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***Pushed to the hedge:***  
**Hedging devices in Romanian online media**  
**discourse on migration and refugees<sup>1</sup>**

The current paper analyses the type and frequencies of hedging devices used in Romanian online media discourse on refugees and asylum seekers, drawing on the media content that was published between Sept 2015 and March 2016. By using a mixed research approach, i.e. by combining pragmatics, Prince et al.'s Model (1982), elements of critical discourse analysis and Schroeder's multidimensional model for media reception analysis, this article investigates 232 news items (both news posts and their comment threads) in a number of 8 mainstream Romanian online newspapers at the intersected space of computer mediated media discourse. Premised on the idea that media discourse is manufactured, the overarching goal of this examination is to identify the hedges and explore their pragmatic functions and their subsequent implications for commenters' cognitive and attitudinal responses. Results obtained indicate that commenters use more hedging devices than journalists and for different purposes. While journalists seek to increase the credibility of the news presented, commenters use hedging to avoid commitment to action and decision.

**Key words:** hedges; hedging devices; media discourse; migration; frequency.

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## 1. Introduction

It is widely accepted that the nature of the news conveyed by the online media can have a detectable impact on overall societal attitudes, which in turn can have a significant bearing on social behaviour. This is particularly relevant to all forms of the public approach to migration, aspects of which have become increasingly contentious in national, regional and global contexts (Suro 2009; Koser 2012, 2014).

The role of the hedging devices in Romanian online media discourse represents the focus of this paper. Specifically, the study looks into the type, frequencies and effects of hedges in order to determine whether hedges affect news presentation, argument quality on receivers' perceptions, their cognitive and attitudinal responses. The study is divided into the following sections. Section 1 begins with an overview of the hedge/hedging concept. As there is no clear agreement on categories of hedges, either in their forms or functions, and since the model developed by Prince et al. (1982) has been adopted in the current study, it has been given separate treatment in Section 3. Section 4 provides an overview of Schroeder's multidimensional model for media reception analysis. The methodology section outlines the steps of the research process in Section 5 and the discussion of the results informs Section 6 of this paper. The last part of the study presents the conclusions.

## 2. Hedge and hedging

Online media discourse is characterized by spoken or written interactions that take place via a broadcast platform in which the discourse is oriented to a non-present reader, listener or viewer. As stylistic devices, hedges acquire their meanings through the author-reader interaction, being "a textual phenomenon" and "a virtual quality" of a text (Markkanen and Schroeder 1997: 14) that rest on the act of communication. However, their subjectivity arising from the fact that they are not inherent characteristics of texts, may be variably controlled by culture and people who share "socially determined aesthetic ideals through their shared educational background" (Spillner 1974: 67).

As early as the 1960s, with the pioneering research of Zadeh (1965) and Weinreich (1966), hedges were outlined in terms as "Fuzzy Sets" and "continuums of classification grades" anticipating their later association with fuzziness and vagueness (Lakoff 1972). According to Zadeh's fuzzy-set theory, a linguistic hedge (*very, much, slightly*, etc.) may be viewed as an operator which acts on the fuzzy set representing the meaning of its operand. Hedges vary in their high dependence



on context and their analysis from the viewpoint of semantics and logics provides a basis for a better understanding of their role in natural languages.

The concept of hedge/hedging itself was first mentioned by George Lakoff (1972) in his article “Hedges: A study in meaning criteria and the logic of fuzzy concepts.” From a language philosophical stance, Lakoff interrogates the communicative value of the use of hedges taking an interest in the logical properties and the semantic aspects of hedges that serve a function of fuzziness. He defines *hedges* as words “whose meaning implicitly involves fuzziness – words whose job it is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy. I will refer to such words as ‘hedges’” (1972: 195).

In the 1970s hedges were defined from mostly linguistic and pragmatic points of view by Fraser (1975) and Brown and Levinson (1978). A cognitive psychological approach to hedges was brought by Rosch (1978) in relation to her semantic prototypes theory. In the 1980s the concept of hedges widened as a result of the increasing influence of pragmatic research which made it possible for them to be viewed as realizations of communicative strategies in contexts of mitigation, politeness, (Brown and Levinson 1978), avoidance of personal commitment (Prince et al. 1982), modality (Coates 1983; Palmer 1986), evidentiality (Chafe 1986), epistemic modality (Holmes 1984), precision and accuracy (Skelton 1988), politeness (Myers 1989) self modesty and indirectness (Swales 1990) and, more recently, in socio-pragmatic contexts (Lafuente Millán 2008; Alonso-Alonso et al. 2012).

For all the abundance of hedging research, hedges are still hard to define. They are according to Biber “[...] informal, less specific markers of probability or uncertainty. Downtoners give some indication of the degree of uncertainty; hedges simply mark a proposition as uncertain” (1988: 240). Other theorists describe hedges as discourse markers (Maschler 1994, and Ohta 1991), downgraders among modality markers (House and Kasper 1981), discourse particles (Weydt 1983), metalinguistic operators (Weinreich 1966), part of an open functional class (Fraser 2010), or a multipragmatic phenomenon with overlapping functions (Varttala 2001; Hyland 2005; Hyland and Salager-Meyer 2008; Alonso-Alonso et al. 2012).<sup>2</sup>

A convenient definition for our purpose of study is offered by Schröder and Zimmer (1997: 249):

A hedge is either defined as one or more lexico-syntactical elements that are used to modify a proposition, or else, as a strategy that modifies a proposition.

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<sup>2</sup> See Aijmer (1987), Blum-Kulka (1985), Holmes (1984) and Loewenberg (1982) for different treatments with differing terminology.



The term ‘hedging’ is used to refer to the textual strategies of using linguistic means as hedges in a certain context for specific communicative purposes, such as politeness, vagueness, mitigation, etc.

As a rhetorical strategy, hedging indicates

... lack of commitment to either the truth value of an accompanying proposition or a desire to avoid commitment to categorical assertions” (Hyland 1998:1), and it may be used “to soften the force of a speaker’s utterance in order to make it more acceptable to the interlocutor (Nikula 1997: 188)

or make the utterance sound less authoritative (Brown and Levinson 1987).

Hedges may be realized by different categories: verbs (*seem, think, appear, suggest, estimate, tend, to argue, indicate, propose, etc.*), modal operators/auxiliaries (*may, might, can, could, should, etc.*), various adverbs (*technically, essentially, practically, probably, approximately, etc.*) adjectives (*possible, probable, unlikely*), approximators of degree, quantity and frequency (*about, somewhat, roughly, etc.*), nouns (*suggestion, assumption, estimate, claim possibility, etc.*), introductory phrases (*it is our view/assumption/suggestion that, we believe, we feel that, etc.*). However, despite their association with many linguistic categories, hedges are context-bound hence their hedging function remains highly contextualized and intentional. When the speaker performs a selection in the propositional content of the message, the force and content will impact on the interpretation of that message. According to Markkanen and Schroder (1997), “the function of such a strategy is to modify the writer’s or the speaker’s responsibility for the truthfulness of the utterance, and to modify the definiteness of an utterance or its information” (48).

From a conceptual point of view, and drawing heavily on the modification of commitment to the truth of the proposition as well as on their fuzzy, diffusive and uncertain nature, several taxonomies of hedges have been developed. Starting from the observation that hedges indicate a lack of full commitment to the propositional content of the whole proposition, Vande Kopple (1985) considers hedges in relation to various metadiscourse types while Rounds (1982) views them as dispersers or “diffusers” of disagreement. In addition, the concept was also broadened when hedges came to be regarded as modifiers of the speaker’s commitment to the truth of an entire proposition, not just of the category or a part of it. Prince et al. conducted in 1982 an empirical research on discourse hedging on physicians working in an intensive care hospital unit. The authors discriminated between two types of hedges, those that affect the truth conditions of propositions, which they call approximators (e.g. *His wife is sort of old*), and those that do not affect the truth con-



ditions, yet indicate the speaker's commitment to the truth of the entire proposition, which they call shields (e.g. *I think his wife is old*).

A similar bipartite distinction, between phrastic and neustic indetermination, is made by Hübler (1983), who holds that understatements are expressions of phrastic determination and they concern the propositional content of a sentence whereas hedges are expressions of neustic indetermination concerning only the validity of the speaker's proposition. In his view, a sentence such as *It is a bit cold in here* is an understatement, while *It is cold in Alaska, I suppose* contains a hedge (*I suppose*). Of late, Caffi (2007) has refined the bipartite taxonomy into a framework consisting of bushes, hedges and shields. All of them are regarded as mitigation devices. If bushes correspond to Prince et al.'s approximators, hedges reflect, in her view, the speaker's commitment and illocutionary force while shields correspond roughly to Prince et al.'s attribution shields. Despite its occasional criticism, it has been argued that Prince et al.'s division "*seems to be sustainable only in the abstract*" (Skelton 1988: 38), the binary model rests on actual language data collection and forms the analysis framework for our present study.

### 3. Prince et al.'s model

Prince et al.'s model relies on the pragmatic function of hedging, effecting on the communication and its effect between speaker and hearer. According to this model, the following sentences convey different propositions:

- (a) *Her face is pale.*
- (b) *Her face is sort of pale.*
- (c) *I think her face is pale.*

Sentence (a) contains no hedges and conveys the unaltered proposition "*her face is pale.*" Sentence (b) conveys a different proposition implied by "*sort of*" although Prince et al. admit that the overall meaning of the proposition is fuzzy and non-prototypical with respect to class membership of an item ("*sort of pale*"). These types of hedges are called approximators. They may be of two types: adaptors (such as *sort of*, *somewhat*, etc) to indicate the degree of closeness to prototypicality, as in sentence (b) and rounders (such as *approximately*, *about*, *something around*, etc.) which are used in measurements and indicate "*that some term is a rounded-off representation of some figure*" (Prince et al. 1982: 93). In sentence (c), the proposition "*her face is pale*" is not affected content-wise, however the hedge "*I think*" points to a certain degree of fuzziness between the propositional



content and the speaker, implicating that the speaker is not fully committed to the truth of the proposition. Prince and her colleagues identified such types of hedges as SHIELDS. They may be of two types: attribution shields (such as *according to, presumably, at least to our knowledge*, etc.) used for situations when the proposition is attributed to someone else and the responsibility falls with another person not with the speaker, as in:

(d) *According to John, they are divorced.*

plausibility shields (such as *maybe, I think, probably*, etc) on the other hand are used when speakers want to indicate the necessity for a cautious assessment of the truth of the proposition.

(e) *Maybe they are divorced.*

Such hedges do not affect the propositional content but merely express doubt, lack of commitment and reduce the degree of implicated liability on the speaker's part. Prince et al.'s model remains an elaborate and refined framework of analysis as it lies at the intersection of semantic (approximators) and pragmatic (shields) interpretations of communication, serving both.

#### **4. Schroeder's multidimensional model**

In order to deal with particular processes of audience meaning-making that help in detecting the possible implications of the use of hedges in online media discourse, we have resorted to Kim Christian Schroeder's (2000) multidimensional model which is apt to better explain readings and meanings allegedly encoded into the media text and the meanings actualized by audiences from that text. In reaction to the classic encoding/decoding model, Schroeder, in "Making Sense of Audience Discourses (2000), sets up an empirically based general model of media reception that rests on six dimensions: motivation, comprehension, discrimination, position, evaluation and implementation. In his view,

The model proposes a conceptual framework to account for the complex processes through which audiences engage, understand, criticize and respond to mass-mediated messages. In addition, it also makes room for researchers with differing views on the power balance between media and audiences to analyse and discuss the stabilizing or oppositional role played by audience readings in the discursive and social practices of the wider social formation. (2000: 254)

The model is multidimensional and may be represented in the shape of a pyramid, having four text-related dimensions (motivation, comprehension, discrimination,



position) concerning the interior reading processes in which the informants convey their messages in specific situational contexts and two additional analytic dimensions (evaluation and implementation), which Schroeder calls “implications” and in which the meanings are interpreted by the analyst in light of their social significance.

The model efficiently analyzes multi vocal processes and underscores dialogical situations arising from comprehension and position all the more so as, in virtual communication, communicators build convenient identities and readapt discourses as the situation demands. E-texts, in particular online media discourses, thus become synonymous with “face” and behind this screen, on which culture and attitudes in all their verbal forms are manifest, the “speaker’s” position is interchangeably making reading not only a complex process but a multi-layered one. The model admittedly retains a percentage of complexity when it comes to media discourse reception of issues such as migration, refugees, asylum seekers, that involve a wider social perspective.

## 5. Methodology

The current research investigates a number of 232 news items (both news posts and their comment threads) from 8 mainstream Romanian online newspapers published between Sept 15, 2015 and March 15, 2016. The search used 3 tags *refugiați* ‘refugees,’ *UE* ‘EU,’ *migrație* ‘migration’ performed on the Romanian news site *ziare.com*. For our analysis out of the 250 articles revealed by the search, a number of 81 articles were selected from mainstream online newspapers (*Cotidianul*, *România liberă*, *Jurnalul Național*, *Adevărul Gândul*, *Evenimentul zilei*, *Gardianul* and *Ziare.com*) and 151 were readers’ comments. A direct match was established between the number of views for an article and the number of comment threads it triggered (for example an article on Angela Merkel’s position towards refugees had 9268 views and a thread of 47 comments), hence our analysis rested on a ‘purposive sampling’ in the acceptance of Silverman (2001). We resorted to such articles and their ensuing comments mainly as they showed a larger pool of attitudes and we thought therein the processes being studied are most likely to occur. Research was conducted on two groups, one comprising 81 articles and the second group 151 readers’ comments. The study is descriptive and involves counting the devices in each news post and its comment threads so as to examine the type and frequency of hedging devices in terms of who uses what hedging devices and for what purposes. The investigation is based on Prince et al.’s (1982) model and is made on the basis of manual counting and subsequent sub-categorization of each hedging device. The



realizations we had in view of hedging devices that corresponded to the Romanian language were modal auxiliaries, lexical-modal verbs, adjectival, adverbial and nominal phrases, approximates of degree, quantity, frequency and compound and multiple hedges. The results obtained were further interpreted within Schroeder's multidimensional model.

## 6. Results and implications

Based on the analysis above, the study found that a large number of hedges were used in both articles and ensuing commentaries. Table 1 cross-tabulates the two groups with the type of hedges in Prince et al's model and Table 2 shows the percentages obtained.

Table 1: Types of hedges

	Approximators			Shields			Total hedges
	Adaptors	Rounders	Total approx.	Plausibility Shields	Attribution Shields	Total Shields	
Group nr. 1	48	31	79	5	85	90	169
Group nr. 2	79	61	140	285	73	358	498
Total	127	92	219	290	158	448	667

By adding the number of shields and that of approximators for each group, it can be observed (from Table 1) that both groups use more shields (448) than approximators (219). Furthermore, attribution shields are predominantly used by the first group (85) whereas commentators from the second group show preference for plausibility shields (285). Moreover, if there is a close balance between the approximators and shields used by the first group (79 vs 90), a significant gap is noticed (140 vs 448) for the second group. This indicates that for the first group, there is a relatively balanced dominant narrative that is carried in mainstream online newspapers coverage and that remains to a large extent unaltered, an insignificant degree of vagueness being found only at the semantic level. Consequently, the predominant use of adaptors by group 1 (such as: *într-un anume fel* 'in a sense'/ 'in a way,' *ca să zic așa* 'as it were', *cam* 'kind of'/ 'sort of', *oarecumva* 'somewhat', *mai mult sau mai puțin* 'more or less', *destul de mult* 'pretty much', *ca să zic așa* 'so to say') within the category of approximators, reflects the journalists' tendency to replace





definite expressions about refugees and their situation in the news story with semantically similar, more flexible and (more) available expressions, as in:

- (f) *Premierul Renzi a declarat în timpul conferinței de presă [de după dezastru] că o blocadă navală în apele internaționale ar putea constitui mai mult sau mai puțin o favoare pentru traficanții de oameni, un fel de transport taxi*

‘Prime Minister Renzi declared during the press conference that a naval blockade in international waters could **more or less** become a favour to the people smugglers, by turning out to be **a sort of** taxi service’ (Cotidianul).

On the other hand, as virtual communication combines the characteristics of public speech with those of dialogue, being essentially ‘text’ oriented (text as agent), it proceeds in conditions of utmost freedom and fully assumed risks. Along this line, the results shows that with the second group, inclusive of the commentators’ responses, the SHIELDS (such as: *după cum* ‘according to,’ *cred* ‘I believe/I feel that,’ *după câte știu* ‘to my knowledge,’ *părerea mea e că* ‘it is my view that’) occur far more often (in a number of 358 occurrences), being more apt to create additional fuzziness between the speaker and the proposition, particularly through the use of plausibility shields ( *cred/nu cred/consider/nu consider* ‘I think/I don’t think/I consider/I don’t consider,’ *îmi amintesc* ‘I remember,’ *părerea mea despre* ‘my view of,’ etc.), as in:

- (g) *...Cred că sunt toate niște minciuni. ‘I believe they’re all lies’ ...*
- (h) *Dacă migrația în UE este problema, nu cred că țara noastră este soluția.*  
‘If EU migration is the problem, [then] **I don’t think** our country is the answer’
- (i) *Din câte cunosc eu, țara noastră nu a avut niciodată sentimente împotriva imigranților.*  
‘**To my knowledge**, our country has never harbored strong anti-immigrant feelings’
- (j) *Poate că ar trebui totuși să acceptăm cotele impuse de către liderii europeni.*  
‘**Perhaps we should** accept the quotas imposed by the European leaders’.

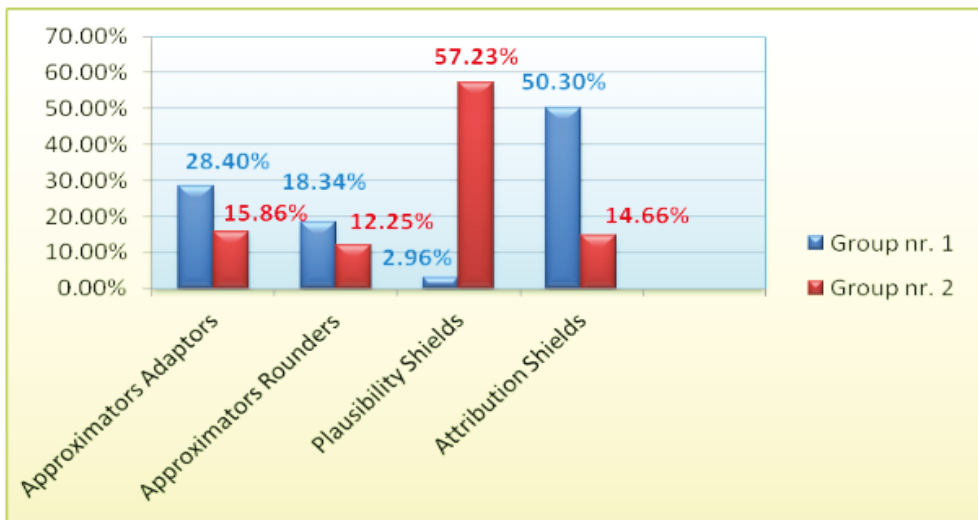
Such hedging devices point to the respondents’ shift from weak to non-commitment to the truth-value of the news propositional content and make commenters and their personal assessments more explicitly engaging on a personal level, giving thus more emphasis to the active role they have in online interaction. The



last example illustrates an instance when the combination of two hedges, *poate* ‘perhaps’ and *ar trebui* ‘should’ maximizes the commenter’s non-committal intentional effect by collocating the performative charge of the verb “accept”. In this case, the speaker is credited with only launching an in-group suggestion being partially absolved of blame in case of being subsequently proven wrong.

Further on, the rates of occurrences (%) for each type of hedge were calculated from the total number of hedges used by each group (169 vs 498). Table 2 shows a comparison of the two groups:

Table 2: Frequency of hedges per group



The occurrence rates of all four types of hedges indicate that SHIELDS are most frequently used in both groups accounting for 67.16% of total hedging devices used (667). The occurrence rate of plausibility shields in Romanian online comments to news articles (group 2) is much higher than the occurrence rates of attribution shields in the group (1) of Romanian online news articles (57.23% vs 50.30%), while the occurrence rates of the rest two types of approximators are higher in group 1 than those in group 2 (46.74% vs 28.11%). These results point to interesting cross-cutting aspects concerning the types of hedges used and the linguistic level hedging devices operate on. Whereas approximators impact on the semantic level, shields do not. In particular, approximators modify the semantics of the news propositional content delivered while the use of shields allows for a maximization of the illocutionary force of the readers’ comments to the posted news. Regarded



per in-group distribution, these findings indicate that, by maintaining a balance between approximators and shields usage, the hedge users of the first group manifest caution in making categorical assertions. In that sense, hedging protects them from making possible false statements and thereby helps them augment the credibility of the news presented. On the other hand, by using more shields than approximators (in a ratio of 3/1) a noticeable change occurs for the second group in the relationship between the comments' propositional content and the commenters themselves, implicating a level of uncertainty with respect to the latter's commitment and a level of plausibility with respect to the assertions made.

The process of detecting multiple readings across embedded levels of responses provided by comment makers (Group 2) is further optimized by Schroeder's multi-dimensional reading. This model has enabled identifying the commenter's motivations to read the article, their corresponding levels of comprehension and position, as well as the discrimination and evaluation dimensions in the commenters' response. In so doing, the commenter appears to act as *analyst* of the news piece and of the comments to his own post/text, respectively and of any of the previous commenters' posts, at least in principle. Some commenters have read no previous comments, some only part of them, some others the whole thread. The 'texts' were inclusive of hyperlinks, hence the understanding of the reading dimensions on each layer was reliably complete only by including the hyperlinked in.

At the motivation level, we hold that the use of hedging devices may have implications for a constant shift of readers from strong to weak levels of involvement particularly under high message relevance, shift resulting in less favorable attitudes and more negative perceptions of the message. The comprehension reading shows that hedging with commenters is deliberate, almost an end in itself and places commenters in total correspondence to both journalists' intended meanings and comments produced by other fellow news readers. The implications of the use of hedging devices for the position level point to subjective, attitudinal responses, more of a rejection than an acceptance type. In this sense, the meta-discourse is reflective of hedges qualifying discourses of difference and disqualifying occasional aggressive/offensive positions. The discrimination level across Schroeder's model has no detectable implications for interpretations as it pertains to the hegemonic struggles between the media text and the readings hence it remains embedded in the position reading. The evaluation level involves a social discourse type of analysis shaped by commenters' fairly constant usage of hedging expressions. Based on their occurrences with most frequent collocations, hedges at this level indicate occasional dominant and frequently negotiated and oppositional stances to the *preferred meaning* of the news story. Finally the implementation level in Schroeder's



model concerns the way in which readers allow their readings to influence their social practice claims. In this sense, the above reading levels and findings confirm the idea that “the power to be different ‘is a resistive power and one that keeps alive the possibility of social change” (Fiske 1989: 72).

## 7. Conclusion

The study investigated the type, frequency and effects of the hedging devices in Romanian online media discourse on refugees and migration resting on Prince et al.’s framework and Kim Christian Schroeder’s multidimensional model. By analyzing some data, it arrives at the conclusion that while the mitigating power of hedges is indisputable, in online media, due to the nature and structure of the news conveyed as well as the strong detectable impact on overall societal attitudes and social behaviour, the mitigating power of hedging is very dynamic, bi-directional and particularly intentional. More specifically, in Romanian online media hedging serves a very important function. This function allows online users, whether a news caster or a news reader, to distinguish between facts and claims and to orient the broadcast platform to a virtual space in which the interaction between the non-present readers can be carefully controlled and negotiated.

The results of the study show that journalists and readers use hedging for different purposes. While news posts contributors use hedging to express caution, moderation and flexibility in their speech, an important segment of news readers represented by commenters resort to hedging to express possibility, prudence and oppositional lack of commitment to action and decision. As well, hedge collocations occurrences indicate frequently oppositional stances to the *preferred meaning* of the news story. In Romanian computer mediated discourse on refugees and migration hedging thus acts as an attitudinal regulator of public perception mitigating the positions (voices) of these two categories of stakeholders engaged. The multi vocal processes and dialogical situations arising from either posting or interpreting the news on migration and refugees are effectively regulated by hedges that help communicators build convenient identities and readapt discourses as the situation demands. Likewise, such use of hedging devices shows a continuous process of choice-making in linguistic forms and communicative strategies, with significant implications for a constant pool of readers shifting from strong to weak levels of commitment.



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#### **DOTJERANI DO RUBA:**

#### **SREDSTVA OGRAĐIVANJA OD REČENOGA U RUMUNJSKOM ONLINE MEDIJSKOM DISKURSU O MIGRACIJAMA I IZBJEGLICAMA**

Radom se analizira tip i učestalost sredstava ograđivanja od rečenoga koje se koristi u rumunjskom online medijskom diskursu o izbjeglicama i azilantima, oslanjanjem na sadržaje u medijima objavljene između rujna 2015. i ožujka 2016. Uporabom kombinirane metode istraživanja, odnosno kombiniranjem (Prince i sur. 1982), elemenata kritičke analize diskursa i Schroederova (2010) multimedijiskoga modela analize usvajanja medijskoga sadržaja, u radu se analizira 232 vijesti (objava vijesti i nizova njima pripadajućih komentara) u osam glavnih rumunjskih internetskih novina na razmeđu kompjuterski-posredovanoga diskursa. Polazeći od postavke da se medijski diskurs proizvodi, temeljni cilj ovoga istraživanja bio je identificirati načine ograđivanja i promotriti njihove pragmatičke funkcije te naknadne implikacije glede kognitivnih reakcija i stavove komentatora. Dobiveni rezultati ukazuju na činjenicu da komentatori koriste više sredstava ograđivanja nego novinari i to čine u različite svrhe. Dok novinari kane povećati kredibilitet predstavljenih vijesti, komentatori se koriste ograđivanjem da bi izbjegli obvezati se na djelovanje i donošenje odluka.

**Ključne riječi:** ograđivanje; sredstva ograđivanja od rečenoga; medijski diskurs; migracije; učestalost.