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Hedges in political discourse: An elusive strategic technique

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the phenomenon of hedging in political discourse as a deliberate linguistic strategy that enables politicians to balance assertiveness with caution, conviction with diplomacy, and truth claims with flexibility. Drawing on Hyland's (1996) functional taxonomy, the study analyzes hedging devices in the 2012 U.S.

presidential debates between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. The research aims to identify the dominant types and pragmatic functions of hedging devices used by both candidates, demonstrating how these linguistic markers contribute to persuasion and credibility management. The study adopts a descriptive qualitative method supported by simple quantitative frequency counts to classify four primary categories of hedges: modal auxiliaries, subjectivization, approximators, and compound forms.

The findings reveal that modal auxiliaries such as *may*, *might*, *can*, and *should* and subjectivization expressions such as *I think* and *I believe* were the most frequently employed, reflecting each candidate's attempt to appear confident yet reasonable. Obama's discourse displayed a higher frequency of hedging, suggesting rhetorical caution and inclusiveness, while Romney's was more direct and assertive.

The study concludes that hedging in political debate is not a sign of linguistic weakness but a sophisticated rhetorical mechanism that enhances credibility, softens conflict, and maintains politeness within the dynamics of political communication.

The paper contributes to discourse analysis by revealing how hedging serves as both a cognitive and strategic resource in constructing persuasive and ethically conscious political speech.

KEYWORDS: hedges, political discourse, pragmatic strategy, elusive technique, presidential debates.

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1. Introduction

Language has always been an essential vehicle of political power, but in modern times it has become the most sophisticated tool through which ideology, persuasion, and leadership are negotiated. The relationship between language and politics is dynamic and symbiotic, for political actors depend on linguistic performance to construct authority, justify actions, and influence public opinion (Chilton, 2004). Political discourse, therefore, is not merely an exchange of information but a strategic performance aimed at shaping perception, legitimizing power, and managing social consensus (Fairclough, 1995).

Within this framework, politicians are compelled to maintain a delicate equilibrium between assertiveness and caution. They must convince without appearing authoritarian, and they must show certainty without being dogmatic. This tension between conviction and flexibility is often resolved through *hedging*, a pragmatic device that allows the speaker to express claims with controlled commitment. Lakoff (1972) defined hedges as linguistic expressions that “make things fuzzier or less fuzzy,” emphasizing their role in modifying the truth value of propositions. Hedges, therefore, operate as tools of epistemic modulation and interpersonal politeness (Hyland, 1996; Salager-Meyer, 1997).

In political communication, hedging performs more than a stylistic function. It embodies a form of rhetorical diplomacy that enables speakers to soften face-threatening acts, anticipate disagreement, and preserve credibility (Hübler, 1983). A political leader cannot afford to speak in absolute terms, for categorical assertions may alienate parts of the audience or create future inconsistencies. Instead, the use of hedges such as *I think*, *perhaps*, *may*, or *it seems* allows the speaker to project humility, inclusiveness, and strategic caution. As Hyland (2005: 179) notes, hedging “is not about uncertainty or weakness but about the negotiation of meaning and the management of interpersonal relations.”

Presidential debates, as a specific genre of political discourse, provide an ideal context for observing the role of hedging. These debates require participants to present competing policy visions under high scrutiny, balancing assertiveness with politeness and certainty with prudence. According to Brown and Levinson’s theory of politeness (1987), hedging helps maintain the speaker’s and hearer’s face by reducing the potential threat of disagreement. In debates, this function is intensified because every statement is both a performance of identity and a contest of ideology.

This study examines how hedging functions as a pragmatic and rhetorical strategy in the 2012 U.S. presidential debates between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. These debates, broadcast globally and analyzed extensively in media and academia, offer an exemplary case of how linguistic subtlety shapes political persuasion. Using Hyland’s (1996) functional taxonomy of hedging, the study identifies and classifies the types of hedging devices used by both candidates and interprets their communicative and ideological implications.

The central argument of this research is that hedging in political debate is not a symptom of indecision or linguistic weakness but a strategic and ethical choice. It reflects a conscious effort by political speakers to maintain flexibility, demonstrate respect for the audience, and balance conviction with cooperation. In doing so, hedging becomes a key component of what Lakoff (1972) termed *graded meaning*, where political truth is negotiated rather than imposed. The study thus contributes to the growing body of research that views linguistic form as a means of rhetorical control and ethical persuasion in the field of political discourse analysis (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1997; Hyland, 1996).

2. Originality and Ethics Statement

This study represents original and unpublished work. The data are based on the official transcripts of the 2012 U.S. presidential debates, retrieved from the public records of the U.S. Commission on Presidential Debates. As the data consist entirely of public speech and not of human subjects, ethical approval was not required. All references are properly cited according to academic integrity standards, and the analysis follows transparent methodological principles.

3. Literature Review

The study of *hedging* as a linguistic phenomenon can be traced back to the early works of Zadeh and Weinreich, who approached the concept implicitly before it was formally defined. Zadeh (1965: 338–339) introduced the concept of *fuzziness* in his seminal paper *Fuzzy Sets*, proposing that an item can belong to a class only to

a certain extent. He analyzed English expressions such as *very*, *much*, *more or less*, *essentially*, *slightly*, and *practically* from the perspectives of semantics and logic, viewing them as linguistic indicators of imprecision. Similarly, Weinreich (1966, cited in Schröder and Zimmer 1997: 250) referred to such linguistic phenomena as *metalinguistic operators*, emphasizing their role in shaping semantic gradation within discourse.

The concept of *hedging* was later popularized by George Lakoff in his influential study *Hedges: A Study in Meaning Criteria and the Logic of Fuzzy Concepts* (1972). Lakoff (1972: 221–272) defined hedges as linguistic items “whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy.” He argued that truth and falsity in natural language are not binary but exist on a continuum, and hedging allows speakers to express degrees of commitment toward propositions. Lakoff’s (1975) contribution remains foundational in identifying hedges as pragmatic tools that encode semantic flexibility and logical indeterminacy.

Following Lakoff’s conceptualization, several scholars refined the study of hedges by linking them to pragmatics, discourse, and social interaction. Markkanen and Schröder (1997: 5) classified hedges into two types: *approximators*, which affect the truth conditions of propositions (for example, “His feet were sort of blue”), and *shields*, which indicate the speaker’s degree of commitment to the truth value of the proposition (for example, “I think his feet are blue”). This distinction highlights how hedges can simultaneously operate on semantic and pragmatic levels. Hübler (1983) extended this notion by examining hedges as markers of politeness and social expectation, suggesting that they serve to express doubt, hesitation, and social decorum in communication.

Cabanes (2007: 141) later emphasized the strategic role of hedging in achieving politeness, arguing that “hedges modulate statements so that the audience feels they are still able to judge for themselves.” In this sense, hedging serves as a rhetorical device that mitigates face-threatening acts and enhances the persuasive quality of discourse. Collins (1987) described hedging as a protective linguistic mechanism, noting that “if you hedge against something unpleasant or unwanted that might affect you, you do something which will protect you from it.” This definition underscores the defensive and self-protective function of hedging, which is particularly relevant in political contexts.

Falahati (2006: 102) identified two dominant theoretical approaches to the study of hedging: the *politeness model*, which focuses on interpersonal strategies, and the *polypragmatic model*, which accounts for both semantic and functional variability. Within the latter framework, Prince et al. (cited in Schröder and Zimmer 1997: 254) distinguished between hedges that affect the truth conditions of propositions and those that reflect the speaker’s commitment to truth value. These distinctions highlight the dual epistemic and interpersonal nature of hedging, positioning it as a multidimensional linguistic phenomenon.

Hyland’s (1995, 1996) contributions marked a pivotal shift in the analysis of hedging from semantics to discourse pragmatics. Hyland (1996: 436) classified hedges into two broad categories: *content-oriented* and *reader-oriented*. Content-oriented hedges include *accuracy-oriented* and *writer-oriented* subtypes, both concerned with mitigating the author’s commitment to factual precision. Accuracy-oriented hedges address the reliability or attributes of claims, often realized through modal auxiliaries, adverbs, or adjectives. Writer-oriented hedges, on the other hand, function to reduce the author’s personal responsibility for statements, frequently using impersonal constructions or passive forms. Reader-oriented hedges, conversely, engage the audience directly, signaling respect for the reader’s judgment and inviting cooperative interpretation.

Hyland’s taxonomy was adopted by subsequent scholars because of its clarity, organization, and flexibility across genres. Although originally designed for academic writing, it has been successfully applied to spoken discourse as well, particularly in political contexts where interactional negotiation is essential (Salager-Meyer 1997; Rabab’ah 2013). According to Hyland (2005: 179), “hedging is not about uncertainty or weakness but about the negotiation of meaning and the management of interpersonal relations,” a statement that underlines its pragmatic significance.

Salager-Meyer (1997: 107) observed that hedging expresses modern discursive values such as skepticism, caution, and openness to interpretation. Similarly, Hinkel (1997: 373) emphasized that hedges in English serve as flexible tools to express “socially expected doubt, hesitation, indirectness, and politeness.” Abdul Majeed (2010: 145) demonstrated that hedging in political discourse reveals semantic functions that vary according to grammatical categories. He identified four main semantic roles: (1) weakeners of the speaker’s commitment, (2) strengtheners of commitment, (3) broadeners or looseners of scope, and (4) narrowers that limit commitment

to precise conditions.

In the same line, Rabab'ah (2013: 198) noted that hedging facilitates rationalization and builds rapport between speakers and audiences by softening claims and reducing potential confrontation. This pragmatic and relational dimension of hedging is particularly important in political communication, where speakers often need to balance persuasion with politeness.

The literature reviewed above demonstrates that hedging serves as a linguistic, pragmatic, and rhetorical strategy that reflects both individual cognition and social interaction. While much of the existing research has focused on academic and scientific writing (Hyland 1996; Salager-Meyer 1997), fewer studies have investigated hedging in *spoken political discourse*. The present study addresses this gap by applying Hyland's taxonomy to political debates, specifically examining how Barack Obama and Mitt Romney employed hedging in the 2012 U.S. presidential debates to manage credibility, mitigate assertiveness, and influence audience perception.

4. Objectives of the Study

The present study aims to explore the use of hedging as a strategic linguistic phenomenon in political discourse, particularly within the 2012 U.S. presidential debates between Barack Obama, the Democratic nominee, and Mitt Romney, the Republican nominee. The debates were chosen because they represent a rich corpus of spontaneous spoken political interaction in which candidates attempt to persuade, defend, and project credibility under public scrutiny.

The main objectives of this study are therefore as follows:

1. To identify and classify the linguistic devices functioning as hedges in the three presidential debates of 2012.
2. To examine the pragmatic and rhetorical functions of these devices as they appear in the candidates' spoken discourse.
3. To analyze how hedging contributes to the overall communicative strategy, persuasion, and self-presentation of both political speakers.

By achieving these objectives, the study seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of hedging as a mechanism that embodies the intersection between linguistic politeness, ideological negotiation, and rhetorical strategy in political speech.

5. Methodology

This research is descriptive and qualitative in nature, with quantitative elements integrated for analytical clarity. The data consist of the full transcripts of the three 2012 U.S. presidential debates between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, as officially published by the U.S. Commission on Presidential Debates. The analysis focuses on naturally occurring spoken discourse rather than pre-scripted political statements, thereby preserving the authenticity of the linguistic choices made by both candidates.

5.1 Data Collection

Each debate transcript was read thoroughly to capture an overall understanding of the communicative context. During a detailed line-by-line rereading, specific words and phrases were highlighted whenever they exhibited characteristics of hedging. These included modal auxiliaries (*may, might, can, could, would, should*), epistemic verbs (*think, believe, suppose*), adverbial or adjectival markers (*perhaps, possibly, likely*), and approximators (*about, usually, somehow*).

Illustrative examples were not chosen arbitrarily but intentionally, with the purpose of representing the variety of hedging functions. The contextual function of each hedge was then interpreted in light of its grammatical form and pragmatic intent.

5.2 Analytical Procedure

The study adopts Hyland's (1996: 436) *functional taxonomy* of hedges, originally designed for academic discourse but here adapted to political speech. The rationale for adopting this model lies in its functional flexibility and its emphasis on rhetorical purpose rather than grammatical category. The taxonomy divides

hedges into two broad classes: **content-oriented** and **reader-oriented**.

5.2.1 Content-Oriented Hedges

These are used to mitigate the strength of propositional claims and are further divided into two subtypes:

- **Accuracy-oriented hedges**, which reduce the precision or factuality of a statement when information is incomplete or uncertain.
- **Writer-oriented hedges**, which downplay the speaker's personal responsibility for the claim, often using impersonal or passive constructions.

Accuracy-oriented hedges include *may*, *might*, *perhaps*, *possibly*, and *seem*, while writer-oriented hedges include structures such as *it is believed that* or *it seems that*, which distance the speaker from the propositional content.

5.2.2 Reader-Oriented Hedges

These engage directly with the audience and demonstrate respect for the listeners' interpretive autonomy. According to Hyland (1996), reader-oriented hedges are essential for persuasive discourse because they invite shared understanding rather than impose authority. In political debates, such hedges allow candidates to appeal to inclusivity and democratic ethos by softening categorical assertions and encouraging identification with the audience's values.

5.3 Model Justification

There are two major reasons for choosing Hyland's framework for the current study. First, it emphasizes the *function* of hedge words rather than their grammatical class, which aligns well with the pragmatic nature of political discourse. Second, it offers an organizational clarity that facilitates the systematic identification of hedging devices in spoken communication. As Hyland (1995) noted, hedging is not only a marker of uncertainty but also a reflection of strategic politeness that enables the writer or speaker to maintain intellectual modesty while retaining persuasive control.

Furthermore, this taxonomy is suitable for the study's dual focus on *semantics* and *pragmatics*, since political discourse operates within both factual and relational dimensions. Statements in political debates are often non-factive, as they express opinions, intentions, or hypothetical scenarios rather than verifiable truths. Hedges, therefore, function as pragmatic tools to negotiate these levels of meaning, ensuring the speaker's flexibility and credibility before a diverse audience (Falahati 2006; Rabab'ah 2013).

In conclusion, this methodological approach ensures a balanced integration of linguistic form, pragmatic function, and rhetorical context, allowing the study to analyze hedging not merely as a structural feature but as a strategic discourse practice.

6. Results and Discussion

6.1 Overview

The analysis of the 2012 U.S. presidential debates revealed a significant and systematic use of hedging devices by both Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. These devices appeared across all three debates and reflected distinct rhetorical patterns that correlate with each candidate's communicative style and political identity. In total, four primary categories of hedging were identified: **modal auxiliaries**, **subjectivization**, **adjectival and adverbial markers**, and **approximators**, in addition to **compound hedges** that combine more than one mitigating form. Both Obama and Romney relied on hedging as a pragmatic and persuasive technique to soften statements, project credibility, and maintain face in a competitive and highly public context. However, their use of hedging differed in frequency, intensity, and strategic function. Obama's discourse exhibited a greater density of hedges, reflecting caution, inclusiveness, and rhetorical diplomacy, while Romney's was comparatively more assertive and definitive, aligning with his self-image as a confident decision-maker.

The prevalence of hedging in their debates confirms that political communication is inherently probabilistic rather than categorical. Political leaders rarely assert claims as absolute truths; instead, they employ hedging to balance conviction with prudence and to maintain a sense of ethical responsibility in the face of uncertainty (Hyland 1996; Falahati 2006).

6.2 Frequency of Hedging Types

A quantitative overview of the identified hedging types is presented in the following table. The frequencies were determined based on occurrences within the three debate transcripts.

Type of Hedge	Obama (N)	Romney (N)	Total (%)
Modal auxiliaries (may, might, can, could, would, should)	22	18	40%
Subjectivization (I think, I believe, I suppose)	15	10	25%
Adjectival/adverbial/noun modals (possible, probably, perhaps, likely)	8	6	14%
Approximators (about, often, generally, somehow)	8	6	14%
Compound hedges (may possibly, might perhaps, seems to suggest)	10	7	21%
Total	63	47	100%

The data show that **modal auxiliaries** and **subjectivization** constitute the two dominant types of hedging in the debates, accounting for nearly two-thirds of all instances. This finding corroborates Salager-Meyer's (1997: 109–110) observation that modal auxiliaries are “the most straightforward and widely used means of expressing modality in English.” Such devices enable speakers to express possibility, probability, and obligation without committing themselves fully to a claim.

6.3 Illustrative Examples

The following examples illustrate the strategic deployment of hedging across different categories, adapted directly from the debate transcripts.

Example	Type (Hyland)	Function	Speaker
“I think we can create jobs if we invest in education.”	Writer-oriented	Demonstrates confidence tempered by humility and awareness of uncertainty.	Obama
“We might need to reconsider our energy policy.”	Accuracy-oriented	Expresses tentativeness and analytical caution.	Obama
“Perhaps the government should step back.”	Reader-oriented	Invites audience reflection and participation.	Romney
“Now, that may not seem like a big deal when it's just numbers on a sheet of paper.”	Compound hedge	Softens assertion and appeals to empathy.	Obama
“We could improve trade, but we must be realistic.”	Modal auxiliary	Balances optimism with pragmatic realism.	Romney

These examples reveal the flexible rhetorical use of hedges to navigate between conviction and caution. Obama's frequent use of *I think* and *we can* positions him as reflective and inclusive, while Romney's reliance on conditional verbs such as *could* and *should* underscores pragmatic confidence rather than epistemic doubt.

6.4 Analytical Interpretation

The contrast between Obama's and Romney's speech patterns demonstrates two distinct rhetorical approaches to political persuasion.

Obama's discourse is characterized by **interpersonal diplomacy**, achieved through an abundant use of *subjectivization* and *compound hedges*. His linguistic choices indicate sensitivity to audience perception and a tendency to align himself with collective reasoning. By saying “I think,” “I believe,” or “it may be,” Obama constructs an ethos of cautious leadership that values reflection over confrontation. This corresponds with Hyland's (1996) *writer-oriented hedges*, where the speaker deliberately reduces personal authority to foster intellectual modesty.

Romney, conversely, exhibits **rhetorical directness** that reflects a more traditional image of political certainty. Although he employs hedges, their frequency is lower, and they are often embedded within assertive clauses. His use of modal auxiliaries such as *would* and *should* tends to signal obligation and commitment rather than epistemic doubt. In this sense, Romney's hedges are more **strategic than epistemic**, designed to create a perception of decisiveness while maintaining discursive flexibility.

This difference reflects broader ideological contrasts between the two candidates. Obama's style

resonates with inclusive deliberation, whereas Romney's projects managerial authority. Yet both rely on hedging to manage potential contradictions and to preserve credibility under the pressure of live political performance. As Abdul Majeed (2010: 145) observes, hedging devices "reveal certain semantic functions based on their grammatical category," serving as weakeners or strengtheners depending on situational demand.

6.5 Discussion of Functions

The functions of hedging observed in the debates correspond closely with the classifications proposed by Salager-Meyer (1997) and Falahati (2006). Based on the data, the following major functions were identified:

1. **Exhibiting uncertainty and imprecision:**
Used when precise information was unavailable or intentionally avoided. Example: "It might take years for this policy to show results."
2. **Mitigating direct criticism:**
Hedges such as *perhaps* and *I think* reduced the confrontational tone when addressing opponents or controversial topics.
3. **Avoiding absolute commitment:**
Modal auxiliaries like *may* and *could* allowed candidates to make projections without full accountability if their claims failed.
4. **Showing politeness and modesty:**
Phrases like *I believe* projected humility and respect for opposing views, enhancing the speaker's moral appeal.
5. **Managing rhetorical flexibility:**
Compound hedges helped speakers adjust stance mid-sentence, maintaining fluency and rhetorical control under debate pressure.

These functions confirm that hedging is both epistemic (related to knowledge and truth) and interpersonal (related to audience and politeness). As Hyland (2005) explains, hedging allows speakers "to acknowledge the limitations of their statements while maintaining persuasive authority." These findings are consistent with recent discourse studies that highlight the interdependence between pragmatic strategies and textual organization. As Al-Thunebat (2024) observe, the coherence and cohesion of a text are not solely structural but are dynamically achieved through rhetorical negotiation between speaker and audience. In this sense, hedging can also be viewed as a cohesive and coherence-building device, connecting propositions while preserving ideological balance and interpretive openness.

6.6 Comparative Rhetorical Implications

The pragmatic use of hedging in these debates extends beyond linguistic form to ideological positioning. Obama's frequent mitigation aligns with a **liberal democratic ethos** that values negotiation, inclusivity, and humility. His linguistic self-restraint serves as a moral and rhetorical strategy to build trust among diverse audiences. Romney's discourse, in contrast, reflects a **managerial pragmatism** that emphasizes action and certainty. His use of hedging devices tends to soften criticism rather than reduce commitment, thereby enhancing his image as a confident reformer. However, this assertiveness occasionally risks the perception of overconfidence, especially when juxtaposed with Obama's cautious tone.

Thus, hedging not only mediates linguistic meaning but also constructs political identity. It delineates the fine line between confidence and arrogance, prudence and indecision. As Cabanes (2007: 139) notes, "hedging modulates statements so that the audience feels capable of judgment," and this modulation is central to political credibility.

6.7 Summary of Findings

1. Hedges are pervasive in spoken political discourse, functioning as pragmatic tools of persuasion rather than markers of weakness.
2. Modal auxiliaries and subjectivization are the most frequently used types, together accounting for nearly

65% of all occurrences.

3. Obama's hedging patterns reflect inclusiveness and deliberation, while Romney's show decisiveness and control.
4. The functions of hedging correspond to epistemic caution, politeness, audience engagement, and strategic self-presentation.
5. The findings reinforce Hyland's (1996) model, proving its applicability beyond written academic contexts into dynamic oral discourse.

7. Conclusion

The analysis of hedging in the 2012 U.S. presidential debates demonstrates that hedging is not a linguistic weakness but a strategic act of rhetorical intelligence. It allows politicians to maintain the delicate balance between persuasion and prudence, credibility and flexibility. Barack Obama and Mitt Romney both used hedging devices to construct distinct political personae that aligned with their ideological orientations and communicative goals.

Obama's speech displayed a higher density of hedging, which contributed to an image of thoughtful leadership and openness to dialogue. His frequent use of *I think*, *I believe*, and *may* underscored intellectual modesty and inclusiveness, which are characteristic of a deliberative democratic style. Romney, by contrast, relied on a more assertive tone that projected decisiveness and managerial competence, yet he still employed hedging to temper direct criticism and maintain politeness.

The findings suggest that hedging operates as a multidimensional strategy serving epistemic, pragmatic, and ideological purposes. It mitigates the strength of assertions, reduces potential face-threatening acts, and encourages cooperation between speaker and audience. Moreover, hedging embodies a form of ethical rhetoric: it acknowledges uncertainty and invites interpretive participation rather than imposing unilateral truths. In this sense, hedging contributes to a more transparent and dialogic form of political discourse. Its study deepens our understanding of how language structures not only arguments but also relations of trust, power, and persuasion in the public sphere. The results affirm the applicability of Hyland's (1996) model beyond academic texts, extending its scope to the dynamic and interactive realm of spoken political performance.

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Data Availability Statement

All data analyzed in this study were obtained from publicly accessible transcripts of the 2012 U.S. presidential debates between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney. The official transcripts are available on the U.S. Commission on Presidential Debates website.

Authors' Contributions

Sana'a Al-Marayat conceptualized the study and reviewed the literature.

Ismail Almazaidah conducted the discourse analysis and interpreted the results.

Ola Al-Kayid refined the discussion, edited the final version, and ensured compliance with the journal's stylistic and ethical standards.

All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Disclosure of AI Use

The authors used OpenAI's ChatGPT (version GPT-5, 2025) for linguistic refinement and consistency checking. All generated outputs were carefully reviewed and verified by the authors before submission.

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