

Hedges that may turn into boosters, and vice versa? Mitigating one's responsibility in potentially defamatory texts

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The use of excessive language might mean committing language crimes such as defamation or hate speech. These crimes are usually linked to extreme verbal aggression (Hardaker & McGlashan 2016; Assimakopoulos et al. 2017, Culpeper et al. 2017; Esposito & Zollo 2021), but, if speakers are aware of the legal risks they are running, they may combine excessive language with hedges useful to downgrade their responsibility towards their words, such as markers of weak epistemic modality (*possibly, might*), indirect evidentiality (*allegedly, apparently*) or personal opinion (*I think, in my view*). However, some hedging strategies may have boosting effects triggered by the co-occurrence with other boosters (e.g. Estrada 2008). For example, expressions of personal opinion (*in my opinion*) do not only restrict the validity of the propositional content by presenting it as purely subjective (hedge), but also allow the speaker to reinforce his/her own viewpoint by conveying that (s)he is fully convinced of that state of affairs (booster) (see Izquierdo Alegría & González Ruiz 2020). This would explain why, whereas some expressions of personal opinion (e.g., in French, *pour moi*, 'in my opinion/view') are normally analysed as hedges, other similar expressions (e.g. *je suis convaincu*, 'I am convinced') are more frequently considered within the realm of boosting (Tobback 2019: 108 109, 114; Kerbrat-Orecchioni 1992).

Although some scholars have identified several expressions able to function both as hedges and as boosters in contexts of verbal aggression (for instance, Auger et al. 2010 analysed the boosting effects of some polite forms of address like French *madame* in political discourse), their polyfunctionality has been neglected.

The aim of this paper is to show how the potential boosting effects of some hedges can (un)intentionally interfere in allegedly defamatory texts and how such polyfunctionality may be exploited by the plaintiff or the defendant in lawsuits. This paper is based on three case studies involving defamation accessed through three Court decisions given Spanish and French courts. They illustrate (a) how an expression of personal opinion (Sp. *para mí* 'to me') can combine hedging and boosting effects derived from its semantics; (b) how unplanned mitigating or reinforcing functions might be activated when a booster (Fr. *notoire* 'manifest') and a hedge (*selon X* 'according to X') are combined; and (c) how such polyfunctionality is used by the defendant to escape liability in a lawsuit.

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