

**WUT2018**  
**IX International Conference “Word, Utterance, Text:  
Cognitive, Pragmatic and Cultural Aspects”**

**HEDGING AS A MITIGATION MECHANISM IN POLITICAL  
INTERVIEW**

Gayane R. Vlasyan (a), Valentina A. Shusharina (b)\*

\*Corresponding author

(a) Chelyabinsk State University, Chelyabinsk, Russia, [vlasyangr@yandex.ru](mailto:vlasyangr@yandex.ru), +7(351) 799 71 50

(b) Chelyabinsk State University, Chelyabinsk, Russia, [10tina55@gmail.com](mailto:10tina55@gmail.com), +7(951) 473 85 93

*Abstract*

The article discusses theoretical bases of mitigation, and hedging as one of its main strategies. The authors investigate approaches to classifying hedges, as well as their functions in political discourse. Being a social and linguistic phenomenon, hedging presupposes differences in regard to human gender. These differences can be easily observed in spoken form of communication, for example in debate, which is common for the genre of political interview. Existing studies on gender showed the prevalence of hedging devices in female speeches. Current study aimed at verifying or falsifying this theory with respect to political speeches. The analysed data were taken from the scripts of interviews with United States top-politicians. The data were classified based on the types of lexical hedges and gender of the speakers. In terms of structure, nine groups of hedging devices were singled out. These include fillers, introductory phrases, modal verbs, modal adverbs, indefinite pronouns, approximators, concessive conjunctions, conditional subordinators, and adverbs of frequency. The study revealed the dominant usage of hedges by women, although a visible shift towards gender uniformity was observed. The most numerous hedging devices for both genders are fillers and introductory phrases. The function of fillers is to “fill in” the pauses when speakers struggle to make her speech coherent and to express hesitation or uncertainty. Introductory phrases serve to mitigate the illocutionary force of the speech act.

© 2018 Published by Future Academy [www.FutureAcademy.org.UK](http://www.FutureAcademy.org.UK)

**Keywords:** Political discourse, political interview, mitigation, hedging, gender.



## **1. Introduction**

Politics is often associated with a struggle for dominance and power in order to implement certain political, economic and social ideas. In this process, a key role is played by the language as every political action is prepared, accompanied, influenced and played by language. This means that political phenomena are indispensable for discourse analysis.

Discourse is a difficult communicative phenomenon with various definitions that covers a large area of studies such as linguistics, sociology, philosophy, psychology and other disciplines. According to Teun van Dijk, 'discourse is a difficult communicative event of socio-cultural cooperation, characteristic lines of which are interests, aims and styles (van Dijk, 1985). Discourse after Norman Fairclough is 'the whole process of interaction of which a text is just a part' (Fairclough, 1989). In this regard, we can interpret discourse as a cohesive text that is inseparable from its situational context. Discourse thus is a general category which in practice is subdivided into minor sub-categories, or sub-discourses. If talking about politics, we deal with political discourse.

Paul Chilton interprets discourse as 'the use of language to do the business of politics and includes persuasive rhetoric, the use of implied meanings, the use of euphemisms, the exclusion of references to undesirable reality, the use of language to arouse political emotions and the like' (Chilton, 2008). According to Schaffner, political discourse, being a sub-category of discourse in general, can be based on two major criteria: functional and thematic. Political discourse is a result of politics and it is historically and culturally determined. It fulfils different functions due to different political activities. Political discourse is thematic because its topics are primarily related to politics such as political ideas, political activities and political relations (Schaffner, 1996).

Political discourse may be further subdivided into spoken and written discourse. The feature that prevails in spoken political discourse is relatively low degree of formality in comparison with written one. It logically follows that formality of written political discourse is usually accompanied by more polite forms and higher degree of impersonality. Among peculiarities of such type of discourse are the choice of specific vocabulary, and syntactic clichés and clear comprehensive structure. As for spoken political discourse, there are some tendencies to bring political speech nearer to the everyday discourse, making political speeches more informal and personal. In this regard, spoken political discourse remains in focus of research.

## **2. Problem Statement**

### **2.1. On the Issue of Mitigation**

One of the new currently developing research areas in linguistics concerns the phenomenon of mitigation (Alonso-Almeida, 2015; Ariel, 2012; Kranich, 2015; Takhtarova, 2014). According to American linguist Bruce Fraser, mitigation is not a specific speech act, but its modification which involves the reduction of certain unwelcome effects which a speech act has on the hearer (Fraser, 1980). Svetlana S. Takhtarova defines mitigation as reduction of illocutionary force intensiveness determined by interpersonal constituent of interaction and including individual and psychological (connected with personal characteristics of the speakers), as well as social parameters of the speech act. Here a specific role

is played by the category of politeness, which enables cooperative interaction of the speakers, thus making the communicative contact effective (Takhtarova, 2010).

However Fraser places a great emphasis on the discrepancy of mitigation and politeness as linguistic categories, arguing that “mitigation involves a reduction in the unwelcome effect of what is communicated, while politeness depends on the extent to which the speaker has acted appropriately in the context” (Fraser, 1980).

In order to reduce the force of the utterance, the speaker might use various mitigation strategies, including the use of indirectness in performing a speech act, the use of distancing techniques, disclaimers, tag questions, parenthetical verbs and hedges (Ibid).

## 2.2. Hedging as a Mitigation Strategy

The term ‘hedge’ or ‘hedging’ was first introduced by George Lakoff in order to describe lexical units as expressions “whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy” (Lakoff, 1972). Bruce Frazer considers hedging a rhetorical strategy, arguing that by including a particular term, choosing a particular structure, or imposing a specific prosodic form on the utterance, the speaker signals a lack of a full commitment either to the full category membership of a term or expression in the utterance (content mitigation), or to the intended illocutionary force of the utterance (force mitigation) (Fraser, 2010).

Let us have a look at the following examples:

*He was always in a sort of bad temper.*

*This boy is kind of six feet tall.*

The above examples illustrate instances of content mitigation as there is an attenuation of the commitment to the temper being really bad and the boy being precisely six feet tall.

Similarly to this, in the utterances

*I suppose I should ask the waiter to bring us one more chair.*

*It seems that no one pays any attention to us.*

We see the instances of force mitigation as there is an attenuation of the commitment to requesting the waiter to bring one more chair, both by virtue of *I suppose* and the modal verb *should*. In the same way, the second utterance shows less than full endorsement to the declaration *no one pays any attention to us*.

Of course, sometimes lack of commitment may mean that the speaker does not have enough knowledge of the issue and in this case stating something straightforwardly might mean providing the speaker with incorrect information. In all other cases, according to Fraser, “hedging must be considered an intentional action in that the speaker chooses a linguistic device over and above the propositional content of the message which will affect the interpretation of the utterance, either by modifying the content of the utterance or its force” (Fraser, 2010).

Hedging is therefore a term used to denote a communicative strategy, whereas hedges are particular linguistic devices, such as various lexical units, syntactic structures, prosodic features and the like, used as mechanisms for implementation of this strategy. Here it should be mentioned that none of these linguistic devices are used exceptionally in the capacity of hedges. When they do not perform hedging function, they may have grammatical categories.

By their functional nature some hedges are very similar to discourse markers –utterance-initial elements which bracket units of spoken talk – because of their structural relations with other units, their cohesive relations, or their interactional relations (Schiffrin, 1988). However if discourse markers perform a cohesive function, binding parts of discourse, the primary function of hedges is mitigation.

In terms of structure, a hedge might be a single word (e.g. almost, actually, somewhat), a phrase (e.g. in a manner of speaking, to my knowledge) or even a clause or an entire sentence (e.g. if you don't mind me saying so, if that would be the right word). Any other way of classifying hedges into subgroups is hardly possible and seems irrelevant as this class is open, constantly changing and being context-dependent to a very high extent. Nevertheless there were some attempts to classify hedges, e.g. Fraser suggests the following list of hedges:

- impersonal pronouns (one);
- concessive conjunctions (though, whereas);
- hedged performative (must);
- indirect speech acts (could you...);
- introductory phrases (we feel that, it is our view that);
- modal adverbs (practically, possibly, apparently);
- modal adjectives (likely, unlikely, possible);
- modal noun (suggestion, possibility);
- modal verbs (should, would, could);
- epistemic verbs (think, believe);
- negation (didn't...?);
- reversal tag (... , isn't it?);
- parenthetical construction (I guess);
- if clause (if true, ...);
- conditional subordinators (given that, so long as);
- conditional clause implying permission (if I may say so);
- conditional clause expressing uncertainty about the extralinguistic knowledge required for a correct interpretation of the utterance (if I'm correct), etc. (Fraser, 2010).

This is not the whole list of hedges represented in Fraser's work and for sure it does not capture the whole list of linguistic means used as hedges in the English language, but it gives a clear idea of the issue.

Although hedges might be used for various purposes, Fraser argues that within the framework of political discourse they are primarily used to mitigate an undesirable effect on the hearer so that speaker's message thereby sounds more polite; as well as to avoid providing the information which is expected or required in the speaker's contribution, thus creating evasion and/or vagueness.

### **2.3. Gender-related Differences in the Usage of Hedges**

Since language is a culturally-based form of social interaction of both men and women, it presupposes, to some extent, the differences on a gender level. According to Janet Holmes, "the linguistic forms used by women and men contrast in all speech communities. It is claimed women are more

linguistically polite than men, and that women and men emphasize different speech functions (Holmes, 2013). In this regard, the correlation between gender and hedging remains in the focus of discussion.

According to Robin Lakoff, female speech is often peppered with expressions like “it seems like”, “sort of”, “kind of” which are used as hedges to express insecurity, lack of power and unwillingness of the speakers to communicate their ideas or to avoid making explicit statements (Lakoff, 1975). The same idea was proposed by Elfira Dwi Rosanti and Alan Jaelani, who studied the use of hedges by students during oral debate and stated that female speakers apply more lexical hedges than men (Rosanti & Jaelani, 2015). Research conducted by them showed that female speakers used almost twice as many hedges in their talks than male speakers. Besides, the female respondents usually gave longer opinion than male respondents about the topic of debate.

Although initially only lexical items were thought as hedges, J. Holmes in the work “An introduction to sociolinguistics” stated that hedges are not only lexical items used by the speaker, but also pause fillers such as “mmmhh” as well as “eeh”, which are mainly used to express hesitation or show that the speaker is reluctant about doing something that is being discussed (Holmes, 2013).

Another point to consider is that there is not only the structural difference in the use of hedges by males and females, but also the correlation of hedges with the proposition, which is often neglected when scholars deal with hedging. Thus, Holmes argues that there are linguistic devices which may be used for hedging or reducing the force of an utterance, as well as there are features which may boost or intensify a proposition’s force (Holmes, 2013). Women were observed to boost the force of their utterances because they think that otherwise they will not be heard or paid attention to, whereas men were thought to mitigate the content of their utterance. Further investigation on hedges in this regard might give us a better understanding of the role of hedging as a mitigation mechanism.

### **3. Research Questions**

Based on the theoretical overview above, the research questions for this study are:

- 1) What structural types of hedges are common for political interviews?
- 2) Does a gender difference in using hedges exist in political interviews?

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

In using the language as a phenomenon of linguistics, there are differences regarding human gender. These differences can be observed easily in spoken form of communication. As hedges are peculiar for spoken discourse, we argue that they might be found in abundance in the potentially conflict-generating contexts, which are represented in the genre of political interview. During the interview the journalist aims at revealing the truth through asking provocative questions. Finding themselves in such situation, politicians intend to communicate in a conflict-free, polite and tolerant way, to keep their face. Such style of communication presupposes the usage of mitigation mechanisms, and, in particular, hedging. The aim of the study is therefore to analyse the usage of hedging as a means of mitigation in political interview relying on existing classifications and to identify whether the prevalence of hedging in female speech is true for political debate.

## 5. Research Methods

The data of this study were taken from the scripts of political interviews with US top-politicians posted by online media sources such as The Washington Post, The New York Times, CBS News, Voice of America and National Public Radio. Six interviews of equal length, among which three were of female speakers (Hillary Clinton, Michelle Obama, Nikki Haley) and three of male speakers (Donald Trump, Rex Tillerson, Mike Pence), were chosen for analysis. Our research used descriptive-qualitative method, as well as contextual interpretation of linguistic phenomena. The data were classified based on the types of lexical hedges and gender of the speakers. The total number of lexical hedges was calculated based on their structural and functional features and grouped according to the gender. The female and male speakers' tendency in using lexical hedges was analysed.

## 6. Findings

After the analysis being completed, the following structural patterns of hedging were singled out based on Bruce Fraser's classification:

- 1) fillers;
- 2) introductory phrases;
- 3) modal verbs;
- 4) modal adverbs;
- 5) indefinite pronouns;
- 6) approximators;
- 7) concessive conjunctions;
- 8) conditional subordinators;
- 9) adverbs of frequency.

The tables below show the allocation of hedging devices according to their structural pattern and gender.

**Table 01.** Data of Lexical Hedges as Fillers

<b>Hedging Device</b>	<b>Males</b>	<b>Females</b>
you know	25	39
sort of	3	3
just	13	24
well	15	13
like	1	1
in a sense	2	0
pretty much	1	0
kind of / kinda	3	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>80</b>

**Table 02.** Data of Lexical Hedges as Introductory Phrases

Hedging Device	Males	Females
I think	41	49
I mean	12	9
all I can say is that	0	1
from our standpoint	0	1
in our view	1	0
it seems	0	1
I find	0	1
I guess	7	0
as you probably know	1	0
I assume	1	0
they say	4	0
I / we believe	3	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>70</b>	<b>62</b>

**Table 03.** Data of Lexical Hedges as Modal Verbs

Hedging Device	Males	Females
could	4	7
should	1	3
might	2	2
would	7	4
can	6	7
must	1	0
may	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>22</b>	<b>23</b>

**Table 04.** Data of Lexical Hedges as Modal Adverbs

Hedging Device	Males	Females
probably	4	2
perhaps	0	1
possibly	0	1
maybe	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>

**Table 05.** Data of Lexical Hedges as Indefinite Pronouns

Hedging Device	Males	Females
one / someone	2	1
something	6	5
<b>Total</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>6</b>

**Table 06.** Data of Lexical Hedges as Approximators

Hedging Device	Males	Females
some	5	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>3</b>

**Table 07.** Data of Lexical Hedges as Concessive Conjunctions

Hedging Device	Males	Females
although / even though	0	2
whereas	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>

**Table 08.** Data of Lexical Hedges as Conditional Subordinators

Hedging Device	Males	Females
given	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>

**Table 09.** Data of Lexical Hedges as Adverbs of Frequency

Hedging Device	Males	Females
sometimes	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>

Thus, the total number of hedges used by male speakers equals 174 items, by female speakers – 182 items. That means that the theory suggested by Holmes, according to which hedging is more common for female speakers, is also true for the genre of political interview. However it should be noted that the overall number of hedges used by male and female speakers does not differ that much, which allows us to conclude that the gap between genders in political discourse is not that evident.

Moreover, in five groups of hedging devices the number of hedges used by males exceeded the corresponding number in females' speech. Besides, males are found to use greater variety of hedging devices in a single category. For example, female speakers used only six types of introductory phrases, while male speakers used 8 types in the same category. The same is true for the most abundant category of fillers, as well as for modal verbs and adverbs of frequency.

A closer look at female and male speech samples reveals that the most numerous groups of hedges for both genders are fillers and introductory phrases. Fillers were used in their primary function of “filling in” the pauses as a struggle to make her speech coherent, as well as to express hesitation or uncertainty. Introductory phrases were used to mitigate the illocutionary force of the speech act, indicating the lack of speaker's commitment to the truth of the proposition.

## 7. Conclusion

As expected, we found numerous examples of hedges used in political interviews as a specific genre of spoken political discourse. At the same time, functional paradigm revealed rather neutral hedging serving



as means of conveying a lack of precision rather than being used for evasion or politeness purposes. The study has also proven the prevalence of hedging devices in the speech of females and the existence of gender difference in political discourse, although a shift towards gender uniformity has become visible. Further investigations on the issue of hedging, identification of hedge functions may provide us with valuable information about mitigation as a communicative category and may be applicable in communicative competence enhancement.

## References

- Alonso-Almeida, F. (2015). On the mitigating function of modality and evidentiality. Evidence from English and Spanish medical research papers. *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 12 (1), 33-57.
- Ariel, M. (2012). Research paradigms in pragmatics. In A. Keith and K. Jaszczolt (Eds.), *The Cambridge Handbook of Pragmatics* (pp. 23-46). Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Chilton, P. (2008). Political terminology. In K. Knapp and G. Antos (Eds.), *Handbook of Communication in the Public Sphere* (pp. 226-242). Berlin, Germany: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power*. London, UK: Longman.
- Fraser, B. (1980). Conversational mitigation. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 4 (4), 341–350.
- Fraser, B. (2010). Hedging in political discourse. *Perspectives in Politics and Discourse*, 36, 201-213.
- Holmes, J. (2013). *An introduction to sociolinguistics (4th Ed.)*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Kranich, S. (2015). To hedge or not to hedge: the use of epistemic modal expressions in popular science in English texts, English–German translations, and German original texts. *Text & talk – An interdisciplinary journal of language, discourse & communication studies*, 31 (1), 77-99.
- Lakoff, G. (1972). Hedges a study in meaning criteria and the logic of fuzzy concepts. *Papers from the eighth Regional Meeting Chicago Linguistic Society*, 183-228.
- Lakoff, R. (1975). *Language and woman's place*. New York, NY: Harper Colophon.
- Rosanti, E. D.; Jaelani, A. (2015). The use of lexical hedges in spoken language by female and male students. *Electronic Journal of UIKA Bogor*, 16 (1), 29-39.
- Schaffner, C. (1996). Editorial: political speeches and discourse analysis. *Current Issues in Language & Society*, 3, 201-204.
- Schiffrin, D. (1988). *Discourse markers*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Takhtarova, S. (2010). *Mitigation category: communicative-discursive and ethnical and cultural aspects* [PhD dissertation]. Volgograd, Russia: VGU.
- Takhtarova, S. (2014). Mitigation strategies of self-evaluation in German linguaculture. *World Applied Sciences Journal*, 31 (2), 208-210.
- Van Dijk, T. (1985). *Handbook of discourse analysis*. London, UK: Academic Press.