Preaching in uncertain terms: the place of hedging language in contemporary sermonic discourse

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Preaching in uncertain terms

The place of hedging language in contemporary sermonic discourse

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This study investigates hedging (standardly assumed to express uncertainty, plausible reasoning and the like) in contemporary sermonic discourse as represented by sermon manuscripts from three Christian denominations in the UK. The article addresses three research questions: (i) To what extent is preaching employed as a discursive resource during preaching; (ii) What form does hedging take in sermonic discourse; and (iii) What are preachers' rationale for hedging? The results suggest that hedging is indeed of central concern in sermonic discourse with some kind of hedging device being called upon once every 32 seconds. When preachers hedge they rely on standard and transparent linguistic expressions that typically perform this discourse function, and the repertoire includes both 'conversational' hedges and hedges that recall practices characteristic of written academic discourse. When preachers self-report on their rationale for hedging a multitude of different discourse functions become apparent. However, it seems that hedging is rarely used to convey lack of epistemic confidence; rather, hedging is seen as a productive interpersonal means to address one of the main objectives of contemporary, turn-to-the-listener, preaching — namely acknowledging sermon listeners as active partners in a sermonic experience.

1. Introduction

Every week, even daily, church services across the world are attended by millions of people engaging in various forms of communicative events in genres of religious

discourse.[1] Despite affecting so many people, our knowledge of communication in religious discourse(s) is actually very limited (Wuthnow 1992). This study is concerned with preaching, a key genre of religious discourse, and with preachers' use of non-assertive/tentative/non-specific language in contemporary sermons. Whereas many other discourses are well researched and well understood regarding their appeal to language of this kind (e.g. academic discourse, Hyland 1998), little is known about the place of non-assertive/tentative/non-specific language in Christian sermonic discourse. When Kaltenböck *et al.* state that it is widely acknowledged that this kind of language plays "a crucial role in both spoken and written discourse" (2010: 1), we do not know whether, and how, this statement applies to preaching.

Many scholars of homiletics (the systematic study of preaching practices) claim that a 'stance' shift regarding the strength of assertions has taken place within western preaching traditions over the last three to four decades ('stance' may be understood as the linguistic expression of attitude or commitment towards a proposition, cf. Biber & Finegan 1989). Craddock notes that previous generations of preachers "ascended the pulpit to speak of eternal certainties, truths etched forever in granite of absolute reality, matters framed for proclamation, not for discussion" (2001: 13). During the second half of the 20th century the wide acceptance of the 'turn-to-the-listener' preaching paradigm is assumed to have affected preaching in a direction away from this assertive baseline position (Allen 2004; Rose 1997), and a more explicit concern for the listener is evident in preaching. Recognizing this trend, Immink claims that "a more traditional assertive discourse is now renounced, and a more indicative … way of speaking is welcomed" (2004: 101), allowing for interpretations of the contents of preaching to be made by both preachers and listeners. To date, these claims from within homiletics concerning the non-assertive appeal of preaching by Craddock (2001), Immink (2004) and others have not been confirmed by any empirical research into the language of sermons.

To address this research gap in religious discourse analysis (or what some might refer to as a gap in 'descriptive' or 'empirical homiletics'), this study investigates how linguistic expressions ostensibly conveying non-assertiveness/uncertainty/non-specificity and the like may be of service to preachers when they engage a contemporary church audience.

(1)   There was once a time when I was convinced that all this religious *stuff* was for wimps, weirdoes and fairies.

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1. In the UK alone (the geographic location of this study) 4.9 million adults (10% of the UK adult population) are reported to attend church on a weekly basis (Ashworth & Farthing 2007).

(2)   Your idea of Jesus' Resurrection is *possibly* very different from mine, and that
is fine.

Examples (1) and (2) highlight preachers engaged in "a rhetorical strategy that attenuates either the full semantic value of a particular expression …, or the full force of a speech act" (Fraser 2010: 15); this discursive and context-sensitive practice is standardly referred to as 'hedging' in the linguistics literature (e.g. Crompton 1997; Fraser 2010; Hyland 1996, 1998, 2005; Kaltenböck *et al.* 2010; Lakoff 1972; Markkanen & Schröder 1997; Salager-Meyer 1994). With a focus on contemporary preaching, this study offers an interesting new context for applied linguistics research in which to explore hedging as a discursive/pragmatic concept.

Drawing on sermon data from across three broadly defined preaching contexts (Anglican, Baptist and Roman-Catholic), the overarching purpose of the investigation is to establish the place of hedging in contemporary sermons where so much emphasis is placed on the listeners and the listeners' role and space in the meaning-making process. It should be emphasized that the investigation is not so much a study about the concept of hedging, as it is a study about hedging as it applies in a particular kind of (religious) discourse. To this end, the paper asks three straightforward questions: (i) To what extent is preaching employed as a discursive resource during preaching; (ii) What form does hedging take in sermonic discourse; and (iii) What is preachers' rationale for hedging?

The next two sections, Sections 2 and 3, provide useful background to the empirical investigation, first by describing the discourse context for (hedged) preaching, focusing on epistemological conditions imposed on the sermon, and then by reviewing some functionally oriented conceptions of hedging. The last part of Section 3 operationalizes hedging as applied to sermonic discourse; this operationalization is then integrated into a functional analytical model described in Section 4. In Section 5 I present the data used in the study and the qualitative and quantitative methods adopted to research hedging in sermons. Section 6 is divided into three sub-sections, each presenting research findings and discussion for each of the three research questions. The last section presents some short concluding remarks.

2.   A context for sermonic hedging

A basic assumption about hedging in this study is that it is a pragmatic phenomenon in the sense that it is evoked and constrained by the particular (social, cultural, and rhetorical) context in which it operates, meaning that "members of different discourse communities use [hedges/hedging] to express meanings which

are particular to their own social and [discursive] objectives" (Hyland 1998: 157). This section provides a brief description of the context for hedging in sermons, with necessary emphasis placed on the epistemological assumptions and values underlying the preaching event since this is essential for our understanding of the conditions under which preachers hedge.

Preaching is best described as persuasive and performative social-communicative action in a religious setting, a context that habitually defies characterization of certain states of affairs as unequivocally true or not true. It is persuasive since the ultimate purpose of preaching is to persuasively engage with listeners and move them towards subjectively applied understanding and to affect individual experience (Craddock 2001; Hogan 1999; Immink 2004; Rose 1997). It is performative (in a broad sense) because 'moving listeners' is not ultimately about an **effect**; instead it is intended to describe what preaching **is doing** (simultaneously to **saying** something) during the sermon. Much homiletic literature talks of preaching as striving for a present-tense experience (notwithstanding the fact that sermonic themes may be past-tense, and often are). Thus, whether the objective of preaching is kerygmatic (emphasizing the spirit of the Gospel), transformational (facilitating an experience of God), or conversational (sharing the responsibility of scripture interpretation) (Rose 1997), preaching language is performative, deliberately reflecting the language of the gospels where performative proclamation language is used for disclosing religious meaning.

Even if Wilson (1995: 264) talks of the preacher as "a proclaimer of truth", the notion of truth and the communication of (un)certainty present major challenges to preachers. A Baptist preacher who was interviewed in connection with this study noted that for many people it is still natural to think that preaching is essentially about providing definitive answers to questions about faith.

> A lot of people come to church believing that they will be given a simple truth, you know: 'Say it as it is, brother! This is what you should believe!' Those people are in for a real journey. In many ways preachers are in the business of uncertainty rather than certainty.

Most modern schools of preaching are adamant that "good preaching does not seek to win consent to a truth claim" (Immink 2004: 101); it is simply not what preaching is about. For truth in a sermonic context, McClure (2003: 70) notes that it "includes both the probable and the plausible". The farthest one might go is to say that "truth is a tentative agreement, a momentary consensus, a synthetic suggestion …".

From within sociology, Wuthnow also stresses the "absence of any empirically verifiable knowledge" in religious contexts and says that "the existence of God cannot be proven; nor can many other claims about God …" (2012: 38). In

non-religious discourses it is usually possible to frame states of affairs as true or not true, but faith-based contexts standardly resist this kind of characterization and open up an epistemological continuum which must somehow be addressed communicatively.

The epistemology characteristic of the sermon is best described in terms of (degrees of) conviction rather than with reference to absolute certainty and actuality (cf. Rose 1997). The kind of conviction referred to is effectively captured in this sermon excerpt, incidentally without any explicit linguistic features of hedging, from an Anglican preacher talking about the resurrection of Jesus:

(3)   We know it is true, because, because, well because we know it is true.

According to homiletics scholars it is best if preaching approaches truth and knowledge from the perspective of verisimilitude:

> In many cases verisimilitude is the source of our truth claim rather than confirmed fact. … We are concerned with presenting at least two kinds of reality [and truth]. We certainly present life as most people know and experience it. We also present life as we know it to be true when seen from the perspective of faith. … A primary purpose of preaching is to move us all from the one perspective to this other one. (Wilson 1995: 267)

In encouraging listeners to embrace the perspective of faith, preachers should not shy away from the "tension of uncertainty" (Lose 2003: 62) that should characterize contemporary preaching. Preaching that carries this trademark of apparent uncertainty, Lose says, does not surrender truth, "but the ability to prove truth; not speech, but the right to have the last word; not faith, but unambiguous certainty" (2003: 62). In a similar vain, Allen (2010: 8) stresses that listeners in the pew "must have the freedom to assent or disagree with what is proclaimed, or it is not good news".

Wuthnow notes that communication in religious discourse "evokes distinctive linguistic practices concerning the language of uncertainty" (2012: 38). A good reason to study hedging in sermonic discourse, then, is that it allows us to say something concrete about these 'linguistic practices' that preachers adopt to negotiate (un)certainty claims in sermons and preachers' rationale for this kind of rhetoric.

In this study, it is argued that hedging is instrumental to addressing all four of the defining epistemological characteristics of contemporary preaching mentioned above (absence of empirical evidence, non-finality of statements, ambiguity, and freedom to (dis)agree). To this end, hedging is central to enable the performative move of listeners (and preachers) from a 'life-as-we-know-it-from-experience'-perspective to a 'life-as-we-know-it-as-people-of-faith'-perspective

(cf. the quote from Wilson 1995 above). The move from one perspective to the other is subject to preachers' successful persuasion of listeners, and consequently this move imposes certain constraints on sermonic communication — listeners must be made to understand what living a life in faith means, but an authoritative and assertive approach to achieving this objective is unlikely to be successful (in view of the characteristics of contemporary preaching — what listeners are entitled to expect). Here, Hyland's (1998, 2005) 'adequacy conditions' and 'acceptability conditions' for successful communication are helpful to understanding and explaining, *a priori*, a very general and fundamental function of hedging in sermonic discourse.

Adequacy and acceptability conditions involve speakers' attending to a set of abstract conditions regarding what an audience recognizes as reasonable claims. Put simply, adequacy conditions pertain primarily to the content of the communication: speakers need to make sure that their communicative contribution adheres to the content expectations of the community; therefore, they consider such aspects of the communicative situation as the background assumptions of the community involving 'acknowledged' or accepted truths as well as disputable points of interests. Acceptability conditions, on the other hand, have more to do with how the topic is communicated and how assumptions are negotiated between the speaker and the addressees. We have seen above indications of what the epistemological precepts of contemporary preaching are (cf. Allen 2010; Immink 2004; Lose 2003; McClure 2003), and in performing its most fundamental discursive functions, hedging, it is argued here, is used by preachers to avoid violating any adequacy and acceptability conditions constitutive of this sermonic epistemology and, concurrently, to acknowledge listeners as sermonic conversationalists, as sharing in the preachers' entertainment of a mental representation of what is communicatively acceptable and adequate during preaching.

3.   Operationalizing hedging as an instance of sermonic metadiscourse

Notwithstanding the unencouraging claim by Crompton (1997) that an entirely satisfactory definition of hedging is lacking, several good attempts have been made to capture this elusive concept. In one of the groundbreaking works on hedging, Lakoff uses the concept in relation to "words whose job it is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy" (1972: 195). Most scholars acknowledge that later conceptions of hedging (notable contributions include Fraser 1975; Brown & Levinson 1978; Prince *et al.* 1982; Hubler 1983; Crompton 1997; Hyland 1998; Caffi 1999; Vande Kopple 2002 and Hyland 2005) represent a gradual move away from Lakoff's original understanding that was primarily concerned with modifying membership in

a certain semantic category. Over time, definitions have come to emphasize hedging as having scope over propositions as well as being an inherent property of individual expressions, meaning also that hedging is now more commonly conceived as a discursive and pragmatic phenomenon (Kaltenböck *et al.* 2010; Markkanen & Schröder 1997), more often than not analyzed from the point of view of what a particular linguistic expression is 'doing' at a certain point in a discourse (Hyland 2005), and typically with reference to epistemic modality (Palmer 1990), evidentiality (Chafe 1986), or communicative vagueness (Channell 1994) (hedging is widely assumed, e.g. Markkanen & Schröder 1997, to cut across all three of these dimensions).

In this pragmatic spirit, Salager-Meyer talks about hedges as "understatements used to convey (purposive) vagueness and tentativeness, and to make sentences more acceptable to the hearer/reader, thus increasing the chance of ratification and reducing the risk of negation" (1994: 150). From a similarly applied perspective, Hyland describes hedging as "the expression of tentativeness and possibility … a discoursal resource for expressing uncertainty, skepticism, and open-mindedness about one's proposition" (1996: 433–434). In more recent work, Hyland (2005: 52, 49) extends the definition of hedging to include expressions whose purpose it typically is to signal "plausible reasoning rather than certain knowledge", and to recognize "alternative voices and viewpoints" [to] "withhold commitment and open up dialogue". Importantly, Salager-Meyer (1994) and others have suggested that we view hedges not only as elements whose function it is to express uncertainty or vagueness because speakers are actually uncertain or have vague notions: "the definition of hedges … goes beyond their mere association with speculation" (1994: 153). However, these sources also assert that these additional functions of hedging are poorly understood, particularly in discourses that have hitherto escaped the attention of discourse analysts, such as religious discourse (Wuthnow 1992). This study directly addresses this lack of attention and contributes to developing an understanding of hedging as much more than a convenient cover term for expressed lack of confidence in a proposition and/or semantic fuzziness.

Hedging is taken in this study to be reflective of the social-interactive nature of preaching seen as 'conversation' between preachers and listeners (Allen 2004; Ädel & Mauranen 2010; Flottum & Dahl 2012) — this is a standard metaphor that most contemporary homiletics subscribe to. Following in the tradition of, for example, Vande Kopple (2002) and Hyland (1998; 2005), hedging is considered a **metadiscursive** phenomenon in the sense that it is used reflexively by preachers in relation to their own discourse "to achieve certain communicative purposes", most fundamentally to negotiate interactional (rather than propositional) meanings during a sermon. Ontologically, these interactional meanings are assumptions regarding social-communicative 'behavior' as entertained between preachers and listeners

— in other words, adequacy and acceptability conditions as introduced above. It is the task of metadiscourse to address these conditions in various ways, meaning that metadiscursively framed communication is prompted by speakers' awareness of and sensitivity to the unique conditions of any communicative situation (cf. Hyland 1998). Already Lakoff had noted that "hedges interact with felicity conditions for utterances and with the rules of conversation" (1972: 213).

The metadiscursive act of hedging is highly heteroglossic, notwithstanding an appearance to the contrary in seemingly monologic discourses like preaching. Through metadiscourse, a meta-comment is made concerning things said or done in the discourse as part of a responsive/dialogic-discursive behavior in relation to propositions which may have been entertained/communicated previously (by the speaker or someone else) or propositions that may be entertained/communicated later on, as White & Sano (2006: 192) note: "the utterance operates [to] present the speaker as recognizing or engaged with other voices and other viewpoints" concerning propositional content. It is this acknowledgement of listeners as conversational partners who share the preachers' assumptions about a certain social-communicative behavior, and preachers' attention to the dialogic nature of sermons that makes sermonic hedging highly interactional.

For the purposes of the present investigation into the place of hedging in preaching, hedging is thus operationalized as a metadiscursive means by which preachers overtly convey non-assertiveness/uncertainty/non-specificity motivated by a desire to negotiate certain interactional meanings and thus engage their listeners interpersonally in different ways and for different purposes. This conception of hedging (which recalls parts of Hyland's general definition of metadiscourse, 2005: 37) lends itself well to a view of preaching as essentially being about social engagement between preacher and congregation, about postmodern congregation-centered hermeneutics instead of traditional persuasive proclamation with little regard for listeners.

4.   Functional model of analysis

Approaching hedging as a metadiscursive resource in preaching means acknowledging that hedging is used by preachers to perform interpersonally motivated functions during the sermon event, that hedging language is **doing** something to further the sermonic relationship pertaining between preachers and their audiences. The functional-analytical model adopted in this study is Hyland's (2005) widely attested model of metadiscourse. This section provides an outline of the basis of the model, insofar as it is relevant for hedging, illustrating the merits of applying hedging operationalized as metadiscourse to sermonic discourse.

Hyland's starting point is a view of metadiscourse as "a system of meanings realized by an open-ended set of linguistic items" (2005: 37) (thereby firmly establishing his model within Systemic Functional Linguistics). This open-endedness certainly applies to hedges, which may acquire their hedging property "only in actual instances of realization" (2005: 37). Fundamental in Hyland's model for analyzing hedging functionally is therefore to establish what counts as a hedge, only thereafter is it possible to decide what particular role the hedge plays. Hyland (2005: 38, adapted) proposes three basic conditions which must be met, namely that

1. hedging is distinct from propositional aspects of discourse;
2. hedging refers to aspects of the discourse that embody speaker-listener interaction;
3. hedging refers only to relations which are internal to the discourse.

The three conditions are essentially three different ways of saying that metadiscursive hedging is *interactional*, i.e. concerned with the discursive relationship between preachers and listeners. The uses of the expression *possible* in (4) and (5) illustrate how these conditions may be applied analytically to distinguish metadiscursive hedging from other aspects of communication.

(4)   It is *possible* for God to be, to act, to make a difference in all aspects of life if you let him pour his Holy Spirit over you.

(5)   It is *possible* that Jesus' words apply strictly to his own glorious Resurrection, but he may also have been anticipating our Resurrection in him.

Hyland (2005) establishes an admittedly vague defining line between propositions and metadiscourse, or in his own words "things in the world [what the text says about the world] and things in the discourse [the communicator's position vis à vis the text and the audience]" (2005: 38); however this vagueness is necessary in a model where metadiscourse is itself considered "a crucial element of … meaning" (2005: 41). Hyland continues: "like propositional discourse, metadiscourse conveys the [speaker's] intended meaning" (2005: 41), though rather than propositional in nature, metadiscursive meaning is interactional, recognizing the listeners in various ways. Thus, when the presence of a certain expression is discursively motivated by the speaker's intention to convey something about the world, then it may be called propositional; when the presence of a certain expression is discursively motivated by the speaker's interpersonal concerns, then it may be called metadiscursive. On this view, it is easy to distinguish the two uses of *possible* in utterances (4) and (5). In the former, the expression helps the audience to conceive a world with a caring God; here *possible* is propositional. In the latter

utterance, *possible* is used by the preacher to directly address the audience, helping the preacher to relate the message/proposition to the specific (dually hermeneutic) context provided by the sermon, also taking into account the relative status of the listeners as dictated by the contemporary preaching situation (which would be different from the status of listeners/readers in other discourse contexts) (Hyland 2005: 41).

The uses of *possible* in (4) and (5) are yet again different when Hyland's second condition for metadiscursive hedging is considered. In (5), the expression functions interactionally in at least two ways: first, it opens up an interpretative space where some listeners may wish to agree with the proposition and others may interpret Jesus' words in a different way (as suggested by the interpretative 'option' in the clause that follows, which is incidentally also hedged). Second, this epistemic adjective manifests the preacher's attention to the acceptability conditions of sermonic discourse (e.g. that sermons *should* open up for different Biblical interpretations), and, consequently, his recognition of the listeners as sharing in this understanding of the nature of sermonic conversation (conveying something like "I know what is expected of me in this situation and you know this too — we are all members of the same social community"); Hyland frames this as the communicator's "sensitivity to the context of the discourse". The use of *possible* in (4) does not evoke any preacher-listener interaction in this way; it does not **do** anything discursively apart from constituting part of the asserted proposition.

For Hyland's third condition of metadiscursive hedging, "the determining factor is … the objectivity of the event, whether the outcome is related to the speaker's assessment of possibility about something happening or to external circumstances which might make it possible" (2005: 48). In (4) the preacher is speaking encouragingly about what listeners may do to invite God into their lives ("let him pour his Holy Spirit over you" — this is the necessary external circumstance), and what presents itself as a real prospect (the outcome) if they do ("for God to be, to act, to make a difference …"). In this sermon utterance, *possible* "is concerned with the ability or volition of the subject of the sentence [God]" (i.e. a case of dynamic modality as conceived by Palmer 1990: 36). This may be contrasted with (5) where the preacher instead uses *possible* with epistemic modal intentions (Palmer 1990), to leave options ('outcomes') open for listeners (thereby indicating his assessment of possibilities).

5.   Materials and methods

The materials used in this study came in two forms, sermon manuscripts and transcribed preacher interviews, and both qualitative and quantitative methods were used to address the three research questions posed in the Introduction.

5.1 Preaching data from different denominations

50 Easter sermon manuscripts each from the Church of England, the Baptist Church and the Roman-Catholic Church (150 sermons in total, corresponding to 189,239 words) provided a small but indicative sample of contemporary sermonic discourse. Only one manuscript from any one preacher was included in the three samples; this was done to avoid skewing of the data because of pronounced personal preaching (and hedging) styles. The choice to use Easter sermon manuscripts only was because I wanted there to be a common theme to all the sermons. All the sermons were preached at some point during the period 2005 to 2011. Table 1 presents an overview of the data. The main reason for choosing these three denominations was to get a reasonably representative spread across well-established Christian preaching traditions.[2] It is interesting to speculate whether denominational affiliation in any way affects preachers' strategies when employing hedging language. A desire to tap any differences between preaching traditions concerning hedging strategies therefore runs as an undercurrent throughout the investigation.

Table 1. Overview of sermonic data used in this study

	Anglican	Baptist	Catholic	All churches
Number of sermon texts	50	50	50	150
Total no. of words (tokens)	64439	76751	48049	189239
Mean length of sermons (tokens)	1289	1532	961	1262

5.2 Data analysis

The qualitative and quantitative analyses of the data proceeded in four basic but necessary stages with the purpose to (i) explore the material, (ii) identify potential hedging forms and functions, (iii) validate the findings, and (iv) provide quantificational perspectives.

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2. There is considerable theological diversity, with direct implications for sermonic discourse, within all three of these denominations; this is perhaps most clearly represented in the Church of England, which is nominally Anglican, yet extremely heterogeneous across the confessional and liturgical spectrum.

5.2.1   *Close reading — inductive discovery of hedges*

A first step in the qualitative analysis, guided by inductive discovery of the sermon data, involved a close reading (Martin 2000) of ten sermon manuscripts from each of the three sermon samples. During a careful reading of the manuscripts, any linguistic expression interpreted to have some hedging function (as defined above) was identified; larger bits of discourse such as whole clauses, sentences or more extensive pieces of discourse were not considered. The reading resulted in the identification of a number of linguistic forms assumed to have a hedging function, and, with the help of the surrounding context, an interpretation (sometimes very speculative) concerning the preacher's rationale for hedging at that particular point in the sermon, i.e. an interpretation of the discourse function of hedging.

5.2.2   *Preacher interviews*

Additional qualitative perspectives were subsequently added to the analysis in the form of reflections and responses from semi-structured interview questions (Drever 2003) from 11 of the practicing preachers who contributed manuscripts, involving at least three preachers from each denomination. The preachers were asked mostly open-ended questions about preaching language practices in general as well as specific questions concerning the use of hedges in their own manuscript. In cases where the preachers had submitted more than one manuscript all the manuscripts submitted were considered during the interviews even if they did not form part of the sample.

The interviews were in part methodologically inspired by Lewin (2005), who prompted her informants (scientific authors) about the pragmatic function of hedges in their own scientific discourse. Her method of asking authors themselves was a novel one, at least in terms of using a systematic approach and looking at extended discourse. In the case of the preacher interviews, I was interested in learning about preachers' rationale for using one or the other type of hedge, and their reasons for hedging. Guided by the way Lewin (2005) phrased her questions, I asked the preachers two questions:

1. Can you point me to any place in your sermon where you feel yourself that you tone down a statement/express yourself tentatively?
2. Why did you tone down your statement/express yourself in this way?

Just like Lewin, I deliberately avoided the term 'hedge' because of its potential pejorative connotations regarding avoidance of responsibility for statements, and because it might confuse the interviewees. In most cases, preachers pointed me to wordings in the manuscript that I had already identified provisionally, but in some rare cases preachers identified wordings that I had not immediately interpreted as performing a hedging function. Regardless, we then discussed their rationale for

toning down the statement in each of the cases. This process led to the confirmation, and in many cases also the rejection, of several of the discourse functions suggested during the close reading.

5.2.3   *Searching for, analyzing and quantifying hedges in sermons*

The qualitative process was then followed by a quantitative investigation. The list of hedging forms identified through the close reading and as a result of the interviews was compared to a list of words with potential hedging functions provided in Hyland (2005). Despite the claim by Markkanen & Schröder (1997:6) that "no clear-cut lists of hedging expressions are possible", previous research into hedging has taught us that certain specific linguistic expressions commonly perform a hedging function. This kind of 'listing' of hedges is not for the sake of listing itself, but allows scholars to explore functional as well as distributional aspects of linguistic expressions which may perform a hedging function; this makes sense when the ultimate purpose is to better understand hedging as communicative behavior in certain discourse contexts.

Since the category of hedges is widely considered to be open-ended, Hyland's (2005) list is as good a starting point as any other, even if his list is reflective mostly of hedges in academic discourse. In cases where Hyland's list did not include an item that I had identified through the close reading or during the interviews, that item was added to his original list. In some cases items from Hyland's list did not appear in the 30 manuscripts that were used in the close reading (e.g. the epistemic adjective *probable* were not used a single time in these manuscripts). For this reason a back-check from Hyland's list was done on the complete sermon samples — any item (n = 21) from the original Hyland-list that did not appear at all in the sermon samples was removed from the combined list. This systematic approach meant that it was possible to identify a reasonably good number of linguistic forms (n = 42) as hedging candidates in sermons. However, it should be stressed that the objective of the study was to investigate different patterns of occurrence of hedges (cf. the expressed objective of Hyland & Tse 2004 for their study on metadiscourse) and to give an indication of the place of hedging in preaching — the study does not claim to be comprehensive in the sense that *all* linguistic elements that could possibly perform a hedging function were identified.

Searches for all the hedging forms on the list of hedging elements were then made in the three sermon samples using freely downloadable concordance software, AntConc (Anthony 2014). A first 'inventory' of potential hedging expressions in the sermon samples resulted in a total of 1,987 returns. All returns then needed to be analyzed manually, using the analytical principles illustrated in Section 4, to ensure that they qualified as hedging metadiscourse. Hyland stresses the importance of this manual process: "analysts must always examine each item

individually to determine its function" (2005: 24). In addition, potential hedges in quoted material in the sermons had to be eliminated.

In order to confirm the reliability of these analytical principles as applied to sermonic data, the principles were confirmed by two research colleagues from other disciplines (neither of them have any formal training in linguistics; one is a native speaker of English, the other is very close to native-speaker competent). After being introduced to the concept of metadiscourse, the concept of hedging, and how to identify metadiscursive hedges (here we looked at very clear examples in context and the conditions in Section 4), they were given 100 concordance lines each (randomly selected by taking every 10th instance in the combined sample of 1,987 candidate items). The raters were also given 'context' in the form of five sentences before and after the sentence that included the target concordance line. I then analyzed the same sub-sample as the raters before reviewing their responses. In identifying those instances to be eliminated (because they were either not used metadiscursively or did not meet the definition of a hedge) we agreed in 92% and 94% of the cases respectively. This was thought to be sufficient to confirm the principles for analysis. After I had manually analyzed the entire sample and eliminated any non-qualifiers, the total number of hedges in the sermon sample was determined to be 1,627.

6. Results and discussion

This section is divided into three parts, each of which is devoted to one of the three research questions. The main findings can be summarized in the following way: Overall, hedging occurs with average total frequencies ranging between 7.5 and 12.2 hedges per 1,000 words of preaching. Interestingly, Catholic preaching uses significantly less hedging than Anglican and Baptist preaching. Preachers rely almost exclusively on transparent/traditional forms of hedging manifested by indefinite expressions, modal auxiliary verbs, semi-auxiliary verbs, and epistemic (modal) adjectives and adverbs. Finally, while it was possible to identify a multitude of metadiscursive functions of hedging in sermonic discourse (ten of which are discussed in here), it was not possible to correlate a specific hedging function with a hedging form in any consistent way. The results presented are consistent with the tenets of the turn-to-the-listener preaching paradigm and also confirm that hedging is a discourse-dependent many-faceted phenomenon.

6.1 Distribution of hedges in sermonic discourse

The frequencies reported in Table 2 confirm the view that hedging is a central concern in contemporary, turn-to-the-listener preaching. A total of 1,627 cases of hedging were found in the collected sample (189,239 words). Anglican preaching uses 12.1 hedges/1,000 words of preaching; Baptist preaching uses 11.5 hedges/1,000 words of preaching; Roman-Catholic preaching uses 7.7 hedges/1,000 words of preaching.

Table 2. Distribution of hedges in various text samples; numbers normalized to occurrences per 1,000 words

	Anglican preaching	Baptist preaching	Roman-Catholic preaching	Denominations combined
Hedges/1,000 words	12.1	11.5	7.7	11.5

For every 1,000 words of preaching, and assuming that preachers speak at a normal speaking rate of 160 words per minute, preachers use some kind of hedging device once every 32 seconds.

It seems Catholic preaching uses less hedging than both Baptist and Anglican preaching. This is confirmed by chi-square analysis of denominational differences pertaining between hedges. These differences are significant: X-squared = 64.72, df = 8, p-value < 0.01, meaning that the markedly lower frequency of hedges in the Catholic sample is not attributable to chance. Closer examination of the standardized residuals confirms that hedges are underrepresented in the Catholic sample and overrepresented in the Anglican and the Baptist samples. Since there is no 'norm' to compare these frequencies to, it is interesting to speculate about the reasons for (i) the low(er) frequency of hedging in Catholic preaching, and (ii) the high(er) frequency of hedging in Anglican and Baptist preaching. In this respect it is worth noting that "the language of uncertainty and faith is … heavily dependent on religious institutions and teachings, traditions, and ritual practices of these institutions" (Wuthnow 2012: 38).

A tendency for Catholic preachers to hedge less is consistent with the view of authority in the Roman-Catholic Church; interpretation, and to some extent there is an interpretative/hermeneutic component present in all preaching, is grounded in the Church's teaching authority, the *magisterium*, widely recognized as a major source of religious influence and truth (Ratzinger & Schönborn 1994). Teaching and doctrine has been carefully "traditioned" (Ratzinger & Schönborn 1994: 78) in the Catholic Church over centuries and there is thus potentially less interpretative and dialogic space for preachers, and for listeners, to inhabit, and this may be manifested by a lower incidence of hedges. Two of the three Catholic preachers

interviewed expressed a distinct feeling of trust in the continuity of the *magisterium* and were hesitant about a need to express themselves in uncertain terms, as reflected by this comment.

> *In most cases there is no need to express uncertainty because you can always turn to the church's teaching. I am then expressing an ecclesial faith and that is enough. There are times when we just have to depend on the church. That continuity is important. What I could do is say that I don't understand something.*

The other end of the ecclesial spectrum (in this study) is occupied by the Baptist Church, which typically tends to renounce doctrinal authority, grounding truth of its faith in biblical revelation and the belief that every individual Christian (rather than the church) has been endowed with the ability to interpret the Bible (Maring & Hudson 2012). In this much wider interpretative space, hedges may play a different, more central, role. To some extent, the same is true for the Church of England where the preachers', and the listeners', right to individually interpret the Bible is widely acknowledged. Comments from both Baptist and Anglican preachers confirm these typical positions and also suggest that this may indeed be a reason for a higher incidence of hedging with these two denominations.

> *I would feel that I was intellectually dishonest if I did not sometimes express myself tentatively. I would even go as far as saying that I am honor bound through my Baptist ministry to do that — what I offer is after all* my *interpretation.* [Baptist]

> *I always, always feel a need to express myself tentatively. I never make theological claims, that I believe some people do, about forgiveness, hell, and things like that. We are really lucky in the sense that the Church of England does not have a strong body of doctrine to which I must give assent and relate in my preaching.* [Anglican]

Interestingly, during our discussion concerning the use of tentative language, but without being asked to make any comparison with other denominations, one of the Anglican informants contrasted preaching in the Church of England with preaching in the Catholic Church, saying that:

> *The Church of England is incredibly liberal when it comes to preachers expressing their own view. We do not speak as representatives of the church as Catholic priests do. In our context, when you express 'your take' on things, which would be a lot more common than saying something about the church's position, then I think expressing yourself tentatively is inevitable.*

6.2 Hedging forms in sermonic discourse

The systematic process involving close reading of the sermon manuscripts (the author's identification of hedges) supplemented by the interviews (the preachers' own

identification of hedges) reveals that preachers almost exclusively rely on transparent, i.e. traditional and previously recognized, forms of hedging. On virtually all occasions when I asked preachers to "point me to any place in your sermon where you feel yourself that you tone down a statement/express yourself tentatively" they indicated places that were metadiscursively framed by a hedging form(s) which was among those that I had identified myself. While this provides support to the analysis, it is surprising that so little mention was made of more subtle, less transparent, forms of hedging (this was clearly the case in Lewin's 2005 study).

The only hedging form that stands out as not being transparent (to the analyst) is various statements involving the communicative verb *pray*, as in (6).

(6) I *pray* that you all follow this example of love.

Several preachers wished to attach tentativeness to this verb, saying, for example, "it is a tentative way of encouraging listeners" or "it is the Church's way of expressing hope and anticipation, and it takes away the forcefulness of a statement; having said that, it is a really churchy way of saying something". These remarks obviously recall Fraser's definition of hedges as expressions that "take away the full force of a speech act" (2010: 15).

A concordance search shows that five grammatical categories of hedges stand out as particularly prevalent in sermonic discourse, none of them surprising as far as standard expressions of hedges are concerned: indefinite expressions, modal auxiliary verbs, semi-auxiliary verbs, modal adjectives and adverbs, and the lexical modal expression *I think*. Table 3 shows the distribution of the most frequent hedging forms of these categories of hedges. What is interesting, though, is that some forms recall practices characteristic of written discourse rather than spoken discourse.

Table 3. Distribution of the most frequently occurring hedges (raw numbers)

Hedge	Anglican	Baptist	Catholic	Combined frequency (% of total no. hedges)
some, someone, something, sometimes	123	134	53	310 (19%)
may	71	89	51	211 (13%)
might	57	87	37	181 (11%)
seem(s)	70	53	21	144 (9%)
perhaps	51	40	21	112 (7%)
possible/-ly	29	28	18	75 (5%)
I think	36	14	18	68 (4%)

By far the most frequent hedge is *some*, and derived forms of that indefinite expression; the combined frequency of *some*-form hedges amounts to 19% of all the hedges found in the data. The example in (7) is representative.

(7) In modern parlance *some* might say that the Gospel writers were spin-doctors for their faith.

Prototypically*, some*-constructions introduce an indefinite variable (Huddleston & Pullum 2002) or an element of vagueness (Channell 1994; Cutting 2007), making propositions deliberately imprecise or ambiguous in some respect. The finding that vagueness structures are frequent in preaching suggests that, in this respect at least, preaching practice is at odds with homiletic advice concerning language use in sermons. Broadus & Weatherspoon (1944: 244), in one of the milestone works in homiletics of the last century, emphasize "clearness and perspicuity" in preaching. The authors urge preachers to "render it not merely possible that the people should understand … but impossible that they should misunderstand" (1944: 96). This is accomplished, according to Broadus & Weatherspoon by using words "that exactly express [preachers'] thoughts [and] terms ought to be precise so that the expression and the idea correspond, neither of them containing anything which the other does not contain".

Some is a typical feature of spoken communication/conversation (Biber *et al.* 1999; Thornbury & Slade 2006), and in this way its deployment in preaching projects a kind of imagined conversation, in many ways a means in itself since preaching should be conversation-like (Buttrick 1987) and for preachers who are anxious to 'sound' conversational, it would be an incentive to flavor their language with expressions so typical of spoken interaction.

A desire to sound conversational may be reflected also in the relatively high occurrence of the 'mental verb' construction *I think*, commonly used in dialogue and face-to-face conversation (Aijmer 1997; Simon-Vandenbergen 2000). *I think* is either used parenthetically or with a (sometimes suppressed) *that*-clause complement as in (8). *I think* indexes a semantic domain of uncertainty and weak commitment (e.g. Aijmer 1997) and, more rarely, authoritative deliberation (Simon-Vandenbergen 2000). Very often, *I think* appears in conjunction with other hedging devices, as in example (8) where the expressions *might*, and *assume* cumulatively amplify the hedging force:

(8) The four Gospels are not consistent about who was present and how near they were but *I think* we *might* reasonably *assume* that the artist intends them to represent the three Mary's.

The modal verbs *may* (9) and *might* (10), in their epistemic senses, together account for nearly 25% of the total number of occurrences of hedging items.

(9)   Believing in Jesus *may* be an intangible and indefinite thing.

(10)   This year we *might* feel our experience is closest to the Emmaus disciples;
       next year we *might* feel more like Mary Magdalene. The year after that it
       might be something completely different.

According to Hyland (1998: 116) both forms are standardly used to "indicate a 50–
50 assessment of possibilities" and they are *par excellence* markers of the domain
of epistemic modality. If preachers desire to sound conversational the frequency
for *might* ought to be higher than that of *may*; *might* is more common in spoken
discourse (Biber *et al*. 1999), but the apparent balance between the two forms may
be attributable to the fact that the investigation is based on manuscripts written
to be spoken.

The semi-auxiliary verb *seem*, referred to by Hyland (1998) as an epistemic-
evidential verb, typically signals preachers' arriving at a tentative conclusion on
the basis of an inferential process, as in example (11) where the preacher involves
the listeners in the inferential process and indirectly points them to the 'evidence':
"go see for yourself — the Bible talks of a man dressed in white".

(11)   In the Bible, white clothing is usually what someone would wear in the
       presence of God, so it *seems* that this man is a messenger from God.

The high incidence of *seem* in the sample is somewhat surprising. According to
Biber *et al*. (1999) *seem* is a typical feature of written academic discourse, and
homiletics (e.g. Buttrick 1987; Craddock 2010) cautions preachers against adopt-
ing an essayistic and formal tone when they preach, lest sermonic discourse sound
academic.

The basic function of the epistemic adjectives/adverbs *perhaps* (12) and *pos-
sible/ly* (13) is to show "the doubt of the proposition" (Biber *et al*. 1999: 868) and to
reduce "categorical commitment" (Hyland 1998: 130–131) respectively.

(12)   *Perhaps* like Mary Magdalene and the other disciples, we find it difficult to
       believe.

(13)   *Possibly*, we will become just that little bit more ready to respond.

Strong opinions have been voiced in the homiletic literature about the use of ad-
jectives and adverbs in sermons. One extreme position is occupied by Buttrick
who recommends that preachers avoid unnecessary adjectives, which do little but
"cloy", and adverbs, since they add "extra beats" leading to a language that is "quite
unnatural" in preaching (1987: 218–219). McClure (2007: 68) advocates that ad-
jectives and adverbs are "used sparingly" and Eslinger (2002: 31) warns that the
language of preaching can be "eroded" by adjectives and adverbs. Eslinger goes as

far as saying that these words, "rob … the hearers of their own judgments regarding the ideas" in the sermon. While recommendations of this kind may be appropriate regarding the use of adjectives/adverbs in colorful descriptions, epistemic adjectives and adverbs of the kind in (12) and (13) do exactly the opposite: they open up dialogue and invite listeners to form their own judgments. This would be one area where the current analysis could serve to inform homiletic theory to make recommendations more nuanced. What is more, on the topic of adjectives and adverbs, homiletic advice appears, again, to be at odds with preaching practices, as suggested by the comment from this Anglican preacher:

> *I happen to love a well-placed adjective or adverb, it adds nuance to what you say, makes your language come alive in interesting ways.*

6.3 Functions of hedging in preaching

An interesting finding from the interviews was that on many occasions, preachers failed to identify what I interpreted to be obvious instances of toning down of statements, suggesting that the main function of much hedging has little or nothing to do with preachers' epistemic confidence in the qualified proposition. There is, instead, indicative evidence of a multitude of other (meta)discursive functions of hedges in sermonic discourse. For reasons of space, the discussion here is limited to ten of the functions identified. While some of the functions have a general communicative value, others are clearly unique to a preaching context and have consequently not been discussed before in the research literature. It should be noted that no clear correlations between preachers' self-reported rationale for hedging and denominational affiliation could be identified.

A first, general, interpersonal function of hedging, which is also evident in contemporary preaching, is to **allow for alternative interpretations** of states of affairs, thereby **opening up a (tacit) dialogue with listeners**. In example (14) the Baptist preacher offers his interpretation (indexed by *possible*) of the place in the Bible they have just read together but together with the added-on question, an invitation is extended to the listeners to challenge the interpretation and take a leading role in the meaning-making themselves.

(14)   It is *possible* that Jesus was upset and sad. Or what do you think?

The tentativeness introduced by the hedge and the open question emphasizes that the preacher is on a faith journey, in similar fashion to his listeners, assuming the position of a 'student of faith', asking questions and exploring possibilities, rather than assuming the position of 'teacher' and providing answers to questions

about faith. In this respect, hedging also highlights an element of inclusiveness, eradicating 'boundaries' between preachers and listeners.

The hedging in (14) also highlights another metadiscursive function crucial to contemporary preaching, namely an inherent **invitation to listeners to explore further on their own**, as expressed by the Baptist pastor when we discussed this example from his sermon:

> There are parts where you can be really firm, and there are other parts where you say 'Look this is my understanding; the best interpretation I can get to is this.' That would encourage people to look at it for themselves.

Both these first two functions of hedging (pointing to alternatives/dialogue, and inviting to explore further) are consistent with homiletic advice that "a sermon must be open to many interpretations and hearers are invited to complete the sermon" (Immink 2004: 100).

In the process of listening to the sermon and in completing the sermon, listeners are entitled to experience doubt, and another function of hedging is **to recognize doubt among listeners**. In example (15) doubt is arguably thematic in this part of the sermon, but according to the Catholic preacher, a real effect of using the words *may* and *maybe* in this way is that they act 'catalytically' upon that theme.

(15)   We *may* have lost the old certainties that we could hold when we weren't challenged every day by a diverse sea of faiths and of moral ambiguity. *Maybe* we have got it wrong.

Commenting further on the hedging the preacher expressed the view that:

> You have to acknowledge that there are huge amounts of doubt around and the people in Church are not immune from this and nor is the preacher himself. … By being cautious in this way I can acknowledge the listeners' feeling of uncertainty. Mind you, the 'maybe' there is highly rhetorical — I then go on to assert that we are in fact right, but the effect of acknowledgement, however hypothetical it may seem, is important.

The 'mysterious' nature of faith is a recurrent theme in much homiletic literature. Buttrick (1987: 261–262) declares that "preaching speaks of the Mystery of God [and] interprets a being-saved community within a mysterious human world". When faced with these mysteries, preachers must sometimes **assume a humble attitude and recognize their failure to understand something completely** — this is another function of hedging, and it goes hand in hand with contemporary listeners' general rejection of authority that is so characteristic in turn-to-the-listener preaching. In this postmodern situation preachers are denied the right to have the last word, and hedging can be seen as a means for preachers to recognize a

reconstructed notion of authority, and to de-emphasize their own perceived authority — contemporary preachers renounce the power to command listeners to do something or even think in a specific way; instead they wish to move listeners towards subjectively applied understanding and to affect individual experience. This desire came out quite strongly in several of the interviews, but was expressed most clearly by this Anglican preacher when we discussed his use of *might* in (16) and the framing of the utterance by the explicit acknowledgement *It is difficult to understand*:

> *I cannot claim to understand everything God teaches us, and for this reason I sometimes feel a strong need to be tentative about what I say. Many people may see me as an authority, but really I am not. I am in search of truth as much as they are, and while I may be able to help them on the journey, they must draw on their own experiences and find their own answers.*

(16)   *It is difficult to understand* what Paul is getting at. *Might* he be implying that turning away from sin is the answer?

Another apparent reason for preachers to hedge is that sometimes it is absolutely necessary to flag something as uncertain because all there is to fall back on is hermeneutics, so there is no real way of 'knowing'. When preachers hedge as a result of **striving for accurate biblical interpretation**, they standardly do it to indicate that there is theological (exegetical) disagreement concerning something. Thus, the rationale on these occasions (as well) has nothing to do with preachers' epistemic confidence in the proposition; rather their only option is to hedge. The sermon excerpt in (17) is a good example of hedging with this motive.

(17)   Bible scholars have offered various ways of interpreting the reading this morning. Jesus' words *may* be taken to refer to Christians only, i.e. people of faith. Alternatively ….

Jesus' words may indeed be taken to refer to Christians only, but his words may equally well be taken to refer to other groups of people, and the preacher then goes on to point to two alternative interpretations. Here the hedge effectively sets up the interpretative scene, but the rationale is not to point to alternative interpretations that listeners may have (that is another function of hedging, see above), but to point to alternatives offered by biblical exegesis (often Bible scholars). Commenting on his use of *may* in (17), this view was offered by a Baptist preacher:

> *When I come to Scripture, which is a fundamental source, there are times where Scripture does not bear a clear witness, where either it is incomplete, or it may appear contradictory. In that case I would have to be intellectually honest and offer different viewpoints or alternatives that I know of and say that I am not going to say*

> which is true, because I don't think I can. Here 'may' signals that there are alternative ways of interpreting Scripture.

Yet another rationale for hedging is exemplified by (18).

(18)   *Perhaps* you can do whatever little is in your power to change the lives of these people.

Here the hedging by the adverb *perhaps* **highlights a desire on the part of the preacher not to impose on the listeners**. Generally, preachers tend to want to avoid imposing on listeners, so a desire not to be perceived as dogmatic, moralist, or as passing ethical judgment or, as in this case, a desire not to be perceived as ordering people about, incentivizes preachers to hedge. Allen (2010: 8) stresses that contemporary listeners "must be able to 'apply' the word spoken to their own lives in their own ways without it being dictated or there is no freedom". Similarly, Wilson (2004: 123) says that "a preacher must not dogmatize or pontificate, but be able to listen and raise issues". Speaking about the excerpt in (18) this Catholic preacher expressed that:

> People today, my listeners, are burdened by so much: personal bereavement, problems of the heart, feelings of insecurity or of being insufficient. While I sometimes have to tell them unpleasant things, it is not my desire to add to that burden by ordering or telling them what to do or what to feel or believe. On this occasion I wanted to encourage them to do something for the refugees, but I wanted to lighten it up somewhat.

Constructing ethos is another dimension of hedging in preaching. The ethos-generating power of hedging operates by adding to the credibility of the preacher. Ethos/credibility as a dimension of tentative language was a point that was reiterated by several of the preachers during the interviews. The Anglican preacher who is the source of (19) said the following by way of explaining his choice of wording (*I think…*):

> That is just a way for me to communicate a credible message that does not focus too much on what I believe the Christian faith is like — I am conscious of not coming across as too firm — I need them to see me as a humble servant of God. Only that way can I make them see things in a potentially new light.

(19)   *I think* that the Christian faith is like this, especially at Easter.

When preachers explicitly acknowledge uncertainty this projects an unassuming character on the part of the preacher ('I do not tell you what to think, believe, feel etc.'). According to Allen (1992: 104) this is a way to be honest as "it adds to the credibility of the preacher; it avoids coming to a premature conclusion". Expressing uncertainty, presenting different viewpoints on a controversial topic

in a sermon, also adds to the credibility of the sermon, rather than the preacher, Allen (1992: 104–105) says. While it might seem difficult to disentangle the credibility of the preacher from the credibility of the sermon, this happens quite readily on occasions when sermons are published, for example in a parish magazine, or online, and then becomes a communicative entity separate from the preacher.

Much homiletic literature advocates the use of everyday language in preaching, underlining "the familiar conversational quality [of sermons] so they don't become classroom lectures" (Waznak 1998: 117), stressing that preaching essentially should be a conversation about the lives of the listeners. While it may be difficult to engage the congregation in traditional conversation on the pattern of a dialogue with turn-taking (although that happens in some churches), if preachers want to heed such advice, it is in their interest at least to make the sermon *sound* like an attempt at conversation. To some degree, hedging helps preachers to address this general stylistic objective during preaching, to **mimic conversation**. When I discussed example (20) with a Baptist preacher it was revealed that one objective of using hedges was that it helps him project a conversation.

(20) *I think* that verse 19 shows us a touch of Jesus' humor when he asked them that question.

I try to preach the way I am speaking to you now. I want my preaching to sound like a conversation between people. In my view, the inclusion of expressions like 'I think' add a certain conversational flavor to the sermon, I think I sound a bit more chatty that way.

A sermon shaped by the turn-to-the-listener preaching paradigm commonly assumes various forms of a narrative structure, often involving an inductive retracing of experience, moving "from the specifics of lived experience to general claims" (Allen 2010: 8–9). If the narrative does not involve the listeners directly, preachers are anxious to make them part of the story in other ways — another function of hedging in preaching is **inviting listeners to be part of the sermon story**.

The sermon excerpt in (21) is a good example of this hedging function. The preacher uses a 'life story' of a young adult living in a neighboring parish as a starting point and backdrop for the sermon as a whole. Listeners are told about the young man's early childhood, how many of his dreams were shattered, and the young man's chaotic family situation. At the point where the three statements in (21) are uttered, the preacher consciously shifts the focus away from the boy of the example to the listeners and applies that experience more generally.

(21) *Perhaps* life is that hard. *Perhaps* life is like that for all of us in some ways. *Perhaps* you become scared when you wonder what your hardships will be — I do not blame you.

The tentativeness communicated by the three occurrences of *perhaps*, rhetorically reinforced by the explicit engagement resulting from the inclusiveness of *us* and the repeated 'naming' of the listeners, via *you*, effectively 'opens' the story for the listeners. Without hedging, the statements would have been straightforward assertions that "life is hard" and "life is like that for all of us in some ways" etc., but with the hedging an additional inclusive space opens up to incorporate the listeners and their experiences. The Catholic preacher who wrote the sermon expresses this in the following way:

> *I express tentativeness to draw people into the story, to give them the space to find themselves in the story. For that to happen, I must leave space for their experiences, which may well be different from mine. In this way I see the expression of tentativeness almost as an invitation for them to join me right there in the unfolding sermon story.*

Finally, hedging can be seen as having a discourse-structuring function, **indicating a discursive boundary between 'other'** (God or other external sources, or the listeners) **and 'self'** (preacher). Generally speaking, preaching is characterized by a high incidence of 'otherness', typically manifested by direct or indirect intertextual references or 'othervoicedness' (Malmström, in press). The fact that preaching by its very nature is hermeneutical assumes two things: (i) many references to other sources of information than the preachers themselves, both biblical and non-biblical sources, and (ii) a projection of those engaged in the hermeneutics, i.e. the preachers themselves. Hedging is a platform for the latter, and as such it effectively features as a demarcation between 'other-sourced' information and, no matter how temporarily it happens, a discursive perspective ascribable to the preacher. In an example like (22), this shift from other to self is very explicit, and the hedge provides a clear signal.

(22)   *I think* that these words speak not of hopelessness, but of an eternal hope in the Resurrection of Jesus.

This interpretation was confirmed by the Anglican preacher who is the source of (22) when we spoke of his decision to qualify the utterance by *I think*:

> *That's to show them that that is me. That's [NN] stepping into the sermon, expressing my view. I do that all the time, obviously, but sometimes I like to make it clear, as in this case.*

7.   Concluding remarks

This investigation set out to establish the place of hedging in contemporary preaching as represented by three Christian denominations in the UK. The findings indicate that preachers from across the denominational range considered frequently employ 'standard' hedging resources, typically not to convey an epistemic attitude *per se*, but as a productive interactional means to address fundamental objectives of turn-to-the-listener preaching, elevating and acknowledging sermon listeners as active partners in a sermonic conversational experience.

There are, however, several limitations to the study. The first concerns the size of the empirical sample; basing the analysis on only 150 sermons and 11 preacher interviews makes generalizations problematic. Second, while self-reporting from informants is considered a common and useful practice in much discourse analysis, there is always the risk that the analysis attaches inappropriate importance to idiosyncrasies. Third, and this is the most obvious shortcoming, since hedging is considered a pragmatic phenomenon, a multimodal investigation of the sermons *as delivered*, rather than in manuscript form, would have provided a much richer basis for analysis. Hedging clearly does not come only in the form of linguistic expressions; prosodic and gestural indicators of hedging (change of tempo, ums, ahs, facial expressions, head and hand movements, etc.) may be as important for hedging as a modal auxiliary verb or an indefinite expression.

Despite these shortcomings this snapshot of preachers' metadiscursive hedging practices raises some potentially interesting implications for religious discourse analysis and for homiletics.

This study addresses an obvious gap in the discourse-analytical literature on religious discourse; Wuthnow (1992: 60) laments the limited knowledge we have concerning "the ways in which religious discourse is actually put together". Any position that religious discourse is somehow irrelevant to anyone outside a religious context is unsustainable: according to Wuthnow (1992: 59) it is indisputable that "the flow of religious discourse [spills] into the public arena with increasing intensity". In view of this cross-fertilization between religious and secular discourses it is important to learn more about how language is used in religious discourse. Knowing more about the rhetorical appeal preaching makes to listeners through the use of hedging language is at least one step closer to a clearer picture of this key genre of religious discourse. Hopefully this piece of research can spark further interest in this branch of discourse analysis to address the concerns raised by Wuthnow (1992) and others.

The study (theoretical approach, methodological approach, and the findings) can be used to inform research in homiletics, a community concerned with furthering effective preaching practices, for example by encouraging homiletics to expand

its methodological approaches to include more descriptive and data-driven methods to complement strictly analytical methodologies. Moreover, not only the findings regarding the distribution, form, and function of hedging as applied to contemporary sermons, but also the operationalization of hedging as 'metadiscourse' will add nuance to a continued discussion within homiletics about how preachers can explore metadiscursive hedging and engage listeners, thereby sustaining approaches to teaching preaching to pre-service and in-service practitioners.

Acknowledgements

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