Bachelor Thesis

The Effect of Expressing Uncertainty in Communication

Florian Casalino
s4860152
International Business Communication
Supervisor: Saskia van Putten
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Radboud University, Nijmegen
This research examined the effect of expressing certainty and uncertainty in communication. We studied whether an email by a manager had a different effect on participants’ perception of the manager when containing either certainty markers (e.g. surely), uncertainty markers (e.g. maybe) or no markers. To study this issue, we administered three different versions of the same email template to participants, one version per participant only, and asked them afterwards to evaluate the manager in terms of authoritativenss, trustworthiness, competence and sociability based on the email they read. Against our expectations, the study did not produce a significant result, meaning that the three versions of the email did not cause different impressions of the manager. These findings could be due to the fact that participants only read one email each instead of all three versions. Furthermore, we can’t be sure if the results were different had we chosen a message that was used in previous research. It is up to future research to clarify these open questions our study provides.

Introduction

In today’s fast-moving, easily confusing working environment, it is as crucial as ever for employees to be guided clearly and professionally by their manager or supervisor. Imagine you receive an email from your manager. Regardless of the informational content, the language used in the email imaginably will have an impact on how you perceive the manager. Suppose he frequently uses linguistic features like “I think …”, “maybe”, or “probably”, could the impression you get of him be affected? Conversely, if words like “definitely” or “certainly” were present a lot, could your impression of the manager be affected in a different way?

Expressions like “I think …”, “maybe” and “probably” are referred to as “hedges” and belong to the linguistic category of uncertainty markers or powerless speech (Bradac & Mulac, 1984). On the contrary, the earlier mentioned linguistic features “definitely” or “certainly” for example are known as certainty markers and belong to the category of powerful speech (Hosman & Siltanen, 1994). We wanted to find out whether hedges or intensifiers could influence the reader’s impression of the person using these markers. More precisely, we tried to examine the impact of such linguistic features used by managers on employees’ perception of managers. To do that, we let our participants read an email sent out by a manager, either with certainty markers, no linguistic markers at all or uncertainty markers (All three email versions can be found in the Appendix). Afterwards, an online survey was administered to participants to get their impression of the manager by examining
four different dependent variables. These variables are authoritativeness of the manager, 
trustworthiness of the manager, competence of the manager and sociability of the manager. 
As we were interested in the evaluation of powerful (intensifiers) and powerless speech 
(hedges), it is important to take a look at existing literature addressing both.

Powerless speech, as categorized by Bradac and Mulac (1984) includes linguistic 
features such as hedges (“Well, …”, “Sort of”, “Probably”), tag questions (The weather is 
good, isn’t it?), politeness (“Thank you for the advice.”) and hesitations (“ehm”, “uh”), 
which are also known as uncertainty markers. As soon as these features are absent, the speech 
is regarded as powerful, according to some studies (Bradac & Mulac, 1984). As further 
research suggests, such a categorization is more complex than it seems at first sight. Some 
studies indicate that the evaluation of a speaker based on linguistic markers depends on the 
speaker’s intention (Bradac & Mulac, 1984), the speaker’s authority relative to the listener 
(Smith, Siltanen & Hosman, 1998), the argument quality of the speaker (Blankenship & 
Craig, 2007), the message content (Hosman & Siltanen, 1994) and the medium of the 
message (Blankenship & Holtgraves, 2005). It is thus fair to conclude that the evaluation of a 
speaker is highly dependent on the context of his message (Durik et al., 2008).

While some research (Bradac & Mulac, 1984) characterizes powerful speech as one 
that lacks uncertainty markers, Hosman and Siltanen (1994) suggest that powerful speech is 
one containing certainty markers, such as intensifiers. Hosman (1989) adds to the body of 
results that intensifiers are perceived as powerful language when hedges and hesitations are 
absent. More recent research also agrees on the fact that powerful language is one containing 
intensifiers (Hosman & Siltanen, 2011). As the literature still seems not to be entirely 
congruent about the former and this issue seems to be a matter of definition, we attempt with 
the present research to shed more light on this unclarity.

Looking more closely at two of our four dimensions, authoritativeness and sociability, 
Hosman (1989) contributed an interesting body of results. He concluded that messages 
without hesitations and hedges were perceived as most authoritative whereas messages high 
in hedges and low in hesitations were perceived as most sociable. The messages he used were 
defendant’s accounts of a car accident in which they answered an attorney’s questions. It also 
revealed that a high-status speaker who used intensifiers was regarded as having a low 
character, character being a concept comprised of trustworthiness and honesty. It is yet to be 
seen whether our study will produce similar results since a manager can be rather considered 
a high-status speaker.
Further findings were realized by Blankenship and Holtgraves (2005). Powerful speech was here characterized by the absence of powerless language, whereas powerless language contained uncertainty markers such as hedges, hesitations, tag questions, and so on. They concluded that a speaker who uses powerful language is associated with attributes like credibility, intelligence, attractiveness and high social power. In fact, research by Hosman and Siltanen (2006) indicated that using intensifiers also has a positive effect on the perception of the speaker’s competence. Conversely, people who use powerless language are perceived as less credible, less intelligent, less attractive and lower in social power, regardless of their gender (Blankenship & Holtgraves, 2005).

Since we want to assess employee’s perception of managers, we took a look at research about linguistic markers used by professionals. Managers are people that could be regarded as having a high expertise level, or in terms of our study, competence. As it turns out, expertise level has been shown to play a role in people’s perception. A study by Smith, Siltanen and Hosman (1998) showed that people have expectations based on someone’s expertise level. If someone has high authority, people evaluate that person more positively when the communication style is congruent with their authority. Thus, a speaker with high authority who used a powerful speech style was evaluated significantly more positively than a speaker with high authority who used a powerless speech style (Smith, Siltanen & Hosman, 1998). Geddes (1992) elaborated on the dimensions of sociability and effectiveness in a professional, managerial context. She let participants view a video of either a male or a female manager using either a powerful, powerless or mixed speech style. A powerful speech style was also here characterized by the absence of any linguistic markers. She found that managers who used a powerless speech style were generally seen as more sociable, whereas managers using a powerful speech style were viewed as more effective and productive.

With this study, we aim to contribute to the literature regarding powerful and powerless speech in a professional context. More specifically, we want to add to the corpus of perception of managers, as this is still a rather lacking area of research requiring more insight (Parton, Siltanen, Hosman & Langenderfer, 2002). In fact, this is the first study that directly compares hedges to intensifiers and no markers. Moreover, we are going to test participants in English as their second language (L2), since previous research about powerful and powerless language has only been conducted in participant’s mother tongue. Due to our rapid globalization, it is far from uncommon to have L2 speakers of English in the workplace. Having assessed the existing literature in the field, we have come to the following research question guiding our study:
Research Question: What is the effect of certainty and uncertainty markers used in written messages by managers on perception towards the quality of managers?

In our study, intensifiers will serve as certainty markers, whereas hedges will serve as uncertainty markers. The perceived quality of managers is a concept comprised of the four dependent variables authoritativeness of the manager (Hosman, 1989), trustworthiness of the manager (Hosman, 1989; Cho & Ringquist, 2010), competence of the manager (Hosman & Siltanen, 2011) and sociability of the manager (Hosman, 1989).

Based on the examined literature, we hypothesize the following outcomes:
Hypotheses:
1. We expect the certainty markers-condition as well as the no markers-condition to have a positive effect on the perception of authoritativeness, competence and trustworthiness compared to the uncertainty markers-condition. This hypothesis is in line with findings by Bradac and Mulac (1984) and Duriek et al. (2008).
2. We expect uncertainty markers to have a positive effect on the perception of sociability compared to certainty markers and no markers as was found in research by Hosman (1989) and Geddes (1992).

Method

Participants

We consulted 97 undergraduate students between 19 and 27 years of age ($M = 21.6$) with English as their second language (L2). There were 23 female and 10 male participants in the certainty markers condition with a mean age of 21.36 years ($M = 21.36$). The uncertainty markers condition contained 18 female and 16 male participants with a mean age of 21.97 years ($M = 21.97$). As for the no markers condition, the mean age was 21.50 ($M = 21.50$) with 17 female participants and 13 male participants. The gender distribution and mean ages of the three groups can be found in Table 1.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant conditions</th>
<th>Mean age of participants in years</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Certainty Markers</td>
<td>21.36</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncertainty Markers</td>
<td>21.97</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Markers</td>
<td>21.50</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Gender distribution and mean ages of the three participant conditions

Design

We used a Between – Subjects Design with Linguistic Markers as the independent variable, containing three levels (Certainty Markers, No Markers, Uncertainty Markers) and Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness, Competence and Sociability as dependent variables, as can be found in Figure 1. It was crucial to us that each participant got administered only one type of email, either containing certainty markers, containing no markers at all or containing uncertainty markers. This is of importance since we wanted to avoid participants being influenced by having previously read emails containing the other marker types. Previous research supports this cautious step (Parton, Siltanen, Hosman & Langenderfer, 2002).

![Figure 1. Research Design](image-url)
Materials

In order to answer the research question, we used an email, sent from a manager to his employee. This email was written by a real manager who tried to keep it as close to an email he would send out to his employees. The idea of administering a piece to read was also done in a study by Blankenship and Holtgraves (2005), who administered messages either containing no linguistic markers at all serving as a control condition, messages containing hedges or messages containing hesitations. Also, it is a method which is applicable online, therefore suiting our study.

The email was adapted to three different versions – one with uncertainty markers, one with certainty markers and one with no linguistic markers at all. As for uncertainty markers, we used hedges (e.g. sometimes, sort of, maybe; Hosman, 1989). We used hedges because they can be used in written language, whereas hesitations (e.g. ehm, uh) are part of spoken language exclusively unless presented in a written transcript of spoken language. This approach though did not make sense to us because we presented an email. Another important reason for why we only used hedges is a finding by Hosman and Siltanen (2011), who found that hedges do not have a negative effect on speaker perception when in presence of other uncertainty markers. It is to be assumed that hedges have a negative effect on speaker perception when presented as the only uncertainty marker.

In contrast, markers of certainty, intensifiers, are represented by words like “definitely”, “certainly” and “obviously”, for instance. The markers were placed at the same spots in the emails, as we aimed for a close comparison. It was not transparent for participants, whether the manager is male or female in order to prevent any kind of responding bias due to gender stereotyping.

Instruments


The dependent variable Authoritativeness was operationalized by these four statements: “The manager seems powerful.”; “The manager seems authoritative.”; “The manager seems confident.” and “The manager seems strong.”.
As for Trustworthiness, we chose the three operationalizing statements: “I trust the manager.”; “The manager seems reliable.” and “The manager seems honest.”.

The third category, Competence, is represented by the statements “The manager seems competent.” and “The manager seems knowledgeable.”.

Sociability, which is the last category of assessment is operationalized by the statements “The manager seems pleasant.”; “The manager seems likeable.”; “The manager seems good-natured.” and “The manager seems sociable.”.

A 7-point Likert scale was used to assess participants’ perception of the managers. We opted for a 7-point scale to get more nuanced results. Having looked at previous research, many studies have done the same thing, using either 7-point or 9-point scales (Blankenship & Craig, 2007; Bradac & Mulac, 1984; Durik et al., 2008; Geddes, 1992; Smith, Siltanen & Hosman, 1998). The seven points are named 1 “Strongly disagree”, 2 “Disagree”, 3 “Somewhat disagree”, 4 “Neither agree nor disagree”, 5 “Somewhat agree”, 6 “Agree” and 7 “Strongly agree”, respectively.

Procedure

The participants were approached through the stratified sampling method in order to counter a gender bias. Participants were approached individually. Our experiment was conducted online, with the help of an online survey. This survey with all the instructions was sent out by us using WhatsApp. After clicking the provided link, participants gave consent to use their answers in our experiment. Afterwards, each got administered an email with the instruction to position themselves in the role of the email receiver, the employee. Having carefully read the email, participants were presented our survey containing questions about the formerly explained dimensions of authoritativeness, trustworthiness, competence and sociability. At the end of the survey, participants could indicate whether the email sounded natural or not. The answer options were either “Yes” or “No”. In case participants answered “No”, they could indicate why that was. Additionally, participants were asked to rate the manager’s level of English on a scale from 1 to 10, 1 being very poor and 10 being native. Next, participants had to indicate their own level of English, using the same scale. Furthermore, next to their age and gender, participants were asked what they thought the purpose of the study was. The last question of the survey provided the possibility to share any comments about the experiment.
Statistical Treatment

In order to answer our research question, we conducted two different tests using the software SPSS Statistics. First, to ensure that all four dependent variables measure the same concept, we determined the inter-item reliability using Cronbach’s $\alpha$. Furthermore, we examined whether linguistic markers had any effect on the persuasion of the manager, using a one-way univariate analysis of variance.

Results

The first step in finding out whether the results of our experiment had produced any significant results was to check for the reliability of all measured concepts. The inter-item reliability of the dependent variable “Authoritativeness” was good ($\alpha = .862$). The inter-item reliability of the dependent variable “Trustworthiness” was also good ($\alpha = .844$). As for the dependent variable “Competence”, the inter-item reliability was good as well ($\alpha = .851$). The last dependent variable “Sociability” had a very good inter-item reliability ($\alpha = .900$).

Both hypotheses 1 and 2 required a one-way univariate analysis of variance, analysing the three email conditions in relation to the four dependent variables. A one-way univariate analysis of variance showed no significant effect of any linguistic marker on authoritativeness of the manager ($F(2, 94) = 1.868, p = .160$). A one-way univariate analysis of variance showed no significant effect of any linguistic marker on trustworthiness of the manager ($F(2, 94) = 2.040, p = .136$). A one-way univariate analysis of variance showed no significant effect of any linguistic marker on competence of the manager ($F(2, 94) = 2.127, p = .125$). A one-way univariate analysis of variance showed no significant effect of any linguistic marker on sociability of the manager ($F(2, 94) = 1.818, p = .168$). The means and standard deviations can be found in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>No Markers</th>
<th>Certainty Markers</th>
<th>Uncertainty Markers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>n = 30</td>
<td>n = 33</td>
<td>n = 34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td>M (SD)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authoritativeness</td>
<td>5.27 (.93)</td>
<td>5.06 (1.24)</td>
<td>4.73 (1.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trustworthiness</td>
<td>5.54 (.68)</td>
<td>5.30 (1.16)</td>
<td>5.06 (.95)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>5.30 (1.20)</td>
<td>4.98 (1.25)</td>
<td>4.63 (1.41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociability</td>
<td>5.25 (.95)</td>
<td>4.74 (.97)</td>
<td>4.86 (1.17)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Means and standard deviations of the dependent variables Authoritativeness, Trustworthiness, Competence and Sociability in the different types of emails (No Markers vs. Certainty Markers vs. Uncertainty Markers)

**Conclusion**

“What is the effect of certainty and uncertainty markers on perception towards the quality of managers?” was the research question of this study. In order to answer this question, we formulated two hypotheses. The first one, saying that we expected the certainty markers-condition as well as the no markers-condition to have a positive effect on the perception of authoritativeness, competence and trustworthiness, compared to the uncertainty markers-condition, was rejected due to statistical insignificance. Nevertheless, authoritativeness, competence and trustworthiness of the manager were regarded as slightly higher compared to the uncertainty markers-condition and thus represent a slight trend in the expected direction. The second hypothesis assumed hedges to have a positive effect on the perception of sociability compared to intensifiers and no markers. Against our expectation, the test also produced a statistically insignificant result for the second hypothesis. The only trend pointing slightly towards our expectation manifested itself through hedges being perceived more positively than intensifiers, but still more negatively than the no markers-condition, which again violates our hypothesis. Consequently, it can be said both hypotheses were proven wrong.

**Discussion**

Our research has shown that, although, with a very small trend in the expected direction, intensifiers and hedges do not have an effect on how a manager is perceived based on an email. The question that needs to be addressed now is why the results were not significant and thus could not replicate the findings of other studies.

Firstly, the informational content of the message itself will be analysed. The message that was communicated in the email contained instructions on how to deal with the currently circulating coronavirus and measures against its spread. A possible approach for an explanation could be the take by Blankenship and Holtgraves (2005) on the different routes of information processing. According to their research, it is not only of importance how a message is linguistically formulated (with certainty markers, with uncertainty markers, or
without markers), but also how participants process the information contained in the message. Blankenship and Holtgraves (2005) revealed that when a message’s relevance is low, people tend to process the message in a heuristic manner, via the peripheral route. Because the message was not examined carefully in that case, powerful speech had a positive effect on persuasion. In contrast, when message relevance is high, people tend to process it more deeply, via the central route. In that case, powerful speech had a negative effect on persuasion (Blankenship & Holtgraves, 2005). When low-relevance messages contained tag questions though, it had a positive effect on persuasion, since participants felt more involved. Here the question is whether tag questions and hedges are comparable since they are both uncertainty markers. If we link the concept of message importance to our own message, the email, it could be that the message had a rather high relevance for participants, since measures against the spread of the recent coronavirus is something everyone has come across lately. Reading about the virus could, therefore, be something people automatically pay more attention to and thus process it centrally. According to their study, Blankenship and Holtgraves (2005) assume that under that condition, markers had a negative effect on persuasiveness. That could explain why the email containing intensifiers as well as the email containing hedges was perceived slightly less positive than the no markers-condition. By drawing this possible conclusion, we assume the positive attributes of a manager used by us, authoritativeness, trustworthiness, competence and sociability to be somehow related to the concept of persuasion of the speaker.

Further research (Parton, Siltanen, Hosman & Langenderfer, 2002) has found that a powerful speech style may only indicate positive speaker attributes such as certainty, competence and power when directly compared to a powerless speech style. These findings provide us with another possible explanation with regard to our results. Our participants did not have the possibility to read more than one version of the emails. Given that we used a between-subject design, each participant either read the email with certainty markers, uncertainty markers or no markers but never more than one. Looking at the research (Parton, Siltanen, Hosman & Langenderfer, 2002), we could conclude that no significant statistical difference was found between the powerful and the powerless speech style because participants did not have the possibility to compare different versions of the email. The reason for this between-subject design choice is the fact that a real email would not be sent out in multiple linguistic versions to the same person in a real-life situation.

An additional explanation for the discrepancy of our results and the results of prior research could possibly be due to the selection of our message. In order to obtain a message
that we could use for the experiment, we asked a manager to formulate a fake email to his employees in a manner that would be realistic and comparable to a real email he would send out. By choosing this type of message, we knowingly took the risk of a lack of authenticity, since it was us who created the other two versions of the email – one containing certainty markers and one containing uncertainty markers. It could be the case that because the messages were not from a single source, the results might be influenced in some way. Blankenship and Holtgraves (2005) for example used messages that had been used in other studies prior to their own. That way, they could be sure their messages did work before in terms of realism and authenticity. Maybe our results would have been different, perhaps statistically significant, had we chosen a message that had already been used in existing research. Contrarily, our specific research design is unprecedented regarding the message type. We could not have taken an email sample from other research that has been proven to work because we conducted the first study containing such a message. Additionally, we could have done a pre-test examining the perception of message authenticity and then adjust the messages afterwards. It is at this point where future research will have to come in. Our study needs to be replicated and checked for possible errors by improving and adjusting the email.

Having looked at the results of this study and the literature related to it, a few additional limitations have become apparent. First, the results indicate that future research should most likely stick to concepts that have been proved to work in previous studies. More specifically, our message could have been one already used in previous research. Furthermore, future studies could investigate both between-subject and within-subject designs in order to clarify whether this distinction could play a role in our results.

This study aimed at adding to the corpus of professional language use by managers. We wanted to find out whether intensifiers had a different effect on the perception of managers than hedges and no linguistic markers. Although this study did not produce a significant result, it can serve as a guide for future research. It has to be concluded that future research will have to take on where we stopped and take into account our limitations.
References


EMAIL WITHOUT MARKERS:

Dear colleagues,

The situation:
The outbreak of the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) has become a worldwide pandemic. The authorities have ordered far-reaching protective measures to slow the spread of COVID-19 until at least mid-April.
For our travel agency, this has consequences, both internally and externally. The external consequences will be:
Flights are cancelled, which means that we will lose clients.
Given that most hotels are currently dealing with a very high cancellation rate, we will lose a large part of the reservations costs already paid to hotels

What we can do internally:

In order for this crisis to pass as quickly as possible, we have to take some measures.
Encounters/meetings with more than 2 persons are prohibited by national authorities.
Considering this and other lockdown conditions, we are all asked to contribute to the decrease of the infection rate by staying at home – as you already know.

How to conquer the challenge:
Please take any chances during your home office time to stay interconnected and to stay in touch with our customers and business partners.
For that, please make yourself familiar with virtual communication tools, such as WebEx, skype business, MS Teams, …
Please make sure to contribute in your regular online team meetings and share relevant information. This way we will be able to continue most operations.

We will not be getting back to normal work any time soon.
Please feel free to contact me in case you might have any questions or ideas on how to improve and overcome the current challenge.

Thank you for your contribution and your comprehension.

Sincerely,
[Name of the manager]

EMAIL WITH CERTAINTY MARKERS:

Dear colleagues,

The situation:
The outbreak of the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) has become a worldwide pandemic. The authorities have ordered far-reaching protective measures to slow the spread of COVID-19 until at least mid-April.
For our travel agency, this surely has consequences, both internally and externally. The external consequences will definitely be:
Flights are cancelled, which certainly means that we will lose clients.
Given that most hotels are currently dealing with a very high cancellation rate, we will definitely lose a large part of the reservations costs already paid to hotels.

What we can do internally:

In order for this crisis to pass as quickly as possible, we clearly have to take some measures.
Encounters/meetings with more than 2 persons are prohibited by national authorities.
Considering this and other lockdown conditions, we are all asked to contribute to the decrease of the infection rate by staying at home – as you surely already know.

How to conquer the challenge:
Please take any chances during your home office time to stay interconnected and to stay in touch with our customers and business partners.
For that, please make yourself familiar with virtual communication tools, such as WebEx, skype business, MS Teams, …
Please make sure to contribute in your regular online team meetings and share relevant information. This way we will definitely be able to continue most operations.

We will definitely not be getting back to normal work any time soon.

Please feel free to contact me in case you might have any questions or ideas on how to improve and overcome the current challenge.

Thank you for your contribution and your comprehension.

Sincerely,
[Name of the manager]

EMAIL WITH UNCERTAINTY MARKERS:

Dear colleagues,

The situation:
The outbreak of the novel Coronavirus (COVID-19) has become a worldwide pandemic. The authorities have ordered far-reaching protective measures to slow the spread of COVID-19 until at least mid-April.
For our travel agency, this could have consequences, both internally and externally. The external consequences will possibly be:
- Flights are cancelled, which probably means that we will lose clients.
- Given that most hotels are currently dealing with a very high cancellation rate, we will potentially lose a large part of the reservations costs already paid to hotels

What we can do internally:

In order for this crisis to pass as quickly as possible, we might have to take some measures.
Encounters/meetings with more than 2 persons are prohibited by national authorities.
Considering this and other lockdown conditions, we are all asked to contribute to the decrease of the infection rate by staying at home – as you may already know.

How to conquer the challenge:
Please take any chances during your home office time to stay interconnected and to stay in touch with our customers and business partners.
For that, please make yourself familiar with virtual communication tools, such as WebEx, skype business, MS Teams, …
Please make sure to contribute in your regular online team meetings and share relevant information. This way we will probably be able to continue most operations.

We will probably not be getting back to normal work any time soon.

Please feel free to contact me in case you might have any questions or ideas on how to improve and overcome the current challenge.

Thank you for your contribution and your comprehension.

Sincerely,
[Name of the manager]
Statement of own work

Print and sign this Statement of own work form and add it as the last appendix in the final version of the Bachelor's thesis that is submitted as a hard copy to the first supervisor.

Student name: Florian Casalino

Student number: s4860152

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b. I also declare that I have only submitted text written in my own words
c. I certify that this thesis is my own work and that I have acknowledged all material and sources used in its preparation, whether they be books, articles, reports, lecture notes, and any other kind of document, electronic or personal communication.

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