

Clearing the hedge – making sense of nonsense

Teacher's notes

Aim

To recognize euphemisms and interpret hedged sentences

What

Building a vocabulary of hedging terms and expressions, speaking clearly and succinctly

Interaction

Teamwork

1:1

Give the student the individual sentences and ask him/her to interpret them

When to use

With or any time after task 7 on page 93

What you need

One set of headlines for the class

Preparation

Enlarge and cut out the news headlines so that there is one set for the class.

Here's how

1. Write the words *ugly*, *cheap* and *stupid* on the board and tell your students that these words have many euphemisms to avoid the speaker from causing offence and to minimize any negativity when talking about other people or products. Do they know any synonyms or euphemisms for these words?

ugly – *unattractive, an eyesore, visually inappropriate*

cheap – *inexpensive, low cost, economical*

stupid – *mentally challenged, simple, hare-brained (idea)*

TIP In a similar way, we *hedge* what we say. The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines *hedging against something* as 'a way of protecting yourself against the loss of something, especially money'. Ask the class where hedging is used in business and how it might happen in language as an example of tentative speech.

The sentence *You are wrong*, for example, can be softened by either adding a modal verb (*You could be wrong*), an adverb (*You are possibly wrong*), giving a personal opinion (*In my opinion, you are wrong*), using a euphemism (*You're on the wrong track*) or a combination of several of these (*In my opinion you might be on the wrong track*).

The extent to which we hedge depends not only on the context and social position of the speaker but also varies from culture to culture – the German language for instance, does not have as many hedging devices as English, subsequently German speakers of English can come across as being too direct and even rude.

2. Divide the class into small groups – ideally 4–5 students. Tell them that to appeal to readers, newspapers normally avoid hedging in their headlines. Explain that you have a set of story outlines and that you need these edited into appropriate newspaper headlines (six to nine words) by removing the hedging and interpreting any euphemisms.
3. Demonstrate by picking up the first headline *It has supposedly been proven that women are more cautious, on the surface at least, when it comes to using social media*. Attach it to the board so that the whole class can see. Give all groups time to rewrite the headline and discuss the results together. Now continue with the other headlines. When everyone has finished, compare the class' headlines with the actual headlines. Which group came the closest?

EXTENSION

Expand on the students' awareness of euphemisms and hedging devices by asking them for examples that they have seen or heard in their own business context. Discuss the appropriateness of using such language – what, after all, is an apparent cardiac arrest?

Key

All stories come from www.breakingnewsenglish.com:

- Women More Cautious On Social Media (25th February, 2012)
- UK PM Leaves 8-Year-Old Daughter In Bar (12th June, 2012)
- The "Friendliest" Countries in the World (14th January, 2012)
- Women Only To Sell Lingerie in Saudi Arabia (5th January, 2012)
- 'Sleep-Texting' Is Here And On The Increase (24th November 2011)
- Old People Smell Nicer Than Young People (3rd June, 2012)
- Learn In Your Sleep, Researchers Say (27th June, 2012)
- 6,000-Calorie Burger Gives Man Heart Attack (16th February, 2012)

Clearing the hedge – making sense of nonsense

It has supposedly been proven that women are more cautious, at least on the surface, when it comes to the use of social media.

On the face of it, it looks like after visiting his local public house, the British Prime Minister, unintentionally of course, sort of failed to make sure his better half had already taken their 8-year old daughter home.

We're led to believe that a report has been published listing the countries which are supposed to be somewhat happier than others appear to be.

Apparently, the fairer sex have now been given the right to sell undergarments in certain kinds of Saudi Arabian retail outlets.

According to an expert on sleep, in some rather extreme cases, people are now sending text messages as a matter of fact in their sleep.

Evidently, a recent report claims that senior citizens usually have a more pleasant odour about them than younger people do.

So-called researchers on the far side of the big pond are known to have suggested that having 40 winks can help us remember things we might have learnt in the recent past.

A hamburger that was said to have 6,000 calories has, in all likelihood, caused a bloke to have an apparent cardiac arrest.

