

Pragmatic Shifts in Indian English: A Diachronic Analysis of Politeness Strategies in Academic Writing

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Abstract

This study investigates the evolving nature of politeness strategies in Indian English academic writing over a twenty-year period, spanning from 2005 to 2025. Drawing upon a diachronic corpus comprising peer-reviewed journal articles and postgraduate students' theses, the research examines linguistic features such as hedging, mitigation, and indirectness—key pragmatic tools that shape scholarly discourse. The analysis reveals a discernible shift toward more assertive and direct rhetorical styles, accompanied by a gradual decline in traditional markers of deference and indirectness. These changes suggest a broader socio-linguistic transformation influenced by global academic norms, increased international collaboration, and the growing confidence of Indian scholars in asserting their intellectual positions. The findings contribute to the fields of pragmatics, corpus linguistics, and English for Academic Purposes (EAP), offering insights into how language use reflects and responds to changing cultural and epistemological paradigms within academic communities.

Keywords: Indian English, Pragmatics, Politeness, Academic Writing, Corpus Linguistics, Diachronic Analysis

Introduction

Politeness strategies play a pivotal role in academic writing, serving not only as linguistic devices but also as markers of scholarly identity and interpersonal alignment within academic communities. These strategies—ranging from hedging and mitigation to indirectness and deference—enable authors to navigate the delicate balance between asserting claims and maintaining collegiality. In the context of Indian English, politeness has historically been shaped by socio-cultural norms that emphasize respect, hierarchy, and indirect communication. Academic texts produced in India have often reflected these values, favoring cautious phrasing and deferential tones, particularly when engaging with established authorities or presenting novel arguments. However, as Indian academia becomes increasingly globalized and integrated into international research networks, there is growing evidence that these traditional norms are undergoing transformation. Indian authors are progressively adopting more assertive, concise, and strategically mitigated styles of expression, aligning their rhetorical choices with global expectations of clarity, confidence, and scholarly autonomy. This shift invites a closer examination of how pragmatic conventions in Indian English are evolving in response to broader epistemic and cultural changes.

The evolution of politeness strategies in Indian English academic writing is not merely a linguistic phenomenon—it reflects deeper shifts in epistemological positioning, authorial identity, and cultural negotiation within global scholarly discourse. As Indian scholars increasingly publish in international journals and participate in transnational research collaborations, their rhetorical choices are shaped by the need to conform to globally accepted norms of academic communication. These norms often prioritize clarity,

assertiveness, and strategic mitigation over traditional forms of indirectness and deference. Consequently, Indian academic writers are compelled to recalibrate their pragmatic strategies to balance cultural authenticity with global intelligibility.

This transformation is particularly evident in the use of hedging devices, which serve as tools for expressing uncertainty, politeness, and scholarly caution. While earlier Indian academic texts frequently employed elaborate hedging to avoid direct confrontation or overstatement, recent writings demonstrate a more calibrated use—employing hedges to signal epistemic nuance rather than cultural deference. Similarly, mitigation strategies, once used extensively to soften claims and defer to authority, are now deployed more selectively, often to enhance persuasive impact or maintain disciplinary decorum.

Moreover, the shift toward assertiveness does not imply a wholesale abandonment of politeness norms. Rather, it suggests a reconfiguration of pragmatic choices that align with evolving expectations of professionalism, credibility, and intellectual agency. Indian authors are increasingly positioning themselves as confident contributors to global knowledge production, using language not only to communicate findings but also to assert scholarly presence. This diachronic analysis thus offers a window into how linguistic pragmatics intersect with broader socio-cultural and institutional dynamics, revealing the complex interplay between tradition and transformation in Indian English academic writing.

Literature Review

Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory of politeness remains foundational, distinguishing between positive and negative politeness strategies. In academic writing, Hyland (1998) and Myers (1989) have shown how hedging and stance-taking reflect disciplinary norms and authorial identity.

In the Indian context, Kachru (1983) and Sridhar (2008) have documented the sociolinguistic features of Indian English, including pragmatic conventions shaped by

cultural values. Recent studies suggest that Indian academic writers are increasingly influenced by international publishing standards, leading to changes in rhetorical style (Bhatia, 2014).

Methodology

Corpus

- Sources:
 - 60 journal articles from Indian authors (2005–2025)
 - 40 postgraduate theses from Indian universities
- Disciplines: Linguistics, Literature, Education
- Time Periods:
 - Group A: 2005–2010
 - Group B: 2011–2015
 - Group C: 2016–2020
 - Group D: 2021–2025

Annotation

- Pragmatic Features Tagged:
 - Hedging (e.g., “perhaps,” “it appears”)
 - Mitigation (e.g., “may be interpreted as”)
 - Indirectness (e.g., passive voice, nominalizations)

Tools

- AntConc for keyword frequency
- NVivo for thematic coding
- Manual cross-checking for contextual accuracy

Results

Hedging

- Group A: High frequency of hedging (avg. 12.4 instances per 1,000 words)
- Group D: Reduced hedging (avg. 6.1 instances per 1,000 words)
- Trend: Shift toward assertive claims and direct argumentation

Mitigation

- Group A: Frequent use of modal verbs (“may,” “might”)
- Group D: Increased use of declarative statements and active voice
- Trend: Reduced mitigation, especially in literature and education papers

Indirectness

- Group A: 65% of sentences in passive voice
- Group D: 38% passive constructions
- Trend: Move toward active voice and authorial presence

Discussion

The findings of this study underscore a significant transformation in the pragmatic strategies employed by Indian academic writers, particularly in the domain of politeness. This shift appears to be closely tied to the broader forces of globalization, the internationalization of higher education, and the increasing influence of global publishing standards. As Indian scholars engage more frequently with international audiences and contribute to globally indexed journals, their rhetorical choices reflect a conscious alignment with dominant academic norms that prioritize clarity, precision, and authorial agency.

One of the most notable changes observed is the decline in the use of hedging and mitigation strategies. Traditionally, these devices served as linguistic buffers, allowing authors to express caution, avoid confrontation, and maintain deference toward established authorities. However, the contemporary corpus reveals a marked reduction in such strategies,

suggesting a growing confidence among Indian authors in asserting their scholarly positions. This assertiveness is not merely stylistic—it signals a deeper epistemic shift wherein Indian academics are increasingly positioning themselves as equal participants in global knowledge production.

The preference for directness and clarity is further reinforced by institutional pressures such as the demand for measurable research impact, citation visibility, and adherence to standardized academic writing conventions. Pedagogical reforms in Indian universities, including the integration of academic writing modules and exposure to international citation practices, have also contributed to this pragmatic reorientation. Moreover, the rise of digital publishing platforms and open-access repositories has expanded the reach of Indian scholarship, incentivizing authors to adopt globally intelligible styles that enhance discoverability and engagement.

Importantly, this shift does not imply a wholesale rejection of cultural norms. Rather, it reflects a strategic recalibration—where politeness is recontextualized to serve both local sensibilities and global expectations. Indian English academic writing is evolving into a hybrid register that retains cultural depth while embracing the pragmatic demands of international scholarship. This nuanced transformation invites further exploration into how linguistic pragmatics mediate identity, authority, and audience engagement in postcolonial academic contexts.

Conclusion

Over the past two decades, politeness strategies in Indian English academic writing have undergone a profound transformation, reflecting broader changes in linguistic norms, academic culture, and global scholarly engagement. The diachronic analysis presented in this study reveals a clear trajectory from indirectness and deference toward assertiveness, clarity, and strategic mitigation. This evolution is emblematic of a larger sociolinguistic shift wherein

Indian authors are increasingly adopting pragmatic conventions that align with international standards of academic communication.

The decline in hedging and mitigation, coupled with a rise in authorial confidence, suggests that Indian academic writers are no longer confined by traditional expectations of politeness rooted in hierarchical and collectivist cultural frameworks. Instead, they are embracing a more autonomous and globally oriented rhetorical stance—one that foregrounds intellectual agency and epistemic credibility. This shift has implications not only for individual writing practices but also for institutional policies, pedagogical frameworks, and editorial standards within Indian academia.

By situating these changes within the broader context of English for Academic Purposes (EAP), this study contributes to ongoing discussions in pragmatics, corpus linguistics, and postcolonial language studies. It highlights the dynamic interplay between language, identity, and power in academic discourse, and underscores the importance of diachronic analysis in capturing linguistic change over time. Future research may benefit from cross-disciplinary approaches that examine similar shifts in other regional varieties of English, as well as comparative studies across disciplines, genres, and institutional settings.

Ultimately, the findings affirm that Indian English academic writing is not static—it is responsive, adaptive, and increasingly assertive. As Indian scholars continue to shape global knowledge landscapes, their pragmatic choices will remain a vital lens through which to understand the evolving nature of academic communication.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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