

A Corpus-based Study of Downtoners – *slightly* and *somewhat* – as Hedging Devices in Indian English

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ABSTRACT

Linguistically, hedges are considered as rhetorical devices that make utterances fuzzier or less fuzzy. In other words, they are understatements that convey purposive tentativeness and vagueness and possibly reduce the risk of negation. Downtoners are considered as one of the most important hedging devices. One of the successful domains of corpus linguistics is in the analysis of contextual variations of lexis. Such analyses of language variation and lexicography through corpus linguistics can be more reliably compared to intuitive studies of applied linguistics. This study seeks to analyze and understand the variations found in the use of two near synonymous hedging expressions – *slightly* and *somewhat* – based on the data from Kolhapur Corpus. It begins with a simplistic comparison of frequencies and dispersions of these two downtoners based on their occurrences in the Brown Corpus, the LOB Corpus and the Kolhapur Corpus. In the second stage, based on the retrieval of all instances of *slightly* and *somewhat* from the Kolhapur Corpus of Indian English, they are analyzed in terms of the lexical items they have modified, the word classes they have represented, and the medium and register of those instances. Finally, this study seeks to determine how these two expressions differ and the external and internal factors that influence the choice of a hedging device.

INTRODUCTION

In the vast field of linguistic expressions, downtoners play a crucial role in modulating the strength of the utterances. Downtoners, such as “slightly” and “somewhat”, function as hedging devices that soften the impact of statements, thereby introducing subtlety and fuzziness into communication. This study delves into the use of these specific downtoners within the context of Indian English. Hedging encompasses strategies for mitigating the force of a person’s statements, and therefore, it is pivotal in the realms of pragmatics and sociolinguistics. By employing hedging devices, speakers can navigate social interactions with greater sensitivity, expressing uncertainty, politeness, or humility as required by the conversational context. In the case of Indian English, understanding the use of “slightly” and “somewhat” can provide insights into the unique manner in which Indian speakers of English negotiate meaning and manage interpersonal communication. Analysis of corpora provide an excellent methodological framework for examining language use in authentic texts. Through a detailed analysis of corpus data, this study aims to illustrate the how “slightly” and “somewhat” are employed by the speakers of Indian English while focusing on the interplay between language and culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of hedging devices in linguistics has been an important field of study, focusing on the manner in which writers and speakers employ language to convey politeness, moderation, and doubt. Linguistic methods such as hedging are employed to reduce the impact of a statement. Modal verbs, adverbs, adjectives, and specific syntactic constructions are among them. Hyland (1998) asserts that hedging enables speakers to convey uncertainty, display civility, and control the degree of commitment to their statements. The idea of hedges was first presented by Lakoff (1973) as a technique to make statements seem less definitive and more hesitant. Studies have indicated that hedging occurs frequently in a variety of registers and genres and fulfills a number of pragmatic purposes (Crompton, 1997).

Metadiscourse: an overview

When there was a shift in applied linguistics from overt grammar instruction to the study of language function, metadiscourse entered the field at that point. In 1959, Zellig Harris coined the word “metadiscourse” to describe how a writer influences the reader to interpret a text or speech in a particular way (Harris, 1959). The phrase has been used in conjunction with other linguistic concepts like hedges and connectives. Hyland (2005) attempted to offer a more robust model by critically analyzing the work on metadiscourse. Hyland’s taxonomy was founded on two primary planes:

The interactive plane: On this level, the author is conscious of the reader's expectations and makes a concerted effort to meet those needs and expectations through the use of resources (devices), which may be employed to limit or regulate what the reader is able to deduce (understand) from the text. There are five kinds in this plane: evidentials (like "Z states", "according to X"), transition markers (like "and"), frame markers (like "finally"), code glosses (like "such"), and endophoric markers (like "the ones mentioned above").

The interactional plane: The reader may easily discern the writer's position and assessment on this plane. In addition, the author imagines a conversation with the reader and addresses any queries they might have. The five categories on this plane are: engagement markers, hedges (like "about"), boosters (like "definitely"), attitude markers (like "surprisingly"), and self-mentions (like "my"). The line that separates these two dimensions appears to be ambiguous and open to several interpretations.

Hedging devices

Cambridge Dictionary defines a hedge as "a word or phrase that makes what you say less strong". The use of hedges in writing or speaking indicates that the data is subjective since it is presented as the author's opinion rather than an objective truth. Hedges, according to Lakoff (1973), are those strategies that help the writer's argument become clearer or less clear. Language learners should be taught how to write in a balanced way so as to avoid coming across as overly confident or hesitant.

Quirk et al. (1985) made a distinction between two primary categories that indicate the degree of commitment by the writer or speaker. These fall into two categories: downtoners (such as approximators, compromisers, diminishers, and minimizers-negative maximizers) and amplifiers (such as maximizers and boosters). Amplifiers are qualifiers or word intensifiers that demonstrate accentuation and highlight the importance of nearby terms. Words like "totally" and "really" are examples of adverbs that are frequently employed as intensifiers. On the other hand, downtoners are statements or words that make another statement or word seem less powerful. Downtoners are used to convey the writer's caution while amplifiers are used to convey the positive emphasis through emphatic methods. One thing that sets native speakers' writing apart is this caution.

Despite the fact that over the past forty years, hedging and related research have advanced and grown significantly, it is nevertheless clear that the semantic category of hedges has not yet been fully defined. The difficulty that scholars have faced is due to the fact that hedging devices have intricate nuanced meanings. However, scholars mostly agree on the definition of hedging, with the exception of the semantic category of hedges. Hedges are associated with fuzziness or lack of clarity according to Lakoff (1973), who states, "For me, the study of words whose job it is to make things more or less fuzzy raises some of the most interesting questions." (p. 195). Indetermination, vagueness, indirectness, and approximation are among the related concepts that have been observed to be covered by the term "hedging," which was originally used to refer to fuzziness (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Vazques & Giner, 2008, Donesch-Jezo, 2010).

Hedging is a strategy used in rhetoric. The speaker indicates a lack of commitment to the intended utterance (force mitigation) or to the full meaning of a term or expression in the utterance (content mitigation) by using a specific term, selecting a specific structure, or imposing a specific form on the utterance. Hedging devices, as demonstrated by Hyland (1996), are employed to convey a wish to avoid making a firm commitment and a lack of total commitment to the reality of the claim. A text is considered to be hedging if it uses any of the various methods that directly or indirectly indicate hedging. One of the most practical conclusions to emerge from the recent study of language use, according to

Channel (1994), is that writers and speakers modify their language to fit the linguistic context (is it an interview, a story in a popular newspaper, or gossip conversation?) and the situation (when, where, and why?).

"Linguistic hedges include linguistic devices, both morphological and syntactic forms used in the process of hedging," according to Aijmer (1984, p. 128). Adverbs, adjectives, concessive conjunctions, impersonal pronouns, indirect speech acts, introduction phrases, hedged performatives, modal nouns, modal verbs, epistemic verbs, negation, tag, adverbs, and adverbs are some examples of linguistic hedges.

Vague language: "slightly" and "somewhat"

Downtoners are a type of adverbial hedges that reduce the force of an expression. "Slightly" and "somewhat" are common examples, used to moderate the intensity of adjectives, verbs, or other adverbs. Quirk et al. (1985) classified downtoners as one of the key categories of adverbs, emphasizing their role in mitigating statements. Holmes (1992) discussed how these adverbs contribute to the politeness strategies in English, allowing speakers to appear less confrontational and more considerate of the listener's perspective.

"Slightly" typically conveys a small degree or extent, while "somewhat" indicates a moderate level of mitigation. Studies have shown that these downtoners are often employed in academic writing, business communication, and everyday conversation to introduce a degree of uncertainty or to soften claims (Biber et al., 1999).

Hedging in Indian English

Indian English exhibits unique linguistic features influenced by local languages and cultural norms. Kachru (1985) highlighted the nativization of English in India, where English has been adapted to fit the sociolinguistic context of the country. Indian English speakers often use hedging devices differently from native English speakers, reflecting cultural preferences for indirectness and politeness (Sailaja, 2009). While there has been extensive research on Indian English, studies specifically focusing on hedging devices are limited. Rasinger (2014) noted that Indian speakers of Indian English tend to use a variety of strategies to express politeness and mitigate statements, including the use of downtoners. However, there is a gap in the literature regarding the specific usage patterns of "slightly" and "somewhat" in Indian English.

In the context of hedging, corpus linguistics enables the systematic analysis of how hedging devices like "slightly" and "somewhat" are employed across different genres and registers. Previous studies have utilized corpora to investigate hedging in academic writing (Hyland, 2005), business communication (Jalilifar, 2011), and media discourse (Catenaccio, 2008).

The existing literature underscores the importance of hedging devices in English and highlights the role of downtoners in mitigating statements. While there is considerable research on hedging in general, specific studies on "slightly" and "somewhat" are less common. Furthermore, the use of these downtoners in Indian English remains underexplored. This study aims to fill this gap by conducting a corpus-based analysis of "slightly" and "somewhat" as hedging devices in Indian English, contributing to our understanding of how English is adapted in different cultural contexts.

METHODOLOGY

This study utilized three corpora for analysis: the Brown Corpus, the LOB Corpus, and the Kolhapur Corpus. These corpora were chosen since they have an almost identical number of texts across different registers (See Table 1) and hence, they would be ideal for comparing the use of the downtoners "slightly" and "somewhat" across American English (Brown Corpus), British English (LOB Corpus), and Indian English (Kolhapur Corpus).

Table 1: The Basic Composition of American, British and Indian Corpora (Retrieved from <http://korpus.uib.no/icame/manuals/KOLHAPUR/INDEX.HTM>)

Text Categories	No. of texts in each category		
	American Corpus	British Corpus	Indian Corpus

A	Press: reportage	44	44	44
B	Press: editorial	27	27	27
C	Press: reviews	17	17	17
D	Religion	17	17	17
E	Skills, Trades and Hobbies	36	38	38
F	Popular lore	48	44	44
G	Belles Lettres	75	77	70
H	Miscellaneous (Govt. Documents, foundation reports, industry reports, College catalogue, industry house organ).	30	30	37
J	Learned and scientific writings	80	80	80
K	General fiction	29	29	58
L	Mystery and detective fiction	24	24	24
M	Science fiction	6	6	2
N	Adventure (Western fiction)	29	29	15
P	Romance and love story	29	29	18
R	Humour	9	9	9
Total		500	500	500

In stage 1, instances of “slightly” and “somewhat” were extracted from the Brown Corpus, the LOB Corpus, and the Kolhapur Corpus. The frequencies of “slightly” and “somewhat” were calculated in each corpus. This involved counting the total number of occurrences of each downtoner in the respective corpora and this data emerged each time a search was made. The dispersion of these downtoners across different sections of each corpus were analyzed to understand their distribution. This step ensured that the use of “slightly” and “somewhat” is not restricted to specific genres or contexts but is representative of the entire corpus.

In stage 2, All instances of “slightly” and “somewhat” were retrieved from the Kolhapur Corpus for detailed analysis. Lexical Analysis: Each retrieved instance is examined to identify the lexical items that “slightly” and “somewhat” modify. This involves categorizing the modified items to determine common collocations and semantic patterns. The instances are analyzed in terms of the medium (written or spoken) and register (e.g., formal, informal, academic, journalistic) to assess how the use of these downtoners varies across different communicative contexts. By employing this methodology, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the use of “slightly” and “somewhat” as hedging devices in Indian English, and elucidating the factors that influence their selection.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In stage 1 of this research, the frequency and dispersion of downtoners - “slightly” and “somewhat” - were tabulated based on the data retrieved after each search in the respective corpus: Brown Corpus of American English, LOB Corpus of British English, and Kolhapur Corpus of Indian English (See Table 2). The LOB corpus had greater instances of “slightly” across texts with 111 occurrences in 88 texts and the Brown Corpus had 77 occurrences in 57 texts while Kolhapur Corpus had just 49 instances in 38 texts. This indicates that the native speakers use “slightly” to modify their statements more frequently than Indian speakers. However, the dispersion data (DPnorm and Juilliand’s D) from the three corpora for “slightly” are similar and there are no significant differences which means that this downtoner is evenly distributed across different texts in each corpus. On the other hand, “somewhat” had more occurrences in Kolhapur Corpus than in the other two corpora indicating that Indian speakers prefer to moderate their statements more frequently with the use of this downtoner than the native speakers. The dispersion data from the three corpora for this downtoner reveal that it is evenly distributed across texts of different genres.

Table 2: Frequency and Dispersion of “Slightly” and “Somewhat” in the Three Corpora

Downtoner	Frequency and Dispersion	Brown Corpus	LOB Corpus	Kolhapur Corpus
<i>Slightly</i>	<i>No. of Occurrences</i>	77	111	49
	<i>No. of Texts</i>	57	88	38
	<i>Frequency</i>	65.478 instances per million words	96.766 instances per million words	42.900 instances per million words
	<i>DPnorm</i>	0.89	0.82	0.93
	<i>Juilliand’s D</i>	0.86	0.89	0.82
<i>Somewhat</i>	<i>No. of Occurrences</i>	53	40	61
	<i>No. of Texts</i>	42	37	55
	<i>Frequency</i>	45.069 instances per million words	34.871 instances per million words	53.406 instances per million words

	DPnorm	0.92	0.93	0.89
	Juilland's D	0.83	0.84	0.87

In stage 2 of this study, the medium and register of the two downtoners - “slightly” and “somewhat” were manually counted based on the coding provided (See Table 1) in Kolhapur corpus of Indian English since the objective of this study is to analyze the use of these two downtoners by Indian speakers of English. “Slightly” was mostly used in writings especially in learned and

scientific writings and in fiction (See Table 3). “Somewhat” was mostly employed in Belles Lettres which are writings that focus largely on language aesthetics (See Table 4). This indicates that “slightly” is mostly used to modify statements in serious writings which are scientific or in accepted forms of fiction. “Somewhat” appears to be a better option in fine writings like Belles Lettres.

Table 3: Medium and Register of “Slightly” in Kolhapur Corpus

Medium and Register		No. of Occurrences
C	Press: reviews	1
E	Skills, Trades and Hobbies	4
F	Popular lore	1
G	Belles Lettres	6
H	Miscellaneous (Govt. Documents, foundation reports, industry reports, College catalogue, industry house organ).	4
J	Learned and scientific writings	9
K	General fiction	9
L	Mystery and detective fiction	7
N	Adventure (Western fiction)	1
P	Romance and love story	4
R	Humour	3
Total		49

Table 4: Medium and Register of “Somewhat” in Kolhapur Corpus

Medium and Register		No. of Occurrences
A	Press: reportage	6
C	Press: reviews	6
E	Skills, Trades and Hobbies	5
F	Popular lore	5
G	Belles Lettres	17
J	Learned and scientific writings	4
K	General fiction	9
L	Mystery and detective fiction	3
N	Adventure (Western fiction)	3
P	Romance and love story	2
R	Humour	1
Total		61

Use of “slightly” to modify adjectives and adverbs

The use of “slightly” in the Kolhapur Corpus shows a tendency to modify adjectives and adverbs, indicating small degrees of difference or change. “Slightly” serves a common function of conveying subtle distinctions. Some examples from the Corpus are below:

...film-maker is so desperately lost more than half-way through a difficult and slightly dated theme that he had no option but to impose a pedestrian.... (Text: KOL_C03)

...tyre before the latter is fitted to the wheel and inflate it slightly sufficient to maintain the shape of the tube. (Text: KOL_E09)

...or prana which is the fuel of thought and which when even slightly disturbed or disorganized creates the disintegrations and distortions of personality peculiar to.... (Text: KOL_F31)

...fertilisers has also found a place in pond preparation. Urea for slightly acidic to neutral and ammonium sulphate for alkaline soils are suggested for.... (Text: KOL_J10)

The text KOL_F31 is about Indian spirituality and the text KOL_J10 is about environmental preservation in the Indian context.

Use of “slightly” to indicate minor differences

The use of “slightly” in the Kolhapur Corpus to indicate minor differences is consistent with its function in English. It typically modifies comparative adjectives to express subtle distinctions, whether positive, negative, or neutral. For instance, in KOL_E12, the subtle distinction between Urdu and Persian is highlighted using “slightly” and the negative effect of interval in a movie (KOL_E14) and the poor quality of a product (KOL_G36) are indicated using this downtoner:

...as, say, English is from Italian. Urdu is only slightly closer to Persian, but still quite different from it. In.... (Text: KOL_E12)

...many bitches the interval is longer: with a few it is slightly shorter. If the interval is very much shorter, there is (Text: KOL_E14)

differing only from their unlovely prototypes in their slightly higher price and slightly inferior quality “. And unhesitatingly he went on, “This.... (Text: KOL_G36)

Use of “slightly” to soften negative statements

The use of “slightly” in the Kolhapur Corpus to soften negative statements is a common linguistic strategy. By modifying negative adjectives and adverbs, “slightly” reduces the severity of the negativity, making the statement less harsh. For instance, ...and all answers which seek to define its function or relevance seem slightly crude and unsatisfactory. We are, therefore, left with nothing.... (Text: KOL_G64)

In terms of Coefficient of equality, the overall position improved slightly from 73.3% to 74.0%, in the case of Scheduled Castes and.... (Text: KOL_H05)

...problem of drinking water in the area. The ground water is slightly alkaline and moderately hard. The chloride contents are within the limits.... (Text: KOL_H09)

Besides these, a prototype second class 3-tier sleeper coach, slightly longer than the present one, with 6 toilets instead of 4.... (Text: KOL_H21)

Use of “slightly” to express tentative opinions

The use of “slightly” in the Kolhapur Corpus to express tentative opinions is a common linguistic strategy. By modifying adjectives and adverbs that reflect opinions or assessments, “slightly” indicates a cautious stance, reducing the assertiveness of the statement as evident in the examples below:

...them. The end walls of the sieve plates are transverse to slightly oblique with a callose deposition all over their surface.... (Text: KOL_J11)

There were, however, certain distinct harmonic properties of the slightly different octaves of the two gramas, which must have aided a.... (Text: KOL_J68)

...if it was their monopoly and tended to treat others in a slightly condescending manner and with the superior air of people who had suffered.... (Text: KOL_K09)

Use of “slightly” to describe minor physical sensations

The use of “slightly” in the Kolhapur Corpus to describe minor physical sensations is a common linguistic strategy. By modifying adjectives and adverbs that describe physical states, “slightly” indicates a minor degree of sensation, reducing the intensity of the description in addition to expressing one’s mental state and feelings:

...if the conglomeration of all past impressions, inchoate and confused and slightly messy, converge to a sharp point, a single memory. (Text: KOL_G64)

...over as if to reveal more of herself; the sun-bronzed back slightly marred with red peeling skin; the well-rounded bottom. The shock.... (Text: KOL_K07)

...him. “ But this one especially, “ he answered, slightly hurt by her indifference. As though in self-justification, he added.... (Text: KOL_K35)

...than the day before. He also noted that his navel hurt slightly. “This is too much. Better go and see a.... (Text: KOL_K44)

...my balcony. For the first time I began to get a slightly uneasy feeling. Was he a member of some intelligence agency or.... (Text: KOL_L04)

...told the doctor (who had aged and was trembling slightly) about the plight of my stomach. He rubbed his hand.... (Text: KOL_P04)

Use of “somewhat” to moderate adjectives and adverbs

The use of “somewhat” in the Kolhapur Corpus to moderate adjectives and adverbs is a linguistic strategy to indicate a moderate degree of a quality or state. By modifying adjectives and adverbs, “somewhat” expresses a middle ground, neither too extreme nor too weak as in the following statements that are deeply rooted in the socio-cultural context of India:

...a different kettle of fish. This little prig, who had somewhat withdrawn after the electoral cataclysm of March 1977, is back to.... (Text: KOL_A18)

...certain product category, consumers generally feel that brand choices available are somewhat limited, such a feeling can become a favourable factor in the.... (Text: KOL_A23)

...Lata Mangeshkar, in her recordings of Tukaram, has taken somewhat greater freedom. But it is only Kumar Gandharva who appears to.... (Text: KOL_C10)

...of children and educational standard of the family. The young and somewhat educated mothers have been found to be more amenable to use the.... (Text: KOL_F20)

Use of “somewhat” to describe ambiguous feelings

The use of “somewhat” in the Kolhapur Corpus to describe ambiguous feelings is a common linguistic strategy. By modifying adjectives and adverbs that describe feelings or emotions, “somewhat” indicates a moderate and often unclear degree of these feelings, reducing the intensity and adding ambiguity as below:

...counterparts, or to display a patronising attitude in according them a somewhat grudging recognition. As a matter of fact, India’s women novelists.... (Text: KOL_C06)

...To what extent if at all aesthetic responses were retarded by the somewhat dry and methodical punctilio of this officer-cum-official approach is arguable. (Text: KOL_C11)

...Army), who was soon up in arms. Couched in somewhat acerbic terms, his reply was that the Government of India had.... (Text: KOL_G27)

...with folded hands some distinguished women guests. I looked at Kukri somewhat stupefied, because he had given the signal earlier for our young.... (Text: KOL_N01)

Use of “somewhat” to mitigate assertions

The use of “somewhat” in the Kolhapur Corpus to mitigate assertions is a linguistic strategy to express a moderate or cautious stance. By modifying adjectives and verbs that represent assertions, “somewhat” reduces the forcefulness of the statement, making it more qualified:

...she had learned to light a kitchen fire. This surprised me somewhat, as she had the reputation (notoriety?) of being.... (Text: KOL_A23)

...death of the progenitor does not result in either the immediate or somewhat delayed break-up of the joint family. Three different patterned timings for.... (Text: KOL_F16)

...carried out in this manner is far greater than that of the somewhat analogous investigation, carried out by men of science, on normal.... (Text: KOL_F31)

...is widened more and more when mystical experiences are uttered in a somewhat mysterious language due to the ineffability of the experiences. (Text: KOL_J55)

Use of “somewhat” to indicate partial agreement or acceptance

The use of “somewhat” in the Kolhapur Corpus to indicate partial agreement or acceptance is a common linguistic strategy. By modifying expressions of agreement or acceptance, “somewhat” suggests a moderate level of agreement or acceptance, with reservations or incomplete support that are typically Indian:

...man, humane, sensitive and scholarly, but I thought he somewhat lacked realism. For several reasons, he had developed an attachment.... (Text: KOL_G07)

...see a Wilde in the West End. Perhaps it would be somewhat superior to say that the principle ingredient of a good popular adaption.... (Text: KOL_G12)

...and complexity were sweeping the city. Nevertheless, the scheme was somewhat of an innovation. It recognized the need for.... (Text: KOL_G13)

...is Right or Left, and of formulating my response to the somewhat one-sided discussion. However, I want you to take note.... (Text: KOL_G16)

Use of “somewhat” to soften criticism or negative feedback

The use of “somewhat” in the Kolhapur Corpus to soften criticism or negative feedback is a strategic linguistic choice. By modifying negative adjectives or phrases, “somewhat” mitigates the harshness of the critique, allowing for a more constructive and less confrontational approach as in the examples below:

...cases, marketer can exercise some freedom in pricing the new product somewhat higher for comparable quality. If, however, the product category.... (Text: KOL_A23)

...higher by about 5 million bales and though the present prices are somewhat higher than about two months ago, they are still considerably lower.... (Text: KOL_A38)

He did not follow this principle and the outcome is a somewhat diffused picture of Bangladesh politics in a wide time-frame with one end.... (Text: KOL_C13)

...the world covered Bangladesh.) In Andhra, the tragedy appeared somewhat domestic (“Oh floods are an annual occurrence!”) (Text: KOL_E05)

Use of “somewhat” to express uncertainty or ambiguity

The use of “somewhat” in the Kolhapur Corpus to express uncertainty or ambiguity is a significant linguistic strategy. By modifying adjectives and phrases that indicate unclear or tentative situations, “somewhat” conveys a moderate level of doubt or mixed feelings as evident in the few examples below:

...took up his own inner life in his hands and with a somewhat belated, but steady and unimpaired growth, astonished the literary world.... (Text: KOL_G11)

...compete with high born? Hence, to make this battle a somewhat equal encounter, unequal opportunity would have to be extended to the.... (Text: KOL_G19)

...then he knew he was there. The ‘Treat Yourself’ happening was somewhat deserted. Clearly very few had believed that their wishes would come.... (Text: KOL_L10)

...be a problem for you to hang those two tomorrow! My somewhat quaint thought. My friend -- the prison Warden -- looks a.... (Text: KOL_L21)

CONCLUSION

This corpus-based study has shed light on the use of the downtoners “slightly” and “somewhat” as hedging devices in Indian English. Through a detailed analysis of authentic language data, several key insights have emerged about the frequency, distribution, and pragmatic functions of these modifiers within the Indian English context. The findings indicate that “slightly” and “somewhat” are employed with notable frequency in Indian English, reflecting their important role in modulating statements and introducing nuance. These downtoners serve to soften assertions, reduce the impact of statements, and convey politeness, uncertainty, or tentativeness. The specific patterns of usage in Indian English also highlight unique aspects of how speakers have social interactions and manage interpersonal relationships.

One significant observation is the contextual variability in the use of these downtoners. While both “slightly” and “somewhat” are used across a range of genres and communicative contexts, their distribution varies, with “slightly” more commonly found in descriptive and evaluative contexts, and “somewhat” appearing more frequently in argumentative or persuasive discourse. This variability underscores the adaptability of hedging strategies to different communicative needs and cultural norms. Moreover, this study underscores the value of corpus-based approaches in uncovering subtle linguistic phenomena. By leveraging large-scale authentic data, researchers can move beyond anecdotal evidence to identify patterns and trends, contributing to a better understanding of language use. The findings from this study not only enhance our knowledge of Indian English but also contribute to the broader field of pragmatics and sociolinguistics by illustrating the manner in which language evolves in diverse cultural settings.

In conclusion, the use of “slightly” and “somewhat” as downtoners in Indian English exemplifies the rich interplay between language and culture. These hedging devices play a crucial role in the pragmatic toolkit of Indian English speakers, enabling them to navigate complex social landscapes with finesse. Future research could expand on this work by exploring other hedging devices and their pragmatic functions across different varieties of English.

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