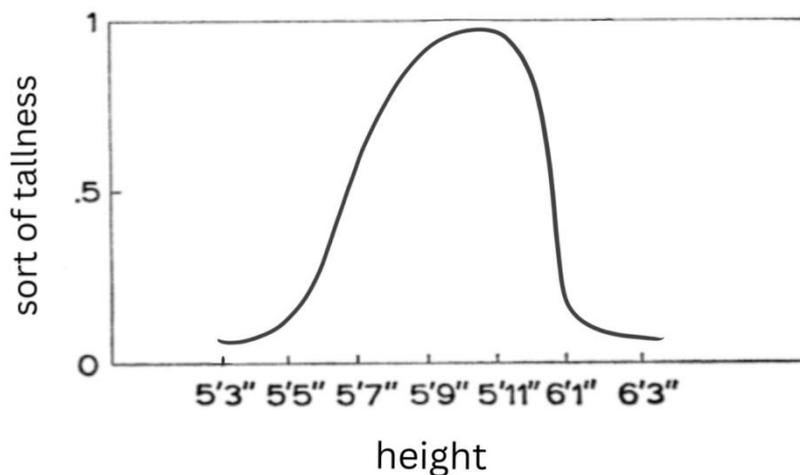


Figure 3: Algebraic function for sort of tallness (Lakoff 1972, 426; modified by this author)

With this applying to all sorts of categories, not just inherently relative ones such a *tallness*, Lakoff proposes that "instead of asking about category membership we ask

instead about the truth of sentences that assert category membership" (1972, 460). The example Lakoff chose to illustrate this was the concept of *birdiness* - an example often used in prototype theory and thus fitted well for this phenomenon concerned with category membership.

Biologically speaking, whether or not an animal classifies as a bird is a simple decision of yes or no, with clear requirements to fulfil, but semantically speaking, there is indeed a ranking of birds that can also be visualized through a similar algebraic function as *tallness*. Here, a cow would be at the far end, not ever being considered in the realm of *birdiness*, while a bat would stand for *not a bird at all* (though it might have bird-like aspects such as wings), and a robin would stand for *definitely a bird*, with different intermediate values such as penguins or chicken in between.

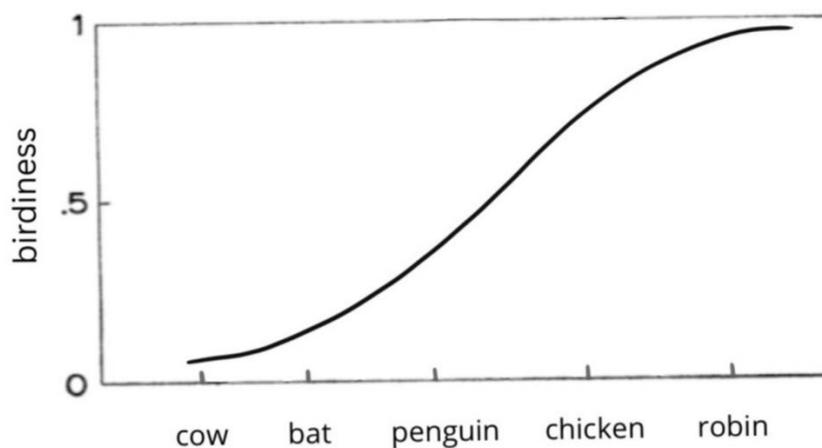


Figure 4: Algebraic function for birdiness (Lakoff 1972, 426; modified by this author)

Applying the same logic, hedges can thus also affect the concept of *birdiness* just as they affect the concept of *tallness*, with different metalinguistic operators distorting the function in different ways.

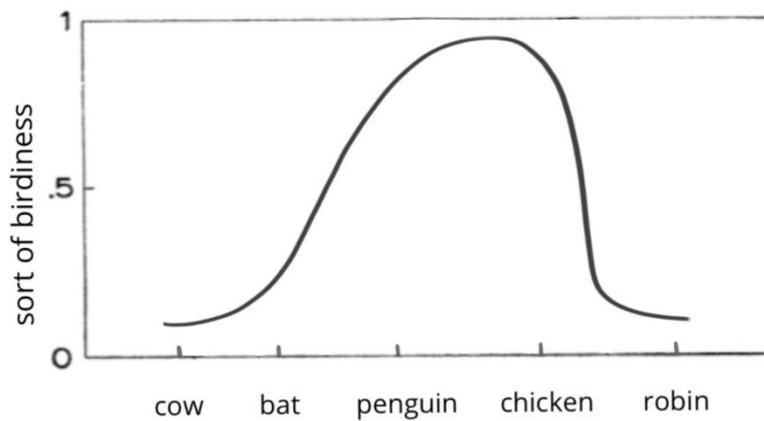


Figure 5: Algebraic function for sort of birdiness (Lakoff 1972, 426; modified by this author)

This visualizes the effect hedges have on category membership, with each different hedge resulting in distorting the function in another way, in this case the hedge *sort of* distorting the chart of *birdiness* in the same way as it distorted the one for *tallness*. Lakoff studied some of these operators he classified as hedges extensively - most notably *strictly speaking*, *loosely speaking*, *technically*, *regular*, and *very* - showing what effect each hedge had on the truth value of a sentence. We will not go in depth and explain all of his findings here, as they are much too vast and not necessary to fully understand for the purpose of this thesis, but we will look at the example of *regular* to show how he approached examining hedges.

- (2) a. John is a bachelor (false)
- b. John is a **regular** bachelor (true)

"Bolinger (1972) has suggested that regular picks out certain 'metaphorical properties'. [...] [2b.] would not be said of a bachelor. It might be said of a married man who acts like a bachelor [...]. In short, regular seems to assert the connotations of 'bachelor', while presupposing the negation of the literal meaning." (Lakoff 1972, 474)

Lakoff called these hedges that he examined in his research **propositional hedges**, and it is important to understand that in his research that was the aspect he was focused on. He was not researching hedging in its entirety - that would only be explored later on by other authors - but mainly how the truth values of category membership are influenced by these metalinguistic operators. Thus, what Lakoff originally termed as a hedge, namely these modifiers predicating adjectives or nominals, now only make up a subsection of what is considered hedging in today's understanding of the term.

2.2 Pragmatic Turn and Subdivision of the Term

Lakoff's approach to hedging was a rather semantic one, though he himself specified in his paper already that semantics are not independent from pragmatics but rather intertwined (1972, 492) and he found his own research on hedging to be proof for this. Namely his findings that hedges such as *regular* make the truth condition of a sentence entirely dependent on a word's connotations, which have been largely regarded to be part of pragmatics, not semantics, show that the lines between those two parts of language become rather blurry here.

Thus, the step to broaden the understanding of hedging and venture out into its more pragmatic realm was the next logical step. Fraser was the one to take it in 1975 when he wrote about **hedged performatives**, as illustrated in the following example.

- (3) a. I apologize for my behavior
b. I **should** apologize for my behavior.

Fraser was interested in certain performative verbs when preceded by a modal verb such as *can*, *should* or *must*. In these cases, Fraser proposes, the illocutionary act indicated by the performative verb is lessened through the modal verb, which functions as a hedge here. This can be seen here in example (3). The sentence in (3b) certainly is an apology, but because of the modal verb, the illocutionary force is lessened, making it not as strong of an apology as (3a) where the modal verb is not preceding the performative verb and thus leaving the statement without any hedges.

Further examples for this phenomenon would be sentences such as:

- (4) a. I **have to** ask you to help me.
- b. I **must** insist you stop smoking now.
- c. I **can** assure you I will hand in my thesis on time.

After this, Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) took this further than only performative verb hedging and wrote about **speech act hedging** in its entirety. They discussed the effect hedges have on speech acts in greater detail, especially against the background of politeness theory. We will not discuss their findings further at this point, but they will be explained in more detail later when examining the theories behind the function of hedges. For now, it is sufficient to understand that Brown and Levinson added this layer to hedging and thus broadened the term further.

It is also notable though that they did distinguish between **attenuation** and **reinforcement** in their publications, thus considering reinforcement to be part of hedging, although only as a minor aspect and without going into much detail. Salager-Meyer (1994) included this in his classification of hedges as well, under the name of **intensifiers**. Today, reinforcement or intensifiers, sometimes also **boosters**, illustrated in example (5), are only rarely seen as part of hedging, being counterintuitive to the general understanding of a hedge always somewhat lessening a statement. We will come back to this aspect later when discussing the delimitation of the term for our definition, but first an example of what reinforcement can look like will be shown.

- (5) a. The thesis is **extremely** well written.
- b. I **absolutely** must insist you stop smoking now.

Prince et al. (1982) proposed a classification of hedges under two different classes, both of which they further divided into two subclasses each, to differentiate between the different functions hedging devices hold.

The first of these classes are **approximators**. Approximators are concerned with the propositional content directly and indicate whether or not its membership in a category is

marked to deviate from the standard or prototype. Among approximators, there are two subclasses, namely **adaptors** and **rounders**. Adaptors can be for instance what Lakoff (1972) referred to as propositional hedges. Expressions like *somewhat*, *kind of*, *sort of*, or *a little bit* fall into this category, showing that the situation is close to a prototypical situation, but not quite equal with it.

- (6) a. He is **kind of** tall.
b. Hedging is **a little bit** complicated.

Rounders on the other hand provide a certain value with a range around said value, in which the propositional content falls. *Approximately*, *about*, and *roughly* are typical examples of rounders.

- (7) a. He is **approximately** 6'3" tall.
b. Hedging is **about** as complicated as other linguistic concepts.

The second class, forming the counterpart to approximators, are **shields**, which have less to do with the actual propositional content itself, but rather with the speaker and their relation and attitude towards said propositional content. It does not matter if the content actually fits a category or not - if the speaker lacks commitment to the content or wishes to imply a level of uncertainty, shields are applied.

Shields are also subdivided into two different subcategories, namely **plausibility shields** and **attribution shields**. Plausibility shields express a speaker's doubt concerning the content, often shown through expressions like *I think*, *probably*, or *as far as I know*. Attribution shields on the other hand shift the responsibility for the accuracy of the statement to another, third party, often through expressions like *according to*, or *as far as X knows*. It is notable though that this strategy is not always truly applied due to a lack of commitment coming from the speaker.

(8) **According to Zadeh**, logic is fuzzy.

In example (8) the speaker or writer most likely does not want to express their doubt in the truth content of Zadeh's findings, but is rather simply following academic rules and conventions of citation. This thus falls into a sort of gray-zone of whether a phrase like (8) would be considered hedged or not.

Approximators are often seen as falling into the realm of semantics, just like Lakoff's early writings on hedging, while shields have more to do with pragmatics (Prince et al. 1982), but since both parts of language cannot be strictly separated, as already discussed earlier, this does not have any tangible implications for the concept of hedging.

Other authors have shown different approaches to the classification of hedges. Hübler (1983) for instance draws a similar line between approximators and shields as Prince et al., though his terms of choice are **understatements** and **hedges**, with understatements roughly aligning with approximators, and hedges with shields.

Caffi's (1999, 2007) approaches to terminology concerning hedging were a bit different to the previous ones, drawing a three-way distinction instead of a two-way one as Prince et al. and Hübler did. According to her, hedging devices can be divided into **bushes**, **hedges**, and **shields**, with Caffi's bushes concerned with the actual propositional content, thus aligning with Prince et al.'s approximators. Her hedges fall into the scope of lessening illocutionary force of a speech act and show non-commitment of a speaker, aligning with their plausibility shields, and her shields shift responsibility to a third party, aligning with their attribution shields.

Most of these authors aiming to add their own terms to the subdivision of hedging seem to have similar approaches and try to cover the same concepts, yet come up with different terms and labels. The fact that many of these publications were released within just a few years of another (Prince et al. 1982, Hübler 1983, Brown & Levinson 1978, 1987) made standardization even more complicated, with little to no natural process occurring where one of these terminologies became to be clearly favoured over the others. The division into approximators and shields has gotten the closest to reaching this status of preference, but the other terms still coexist alongside them and make discussing hedging a rather complex ordeal.

2.3 Current Research - Academic Discourse and Discourse Analysis

This onslaught of new terms and different approaches to subdividing hedging further hit its peak in the 70s and 80s, with only few exceptions of authors such as Caffi (1999, 2007) trying to expand on it even further and coin new terms into the 90s and 2000s. Generally speaking though, the broadening of the concept was over by then, and while authors most definitely thoroughly explored it, they also removed the meaning of hedging quite far from what Lakoff had originally intended the definition to encompass. This brings us to the last part of this overview, namely where we are today and what research is being done based on the findings of the 70s and 80s.

When looking at the current research and publications concerning hedging, it is obvious that the focus has long drifted away from theoretical approaches akin to those logicians like Zadeh had, and shifted to now be almost entirely limited to analysing academic discourse. Hyland (1996) laid the groundwork for this when first writing about forms of hedging in research articles. Back when he published his findings, the focus had still been on casual language.

"Hedging in casual conversation has received the most attention, where it occurs possibly twice as frequently as in written discourse and represents a significant communicative resource." (Hyland 1996, 254)

Looking at today's research, this can certainly not be said to still be true. The focus in publications has since then shifted to lie either on how hedging is used in research papers, or what hedging strategies are being deployed in different academic discourses.

Regarding scientific papers, research has been done comparing hedging in different sections of scientific publications such as abstracts and discussions with one another (Varttala 2001) as well as comparing different disciplines like natural versus social sciences (Malášková 2011) or business versus social science texts (Elheky 2018). As for political discourse, Gribanova and Gaidukova (2019) for instance compared the frequency of hedging devices in interviews versus speeches, while Fraser (2010) analysed hedging in political discourse through the 2007 Bush press conference.

There has also been gender specific research, focusing on the differences in hedging strategies between men and women. The basis for this lies in Robin Lakoff's (1973) publication "Language and Woman's Place", where she identified hedges as one of the characteristics of female language. More studies have been done in this area, with slightly

diverging results - studies done on Finnish men and women for instance actually showed that men hedged more frequently than women (Crismore, Markkanen, Steffensen 1993). Gender differences are thus still not entirely clear.

Cross-linguistically speaking, while English is undeniably the language in which hedging devices have been most thoroughly analysed, research has also been done in other languages. Most of it has been comparative research though, highlighting the differences in hedging between other languages and English, and also with a focus on academic discourse. Examples for this would be Jalilifar's (2011) research on meta-discourse in Persian and English research articles, or Vold's (2006) comparison of hedges in academic writing in English, Norwegian, and French. Also, research has been done comparing the use of hedges in English between English natives and ESL speakers with different linguistic backgrounds (Neary-Sundquist 2013, Nurmukhamedov & Kim 2010, Sládková 2017).

For the purpose of this thesis it is also important to look at the research that has been done and is being done on hedging in the German language. Here, much as in English, academic discourse takes up a large part of publications, which are mostly concerned with the German scientific register, also often referred to as *Wissenschaftssprache* (*scientific language*). Clyne's (1991) research showed that German speaking authors used more hedging devices than English speaking authors, both in German and in English, therefore following the hedging conventions of their native language even when using another language. German *Wissenschaftssprache* has also been found to use rather complex hedging strategies, often expressed in so-called complex hedges (Clyne 1991), that can be strings of hedges, resulting in double or even triple hedges. German is generally also said to use hedging less frequently than English in spoken language, while the reverse is the truth in written language, though this has only been researched in regards to *Wissenschaftssprache* as well (Clyne 1991).

This thorough exploration of the German scientific register with lack of colloquial German is the reason why the corpora used in the later part of this thesis will exclusively be non-scientific corpora and why our proposed taxonomy will be based on the hedging strategies and devices identified in these standard German texts.

3 Functions of Hedging

Not only has the concept of hedging led to much discussion of how to properly classify hedges and what terminology to use in order to address the different subdivisions - there have also been different approaches to explaining the functional aspect of hedges.

There is no consensus among linguists concerning the function of hedges in language use. Generally speaking, there is a divide right down the middle, of hedging being explained more through the lens of semantics, or more through the lens of pragmatics, though, as stated before, these two areas naturally cannot be viewed entirely separately from one another.

In the following section we will discuss the different views linguists have on what the functions of hedging devices are, focusing on what are arguably the three most popular approaches. First, we will dive into semantics again, looking at hedges strictly as devices for expressing category membership. Second, we will move to pragmatics and look at hedges as tools to express epistemic modality. And third, we will discuss hedges against the background of politeness theory.

The goal of this analysis is not to find a conclusive answer as to what the function of hedging is, as it would probably lie somewhere in the middle of all three approaches. We will rather look at them to give an overview of what different authors consider the discursive functions of these devices, and to understand the phenomenon on a deeper level.

3.1 Expressing Category Membership

The first functional aspect is one we have already explored in this thesis, but it is nevertheless one I would like to quickly highlight here again and further elaborate on, since it is what many see as the primary functional aspect of hedging devices - namely the function hedges have in category membership.

Logicians like Zadeh (1965) and linguists like Lakoff (1972) have not devoted much thought to the discursive functions that might lay behind hedging, but have focused rather on the semantic function these devices fulfil - though it is notable at this point that Lakoff (1972) did in fact mention that the need to express uncertainty or the need to soften language in order to be polite can be two reasons for the use of hedging devices. However,

this was not the focus of his research and was only fully explored later on by other authors (see for instance Prince et al. 1982, Fraser 2010 Brown & Levinson 1978, 1987).

As Lakoff proposed, humans possess a low level perceptual apparatus that makes it possible for us to perceive small nuances in meaning and thus also in category membership. Biology might argue that a penguin is as much a bird as a robin, but linguistically, following Prototype Theory, we know that this is not true. As speakers of a language, simply by viewing statements with different hedges about category membership of birds, and assessing their truth value, we can see that there is much more nuance.

- (9) a. A penguin is a bird **par excellence**. (false)
b. A robin is a bird **par excellence**. (true)
c. A penguin is **sort of** a bird. (true)
d. A robin is **sort of** a bird. (false)

When viewing these statements, we immediately know that (9a) and (9d) cannot be true. In (9a), a penguin cannot be a bird *par excellence*, because it lacks certain characteristics, such as the ability to fly, while in (9d), a robin cannot be *sort of* a bird, because there is no question that it is a bird.

Lakoff explains this nuance through different meaning criteria that we perceive when making decisions about category membership. He splits these up into four categories, namely **definitional**, **primary**, **secondary**, and **characteristic though incidental**. All but the last one are able to confer category membership, and characteristic though incidental only becomes relevant when certain hedges like *regular* are at play, as explored in example (2), where metaphorical properties are picked out by the hedge.

In (9a) and (9b) for instance, the subject would have to fulfil definitional, primary, and secondary meaning criteria in order for the statement to be true. On the other hand in (9c) and (9d), the statement would be true if definitional criteria are fulfilled, but either primary or secondary ones are not fulfilled - such as the animal not being able to fly.

These nuances exist in our perception, and thus there is a need to be able to express them linguistically as well. Hedges are simply the tool with which we express how we perceive these meaning criteria and these differences in how category membership can be fulfilled. According to Lakoff (1972, 494) this way we show nuance can even be seen as one of the ways how natural languages differ from artificial ones.

3.2 Hedges as Tools to Express Epistemic Modality

Semantically speaking, the function of hedges to express category membership might be the basis on what the concept was explored, but its pragmatic functional aspects are equally important to understand.

The first thing we will discuss here is the functional aspect of hedging as a tool of epistemic modality. Expressing epistemic modality is a key function of hedging, with some authors such as Lyons going as far as to say that it is its main function, defining a hedge as "any utterance in which the speaker explicitly qualifies his commitment to the truth of the proposition expressed by the sentence he utters is an epistemically modal or modalized sentence" (Lyons 1977, 797).

One thing I have noted while researching hedging devices is that sometimes the terms hedging and epistemic modality are used quite interchangeably and often without thorough explanation of where the difference lies or if there is a difference at all - sometimes even resulting in the term **epistemic hedging**. Once again, the terminology and thus the borders between concepts have become quite fuzzy here. To make it more clear, we will first look at the definition of epistemic modality.

"[Epistemic modality] . . . is the speaker's assessment of probability and predictability. It is external to the content, being a part of the attitude taken up by the speaker: his attitude, in this case, towards his own speech role as 'declarer'."
(Halliday 1970, 349)

Epistemic modality is thus a subtype of modality that is dependent on knowledge and belief of the speaker, so whether or not they believe the propositional content of their statement to be true and to which extent. Epistemic modality can be expressed through different grammatical and non-grammatical structures but is most often exemplified through modal verbs such as *might*, *can*, or *must*.

There is an overlap with hedging here, as for instance in sentences such as examples (3) and (4) where modal verbs as hedges are indeed used to express epistemic modality – a reason behind that possibly being that the speaker simply does not have enough information to make a confident statement void of any hedges.

We will look at a few examples of hedging where it can be used to express epistemic modality.

- (10) a. **As far as I know**, hedging and epistemic modality are not the same thing.
- b. **It looks like** he **might** need help.
- c. That is **possibly** the best thing you can do.

All of these examples show some sort of caution in making a statement, the hedges marked in bold marking the statements for a kind of uncertainty on the speaker's part, unwilling to express full commitment to the sentence.

This is one of the reasons hedging is so often used in academic writing and when presenting research, which is why hedging is so characteristic for the academic register and specifically German *Wissenschaftssprache* that uses hedging quite frequently. According to scientific maxims, theories cannot actually be verified, but only hold up until they are falsified. Attempts at absolute statements are rather frowned upon and thus, presenting results through hedging often is actually the most precise and accurate way a researcher can present their findings to an audience: "Hedging may present the true state of the writers' understanding, namely, the strongest claim a careful researcher can make" (Salager-Meyer 1994, 3).

Still, the two concepts of hedging and of epistemic modality cannot and should not be used synonymously, as this overlap is all there is to it - an overlap. Hedges are tools of epistemic modality, and expressing epistemic modality can be one of the functions of hedging. But hedging does also fulfil other functions besides this, and epistemic modality can be expressed through other tools as well, such as intonation. I have thus created this Venn diagram to show where the overlap and difference between the two concepts lies to clear up some of the confusion.

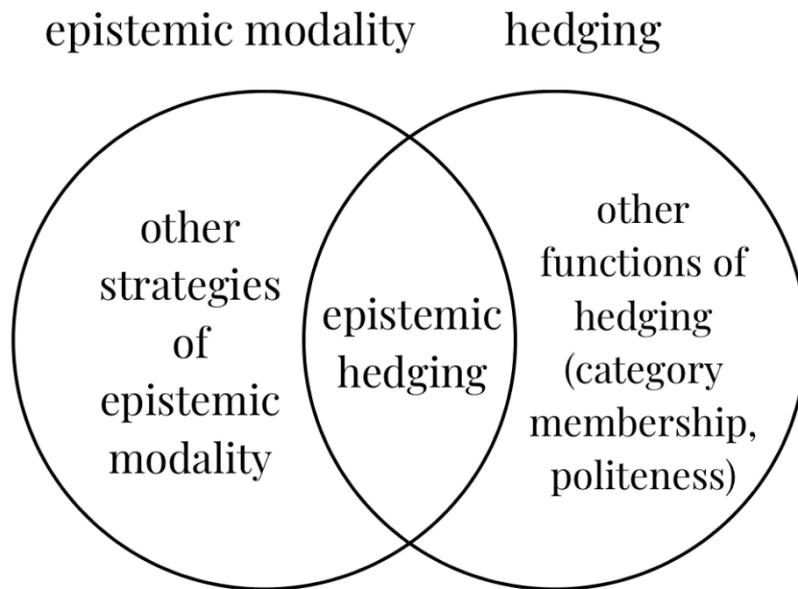


Figure 6: Venn diagram for epistemic modality and hedging

3.3 Politeness Theory and Face Threatening Acts

The last discursive function we will explore is hedging against the background of politeness theory, which is often seen as the main function hedging devices hold in language.

Prince et al. (1982) and Skelton (1988) believe that the main reason hedging is used, is in order to convey information in an unobtrusive and unostentatious way. Salager-Meyer (1994) wrote about this as well, stating that oftentimes, statements need to be toned down in order to not be perceived as impolite. Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) and Fraser (2010) wrote about hedging in relation to politeness and face threatening acts (FTAs), analysing how hedges are used in different types of politeness strategies.

According to politeness theory, there are four main politeness strategies interlocutors use to reduce the effects of face threats - namely bald on-record, negative politeness, positive politeness, and off-record (Brown & Levinson 1978, 1987). Two of these do not play a role when analysing hedging, as hedges are not used in bald on-record strategies, and only play a minor role in off-record strategies. If you consider hedging by evasion a hedging strategy, which some authors do (see for instance Fraser 2010), this would overlap with off-record politeness strategies, as both strategies express something general to avoid

conflict or a difficult question, instead of stating the speaker's true thoughts. For now however, we will focus on the two other strategies, positive and negative politeness.

Positive politeness strategies are used in order to not hurt the hearer's positive face. Speakers will thus use language that will increase familiarity and solidarity between speaker and hearer, to make the hearer feel valued and good about himself. Meanwhile, negative politeness strategies are deployed in order to minimize the threat on the hearer's negative face by imposing on them. Thus, when the speaker wants to mitigate the negative impact a statement could have on the hearer, or to make statements more tentative, hedging can be used (Brown & Levinson 1978, 1987).

Hedging can be a tool of positive and negative politeness, but already when taking the definitions of both strategies into account, it becomes clear that hedging is most often associated with negative politeness.

"Negative politeness strategies function to increase the social distance between interlocutors. It is essentially avoidance-based [...]. According to the authors, hedging is one of the strategies of negative politeness, which is aimed at avoiding directness in expressing their opinions, mitigating categorical statements and judgments." (Vlasyan 2018, 687)

In some cases however, hedging can also be used to express positive politeness, as Vlasyan (2018) wrote for instance when using tag questions at the end of a statement instead of simply making the statement, to make the hearer feel as if their opinion is valued and to make them feel included.

(11) It isn't your fault, **is it?**

As for negative politeness though, the examples are much more plentiful. Tang (2013) for instance used Prince et al's (1982) classification of hedges as adaptors, rounders, plausibility shields, and attribution shields, and showed how all of them can be used to express politeness. His examples (Tang 2013, 158-159) all fulfilled negative politeness strategies.

- (12) a. Your coat **is a little bit** dirty.
- b. My annual income is **about** the expenditure of a new car.
- c. **It's hard to say** if your poem is good, I'm not good at literature.
- d. **According to John**, all men are requested to wear suits at the party.

In (12a), the hedge *a little bit*, which is an adaptor, is used to lessen the impact of a statement that is criticizing the hearer. The rounder *about* in (12b) makes it possible for the speaker to not answer a question that is maybe too private for them, without threatening the hearer's face by refusing to answer the question altogether. In (12c), *it's hard to say* is a plausibility shield that lets the speaker avoid stating outright that the poem is not good, instead being polite by implying they do not have enough knowledge to pass a confident judgment. And lastly, the attribution shield *according to John* in (12d) makes the speaker's request that the hearer should wear a suit less direct and impolite, by shifting responsibility for said request to a third party, John.

These are only a few examples to illustrate how hedging devices are used to express politeness and avoid FTAs, but they certainly show that this is an important and frequently used function of hedging (Tang 2013).

Now that we have covered the three biggest reasons hedging is used in language, it is important to note that assumptions on the functional aspect of an instance of hedging can only be that - assumptions. The real reason why a speaker uses a hedge is not entirely possible to deduct with certainty from the outside as hedges are always polyfunctional. To illustrate this with an example, let us view the following sentence.

- (13) He is **kind of** rich, **I guess**.

This sentence can be analysed and interpreted through all different scopes. One could argue that the man in question has enough money to be considered *kind of rich*, but not quite enough to be classified as *rich*, thus the speaker is using hedging to show this ambiguity in category membership. On the other hand, it could be that the speaker does

not have enough knowledge about the man's wealth to make an absolute statement about him being rich, and is rather choosing to express this epistemic modality through hedging. And lastly, it could be that the man is in fact rich, and the speaker knows this as well, but chooses to use hedging devices to soften the statement for whatever reason - maybe the listener himself is rather poor and the speaker does not wish to come off as impolite by simply making this statement about wealth without hedging.

There can be numerous reasons why a speaker would use hedging devices, and it is important to be aware of what research says about the functional aspects of hedging in order to understand it fully. Due to this ambiguity in functionality, absolute assessments about the reasons behind individual instances of hedging should only be made very tentatively though.

4 Development of a Taxonomy for the German Language

With this insight and deeper understanding of the classification and function of hedging devices, it is now possible to step away from English, the most researched language when it comes to hedging, and focus on the goal of this thesis - developing a taxonomy for German standard language. Thus, from here on, all examples will be in German instead of English, taken from the corpora published by the DGD, or created by the author.

For this, and in order to draw examples from as many different aspects of standard German, I have not taken texts from only one corpus, but from four different corpora provided by the DGD. The DGD possesses a variety of different corpora, not all of which are fitting for this analysis of standard German though, since many of them are concerned with regional variants or dialects, such as the corpus *Australiendeutsch (Australian German, AD)*, which focuses on the German spoken by German emigrants to Australia. The corpora which seemed the most fitting for this were *Biographische und Reiseerzählungen (biographical and travel stories, BR)*, *Deutsch Heute (German today, DH)*, *Elizitierte Konfliktgespräche (elicited conflict discussions, EK)*, and the *Zwirner Korpus (Zwirn corpus, ZW)*, as they all feature transcripts of spoken, non-academic language in more or less standard German. I have taken one text from each of these corpora to draw examples from, except for the EK from which I have taken two texts, simply based on the fact that the texts in this corpus are very short compared to the others.

It is important to note that since all of these texts are transcripts from authentic spoken language, not all of the examples will be grammatically correct or full sentences and have been taken from the corpus as they are. Furthermore, since these hedging devices can be rather specific to the language and difficult to translate literally, the English translations are not perfectly accurate word by word, but rather reflect the general effect the hedge has on the sentence.

Lastly, I would once again like to note that the goal of our definition and taxonomy is not to be all-encompassing, but rather as precise as we can, focusing on the true core of what hedging is and leaving out the fringes of what linguists could argue also qualifies as hedging, but is not central to its concept.

Therefore, delimitation is necessary, showing what linguists have put under the umbrella of hedging, but what we will not consider here. From this on out, we will develop a working definition for hedging and then create a taxonomy of hedges, summarized in a chart. The classification used in the chart will later be explained further and illustrated through examples taken from our corpus.

4.1 Development of a Working Definition and Delimitation

Probably the most difficult part about creating a definition for hedging devices is drawing a line and making delimitations as to what to include and what not, as hedging in itself is a rather fuzzy concept. Clemen (1997) for instance comments on this issue:

"There is no limit to the linguistic expressions that can be considered as hedges. [...] The difficulty with these functional definitions is that almost any linguistic item or expression can be interpreted as a hedge [...] no linguistic items are inherently hedges but can acquire this quality depending on the communicative context or the co-text. This also means that no clear-cut lists of hedging expressions are possible" (Clemen 1997, 6).

Trying to simply create a list that contains all hedges used in German would not only be a very time consuming endeavour - it would also be a pointless one, as there is no such thing as the word class of hedges, with expressions rather only becoming hedges when used in context. It makes more sense to follow the approach of function over form when it comes to hedging.

First, we will have to make delimitations and identify the concepts we do not see fit for our definition. Something we will exclude from our understanding of what hedging devices are, are boosters, or reinforcements, something we have already discussed previously when speaking of how different authors classified hedges. Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) for instance do consider reinforcements to be part of hedging, as well as Lakoff (1972) to some extent when for example discussing the effect the expression *par excellence* has on statements about category membership. This does however not fit today's general understanding of hedges expressing tentativeness and the somewhat lessening of a statement, thus we will not consider boosters or reinforcements to be part of hedging for this definition.

Ken Hyland (1994) remarks that a hedge is any metalinguistic device that marks uncertainty, hesitation, ambiguity, and tentativeness in his works on hedging in academic writing. He does however use the term hedging very loosely as well, going so far as to include things such as punctuation under it. Some authors even see gestures such as shrugging or vocalizations such as *uhhhhm* or *weeeeell* as hedging (Fraser 2010), but since this thesis is focused on establishing a strict taxonomy I see this very critically and will not consider this as hedging. Lastly, something we will also not consider as hedging is hedging by evasion, so simply avoiding answering a question and switching the topic or saying something completely unrelated.

Taking these delimitations and the approaches from different authors into consideration, I have come up with the following definition:

"Hedges are words or phrases whose function in the context of a sentence is expressing ambiguity in category membership and / or indicating something less than full certainty or commitment to the sentence."

I have used *words or phrases* in this definition instead of for instance *metalinguistic devices* or *communicative strategies*, to already exclude things like gestures, punctuation, intonation, or vocalizations from what we consider hedging, as their inclusion dilutes the concept of hedging too much for our purpose.

Further, the use of *function in context* clears up any confusion that might result from a polyfunction some words or phrases might have, where in some contexts they are indeed used as hedges, and in other contexts they are not. It therefore reflects our approach of function over form. Let us illustrate why this is important through two examples.

(14) a. **Vielleicht** ist es eine gute Bachelorarbeit.

'**Maybe** it is a good bachelor thesis.'

b. Das ist **vielleicht** eine gute Bachelorarbeit!

'That is **one** good bachelor thesis!'

c. **Ich glaube**, er braucht Hilfe.

'**I think**, he needs help.'

d. **Ich glaube** an Gott.

'**I believe** in God.'

In (14a) and (14b), *vielleicht* might have the same form, but it only functions as a hedge in (14a), namely as an adaptor, while in (14b) *vielleicht* is a modal particle without any hedging function, expressing emphasis. The case is similar for (14c) and (14d), where in (14c) *ich glaube* is a hedge, more concretely a plausibility shield, whereas *ich glaube* in (14d) refers to one's religious belief, translating to *I believe* in English rather than *I think* in (14c), and does not signify any hedging. This is why context is crucial when identifying hedges as such.

Lastly, the purpose of the phrasing *expressing ambiguity in category membership and / or indicating something less than full certainty or commitment*, excludes concepts like hedging by evasion and boosters and reinforcements from our definition.

4.2 Taxonomy of Hedging Devices for Standard German

Now that a definition has been established, we can continue with our taxonomy of hedging devices used in German. To do this, we will first look at what is arguably the most well-known taxonomy of hedging devices, namely that by Salager- Meyer (1994) and Hyland (2005). We will show what their approach was and argue why it is not sufficient to simply adapt this already existing taxonomy and simply apply it to German, but why we will rather create a new one for the purpose of this thesis.

Table 1: Taxonomy of hedging devices by Salager-Meyer (1994) and Hyland (2005), adapted from Asfina et al. (2017, 651)

No.	Type	Variants	
1.	Shields	can/could may/might appear (s)/(ed)/(ing) seem (s)/(ed)/(ing(ly)) probable (ly) (un) likely suggest (s)/(ed)/(ing) speculate (s)/(ed)/(ing) indicate (s)/(d)/(ing) Ought plausible (ly) postulate (s)/(d)/(ing) Should suspect (s)/(ed)/(ing) typical (ly) doubt (s)/(ed)/(ing)/(ful(ly))	apparent (ly) argue (s)/(d)/(ing) assume (s)/(d)/(ing) claim (s)/(ed)/(ing) unclear (ly) estimate (s)/(d)/(ing) feel (s)/(ing)/felt guess (es)/(ed)/(ing) maybe perhaps possible (ly) presumable (ly) suppose (s)/(d)/(ing) tend (s)/(ed) to uncertain (ly) would
2.	Approximators of quantity, degree, frequency and time which express heed and coyness	approximately roughly somewhat quite in most (cases/instances) occasionally frequent(ly) often mainly on the whole relatively sometimes	about almost around broadly certain (amount/extent/level) fairly (in) general (ly) (at) large (ly) most(ly)/(of) rather usual(ly) (in) particular (ly)
3.	Expressions which express the authors'/speakers' personal doubt and direct involvement	(I/researcher) believe(s) to (my/our) knowledge in (my/our) view	from (my/our) perspective in (my/our) opinion (I/researcher) think(s)
4.	Emotionally-charged intensifiers (comment words used to project the authors'/speakers' reactions)	dishearteningly (of) particular (ly) surprisingly	essentially unexpectedly
5.	Compound hedges which comprise "strings of hedges" (i.e., the juxtaposition of several hedges)	it would seem somewhat unlikely that it could be suggested that it would seem likely that	it seems reasonable to assume it may suggest that

This taxonomy of hedging devices is one that is frequently quoted and often used in research, but there are some aspects of it that I see unfitting for the purpose of this thesis and for the approach we are taking on hedging.

The taxonomy is split into *types* and *variants*, subdividing hedges into five different types. Here is the first issue I have with this classification, namely that the subdivisions are not clear enough and overlap with one another. They loosely follow Prince et al. 's (1982) classification of hedges and also divide them into *shields* and *approximators*, but seem to use the terminology differently, as they for instance also propose *expressions which express the author's / speaker's personal doubt and direct involvement* as a separate class. Following Prince et al. 's approach, this should fall under the umbrella of shields, more

concretely plausibility shields. On the other hand, attribution shields seem to be completely left out of this taxonomy, not being listed under any of the types.

Also, adding a separate category of *compound hedges*, which are longer, more complex forms that are made up of strings of hedges, further gives the illusion that they form a separate entity outside of shields and approximators, which is not true, as they are made up of them. It would be more conclusive to add the fact that hedges can be combined into these compound hedges in a footnote or as a further elaboration separate from the chart.

If we do classify hedges into different types, I see it more fit to use a stricter and more comprehensive classification like that of Prince et al. into adaptors, rounders, plausibility shields, and attribution shields, thus minimizing overlap between the different types. Furthermore, Salager-Meyer (1994) and Hyland (2005) do include *emotionally-charged intensifiers*, in other words boosters, in their taxonomy, which we have already argued will not be included in our taxonomy of hedges.

The second, and in my opinion, larger issue though is the fact that the way the variants are listed makes it seem like this taxonomy is providing a complete overview of what words or phrases are hedging devices. There have been other approaches to taxonomies of hedging, such as that proposed by Martin-Martin (2008), but most of them run into a similar problems, most notably the attempt, or at least the illusion of an attempt, to create a complete list of hedging devices or grammatical or lexical categories that can be hedges. We have already discussed why this form over function approach is not appropriate for this linguistic phenomenon, as it is highly context dependent. It would be much more fitting to show which forms come up most frequently and to illustrate them with only few expressive examples, instead of including long lists of possible hedges in a taxonomy.

Thus, taking into account all these different approaches and what research tells us about hedging, I am proposing the following taxonomy for the German language:

Table 2: Taxonomy of hedging devices in standard German

Type	Subtype	Frequently occurring forms	Examples from corpus
approximators	adaptors	modal adverbs phraseologies indefinite pronouns degree particles adjectives	einigermaßen an und für sich ein bisschen ziemlich verhältnismäßig
approximators	rounders	adverbs adjectives phraseologies verbs expressing tendency postpositional phrases phrases that give a range of value	fast, schätzungsweise ungefähr, knapp so ziemlich tendieren, neigen oder so plus minus; zwei, drei
shields	plausibility shields	modal verbs (+ conjunctive forms) adverbs nouns adjectives subjectivization (1st person + verbs of cognition / estimation) phrases that negate certainty	können, müssen vielleicht, eventuell Möglichkeit, Ansicht möglich, wahrscheinlich ich denke... ich weiß es nicht
shields	attribution shields	agentless constructions (often with <i>man</i> or <i>es</i>) constructions with other entity as subject adverbs	man kann sagen... laut... offenbar, scheinbar

This taxonomy was created following the classification of hedges by Prince et al. (1982) since it is the one that provides the most well established terminology when it comes to hedging and is also the one that seems the most conclusive, because it avoids overlap between its subtypes while still being comprehensive.

To make sure this taxonomy is fitted to the German language, I did not simply translate lists of hedging devices from English to German, but rather followed more of a bottom-up approach where I went through the five different texts drawn from the corpus of the DGD, identifying each occurrence of hedging in context and noting which forms came up the most frequently.

It is important to note that thus the phrasing *frequently occurring forms* used in this chart, instead a simpler *forms*, is intentional, because it indicates that this is not a complete list, but rather that those are the forms that came up frequently when analysing our corpora. Having these forms listed under their correct type helps pick out hedges more easily when using this taxonomy as a guideline to analyse a corpus, but it does not make the mistake of making it seem like these forms always have to be hedges - for instance assuming all adverbs to be hedging devices simply because they are listed under every sub-classification would simply be untrue, as adverbs do not always express hedging content. This also does not mean that other forms that are not listed here cannot be hedges.

That is also the reason why I chose to include only few examples in the chart - their function is to make these rather abstract concepts more tangible and help understand what hedges can look like, thus making them easier to identify when working on a corpus of your own. But these examples are in no way meant to be complete lists of words one should search for in a text and simply apply the label of hedging onto without considering the context.

To further gain deeper understanding into how these forms can manifest themselves as hedging devices in standard German, we will take a closer look at all four sub-classifications and explain and visualize them further by providing examples drawn from our corpora.

4.2.1 Approximators

First, we will see how approximators are used in the German language. To take a step back and look at the theory again: approximators are those hedges that are directly concerned with the propositional content, not with the speaker's positioning towards said

content. Approximators can be differentiated into adaptors, which show that the content deviates from a prototypical situation or value, and rounders, which show that the content is somehow close to, but not equal to a comparative value.

4.2.1.1 Adaptors

First, we will see how adaptors are frequently used in standard German. When analysing the texts for hedging devices, the main five forms that could be identified as adaptors were modal adverbs, indefinite pronouns, degree particles, phraseologies, and adjectives. We will illustrate all of these with examples below.

Modal adverbs, such as *eigentlich* (*actually*), *sozusagen* (*so to speak*), *eher* (*rather*), or *einigermaßen* (*relatively*), were by far the word class that was most often used as adaptors, with examples easy to find in all of our texts. They occur frequently in spoken language and are relatively simple to identify as adaptors.

- (15) a. Und dann müsste man doch **eigentlich** zurecht kommen.
'And then you should **actually** get by.'
- b. Sie sind mit dem Wald **sozusagen** aufgewachsen hier.
'You have grown up with the forest here, **so to speak**.'
- c. Das ist der einzige österreichische Rapper der in Deutschland auch **einigermaßen** auch populär ist.
'That is the only Austrian rapper that is **kind of** popular in Germany too.'

Adverbs are plentiful, yet as you can see in example (15b), they do not always literally translate to adverbs in English. Here for instance, the phrase *so to speak* had been shortened to the word *sozusagen* in German, expressing the same content, just in a different form. This is one of the reasons it is so important to do language-specific research for hedging devices, because the same hedge can have different forms entirely in two different languages.

Because of the overwhelming majority of adverbs when it comes to adaptors, it would be easy to draw the conclusion that this is all there is to adaptors and that they cannot take on any other form, but this would be incorrect. A good example to illustrate this is the

following sentence from our corpus, which does in fact use three different hedging devices, all of them adaptors, of which only one is an adverb.

- (16) Das ist ein Unterschied ob ich jetzt in der Schule da rede ich **ein bisschen** anders als daheim also weil wir doch **eh**er da weiter in die Berge herinnen sind als wo ich **an sich** herkomme.

'There is a difference whether I'm in school, there I talk **a bit** differently than at home because we are **rather** more in the mountains there than where I am from **per se**.'

Ein *bisschen* (*a bit*) is an indefinite pronoun which is here used as an adaptor to the word *anders*, lessening its force. *Eher* (*rather*) is an adverb, just like the examples in (15), and lastly, *an sich* (*per se*) is a phraseology, or *Wortverbindung* in German, also often used in its longer form *an und für sich* (*per se*). Another example for these phraseologies being used as hedges would be the following sentence:

- (17) Na wir sind denn trotzdem gefahrn und ham da eigentlich **mehr oder weniger** die Zeit am Fernseher und Rundfunk zunächst verbracht.

'Well, we still drove there and spent **more or less** our whole time in front of the TV or radio at first.'

Another form that came up while analysing the corpus was the use of degree particles such as *ziemlich* (*pretty*) or *ganz* (*pretty*) as adaptors. I have not seen them used as frequently as adverbs, but there are indeed examples of degree particles functioning as hedges.

- (18) a. Und es war **ziemlich** gefährlich, da drinne zu sein.

'And it was **pretty** dangerous to be in there.'

b. Ja das ist **ganz** witzig.

'Yeah, that is **pretty** funny.'

Note again that these particles are especially hard to translate to English as their nuance in meaning is very specific to the German language and often gets lost in translation or results in the same translation for different words as in examples (18a) and (18b) both resulting in *pretty*. It is also important to note here that while some degree particles as those used in these examples do fulfil hedging purposes, many degree particles such as *sehr* (*very*) or *mega* (*really*) cannot be considered hedges if we follow our definition. The reason is that they function as boosters or reinforcements, which we have delimited from our understanding of what hedging devices are, but might be considered hedges under less strict definitions.

There is one last form of adaptors we will discuss here, namely adjectives as adaptors. While adjectives are more frequently used as rounders, there are instances of them fulfilling the role of adaptors.

(19) a. Und das Weizer Krankenhaus ist an sich ich weiß nicht nicht wirklich nichts bes/ also nicht **verhältnismäßig** nicht so gut.

'And the Weizer hospital is in itself, I don't know, not really, not especially/ well **comparatively** not so good.'

b. Also so ich habe ja **relativ** viel Insiderwissen.

'Well, I do have a lot of inside knowledge, **relatively**.'

Example (19a) contains multiple instances of hedging, but we will only focus on the use of *verhältnismäßig* (*relatively*) here. One might argue that this adjective is a rounder and not an adaptor as it compares the propositional content to a value. But I argue it is indeed an adaptor, as it does not compare, or round, the propositional content to an actual concrete comparative value, but rather an imaginary, prototypical one. This, following Prince et al.'s definition of marking something as deviating from a standard or prototype, makes this an adaptor. The same goes for example (19b) where treating *relativ* (*relatively*) with a similar logic makes it qualify as an adaptor.

4.2.1.2 Rounders

Next, we will see how rounders are used in colloquial German. Here, the main forms I have found were adverbs, adjectives, phraseologies, and verbs or phrases expressing tendency. They can also take on the form of mostly short postpositional phrases, or phrases that show a range of values in which the propositional value falls.

As with adaptors, the first form we will look at again are adverbs. Adverbs such as *circa* (*circa*), *fast* (*almost*), *schätzungsweise* (*estimated*), *rund* (*around*), or *etwa* (*about*) can express hedging content and function as rounders. Though, as so often, many of these expressions also have alternative meanings, for instance *rund* also refers to the shape *round* and *etwa* sometimes functions as a modal particle. As always with hedging, it is thus important to take into account the context of the sentence.

(20) a. Diesen Zeitungsartikel, den haben **fast** alle oder sehr viele Leute gelesen.

'This news article, **almost** all, or a lot of people have read it.'

b. Am Siebten da warn' s fünf- sechstausend **vielleicht**.

'On the seventh there were **roughly** five-six thousand.'

Note that (20b) *vielleicht* is also a rather special case because the word is context dependent and can have the meaning of *maybe*, *possibly* in some contexts, whereas it has the meaning of *roughly*, *approximately* in other contexts. Example (20b) is the latter, with *vielleicht* expressing an estimation.

Next, there are adjectives that can function as rounders, such as *knapp* (*just short*), *ungefähr* (*roughly*), or *tendenziell* (*tend to*), which are for instance used in the following examples:

(21) a. Also wir reden zuhause nicht Hochdeutsch aber **tendenziell** ein bisschen gehobener

'Well, we don't speak standard German at home but we **tend to** speak a bit upscale.'

b. Erzählt einmal **ungefähr**, wie es gewesen ist.

'Go explain how it was **roughly**.'

There are also some fixed phraseologies that can be used as rounders in hedging. Examples for those would be *so ziemlich*, or *so gut wie*, both translating roughly to *pretty much* in English. An example for this would be the following sentence.

(22) Ich hatte sonst früher nie was überhaupt **so gut wie** nie was mit der Stasi zu tun

'Back then I otherwise **pretty much** never had anything to do with the Stasi.'

Another form that came up in our analysis was verbs or phrases that expressed some form of tendency or inclination, such as *tendieren*, *neigen* or *den Hang haben*, all translating roughly to *to tend* in English. This is also better explained through an illustration.

(23) Du **tendierst** in letzter Zeit dazu halt, äh, immern bißl spät wiederzukommen

'Lately, you **tend to**, uhm, come back a bit late.'

In example (23), the verb *tendieren* (*to tend*) expresses that the hearer comes back late, but that it does not happen all of the time, just that there is a tendency towards that behavior, thus I would classify this as a hedge.

Rounders can also take on the form of mostly short postpositional phrases such as *oder so* (*or something*) or *irgendwie sowas* (*or something like that*).

(24) Dona novis pace **oder irgendwie sowas**.

'Dona novis pace **or something like that**.'

Here, the speaker says the phrase *dona novis pace* (correctly: *dona nobis pacem*), but then probably realizes that what he said was not entirely what he wanted to express. Thus, he

adds the postpositional phrase *oder irgendwie sowas* at the end, to show that what he wanted to express is somewhat close to what he did say, but not exactly the same.

Another case in which rounders take on the form of phrases, is when there is a range of values given in which the propositional content falls, while leaving ambiguity as to which value exactly it has. One way to do this that I have come across in the texts is a form where multiple successive values are listed together, showing that the actual propositional content lies somewhere in that range. This can already be seen in example (20c) *fünf-sechstausend* (*five-six thousand*), but will be further illustrated with another example.

(25) Nachmittags, **um vier, um fünf rum**.

'In the afternoon **around four, five.**'

The *rum* already expresses hedging and is also a rounder, the shortened, colloquial version of *herum* (*around*), but the *um vier, um fünf* (*at four, at five*) is the hedge we are interested in. Here, the speaker gives a time range, expressing something is happening at four or five, or sometime in between, while leaving the exact time uncertain. Another way to do this is by stating a concrete value and adding the rounder *plus minus* to it, either on its own, or with another value that shows the range by which it can differ from said concrete value. An example would be following sentence:

(26) Und das warn an dem Abend so um die siebzichtausend rum, **plus minus zehntausend** so ungefähr.

'And that evening there were around seventy thousand, **plus minus around ten thousand.**'

The speaker of the sentence in (26) expresses that there were seventy thousand people present that evening, but then hedges this by stating that there could have been ten thousand more, or ten thousand fewer, leaving the concrete number of people ambiguous.

Lastly, something I have not listed in the taxonomy chart, as I have only come across one instance while analysing the texts, but which did in this case function as a rounder, is the degree particle *gegen* (*towards*).

(27) Dies dies ist nicht direkt auf der Kornebene, sondern es ist mehr daher zu, **gegen** Nordrach

'That is not directly on the Kornebene, but it is rather **towards** Nordrach.'

The degree particle here shows hedging, since the speaker does not express where exactly the location is, just that it is *towards* Nordrach, expressing uncertainty and ambiguity in the place through this hedge.

4.2.2 Shields

Now that we have discussed what approximators can look like in German, we will move onto shields. Again, as for the theory: shields are those hedges that are concerned not with the truth value of the hedging content itself, but rather with the attitude the speaker has towards it. Shields can be subdivided into plausibility shields, which show a speaker's personal doubt or lack of involvement, and attribution shields, which shift the responsibility to a third party or outside force.

4.2.2.1 Plausibility Shields

Plausibility shields can take on a range of forms and there were a multitude of examples to be found in our texts. The main forms that came up rather frequently were modal verbs and their conjunctive forms, adverbs, nouns, and adjectives that express some form of epistemic modality. Furthermore, there is the strategy of subjectivization, as well as phrases that negate certainty.

First, let us look at an example where a modal verb is used as a plausibility shield. The modal verbs in German are *dürfen* (*may*), *können* (*can*), *mögen* (*want*), *müssen* (*must*), *sollen* (*shall*), and *wollen* (*will*), along with their conjunctive forms, are often used for hedging.

(28) Trotzdem, ich meine weils später werden **könne**.

'Still, I mean because it **could** get late.'

Note that in (28) the speaker used *könne* instead of *könnte* (*could*), which is simply due to dialectal differences. By using the modal verb *könnte*, the speaker leaves some ambiguity open whether or not it will get late, thus hedging the statement.

Another form that is frequently used are adverbs, such as *vielleicht* (*maybe*), *eventuell* (*potentially*), *wahrscheinlich* (*probably*), or *möglicherweise* (*possibly*).

(29) a. Also das das liegt mir **wahrscheinlich** nich so.

'Well, I am **probably** not that good at it.'

b. Es hört sich **eventuell** schon ein bisschen anders an.

'It **potentially** sounds a bit different.'

c. **Vielleicht** wird' s gar nicht so schlimm.

'**Maybe** it won't be that bad.'

Without these hedges, the statements in (29a) to (29c) would be absolute ones, but with the hedges in place, there is room for uncertainty on the speaker's part. This can be due to the speaker not wanting to be quoted on something false, but can also have other reasons, as discussed in the section analysing functions of hedging. Here, you can again see how differently *vielleicht* is used depending on its context. Whereas it has functioned as a rounder in (20b), it expresses epistemic modality in (29c), thus translating more to *maybe* than to *roughly* here.

Adjectives can also be plausibility shields, often in the combination of *es ist* (*it is*) + epistemic adjective. Some adjectives that are often used in this context are those expressing epistemic modality, such as *wahrscheinlich* (*probable*), *möglich* (*possible*), or *denkbar* (*thinkable*). Note that *wahrscheinlich* can be an adjective or an adverb, as in (29a), depending on the context.

(30) Das kann **möglich** sein, dass eine so gewesen ist.

'It can be **possible** that one of them was like that.'

Furthermore, some nouns can be used as plausibility shields in certain contexts, namely those that express some sort of epistemic modality or subjective judgment, such as *Möglichkeit* (possibility), *Wahrscheinlichkeit* (probability), *Eindruck* (impression), or *Ansicht* (opinion).

(31) a. Ich hatte also den **Eindruck**, dass die Polizei und die Einsatzgruppen da es nicht drauf anlegten auf irgendwelche Konfrontation.

'I was under the **impression** that the police and the task forces were not aiming for any confrontation.'

b. Und da bin ich nicht, bin ich wirklich der **Ansicht**, dass du eben wirklich früher zu Hause sein solltest!

'And I am not, I am really of the **opinion** that you should really be home earlier!'

Note that there is a lot of overlap between these forms we just discussed, since they are often simply different derivational forms of the same morpheme, such as the adverb *möglicherweise*, adjective *möglich*, and noun *Möglichkeit*, which can all be used as plausibility shields.

Furthermore, a strategy that is often deployed to express hedging and classifies as a plausibility shield, is subjectivization. This mostly takes on the form of a 1st person pronoun + a verb of cognition like *denken* (think), *glauben* (believe/think), *meinen* (mean), or, more colloquially, *finden* (find), or verbs expressing estimation, such as *schätzen* (estimate).

(32) a. Aber ich mach schon was, **finde ich**.

'But I do some things, **I think**.'

b. **Ich glaube** die könnte man schon unterscheiden.

'**I think** you could tell them apart.'

This can also take on the form of phrases in which certainty is negated, such as *ich weiß nicht* (*I do not know*), *ich bin mir nicht sicher* (*I am not sure*), or *ich kann es nicht beschwören* (*I cannot swear to it*).

(33) Wenn man noch immer weiter nach Norden so Birkfeld und rein nach **weiß ich nicht** Wenigzell so die haben äh gröberer also einen anderen [Dialekt]

'When you [drive] further into the north, towards Birkfeld and into, **I don't know**, Wenigzell, they have a more rough, well a different [dialect]'

Lastly, something that I did not find an example for in the five texts from our corpus, but which also would be a possible form of a plausibility shield in German, is the use of past participles of estimating verbs, such as *geschätzt*, the past participle of the verb *schätzen* (*estimate*). A possible example sentence for this would be the following:

(34) Es waren **geschätzt** 20 Leute auf der Party.

'There were **approximately** 20 people at the party.'

4.2.2.2 Attribution Shields

The last sub-class of hedging we will discuss are attribution shields. The scope of forms they usually take on in German is not as plentiful as for some of the other classes, but there were still some different forms I have come across while analysing the corpus. Mainly, the ones that came up most frequently were agentless constructions, often with *man* or *es* as the subject, constructions with another entity than the speaker as the subject, and again, adverbs.

First, agentless constructions can be attribution shields, either as passive constructions or as active ones with *man* or *es* as the subject. They show uncertainty in the hedging

content, but let the speaker show this uncertainty not in a subjective way, like plausibility shields do, but rather in a general, more objective sense.

(35) a. **Man kann eher sagen**, dass wir Hochdeutsch sprechen.

'**One could rather say** that we speak standard German.'

b. **Das war ja bekannt**, dass die dass die aus allem Geld machten.

'**It was known** that they make money from anything.'

The example (35a) shows a construction with the indefinite pronoun *man* as the subject, thus framing the statement that they speak standard German not as a subjective opinion the speaker holds, but rather as one that you could generally agree on. Similarly, in (35b) the speaker does not take direct responsibility for the statement, but also names no concrete source they attribute this knowledge to, rather just stating it as general knowledge that the people in question make money through anything.

If there is a concrete source the speaker wants to quote, there is also the strategy to do this through active constructions that have a third party, or another entity than the speaker, as the subject. This shifts the responsibility for the accuracy of the statement from the speaker to said third party. In academic writing, this is often done by referring to the data or to other researchers, but as we are more concerned with colloquial speech, let us illustrate how this can be done in colloquial language through some examples.

(36) a. Ich mach zwar **deiner Meinung nach** nicht übermäßig viel.

'**In your opinion** I might not do overly much.'

b. Da is die an nem Sonntag hergekommen und **hat gesagt**, da sollte ne Veranstaltung sein.

'She came home on a Sunday and **said** that there would be an event.'

Example (36a) hedges the statement by shifting the responsibility of the statement to the hearer, saying that only in the opinion of the hearer, the speaker does not do much.

Similarly, in (36b), the speaker does not simply state that there is an event on Sunday, but shifts the responsibility for the statement to the woman who told the speaker that information.

Lastly, as with the other subclasses, attributional shields can also take on the form of adverbs, such as *offenbar* (*apparently*), *anscheinend* (*seemingly*), or *scheinbar* (*seemingly*).

(37) Es gab ja **offenbar** auch irgendwelche Bewegungen.

'There were **apparently** also some movements.'

Example (37) shows how adverbs can be used as attribution shields, and functions similarly to example (35b) in that the speaker has no concrete source to quote or any third party to refer to. Through the hedge, the information is instead framed as one that is generally observable and objective, thus not the opinion or perception of the speaker directly.

This concludes the main forms I have found in the texts I based this proposed taxonomy on, but the examples found in the corpus were much more plentiful than possible to show in this thesis. These were simply the most expressive examples I found to illustrate some of the nuances in hedging in the German standard language the best.

5 Conclusion

This thesis aimed at creating a definition and proposing a taxonomy for hedging devices in standard German. To achieve this, we followed a rather theoretical approach, looking at how different linguists and scholars defined and sub-classified hedging in the past and which terminology is most used and best fitted for our goal. Furthermore, we analysed the functional aspects behind hedging, showing the three main functions behind this strategy, namely expressing category membership, epistemic modality, and politeness. Here, arguably the most important step was to clear up the rather fuzzy boundary between epistemic modality and hedging, showing where the two concepts overlap and where they differ. All of these findings were used to come together to create our working definition of hedging for this thesis. Lastly, we worked with corpora derived from the DGD, following a bottom-up approach to identify the most frequently occurring forms of hedging in our texts, sub-classifying them according to our chosen terminology and illustrating them with examples from said corpora.

Three main conclusions can be drawn from this thesis. First, the fact that there is different, oftentimes conceptually overlapping terminology used to describe hedging, depending on which approach and which author you follow, makes talking about hedging rather complex. This includes different views on what concepts should be included under the term of hedging, and which do not fall under that scope, as well as how to sub-classify the concept further. Thus, it is important to make clear delimitations, whether you choose to make them strict or loose, and have a clear definition of hedging before attempting any sort of analysis. This thesis followed a rather strict approach with a very tight delimitation of what should be considered hedging, and proposed a taxonomy of hedging devices in standard German according to this definition.

Two, though it is important to be aware of the functional aspects of hedging and what semantic as well as pragmatic functions they can fulfil in language, it is important to keep in mind that it is not always possible to make an outside diagnosis as to why a speaker used a hedging device in a certain context.

And lastly, and arguably most importantly, hedging devices are highly context dependent and cannot simply be classified as such by conducting a keyword search, but rather have to always be carefully viewed in the context of a sentence to judge whether there is indeed an instance of hedging or not. The taxonomy gives an overview of frequently occurring

forms and classifies them under their subdivisions, but is only meant to serve as a guideline when analysing a corpus or making any further research.

The method used in this thesis does however have its shortcomings. As the corpus used only consisted of five texts, there were certainly a multitude of possible hedging strategies in standard German which were overlooked that could have been discovered by using a larger sample size, analysing more or longer texts. Furthermore, it would be interesting to conduct a study specifically dedicated to finding out which of these strategies are used most frequently and how this differs across text genres, also using a larger corpus. Keeping the context dependency of these devices in mind, one could theoretically write about the uses and delimitations of each single hedging device, though this is certainly beyond the scope of a thesis like this.

Further aspects of hedging which would certainly be interesting to explore would be how hedging in standard German concretely differs with that used in the scientific register, or *Wissenschaftssprache*, both considering the quantity as well as the specific forms used in either.

More generally speaking, further research on hedging in other languages, especially from other language families, would certainly offer new insights on a concept that has been mainly explored in the English language. Hedging is a highly interesting, albeit complex linguistic strategy, and thus exploring as many different aspects of it is certainly a worthwhile endeavour.

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Appendix

List of examples drawn from online corpora

Corpus 1: Datenbank für Gesprochenes Deutsch, Corpus: Deutsch Heute, Text: Transkript DH--_E_00230_SE_31_T_01

- (15c) Das ist der einzige österreichische Rapper der in Deutschland auch einigermaßen auch populär ist. (0266, BIR3)
- (16) Das ist ein Unterschied ob ich jetzt in der Schule da rede ich ein bisschen anders als daheim also weil wir doch eher da weiter in die Berge herinnen sind als wo ich an sich herkomme. (0050, BIR3)
- (18b) Ja das ist ganz witzig. (0247, BIR3)
- (19a) Und das Weizer Krankenhaus ist an sich ich weiß nicht nicht wirklich nichts bes/ also nicht verhältnismäßig nicht so gut. (0006, BIR3)
- (19b) Also so ich habe ja relativ viel Insiderwissen. (0490, BIR3)
- (21a) Also wir reden zuhause nicht Hochdeutsch aber tendenziell ein bisschen gehobener. (0077, BIR3)
- (29b) Es hört sich eventuell schon ein bisschen anders an. (0162, BIR3)
- (32b) Ich glaube die könnte man schon unterscheiden. (0426, BIR3)
- (33) Wenn man noch immer weiter nach Norden so Birkfeld und rein nach weiß ich nicht Wenigzell so die haben äh gröberen also einen anderen [...] (0033, BIR3)
- (1b) / (35a) Man kann eher sagen, dass wir Hochdeutsch sprechen. (0074, BIR3)

Corpus 2: Datenbank für Gesprochenes Deutsch, Corpus: Elizitierte Konfliktgespräche, Transkript EK--_E_00078_SE_01_T_01

- (15a) Und dann müsste man doch eigentlich zurecht kommen. (p. 5)
- (32a) Aber ich mach schon was, finde ich. (p.1)
- (36a) Ich mach zwar deiner Meinung nach nicht übermäßig viel. (p.1)

Corpus 3: Datenbank für Gesprochenes Deutsch, Corpus: Elizitierte Konfliktgespräche, Transkript EK--_E_00031_SE_01_T_01

- (23) Du tendierst in letzter Zeit dazu halt, äh, immern bißl spät wiederzukommen. (8-9)

- (28) Trotzdem, ich meine weils später werden könne. (37)
- (31b) Und da bin ich nicht, bin ich wirklich der Ansicht, dass du eben wirklich früher zu Hause sein solltest! (46-47)

**Corpus 4: Datenbank für Gesprochenes Deutsch, Corpus: Zwirner Korpus,
Transkript ZW--_E_00514_SE_01_T_01**

- (15b) Sie sind mit dem Wald sozusagen aufgewachsen hier. (0001, S1)
- (21b) Erzählt einmal ungefähr, wie es gewesen ist. (0043, S3)
- (27) Dies dies ist nicht direkt auf der Kornebene, sondern es ist mehr daher zu, gegen Nordrach. (0044, S2)
- (30) Das kann möglich sein, dass eine so gewesen ist. (0100, S2)

**Corpus 5: Datenbank für Gesprochenes Deutsch, Corpus: Biographische und
Reiseerzählungen, Transkript BR--_E_00006_SE_01_T_01**

- (17) Na wir sind denn trotzdem gefahren und ham da eigentlich mehr oder weniger die Zeit am Fernseher und Rundfunk zunächst verbracht. (0146, GM)
- (18a) Und es war ziemlich gefährlich, da drinne zu sein. (0119, BK)
- (20a) Diesen Zeitungsartikel, den haben fast alle oder sehr viele Leute gelesen. (0179, TR)
- (20b) Am Siebten da warn' s fünf- sechstausend vielleicht. (0210, TR)
- (1a) / (22) Ich hatte sonst früher nie was überhaupt so gut wie nie was mit der Stasi zu tun. (0463, GM)
- (24) Dona novis pace oder irgendwie sowas. (0538, BK)
- (25) Nachmittags, um vier, um fünf rum. (0033, TR)
- (26) Und das warn an dem Abend so um die siebzichtausend rum, plus minus zehntausend so ungefähr. (0208, TR)
- (29a) Also das das liegt mir wahrscheinlich nich so. (0781, TR)
- (1c) / (29c) Vielleicht wird' s gar nicht so schlimm. (0185, TR)
- (31a) Ich hatte also den Eindruck, dass die Polizei und die Einsatzgruppen da es nicht drauf anlegten auf irgendwelche Konfrontation. (0046, TR)
- (35b) Das war ja bekannt, dass die dass die aus allem Geld machten. (0474, TR)

- (36b) Da is die an nem Sonntag hergekommen und hat gesagt, da sollte ne
Veranstaltung sein. (0019, TR)
- (37) Es gab ja offenbar auch irgendwelche Bewegungen. (0526, GM)