

## **Week 2: The Division of Time II & Cautious Language ('hedging')**

### **The future**

There are a number of ways of marking the future, including the following:

- a. The delivery **will arrive** at 10am. (auxiliary verb *will* + infinitive form of the main verb)
- b. The new department store **opens** its doors in February. (present simple tense)
- c. The delivery is **going to arrive** at 10am (auxiliary verb *going to* + infinitive form of the main verb)

**Task 1: Is there any difference in meaning/style between the three grammatical structures above, or can they be used interchangeably?**

**Task 2: What is strange about the following sentence?**

When the Bank of England will meet next week to make decisions regarding interest rates, there is likely to be intense discussion.

The use of the auxiliary verb *will* or the simple present tense (see a & b above) indicate that the future event is **certain**. In academic writing, expressing **certainty** about future activities or states is unusual as the writer is expected to project modesty and proper caution, as well as to anticipate negative reactions to the claims being advanced. Furthermore, marking the future tense by means of the somewhat informal '*going to*' is not widely accepted in formal academic writing.

In other words, marking the future tense with any type of future verb form, such as '*will*', '*going to*', or the simple present tense, is often considered to be inappropriately definite and/or conversational and colloquial. Instead modal verbs such as '*may*', '*can*' or '*could*', and phrases such as '*it is possible that/likely to*', are used to project an appropriate amount of hesitation and cautious claim making.

Studies of academic writing produced by non-native speakers of English suggest that it often creates the impression of an inappropriately high degree of certainty. This is partly due to the fact that non-native speakers employ more markers of future tense (e.g. '*will*') than native speakers.

**Tip: Use '*will*' when you want to express certainty. However, when future events are less than certain, as is often the case, academic writers are encouraged to employ modal verbs such as '*may*', '*can*' and '*could*', and phrases such as '*it is possible/likely to*', instead.**

In the excerpt (a) below, the uses of the future tense give a high degree of certainty to the text, certainty which may well not reflect reality. In excerpt (b) this has been corrected.

a) In countries like Costa Rica, political decisions are based on the economic model. Under this model, the market competition **will** increase, and the economy **will** solve most problems in an efficient way without any intervention from the government.

b) In countries like Costa Rica, political decisions are based on the economic model. Under this model, the market competition **may** increase, and the economy **can** solve most problems in an efficient way without any intervention from the government.

**Source:** Hinkel (2004)

**Task 3: A less than certain future**

**The excerpt below is a continuation of the text above. Reword it replacing definite future tenses with modal verbs with less definite meaning and/or phrases like ‘it is likely/possible that’ as is the convention in academic writing.**

When markets do not work well, the government will try to fix them, but they will fail because the market cannot be fixed by the government. The market will solve its own problems, and it will benefit the people and create a stable economy. In turn, the stable economy will lead the country to political stability, and the political order will give the people peace for a long time.

**Cautious Language (‘hedging’)**

Not only is caution advisable when talking about the future, it should also feature when making claims, particularly if there is not a great deal of evidence to support what you are claiming to be true. In the words of Hyland (1998), “the purpose of hedging is to reduce the writer’s commitment to the truthfulness of a statement”.

**Task 1: Compare the following two texts. Which do you think is preferable, and why?**

Adjusting to higher education	Adjusting to higher education
<p>1. Other new students refer to feelings of bewilderment because of the differences in size between school and a large university or polytechnic. . . . The sheer variety of possible activities is confusing. . . . Students who have chosen to cater for themselves have difficulty in finding time for shopping and housekeeping. . . . To these domestic problems are added financial difficulties when grants fail to arrive, in the case of foreign students who have no family at hand to assist them.</p> <p>2. Discussion with students in various university departments shows that they are not so fortunate. . . . Failure to specify and to communicate aims and objectives also have long-term consequences. . . . Initially practice should be offered in reading, taking notes from lectures or books and in writing brief reports or paragraphs. . . . Skill in skimming articles to select important or relevant points, and use of the index to look up a topic in a number of books, also need practice. Science students grow accustomed to careful, sequential reading through a text and need reminding that there are other ways of reading and using books. . . . Students' skills in writing differ widely on entry. Problems arise with those who are hardly literate initially. . . .</p> <p>3. The problems of adjusting to life at university, polytechnic or college of higher education is more acute for mature students. Nonetheless, it is possible to discern similarities within groups of mature students that have implications for teaching and learning in higher education. Various studies show that there are three reasons why adults take UP full-time study: (1) to make a change in their career; (2) to obtain a job qualification - for such reasons as job promotion; (3) to seek personal and intellectual development.</p> <p>4. The difficulties facing adult learners are categorised into three kinds – social, psychological and physiological... But for others such problems do not arise.</p>	<p>1. Other new students may refer to feelings of bewilderment because of the differences in size between school and a large university or polytechnic. . . . The sheer variety of possible activities can be confusing. . . . Students who have chosen to cater for themselves may, at first, have difficulty in finding time for shopping and housekeeping. . . . To these domestic problems may be added financial difficulties when grants fail to arrive, often in the case of foreign students who have no family at hand to assist them.</p> <p>2. Discussion with students in various university departments suggests that some are not so fortunate. . . . Failure to specify and to communicate aims and objectives may also have long-term consequences. . . . Initially practice can be offered in reading, taking notes from lectures or books and, perhaps, in writing brief reports or paragraphs. . . . Skill in skimming articles to select important or relevant points, and use of the index to look up a topic in a number of books, may also need practice. Science students, in particular, tend to grow accustomed to careful, sequential reading through a text and may need reminding that there are other ways of reading and using books. . . . Students' skills in writing often differ widely on entry. Problems most frequently arise with those who seem hardly literate initially. . . .</p> <p>3. The problems of adjusting to life at university, polytechnic or college of higher education can be more acute for mature students, but it does not follow that this will necessarily be the case. . . . Nonetheless, speaking in broad terms it is possible to discern some similarities within groups of mature students that suggest implications for teaching and learning in higher education. It appears, for example, from various studies that there are three main reasons why adults take UP full-time study: (1) to make a change in their career; (2) to obtain a job qualification - for such reasons as job promotion; (3) to seek personal and intellectual development.</p> <p>4. The difficulties facing adult learners can, for convenience, be categorised into three kinds – social, psychological and physiological... But for others such problems do not seem to arise.</p>

Source: Jordan (1990).

**Task 2: Underline/Highlight all the examples of cautious language in the right hand text above.**

**Task 3: Cautious language is - as one might expect - commonly found in conclusions. Compare the two conclusions below, underlining/highlighting examples of cautious language in the second one.**

<p>This literature review has discussed both the advantages and disadvantages to countries of origin and receiving states of the free movement of labour within EU countries. Whilst the right will ultimately be of benefit to all member states, a transition period during which adjustments to the new circumstances can be made is desirable. It is obviously useful if future policy is informed by the consequences of past practice, and it is therefore worthy of note that the literature which draws on the experience of certain countries at the time of past EU enlargements supports this view. The evidence is not unsubstantial, and a strategy which permits member states, unilaterally, to introduce transition period legislation is the most sensible option. The desirability and workability of such an option, and models for legislation, are the subject of the following study.</p>	<p>This literature review has discussed both the potential advantages and disadvantages to countries of origin and receiving states of the free movement of labour within EU countries. Whilst it seems likely that the right will ultimately be of benefit to all member states, a transition period during which adjustments to the new circumstances can be made may well be desirable. It is often useful if future policy is informed by the consequences of past practice, and it may therefore worthy of note that much of the literature which draws on the experience of certain countries at the time of past EU enlargements appears to support this view. Whilst further research is clearly needed, the body of existing evidence is not unsubstantial, and a strategy which permits member states, unilaterally, to introduce transition period legislation could well be the most sensible option. The desirability and workability of such an option, and possible models for legislation, are the subject of the following study.</p>
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**Examples of cautious language**

1. **Introductory verbs** *seem, tend, look like, appear to be, think, believe, doubt, be sure, indicate, suggest*
2. **Certain lexical verbs** *believe, assume, suggest*
3. **Certain modal verbs:** *will, must, would, may, might, could*
4. **Adverbs of frequency** *often, sometimes, usually*
5. **Modal adverbs** *probably, possibly, perhaps, conceivably,*
6. **Modal adjectives** *certain, definite, clear, probable, possible*
7. **Modal nouns** *assumption, possibility, probability*
8. **That clauses** *It could be the case that ...  
It might be suggested that ...  
There is every hope that ...*
9. **To-clause + adjective** *It may be possible to obtain ...  
It is important to develop ...  
It is useful to study ...*

**Further examples**

**Probability**

There are many ways of expressing probability in written academic English. The simplest is the modal auxiliary. Notice how the claims progressively weaken in these three sentences:

- A reduced speed limit **will** result in fewer highway injuries.
- A reduced speed limit **may well** result in fewer highway injuries.
- A reduced speed limit **may** result in fewer highway injuries.
- A reduced speed limit **could** result in fewer highway injuries

In these further examples, the phrases weaken in strength.

- It is **certain** that...
- It is **almost certain** that...
- It is **very probable/highly likely** that...
- It is **probable/likely** that...
- It is **possible** that...
- It is **unlikely** that...
- It is **very unlikely/highly improbable** that...

...a reduced speed limit will result in fewer injuries.



- There is a **strong** possibility that...
- There is a **good** possibility that...
- There is a **definite** possibility that...
- There is a **slight** possibility that ...
- There is a **remote** possibility that...

...a reduced speed limit will result in fewer injuries.

## Distance

Distance is another way of removing yourself from a strong - and possibly unjustified - claim. Compare these sentences:

- Consumers have less confidence in the economy today than 10 years ago.
- Consumers **seem/appear to** have less confidence in the economy...
- It would seem/appear** that consumers have less confidence in the economy...

An alternative strategy is to distance yourself from the data by showing in some way that it is 'soft.' (as opposed to 'hard'). Here are a few examples:

- On the limited data available, ...
- In the view of some experts, ...
- According to this preliminary study, ...
- Based on informal observations made by highway patrol officers, ...

... a lower speed limit may reduce highway fatalities.

## Generalization

The classic verb for qualifying (or defending) a generalization is the verb **tend**.

- Consumers have less confidence in the economy.
- Consumers **tend to have** less confidence in the economy.

Another way to defend a generalization is to qualify the subject.

- Many** consumers have less confidence in the economy.
- A majority of** consumers have less confidence in the economy.
- In most parts of the country**, consumers have less confidence in the economy.
- Consumers **in most income brackets** have less confidence in the economy.

A third alternative is to add exceptions.

**With the exception of...**  
**Apart from...**  
**Except for...**



...a few oil-rich states, national economies in Africa are not likely to improve greatly over the next decade.

### Weaker Verbs

Finally, claims can be reduced in strength by choosing a weaker verb. Which verb is the weaker in the following sets of sentences?

- a. Deregulation **caused** the banking crisis.
- b. Deregulation **contributed to** the banking crisis.
  
- a. Table 9 **suggests** that Venezuelan scientists need help with writing English
- b. Table 9 **shows** that Venezuelan scientists need help with writing English.
  
- a. These results **indicate** that there is a link between secondary smoking and lung cancer.
- b. These results **establish** that there is a link between secondary smoking and lung cancer.

### Combined Qualifications

Often, of course, several types of qualification are combined in order to construct a **defensible** statement/claim. Here is an example. We start with a **big** claim!

The use of seat belts prevents physical injuries in car accidents.

Now see what happens when the following qualifications are added.

prevents → reduces	(weaker verb)
reduces → may reduce	(adding probability)
+ in some circumstances	(weakening the generalization)
+ certain types of	(weakening the generalization)
+ According to simulation studies	(adding distance)

So we now have:

**According to simulation studies, in some circumstances** the use of seat belts **may reduce certain types of** physical injuries in car accidents. – which is so ‘diluted’ it says virtually nothing!

### Task 4: Rewrite the following text using cautious language.

- a. There are a number of reasons why Thai graduates have low English language skills. To begin with, it is because too much emphasis is placed on grammar and vocabulary, rather than on writing and speaking fluently. A further reason is that Thai teachers of English are themselves not comfortable using English, thus reducing the amount of English used in the classroom. However, the main reason is that Thai learners of English do not have much interaction with native-English teachers and speakers when learning the language.

### Sources

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Hyland, K. (1998). *Hedging in scientific research articles*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamin Publishing Company.

Jordan, R.R. (1990). *Academic Writing Course*. Harlow: Addison Wesley Longman Ltd.