

HEDGING AS INTERPERSONAL DESIGN IN WOMEN'S INSTRUCTIVE WRITING: THE CASE OF *MRS JOHNSTON'S RECEIPTS* (1740)*

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on a diplomatic transcription of *Mrs Johnston's Receipts* (1740), this article examines explicit hedging as interpersonal design in women's instructive writing. I operationalise Hyland's model (1996, 1998, 2005) through an SFL/Appraisal lens and confine analysis to overt markers, epistemic modals, if-frames, approximators, and reader-judgement phrases. A rule-based regex inventory yields normalised counts and micro-examples. Results point to an accuracy-plus-engagement profile: approximators (e.g., *a little, about*) dominate to encode tolerances of measure, time and doneness, while if-frames and permission/optative modals (may, would) license options and manage contingency. Tokens of can mostly express ability/availability rather than epistemic caution. Writer-protective and attributional hedges are scarce; credibility is enacted through procedural plausibility paired with courteous flexibility. Methodologically, the study offers a replicable baseline for diachronic and cross-domain comparison. Substantively, it reframes hedging in domestic-technical prose as a pragmatic technology for trustworthy guidance under material variability, rather than evasiveness.

KEYWORDS: Hedging, Appraisal (SFL), Recipe Discourse, Women's Instructive Writing, Approximators, Eighteenth-century English.

LA ATENUACIÓN COMO DISEÑO INTERPERSONAL EN LA ESCRITURA INSTRUCTIVA DE MUJERES: EL CASO DE *MRS JOHNSTON'S RECEIPTS* (1740)

RESUMEN

A partir de una transcripción diplomática de *Mrs Johnston's Receipts* (1740), este artículo analiza la atenuación explícita como diseño interpersonal en la escritura instructiva femenina. El estudio se apoya en el modelo de Hyland desde una perspectiva SFL/Appraisal y se centra en marcadores visibles como modales epistémicos, estructuras condicionales y aproximadores. Los resultados muestran un perfil que combina precisión y implicación: los aproximadores dominan para gestionar márgenes de medida y tiempo, mientras que los condicionales y modales permisivos abren opciones y manejan la contingencia. Lejos de ser evasiva, la atenuación funciona aquí como una estrategia pragmática de orientación fiable en contextos materiales variables.

KEYWORDS: atenuación, valoración, recetas, escritura instructiva por mujeres, aproximadores, inglés del siglo XVIII.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25145/j.recaesin.2026.92.15>

REVISTA CANARIA DE ESTUDIOS INGLESES, 92; abril 2026, pp. 305-320; ISSN: e-2530-8335
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1. INTRODUCTION

Eighteenth-century English recipe books are not merely household aids. They are indeed textual sites where knowledge is made credible, authority is negotiated, and readers are guided through action under conditions of uncertainty. In this sense, recipes are a distinctive register of instructive prose whose success depends as much on *how* a writer modulates commitment to claims as on *what* techniques are prescribed. While scholars of historical food writing have charted the material, social, and epistemic worlds of the kitchen (Leong 2018; Pennell 2016; Wall 2016), comparatively little attention has been paid to the microlinguistic devices, especially hedges, by which women recipe writers temper assertion, offer options, and invite cooperation from readers. Hedging, in Ken Hyland's terms, is the family of resources that qualify commitment and open a space for negotiation with readers, and it is relevant to the understanding of how instruction and interpersonal alignment co-operate in written discourse (Hyland 1996; 1998; 2005).

Hyland's work, developed largely on research articles, shows that hedges (e.g., modal verbs like *may/might*, stance adverbs like *probably*, conditional framing with *if*) are not mere markers of indecision but strategic means to calibrate risk and collegiality in public knowledge-making (Hyland 1996; 1998; 2005). In recipe discourse, where domestic practice meets contingent materials and variable kitchens, one expects hedges to manage both epistemic contingencies (ingredients, heat, timing) and interpersonal relations (respecting the reader's agency while maintaining instructional clarity). Bringing this lens to women's instructive writing enables a finer-grained account of how authority is exercised with tact, via permissions, options, and approximations, rather than simply that authority is present.

At the same time, work in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Appraisal theory gives us a principled way to link hedging to interpersonal meaning, i.e., modality and graduation resources scale commitment, while engagement resources acknowledge alternative positions (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014; Martin and White 2005). Read alongside Hyland, this perspective foregrounds hedging as a patterned set of choices that mediate between procedural necessity (the "do this" of recipes) and social attunement (the "as you please / if you like" of domestic negotiation).

This article offers a corpus-informed, close-reading analysis of explicit hedging in *Mrs Johnston's Receipts for all sorts of pastry, creams, puddings, custards, preserves, marmalets, conserves, geillies, syrups, wines, wet and dry confections, biskets, sauces, pickles, and cookery* (1740). We operationalize Hyland's categories to capture only overt devices, lexical and constructional forms that are recoverable without contextual

* The research conducted in this paper has been supported by the Agencia Estatal de Investigación, Plan Estatal de Investigación Científica, Técnica y de Innovación 2021–2023, under award number PID2021-125928NB-I00. I hereby express my thanks. Unión Europea · Fondo Europeo de Desarrollo regional "Una manera de hacer Europa."



inference, namely: (i) epistemic modals (e.g., *may, can, would*); (ii) conditional frames (*if*-clauses) that render steps optional or contingent; (iii) approximators (e.g., *about, almost, a little, a few*); and (iv) reader-judgment phrases (e.g., *as you think / as you please*). We deliberately exclude implicit softeners (e.g., passives without agents, generic *you*, bare conditionals of necessity) to keep the taxonomy transparent and replicable. This focus responds to two gaps: first, the lack of systematic hedging accounts for historical cookery prose in English (most hedging studies focus on scientific or medical genres); second, the need to connect interpersonal design in women's instructive writing to measurable linguistic patterns that can be compared across texts and periods (Hyland 1996; Salager-Meyer 1994).

Our approach is anchored in the historiography of recipes as everyday knowledge (Alonso-Almeida 2013). Studies show that recipe books sit at the nexus of household science, material practice, and print culture, with women often positioned as both compilers and experimenters (Leong 2018; Pennell 2016; Wall 2016). On this view, hedging is not a defect but a *feature* of credible instruction, as it encodes tolerances, accommodates variability, and signals respectful guidance over authoritarian command, precisely the interpersonal balancing act expected in stratified households and local networks of expertise. By tracking hedges across the entire text (paratext and recipes), we also attend to whether stance work clusters in particular sections (e.g., optionality in ingredient lists versus method steps) and whether culinary domains (pastry, preserves, pickles) differ in their reliance on approximators versus conditionals.

This study asks, first, which explicit hedging devices occur in *Mrs Johnston's Receipts* (1740) when coded through Hyland's taxonomy. Second, it examines how these hedges are distributed across textual zones, the prefatory or other paratextual materials versus the recipe bodies, and across culinary domains such as pastry, preserves, and pickles. Third, it investigates the interpersonal work these forms do in women's instructive writing, including licensing permission, signalling optionality, marking approximation, and managing contingency (e.g., "If it should prove too strong, add..."). Finally, it explores how such explicit hedges co-exist with the imperative backbone of recipe discourse, asking how procedural authority is tempered without loss of clarity and stepwise control.

Empirically, the article offers a reproducible coding protocol for explicit hedges in an eighteenth-century women's recipe book, reports normalised counts, and supplies exemplification adequate for diachronic comparison. Methodologically, it brings Hyland's hedging taxonomy into conversation with an SFL-Appraisal reading of interpersonal meaning in instructive prose, as also evinced in Alonso-Almeida (forthcoming) affiliating categories with resources of engagement and graduation (for example, *you may, perhaps, about*). Substantively, it reframes domestic recipes as a domain in which calibrated tentativeness is not ancillary but constitutive of credible guidance; this calibration accommodates contingent materials, tacit household know-how, and the reader's agency while keeping the instructional line intact.



2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Following Hyland, I treat hedging as any linguistic choice that signals less-than-full commitment to a proposition or frames a claim as opinion rather than categorical fact, and I take it as a principled way of managing knowledge and relationships with readers rather than a strategy of obfuscation (Hyland 1998; 2005). In practical terms this includes modal auxiliaries, stance adverbs, parenthetical frames such as *it seems* or *I believe*, approximators, permissive constructions such as *you may*, and conditional cushions of *the if it should...* or *if you find...* type. In historical science writing, hedging sits alongside stance and evidentiality, as writers temper commitment while signalling sources and calibrating alignment with their audiences, and the same nexus is relevant to instructional prose. Hyland's polypragmatic model provides the functional scaffold I adopt for *Mrs Johnston's Receipts* (1740), a model already applied to historical writing (cf. Alonso-Almeida forthcoming). Content-oriented hedges regulate the fit between words and world, for instance when quantities or outcomes are left elastic (Álvarez-Gil & Quintana-Toledo 2022). Accuracy-oriented hedges come in two forms: (a) attribution hedges that flag possible model-data slippage, and (b) reliability hedges that grade confidence in a claim's truth value. Writer-oriented hedges manage face and reduce vulnerability to criticism, often through first-person or impersonal stance frames. Reader-oriented hedges invite acceptance, soften directives, and open space for participation, as when options are licensed with *you may* or outcomes are qualified with *perhaps*. I situate hedging within a wider stance-evidentiality net work in which hedges constitute one subset of epistemic marking alongside evaluative stance and source-telling evidentials; this integrated view helps prevent category creep and keeps annotation stable for an eighteenth-century cookbook or receipt genre (Hyland 1998; 2005).

Diachronic work on scientific prose consistently shows hedging as a central resource for negotiating knowledge, protecting face, and managing uncertainty. Typical cues, e.g., "it may be supposed...", "it seems...", "perhaps," permit authors to keep claims mobile while maintaining a cooperative stance towards readers. In one well-documented line of research on astronomy, hedges tend to increase over the eighteenth century and cluster in writer-oriented self-protection and reader-oriented engagement. Authors shade predictions, distance themselves from possible error, and bring readers along with calibrated invitations to assent. The same pressures obtain, in genre-specific form, in culinary-medical instruction, as ingredients vary by season and storage, hearths run hot or cool, and measures are elastic. Hence the recurrent comforts of "you may," "if it prove too strong, add...", "about a quarter of an hour," or "as you think fit." Such wording keeps procedural control intact while acknowledging material contingency and domestic know-how.

For women's specialised writing, highly relevant to Mrs. Johnston's context, stance work sits alongside strategic directness. Authors balance mitigation with assertion to claim authority in a male-dominated community of practice. In this context, permissive frames and approximators co-occur with boosters and even face-threats where needed to secure compliance or to rebut competing expertise. A recipe that offers "you may strain it finer if you please" may also insist that a step



“must be done immediately” or that a mixture “will certainly fail” if altered. That oscillation is not inconsistency; it is a rhetorical design. In our framework, hedging is one pole in a larger stance system (alongside boosters, evidentials, and evaluative cues), and its interpersonal value is clearest when read against that system as a whole. Put differently, hedges do not weaken instruction; they licence permission, mark optionality, register approximation, and manage contingency, thereby legitimising a female author’s guidance without sacrificing procedural clarity.

Receipt books are procedural and prescriptive, yet they hedge in patterned ways that make the instructions credible and usable in real kitchens. Writers routinely acknowledge measurement and process variability through approximators that bracket precision (*about, near, almost, as much as will, until it be enough*) because spoonfuls are not standard, eggs differ by size, fires run hotter or cooler, and seasonal produce shifts in strength and yield; such wording keeps claims tractable without overpromising. Directives are also softened with permissive or advisory framings, *you may add..., it should be..., it is best to..., if you find...,* which preserve procedural control while licensing the reader’s choice. Knowledge is sometimes attributed rather than owned, *it is said/it is thought, some advise...,* to manage responsibility for outcomes and to acknowledge a community of practice. Following research on vague and elastic language in instructional and historical recipe discourse (Alonso-Almeida & Quintana-Toledo 2022), I treat these devices as explicit, interpersonal hedges whenever they mitigate commitment or soften instruction, rather than as mere noise. This motivates an accuracy-oriented subcoding for approximators in the present corpus, distinguishing their locus (quantity, time, process), their form (premodifying vs. sentential adverbials, comparatives like *at least*, scalar add-ons like *or so*), and their interpersonal force (calibrating confidence vs. cushioning a directive). The coding protocol and worked examples are documented alongside the dataset.

In this study we annotate only overt hedging forms, i.e., items that are textually present and lexically recognisable, setting aside purely contextual or passive softening that lacks an explicit hedge token. Operationally, and aligning categories with Hyland’s functional account (1998; 2005), our inventory for *Mrs Johnston’s Receipts* (1740) comprises six families. First, epistemic modals are coded when they signal less-than-full commitment or offer options; we disambiguate non-epistemic uses (e.g., bare ability or routine futurity) and, where relevant, label their interpersonal orientation as writer- or reader-oriented, with a reliability tag when they grade confidence (e.g., “it may preserve...”, “you may add...”). Second, epistemic adverbs and adjectives (*perhaps, possibly, likely, probable, uncertain*) are treated as reliability hedges, marking the degree of commitment attached to a proposition rather than the procedure itself (“perhaps the syrup will thicken”). Third, stance verbs (*seem, appear, believe, suppose, suggest, think*) are coded as writer-oriented hedges when they attribute a claim to the author’s judgement and thereby protect face (“it seems best to...”; “I suppose you...”). Fourth, approximators and quantifiers (*about, near(ly), at least, a little, to taste*) receive an accuracy–attribute label, since they acknowledge elastic measures or variable processes; we subcode their locus (quantity, time, heat, process) and form (premodifier vs. sentential), distinguishing, for instance, *about half a pint* from *at least an hour* or *stir a little*. Fifth, evidential and attributional



frames (*it is said/held, as is thought, according to N., some say*) are coded as content- or reader-oriented hedges when they shift responsibility to a source or community and invite acceptance without overclaiming (“some say it will keep longer”). Sixth, open alternatives and tempering conditionals are annotated when they explicitly soften commitment or license choice (*if you please; you may either...or...*), thereby engaging the reader while preserving procedural control.

A few boundary rules keep the scheme stable. Multiword strings (e.g., *if you please, according to N.*) are counted as single hedge events. Negated or intensified forms are coded for their hedging function when the polarity still mitigates commitment (e.g., *not quite done* under approximation). Generic passives, nominalisations, or the generic *you* are excluded unless accompanied by an explicit hedging token. We lemmatise across historical spellings for searching (e.g., *near/nearer/nearly; probable/probably*), but report surface forms in examples; likewise, we sense-disambiguate modals so that *can* (ability) is not conflated with epistemic *can* (plausibility). Each instance is assigned a single primary Hyland-aligned label (content, accuracy-attribute vs. accuracy-reliability, writer, reader) with optional secondary tags for orientation and locus, enabling reproducible counts and fine-grained comparisons across paratext and recipe bodies, and across culinary domains.

Our coding rests on four complementary lenses that keep the scheme functional, historically sensitive, and reproducible. First, Hyland’s account of hedging (1998; 2005) supplies the backbone. I treat hedges as interpersonal resources with potentially polysemous work, so we allow dual tags when a single token plausibly does two jobs in context (for instance, *you may* can both grade reliability and invite reader choice). Second, we use Crompton’s commitment-increase test (1997) for borderline decisions. If a clause can be restated with higher commitment without altering its propositional content, the original counts as hedged. In recipes this is often easy to demonstrate, e.g., *it may thicken* is *it will thicken*; *about a quarter of an hour* is *for fifteen minutes*; *if you please, add sugar* is *add sugar*, and the test helps separate genuine mitigation from mere variation in phrasing. Third, we embed annotation in a historical stance–evidentiality ecology. Early Modern prefaces routinely mix effective (deontic) and epistemic stance to position author and audience; cues such as first-person disclaimers (*I have found...*), community attribution (*it is said..., some advise...*), and status appeals (*according to N.*) are therefore read as patterned resources, not incidental politeness. We leverage these diagnostics in paratexts and headnotes so that, for example, it seems best is coded as writer-oriented hedging while a bare imperative in the same preface is read as a deliberate assertion of procedural authority. Fourth, we keep disciplinary and cross-cultural variation in view: contrastive work shows that hedging choices track community norms and communicative purpose. Directive prose aimed at getting things done must still manage rapport; hence our particular attention to reader-oriented devices (*you may, if you please, either...or...*) that temper instruction without loosening control. Together, these lenses let us tag only overt forms while remaining alert to polysemy, guarding against category creep, and preserving comparability across paratext and procedure.

We proceed on four related hypotheses tailored to the interpersonal ecosystem of *Mrs Johnston’s Receipts* (1740). First, reader-oriented hedges will be most visible in



imperative strings, typically following a base command to licence variation without relaxing control; patterns like “you may add a spoonful of...” or “you may either strain or settle it” are expected to cluster after core steps such as take, boil, skim, where they temper face-threat while keeping the procedure on track. Second, accuracy-attribute hedges will concentrate around measures, timing, heat, and doneness cues, reflecting material variability: “about half a pint,” “near a quarter of an hour,” “a little sugar,” “to taste,” “until it be enough,” and cognate signals of endpoint recognition in preserves and confectionery, for instance “till it come to a jelly.” Third, attributional or evidential hedges should appear chiefly in paratexts, headnotes, and remedy-like entries where knowledge is framed as communal or sourced rather than strictly authorial, using formulae such as “it is said,” “some advise,” or “according to N.” to diffuse responsibility and invite assent. Fourth, writer-oriented hedges will surface in prefaces and at points where alternatives are introduced or generalisations are made, with frames like “it seems best,” “I believe,” or “I suppose” managing accountability and pre-empting criticism in a manner consistent with contemporary scientific prose. All these expectations predict a distribution in which permission-granting and optionality markers co-occur with imperatives in the recipe bodies; approximators cluster around quantities, time, heat, and process; source-attribution concentrates in paratextual zones; and author-stance cues appear where the writer negotiates choice or defends judgement. We also anticipate local pairings of hedges with boosters or necessity markers, “you may...,” alongside “must be well beaten,” for example, since authority and mitigation frequently work in tandem to secure both compliance and cooperation.

3. CORPUS AND METHOD

This study examines the complete text of *Mrs Johnston's Receipts* for all sorts of pastry, creams, puddings, custards, preserves, marmalades, conserves, geillies, syrups, wines, wet and dry confections, biscuits, sauces, pickles, and cookery, after the newest and most approved method (s.n., [1740]). Analysis draws on a diplomatic plaintext transcription supplied by the project *Los mecanismos interpersonales en los textos instructivos especializados, domésticos y no domésticos, escritos por mujeres en inglés moderno* (PID2021-125928NB-I00). All textual zones are included, namely, title matter, paratext, recipe heads, ingredient lines, and directions, because hedging can surface at any point where claims are made or responsibility is distributed. The dataset comprises 22,011 running tokens, counted by a regex tokenizer that treats alphabetic strings with apostrophes and hyphens as single tokens (a choice that respects eighteenth-century compounding and elision). Orthography is not modernised: a lowercased working copy supports case-insensitive searching, but every quoted example retains the original spelling and punctuation. For counting, the book is treated as a single corpus; in the full paper we will add a secondary layer that leverages the work's internal headings to compare culinary domains (pastry, preserves, pickles, etc.). This is a focused case study rather than a claim to period-wide representativeness. Its aim is to deliver a replicable operationalisation of



explicit hedging in women's instructive prose that can be extended to other texts and compared diachronically, in line with corpus-based approaches to historical stance and mitigation (cf. Alonso-Almeida 2012; Carrió-Pastor 2016; Álvarez-Gil 2022; Quintana-Toledo 2024).

I adopt Hyland's (1996, 1998, 2005) account of hedging as the strategic modulation of commitment and reader engagement, interpreted through an SFL/ Appraisal lens for interpersonal meaning. In keeping with your specification, we confine the analysis to explicit hedges, i.e., overt lexical or constructional markers retrievable without broader discourse inference, so that coding remains transparent and reproducible (Hyland 1996; Crompton 1997; Alonso-Almeida 2012). Concretely, the inventory comprises, as already mentioned, epistemic modal auxiliaries *may*, *might*, *can*, *could*, *would*, *should*, counted only when they signal reduced commitment or license options; conditional frames that temper directives or open alternatives (*if you...*, *if it...*, *if the...*), subtyped by subject where relevant and included solely in their reader-oriented, contingency-managing uses; accuracy-oriented approximators in measurement and time, scalar items such as *about*, *almost*, *nearly*, *at least*, *or so*; vague-quantity phrases like *a little* and *a few*; and, where present, typicality/frequency adverbials (e.g., *often*), which are scarce in this text; and reader-judgement phrases that delegate choice (*as you please*, *as you think*). Multiword strings are treated as single hedge events; modals are sense-disambiguated so that non-epistemic readings are excluded; and boundary cases are resolved with Crompton's commitment-increase test. To avoid inflating counts with genre-typical indeterminacy, we exclude generic determiners (*some*, *any*) unless they form part of an included approximator, and we ignore implicit mitigation via passives, nominalisations, or generic you when no overt hedge token is present. Non-epistemic obligation modals (*must*, *shall*) are also excluded unless they unmistakably function with hedging force, which we did not observe here. Each attested hedge receives a Hyland-aligned functional tag, content-, accuracy-, writer-, or reader-oriented, alongside its formal class, with dual tags permitted where a single token plausibly performs more than one interpersonal job in context. This integrated, form-plus-function approach curbs category creep and keeps the boundary between hedging and routine recipe vagueness stable and comparable across eighteenth-century instructive prose (Hyland 1996, 1998, 2005; Crompton 1997; cf. Alonso-Almeida 2012; Carrió-Pastor 2016; Quintana Toledo 2024).

I proceeded in five steps. First, we created a lowercased working copy of the diplomatic transcription for search; no other normalisation was applied, and all quoted examples in the article retain original spelling and punctuation. Second, we designed a regex inventory keyed to Hyland's taxonomy so that every target was explicitly retrievable: modal auxiliaries were queried with `/\bmay\b/`, `/\bmight\b/`, `/\bcan\b/`, `/\bcould\b/`, `/\bwould\b/`, `/\bshould\b/`; conditionals with `/\bif\b/` plus subqueries that capture addressee and process contingencies (`/\bif you\b/`, `/\bif it\b/`, `/\bif the\b/`, `/\bif they\b/`); scalar approximators with `/\babout\b/`, `/\balmost\b/`, `/\bnearly\b/`, `/\bat least\b/`, `/\bor so\b/`; vague-quantity approximators with `/\ba little\b/` and `/\ba few\b/`; typicality with `/\boften\b/`; and reader-judgement phrases with `/\bas you please\b/` and `/\bas you think\b/`. Third, counts were extracted automatically,



then spot-checked in context to confirm a hedging reading in this genre. Ambiguous tokens were adjudicated conservatively: for instance, *would* was retained only when it encoded optionality or reduced commitment, as in “if you would have...”, and *can* was excluded where it meant bare ability. Fourth, we report both raw and normalised frequencies per 10,000 tokens, with $N = 21.609$. Fifth, each category is illustrated with brief, verbatim examples that show its interpersonal function, whether permission or possibility, contingency management, approximation, or delegated choice.

Reliability rests on full specification of the search space and on a transparent boundary policy. The complete query list is given above to facilitate replication, multiword strings are treated as single hedge events, and Crompton’s commitment-increase test guided edge cases. Manual checks targeted known pressure points, such as distinguishing *can* of permission from *can* of ability, or *if* as reader-oriented optionality from *if* as strict process condition. A second-coder pass can be incorporated in the full paper; given the explicitness of the inventory, agreement on overt markers should be high. We also draw a clear exclusion line to avoid inflating counts with recipe-typical indeterminacy: generic determiners (some, any) are ignored unless part of an included approximator; passive, nominalisation, or generic *you* are not counted as hedges unless accompanied by an overt hedging token; and non-epistemic obligation modals are excluded unless they unmistakably carry hedging force, which was not observed here.

Two limitations follow from this stance. Some intrinsic indeterminacy in recipes, phrases such as *to taste* or *till enough*, falls outside the present inventory where no explicit hedge token is present in the transcription; and, for economy of reporting, all *if* tokens are treated as potential reader-oriented hedges within imperative contexts, with the understanding that the full paper will subdivide instructional optionality (e.g., *if you please/if you prefer*) from process contingency (e.g., *if it be too thin*). The pipeline itself is portable, as the same queries and validation steps can be run over other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women’s instructive texts to test diachronic and cross-genre hypotheses.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. OVERALL PROFILE

Working from the full diplomatic transcription of *Mrs Johnston’s Receipts* (21,609 tokens), the search inventory (explicit forms only as explain the Method section) yielded 304 hedge tokens, i.e., 140.68 per 10,000 tokens. Approximators are the dominant type (68.1% of all hedges), with conditionals and modal auxiliaries forming a second tier. Reader-judgment phrases are present but comparatively rare.

Two facts are salient. First, accuracy-oriented hedging (Hyland 1998, 2005) is the workhorse of this cookbook. The cluster of approximators (esp. *a little*) accounts for 207/304 tokens (68.1%), with *a little* alone contributing 147 tokens (48.4%). Second, reader-orientation appears both via *if*-clauses (13.2% of hedges) and via



permissive/possibility modals (15.1%), mapping neatly to Hyland's interpersonal view of hedging as the management of risk and rapport rather than mere vagueness (Hyland 1996, 1998, 2005).

TABLE 1. HEDGING CATEGORIES IN MRS JOHNSTON'S RECEIPTS (RAW AND NORMALIZED)

CATEGORY	Raw	Per 10,000	Notes
Epistemic modals (<i>may, can, would</i>)	46	21.29	<i>may</i> 22; <i>can</i> 20; <i>would</i> 4; (<i>might/could/should</i> 0)
Conditionals (<i>if</i> -clauses)	40	18.51	<i>if you</i> 28; <i>if the</i> 6; <i>if it</i> 2; <i>if they</i> 1
Approximators – scalar (<i>about, almost, at least, or so, nearly</i>)	44	20.36	<i>about</i> 34; <i>almost</i> 7; <i>at least</i> 1; <i>or so</i> 2; <i>nearly</i> 0
Approximators – vague quantity (<i>a little, a few</i>)	161	74.51	<i>a little</i> 147; <i>a few</i> 14
Approximators – typicality (<i>often</i>)	2	0.93	<i>often</i> 2
Reader-judgment phrases (<i>as you think / as you please</i>)	11	5.09	<i>as you think</i> 7; <i>as you please</i> 4

4.2. CATEGORY-BY-CATEGORY FINDINGS

This section profiles the hedging repertoire in the book through rates and function, organised under four headings and one notable absence. Epistemic modals are modest (21.29/10k) and lean towards permission and possibility; conditionals are frequent and versatile (18.51/10k); approximators dominate the landscape (95.80/10k) and do most of the accuracy work; reader-judgement phrases are fewer but telling (5.09/10k). Together they sketch a domestic-technical register where precision and choice carry interpersonal weight: *may* and *would* license options, *if*-frames manage contingencies, and scalar or vague quantifiers calibrate measures and timings. For transparency I retain *can* within the explicit modal set, while signalling when tokens encode ability or availability rather than epistemic caution. Attributive or evidential hedges are absent, which suggests credibility is secured through procedural plausibility and alignment with the reader rather than appeal to named authorities. The subsections that follow illustrate each pattern with representative tokens and brief commentary.

a. Epistemic modals (21.29/10k)

The text favours permission/possibility rather than uncertainty modals. *May* (22) licenses optional actions and alternatives; *would* (4) appears in optative frames; *can* (20) often encodes ability/availability rather than epistemic possibility, a point I shall return to below. Typical realizations include the following:

- (1) You may make all these Tarts either of Puff, or cold Paste, as you please. (30)
- (2) You may do Barberries or black Rizers the same Way, if you please. (32)



- (3) You may candy them as you do Pears. (50)
- (4) Take the biggest Morala Cherries you can get. (31)
- (5) If you would have the red Geil very fine, do it the same Way. (42)
- (6) If you would have the Paste red, colour it with Cochineel ... If you would have it yellow, colour it with Saffron. (44)

In Hyland's terms, (1-3) are classic reader-oriented hedges, granting permission and thereby softening the imperative backbone of recipes. Tokens like (4) *you can get* are borderline, as they mark capacity/availability rather than epistemic caution. We have retained them under "explicit modals" for transparency but note that many *can* tokens are ability-oriented rather than hedging in a strict epistemic sense (cf. Crompton 1997). The *would*-conditionals (5-6) instantiate polite optionality (Hyland 1998), projecting desired outcomes without imposing them.

b. Conditionals (18.51/10k)

Conditionals are frequent and pragmatically diverse. Of the 40 instances, "if you ..." dominates (28), indexing reader choice; environment- and process-conditionals (*if the/it...*) also appear, as observed in the following instances:

- (7) If you please to do them with the Stalks, you may take fewer of bruised Currans. (32)
- (8) If the Syrup turn thin, boil it up again. (31)
- (9) If it be not the Time of Gooseberries, take Currans and Raisins. (31)

These are engagement/contingency frames in Hyland's sense. The instance in (7) negotiates optionality with the reader while (8-9) encode process tolerance and seasonal variability. In recipe discourse, such *if*-frames are an interpersonal analogue of scientific conditionality. They maintain procedural clarity while acknowledging real-world instability (Alonso-Almeida 2012).

c. Approximators (95.80/10k combined)

Approximators drive the hedging profile. Scalar approximators (*about, almost, at least, or so*) register measurement/time elasticity; vague-quantity forms (*a little, a few*) dominate seasoning and texture cues; typicality (*often*) is rare.

- (10) Cut them in pieces about 4 inches long. (4)
- (11) Boil it till it be almost candied... (47)
- (12) Let all boil two hours and a half at least ... (114)
- (13) Put in a little Vinegar; cut Parsly, and a few Oysters... (68)
- (14) Baste and turn them often. (104)

Following Hyland's "accuracy-oriented" hedges and subsequent work on elastic language (e.g., Quintana Toledo 2024; Álvarez-Gil 2022), these devices encode



tolerances. They invite the reader to calibrate quantities, textures, and doneness within safe bands. The overwhelming presence of *a little* is not mere imprecision. It is indeed a design solution in a pre-standardized measurement culture, simultaneously technical (specifying small increments) and interpersonal (polite guidance rather than fiat).

d. Reader-judgment phrases (5.09/10k)

These concise directives explicitly delegate choice to the reader:

- (15) ...take as much white-wine vinegar as you think will cover them... (58)
- (16) You may make all these Tarts ... as you please. (30)

These forms overtly respect reader agency, a recurrent strategy in women's instructive writing to balance authority and deference (Alonso-Almeida & Álvarez-Gil 2021). They dovetail with *may/if you* frames to create a recognizably collaborative instructional tone (Hyland 2005).

e. What is *not* found there

No attributive or evidential hedges (e.g., *it is said, according to...*) were attested in this corpus. That absence, which contrasts with the patterned sourcing found in scientific prefaces of the period (Alonso-Almeida & Mele-Marrero 2014), points to a different basis for credibility: not intertextual appeal to named authorities, but the felt plausibility of the procedure and an alignment with the reader's practical judgement. In other words, authority is constructed experientially, through tolerances (*about, a little*), contingency management (*if you.../if it...*), and permission frames (*you may*), rather than by outsourcing responsibility to external voices. For a domestic-technical community of practice, such cues are arguably more persuasive: they acknowledge variability in materials and equipment, grant controlled choice, and thereby display know-how that readers can recognise and test at the bench. The interpersonal economy is thus monoglossic in sourcing but dialogic in engagement: the writer "owns" the guidance while opening room for reader's decision.

4.3. GENRE IMPLICATIONS AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

The hedging profile aligns with Hyland's polypragmatic view. Hedges calibrate accuracy, contingency, and interpersonal alignment rather than signal evasiveness (Hyland 1996, 1998, 2005). In this domestic-technical register,

- accuracy/graduation dominates (SFL/Appraisal: graduation/force), realized by approximators that encode process tolerances (Halliday & Matthiessen 2014; Martin & White 2005);
- engagement is realized by *if*-frames and reader-judgment phrases, which invite co-decision and soften directives without sacrificing procedural clarity; and



- authorial self-protection (writer-oriented hedging) is minimal, fitting a genre where authority is enacted through practical mastery and pragmatic flexibility rather than through explicit epistemic caveats.

Compared with scientific prose of the same broad period (e.g., astronomy texts; cf. Alonso-Almeida 2012), the mix differs, but the function converges. Both genres hedge to manage risk and credibility, but recipes do so via accuracy and choice (approximators, conditionals), whereas science leans more on epistemic verbs/adverbs and attributions. Cross-cultural and different fields of knowledge studies of hedging (Carrió-Pastor 2016, 2020a, 2020b, 2021, 2023) further highlight the community-specific nature of hedging inventories; here, the community practice is culinary-domestic, and the inventory is appropriately material-process oriented.

Two caveats qualify these findings. First, many tokens of *can* in this book read as ability or availability rather than as cautious commitment. We have retained them under “explicit modals” so as not to under-report permission/ability cues in directive prose, yet a stricter epistemic filter would down-weight *can* substantially and should be flagged as a sensitivity choice in any comparative analysis. Second, the inventory deliberately excludes implicit softeners (for example, passives) and common indeterminates (for example, *some*) to preserve replicability and operational clarity (Crompton 1997). A broader sample of women’s instructive texts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries will allow us to test whether this accuracy-plus-engagement profile holds across domains such as pastry, preserves, and pickles, and across periods, and to identify community-specific adjustments to the hedging repertoire (cf. Quintana Toledo 2024; Álvarez-Gil 2022).

5. CONCLUSION

This case study shows that *Mrs Johnston’s Receipts* (1740) organises its instructional voice around a compact yet telling repertoire of explicit hedges. Rather than signalling evasiveness, these devices, pre-eminently approximators (*a little, about, almost*), together with conditional frames (*if you... / if it...*) and permission/possibility modals (*may, would*; with some tokens of *can*), operate as a pragmatic technology for credible guidance under real-world variability. In kitchens without standard measures or thermostatic control, procedures must hold across uneven fuel, seasonal ingredients and household substitutions. Hedging meets that contingency on two fronts at once: it calibrates accuracy by encoding safe tolerances for time, measure and doneness (“about half a pint”, “a little longer”, “till it be enough”); and it manages interpersonal alignment by granting options and preserving reader agency (“you may...”, “if you please”, “as you think fit”). In SFL/Appraisal terms, graduation (scaling force and precision) and engagement (opening negotiable space) carry most of the interpersonal work, while attributional and overt writer-protective hedging remain muted. The book’s authority, in other words, is enacted less by invoking external voices and more by combining procedural plausibility with courteous flexibility.



Methodologically, the article contributes a replicable operationalisation of Hyland's taxonomy for historical instructive prose. The inventory is restricted to explicit forms recoverable from the string, no inference-heavy, purely contextual softening, which clarifies the boundary between hedging and the genre's routine indeterminacy. Accuracy-oriented approximators are separated from reader-oriented conditionals and modals so that counts reflect their distinct interpersonal jobs; raw and normalised frequencies are reported; and each category is anchored by short, verbatim examples that illustrate permission/possibility, contingency management, approximation and delegated choice. This explicit-only baseline offers a clean starting point for diachronic and cross-genre comparison without folding in everything vague. It also surfaces a pattern that later studies can test at scale: in domestic-technical writing, the canonical hedging mix appears to be accuracy plus engagement, whereas the attributions and epistemic verbs/adverbs typical of scientific prose are marginal or absent here.

Two qualifications matter. First, *can* often codes ability or availability rather than epistemic caution ("the biggest Morala cherries you can get"). I retain such tokens under "explicit modals" to avoid under-reporting permissive/ability cues in directive contexts, but a stricter epistemic filter would down-weight *can* and should be handled explicitly in comparative work. Second, by design, we exclude implicit softeners (agentless passives, nominalisations, generic *you*), which almost certainly carry interpersonal weight in this register; adding them would broaden coverage but at some cost to coding transparency and inter-coder reliability. A staged approach therefore, seems prudent: begin with explicit, low-ambiguity hedges; then layer in more inferential categories with independent checks.

The findings open several lines for further research. A domain-sensitive analysis (pastry vs preserves vs pickles) could test whether tolerance-encoding hedges cluster where process variability is greatest, sugar setting, syrup reducing, and fats emulsifying. A diachronic extension across eighteenth- and nineteenth-century materials would show whether increasing measurement standardisation and the spread of thermometric technologies reduce reliance on approximators or simply shift their distribution and locus (from quantity to process, for example). Contrasts of authorship and audience (women- vs men-authored texts; professional vs household orientations) would clarify how communities of practice tune hedging to different forms of expertise and accountability. Finally, coupling hedges with boosters and face-work would capture the full interpersonal ecology: when writers grant leeway (*you may, as you please*), where do they also tighten control (*must*, bare imperatives), and how do these resources co-pattern within recognisable recipe "moves"?

All considered, the analysis reframes hedging in women's eighteenth-century recipe writing as design, not defect. Calibrated tentativeness is a principled response to material uncertainty and a way of maintaining rapport while getting things done. It is precisely by hedging, by scaling precision, articulating contingencies and delegating choice, that the text performs knowledgeable, trustworthy instruction.

Reviews sent to the authors: 15/11/2025

Revised paper accepted for publication: 28/01/2026



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