

# THE USE OF HEDGES IN THE FIRST CLINTON-TRUMP PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE

## PENGGUNAAN HEDGES DALAM DEBAT KEPRESIDENAN PERTAMA ANTARA CLINTON DAN TRUMP

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### Abstract

This research investigated the use of hedges in the first Clinton-Trump presidential debate in 2016. The objectives of this research were 1) to identify the linguistic features of hedges, and 2) to scrutinize the functions of hedges. Since this research is explanatory in nature, the qualitative method is applied. The results revealed that seven linguistic features of hedges, i.e. modal auxiliary verb; modal lexical verb; adjectival, adverbial, and nominal modal phrases; approximators of degree, quantity, frequency and time; introductory phrase; “if” clause; and compound hedges were employed by both candidates. In addition, all of the five pragmatic functions of hedges, i.e. mitigating claims by showing some kind of uncertainty, expressing a lack of full commitment, searching for acceptance as well as expressing politeness, avoiding direct criticism especially when predicting future events or consequences, and requesting the listeners’ involvement were manifested.

**Keywords:** pragmatics, hedge, presidential debate

### Abstrak

Penelitian ini menganalisis penggunaan hedges dalam debat kepresidenan pertama antara Clinton dan Trump pada tahun 2016. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah 1) untuk mengidentifikasi ciri linguistik penggunaan hedges, dan 2) untuk menginvestigasi fungsi penggunaan hedges. Metode yang digunakan adalah metode kualitatif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa tujuh macam ciri linguistik penggunaan hedges yaitu kata kerja bantu modal; kata kerja leksikal modal; perkiraan derajat, kuantitas, frekuensi, dan waktu; frasa modal ajektiva, adverbia, dan nominasi; frasa pengantar; klausa if; dan gabungan hedges. Semua fungsi pragmatis penggunaan hedges juga ditemukan dalam penelitian ini. Fungsi-fungsi tersebut adalah memitigasi klaim dengan menunjukkan ketidakpastian, menyatakan kurangnya komitmen, mencari persetujuan dari pendengar dan untuk menyatakan kesopanan, menghindari kritik langsung terutama ketika memprediksi kejadian atau konsekuensi di masa mendatang, dan meminta keterlibatan pendengar.

**Kata kunci:** pragmatik, hedges, debat kepresidenan

## INTRODUCTION

Language in politics is more than just a means for verbalizing standpoints. When someone goes for being a politician, they have to prepare strategies to get their purpose of involving in politics. One of which is through a strategy of good

communication in order to win political campaign. The strategy is highly needed to hit the target of gaining mass support by successfully using language to deliver their ideas and points of view related to a certain problem. As stated by Jones and Peccei (2004: 39), through language that is said,

someone can influence and even can control others' mind.

For that reason, the politicians having skillful competence in communication will easily get support from the people. One of some strategies to this end can be done by employing particular linguistic devices such as hedges for delivering their speech

This kind of linguistic devices enables the speaker to present information which is not one hundred percent true. Thus, by way of this, the speaker may convey some other purposes of communication like saving their public image, signaling a lack of full commitment, or showing uncertainty about the information.

Communication in politics can be performed in several ways, one of which is by holding a political debate. Hedges can be found many where in the events of political contexts as a linguistic strategy with the aim of achieving certain purposes. One of which is in presidential debates. The recent debate being talked all around the world is the series of the United States of America presidential debates in 2016.

In this point, hedging devices come as the solution for them to mitigate their claims while performing speech since lack of this kind of expression may put at risk of being proven wrong or even the chance being choosen.

Preceding studies under the same topic that is the use of hedges in political

context are done by Ika Wahyuni and Zeya Firdaus Widyaka.

The first previous research was conducted by Ika Wahyuni in 2017. It is an undergraduate thesis entitled *The Use of Hedges in the Second Obama-Romney Presidential Debate*. The researcher brought three research questions related to the types of hedges, the functions of hedges, and also the impact of hedges in the debate. She used the theory of the types of hedges proposed by Prince et al in 1982 as cited by Bruce Fraser in 2010. For the function of hedges, she employed a combination of theories offered by Lakoff, Martin-Martin, Fraser, and Fetzer.

The second previous research was done by Zeya Firdaus Widyaka in 2017. It is a graduate thesis entitled *Hedging Dalam Pidato Calon Presiden Amerika Serikat Tahun 2016*. Its purpose is to reveal the form, frequency, and functions of hedging in the acceptance speech. The theories applied are Salager-Meyer's in 1997 and Rabab'ah and Rumman in 2015.

Moreover, this research is different from those two mentioned above researches. This research differs from Wahyuni's research in terms of the applied theories as well as the research purposes since this research only investigates the linguistic features and functions of hedges. Compared to the research belongs to Widyaka, the theories used are the same but even though still in the same context of presidential

election between Clinton and Trump, the object being investigated is different.

This study is aimed to shed more light to the knowledge about the use of hedges especially in political context as well as to give contribution to some parties: students, lecturers, other researchers, and people in general as the reference to improve their understanding about hedges.

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

### **Type of Study**

The researcher used qualitative method. In line with the objective of the research for identifying and revealing the use of hedges in the first presidential debate between Clinton and Trump, the qualitative method was the most appropriate to be employed in the research. The data were presented in the form of narration instead of statistics. The result was explained narratively. Thus, the type of this research was categorized as a qualitative research.

### **Time and Place of the Study**

This study took place in Yogyakarta, Indonesia from November 2017 until Mey 2018.

### **Subject of the Study**

The subject of the study was the first Clinton-Trump presidential debate which was held on September 26, 2016 in Hofstra University, Hempstead, New York. The study focussed on hedges performed by the debaters only.

## **Data, Instrument, and Data Collection Techniques**

The research data were in the form of utterances indicating hedges said by Clinton and Trump. The context of the data was the dialogue between the presidential candidates as the debaters during the debate. The data source of this research was the debate video along with its transcript.

The researcher played an important role as the key instrument of the research, and another instrument was also used namely data sheet.

In qualitative research, there are four categories of collecting the data as proposed by Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009: 189). They are interviewing, ethnographic observation, documents and material culture analysis, and visual analysis. In line with it, the data about hedges were collected by way of documents based on the transcript as well as visual analysis by watching the debate video.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed based on the theory proposed by Salager Meyer (1997) and Rabab'ah and Rumman (2015). In this research, the technique used for analyzing the data was textual analysis. Vanderstoep and Johnston (2009: 211) states that textual analysis concerns on the identification and interpretation of a set of text based on the researcher's perspective. Moreover, each perspective on a meaning might lead to different interpretation.

**Findings and Discussions**

The analysis is based on Francoise Salager-Meyer’s theory (1997) that divides the linguistic features of hedges into seven categorizations. They are modal auxiliary verb, modal lexical verb, adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrase, approximator of degree, quantity, frequency and time, introductory phrase, “if” clause, and compound hedges. Also, to scrutinize the second objective about the function of hedges in the debate, this research employs Rabab’ah and Rumman’s theory recently proposed in 2015. They bring five functions of hedges, i.e. mitigating claim by showing some kind of uncertainty, expressing a lack of full commitment, searching for acceptance and showing politeness especially when predicting future events or consequences, and requesting the listener’s involvement.

**Table 1. Linguistic Features and Functions of Hedges**

Function s	Mitiga ting claims by <i>showin g</i> some kind of uncert ainty	Expres sing a lack of full commit ment	Search ing for accept ance and expres sing polite ness	Avoid ing direct critici sm especi ally when predic ting the future	Reques ting the listen er’s involve ment
Feature s					
Modal Auxilia ry Verbs	V	-	-	V	-

Modal Lexical Verbs	V	V	-	-	-
Adjecti val, adverbi al, nomina l modal phrases	V	-	-	-	-
Approxi mator of degree, quantity, frequenc y and time	V	-	-	-	-
Intro ductory phrases	-	V	V	-	V
“If” clauses	-	-	-	V	-
Compo und hedges	-	V	V	-	-

After analyzing the debate, the result shows that all of the linguistic features and functions are performed by both Clinton and Trump. The result is summarized in the table above. It is the representation of the connection between the linguistic features and functions of hedges used in the first U.S presidential debate. Clinton and Trump perform all of the linguistic features of hedges which are modal auxiliary verbs; modal lexical verbs; adjectival, adverbial, and nominal modal phrases; approximators of degree, quantity, frequency and time; introductory phrases; “if” clauses; and compound hedges. However, in the third group of the features which is adjectival,

adverbial and nominal modal phrase, nominal modal phrase is not expressed in the debate.

Furthermore, the five functions namely mitigating claims by showing some kind of uncertainty; expressing a lack of full commitment; searching for acceptance and expressing politeness; avoiding direct criticism especially when predicting future events or consequences; and requesting the listeners' involvement are manifested within all of the hedges used. Three of the linguistic features of hedges convey only one function, and the rest of linguistic features bring more than one function which are modal auxiliary verb, modal lexical verb, introductory phrase, and compound hedges. In addition, the data show that one expression of hedging device can have more than one function at the same time. It is in line with Rabab'ah and Rumman's statement (2015:175) that sometimes one hedging device can fulfill more than one pragmatic function of hedges.

## 1. Linguistic Features of Hedges

### a. Modal Auxiliary Verbs

Modal auxiliary verbs or known as helping verbs are auxiliary verbs which come before main verbs for modifying the meaning of the main verbs. Modal auxiliary verbs can be used for showing several puposes which are expressing willingness, ability, necessity, or possibility. It is used in the forms of *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *will*, *would*, *shall*, *should*, and *must*. In relation to the use of modal auxiliary verbs as hedging device, it is that of expressing possibility to soften or

weaken proposition or statement. In the debate, both Clinton and Trump employ modal auxiliary verbs in the forms of *can*, *could*, *may*, *might*, *will*, *would*, *should*, and *must*. In other words, the only one modal auxiliary verb which is not performed by both candidates is *shall*. Even though eight of nine modal auxiliary verbs are manifested in the debate, not all of which act as hedges showing possibility to weaken their statement. Modal auxiliary verbs used in the debate considered as hedges are only in four forms namely *would*, *could*, *may*, and *might*.

### b. Modal Lexical Verbs

The next linguistic feature found in the debate is modal lexical verb. It includes all verbs except auxiliary verbs. In modal lexical verbs, the verbs show the speaker's attitude or opinion or it can be said that this modal lexical verb is about the speaker's view of the world. In the debate, the candidates use linguistic expressions acting as hedging device which its linguistic feature is modal lexical verb performed by the use of two lexical verbs. They are *to seem* and *to look like*. They employ *it* with those verbs when the following clause is the object of the verb.

### c. Adjectival, Adverbial, and Nominal Modal Phrases

The use of hedges is also found in some linguistic expressions which its features are adjectival and adverbial modal phrases. However, hedges which its linguistic feature is nominal modal phrase are not found in the

data. Hedges which its linguistic feature is adverbial modal phrase are performed by the use of *probably*, *perhaps*, and *maybe*. Meanwhile, the linguistic feature of adjectival modal phrase is employed by the use of *possible*.

#### **Approximator of Degree, Quantity, Frequency, and Time**

Approximator of degree, quantity, frequency and time includes all of linguistic devices denoting imprecision of degree, quantity, frequency, and time. Also, probability measurement of something in particular is counted as the approximator. Since it shows imprecision, the information delivered is being vague. In the debate, hedges in this category are done by both of the candidates. They use these hedges in the forms of *a little bit*, *somewhat*, *approximately*, *almost*, *nearly*, and *about*.

#### **e. Introductory Phrases**

The data show that the use of hedges is also performed by linguistic expressions which its linguistic feature is introductory phrase. By the use of this hedge, the speaker shows his or her personal doubt as well as direct involvement to the statement delivered. In this debate, the introductory phrase is expressed through the use of personal pronouns which are *I*, *we* as well as *you*. These pronouns are followed by verbs *think*, *know*, and *feel*. The most significant is that the use of introductory phrase *I think*.

#### **f. "If" Clauses**

The linguistic feature of hedges which is "if" clause is also employed by the candidates. It is used by the debaters to show uncertainty about future events or consequences.

#### **g. Compound Hedges**

The use of hedges in the debate is also expressed by a phrase made up several hedges. The only one compound hedge manifested is double hedge which is two devices of hedges coming together and modifying each other. The occurrence of this linguistic feature is presented by the use of *I kind of assumed*.

Moreover, the occurrence of two hedges coming together is not always considered as compound hedges. In the debate, two hedges coming together but not compound hedges because they do not modify each other are also found.

#### **2. Functions of Hedges**

According to Rabab'ah and Rumman (2015), there are five pragmatic functions of hedges. They are mitigating claims by showing some kind of uncertainty, expressing a lack of full commitment, searching for acceptance as well as expressing politeness, avoiding direct criticism especially when predicting future events or consequences, and requesting the listeners' involvement. The result shows that the five pragmatic functions of hedges are manifested in the debate.

The most widely achieved pragmatic function of hedges is to mitigate claims by showing some kind of uncertainty. This is due to the candidates' need to shield them from being proven wrong later if the claims are not correct. Thus, they use hedges for mitigating their claims by avoiding giving the precise points of claim. This is also supported by the existence of fast checkers in the debate who work for checking whether the candidates' claims are correct or not. This urges both Clinton and Trump to employ hedges with the intention for mitigating their claims by showing uncertain or imprecise statements.

#### **a. Mitigating Claims by Showing Some Kind of Uncertainty**

The first pragmatic function of hedges mentioned by Rabab'ah and Rumman in their theory is to mitigate claims by showing some kind of uncertainty. The data show that this function is achieved by four linguistic features of hedges used by Clinton and Trump namely modal auxiliary verb, modal lexical verb, adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrase as well as approximator of degree, quantity, frequency and time. An example is by the use linguistic feature of adjectival, adverbial, and nominal modal phrase for achieving this pragmatic function.

TRUMP: It's **probably** \$5 trillion that we can't bring into our country, Lester. And with a little leadership, you'd get it in here very quickly, and it could be put to use on the inner cities and lots of other things, and it would be beautiful.

(Datum 22)

This statement is delivered by Trump when he is explaining that Clinton cannot bring back jobs which leave the country because she increases the taxes for companies in the country. Thus, it makes the companies leave the country to some other countries applying lower taxes. Then, he states that his opponent cannot bring back companies and thus money into the country. However, he inserts a hedging device performed by an adverb *probably*. This hedge shows that he is not being certain about the total number of how many trillion dollars that they cannot bring into their country. Therefore, this use of hedge implies that Trump mitigates the claim of how many trillion dollars they cannot bring back by showing uncertainty since the hedge modifies the claim to be less accurate.

#### **b. Expressing a Lack of Full Commitment**

The use of hedges can also be functioned for showing that the speaker avoids being fully committed to the statement she or he delivered. The presidential candidates also show this occurrence. Based on the data gained in this study, this function is achieved by two linguistic features of hedges namely modal lexical verb as well as introductory phrase.

The linguistic feature of hedges which is widely used by the candidates for achieving this function is introductory phrase. It can be illustrated by the following example.

CLINTON: And I have -- well, not quite that long. **I think** my husband did a pretty good job in the 1990s. I

think a lot about what worked and how we can make it work again...  
(Datum 12)

The use of *I think* in the datum shows that Clinton expresses a lack of full commitment. This is because through the use of this hedge, she shows that the statement about what has been done by her husband is merely her opinion. Thus, it weakens the force of the statement by showing that she is not fully committed to the statement.

### **Searching for Acceptance from the Audiences and Expressing Politeness**

The function to search for the audiences' acceptance and expressing politeness in the first Clinton-Trump presidential debate is achieved by the use of hedges which its linguistic features are introductory phrase and compound hedges. It is because only these features allow the speaker to show their personal doubt which is their attitude toward the statement delivered. The speaker employs their personal doubt by the use of hedges in order to weaken the force of the statement.

Then, when the statement is being soft, it will be more accepted than too assertive statement. Also, since the statement becomes softer, it saves the interlocutor's face which is public self image that everyone wants. Thus, it is also used for expressing politeness which can be positive politeness or negative politeness. Negative politeness deals with the strategies for saving the need for getting freedom and independent for

delivering ideas whereas the need to be connected and respected is considered as positive politeness. All in all, searching for acceptance and expressing politeness are strongly connected.

Based on the data, this function can be achieved by the use of hedges which its linguistic feature is introductory phrase.

CLINTON: For 40 years, everyone running for president has released their tax returns. You can go and see nearly, I think, 39, 40 years of our tax returns, but everyone has done it. **We know** the IRS has made clear there is no prohibition on releasing it when you're under audit.

(Datum 31)

This is Clinton's statement as her response to Donald's reason why he does not release his tax returns. The use of the bold expression softens her statement as her refusal of her opponent's statement that the unreleased tax returns are because he is still under audit. This is used for showing that Clinton is trying to search the audiences' acceptance since it signals that the statement about the permission for releasing tax returns while still under audit is already known by her as well as the audiences. Moreover, since it is to soften the force of the statement, this also achieves the need for expressing politeness. In this context, the politeness being expressed is positive politeness. It is because the use of pronoun *we* indicates that Clinton needs to be accepted as well as connected with the audiences.

Additionally, it is not only positive politeness which is achieved by the

candidates, but also negative politeness. The negative politeness is also expressed through the use of introductory phrase hedges.

TRUMP: Well, nobody was pressing it, nobody was caring much about it. I figured you'd ask the question tonight, of course. But nobody was caring much about it. But I was the one that got him to produce the birth certificate. And **I think** I did a good job.

(Datum 49)

This is stated by Trump when he refuses Clinton's claim that he does racism to President Obama by saying that Obama is not American citizen. Thus, Trump says this that he does not do that and even he helps Obama to produce his birth certificate. Because of this, he says that he did a good job. However, he inserts a hedging device that is a pronoun *I* followed by a verb *think*. This hedge is used for searching the audience's acceptance since the statement that he did a good job is merely his opinion and it may contradict to the listener's opinion. In addition, it is also used for expressing politeness that is negative politeness since the use of this hedge shows that Trump tries to save Clinton's face because it contradicts with what has been stated by her. Thus, he attempts to show negative politeness that is saving the need for being independent and free to deliver statement.

#### **d. Avoiding Direct Criticism Especially when Predicting Future Events or Consequences**

The use of hedges also accomplishes the function of avoiding direct criticism

especially when predicting future events or consequences. This function is signaled by the use of hedges for predicting something in the future. The result shows that this function is reached by the use of modal auxiliary verb as well as "if" clause.

CLINTON: Independent experts have looked at what I've proposed and looked at what Donald's proposed, and basically they've said this, that **if his tax plan, which would blow up the debt by over \$5 trillion and would in some instances disadvantage middle-class families compared to the wealthy, were to go into effect, we would lose 3.5 million jobs and maybe have another recession.**

(Datum 10)

Clinton states this when she is explaining about what has been concluded by independent experts about Trump's plan and hers for putting more money into the pocket of Americans. By looking at its form, this hedge is concluded as a member of the linguistic feature categorization of "if" clause. Since it predicts the future, this shows that Clinton is trying to avoid criticism especially when predicting future event as the consequences of applying Trump's plan of cutting tax tremendously.

#### **e. Requesting the Listeners' Involvement**

Requesting the listeners' involvement as the last pragmatic function of hedges is fulfilled only by the linguistic feature of hedges that is introductory phrase. It is because only this feature allowing the speaker to invite the listeners into the statement conveyed since this kind of

hedge made up two linguistic units namely pronoun and verb. Moreover, this function can be signaled by the use of pronoun *you* as well as *we* since this involves the listeners into the proposition delivered.

CLINTON: For 40 years, everyone running for president has released their tax returns. You can go and see nearly, I think, 39, 40 years of our tax returns, but everyone has done it. **We know** the IRS has made clear there is no prohibition on releasing it when you're under audit.

(Datum 31)

This is Clinton's statement for responding what has been said by Trump which is the reason he does not release his tax returns when he is running for being a president is because he is still under audit. She rejects it by saying that the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) has made clear that releasing tax returns when somebody is under audit is allowed. However, she inserts a hedge which its linguistic feature is introductory phrase by employing *we know* in the beginning of the statement. The use of personal pronoun *we* signals that it means herself as the speaker together with the audiences as the listeners. Hence, this use of introductory phrase is for requesting the listeners' involvement to the statement about the IRS' permission for releasing the tax returns when he is still under audit. It shows that the statement is already widely known by her as well as the audiences.

## CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

### Conclusion

The results show that there can be found a pattern of the use of hedges in the first Clinton- Trump presidential debate. The first linguistic feature of hedges that is modal auxiliary verb is performed for getting the functions of mitigating claim by showing some kind of uncertainty and avoiding direct criticism especially when predicting future events or consequences. The second linguistic feature that is modal lexical verb is used in order to get two functions, namely mitigating claims by showing some kind of uncertainty and expressing a lack of full commitment. The third linguistic feature comprising of adjectival, adverbial, and nominal modal phrases is employed for the function of mitigating claim by showing some kind of uncertainty. Then, the fourth linguistic feature that is approximator of degree, quantity, frequency, and time is presented for getting the function of mitigating claim by showing some kind of uncertainty. The fifth linguistic feature that is introductory phrase is used for obtaining three functions, i.e. expressing a lack of full commitment, searching for being accepted and expressing politeness, as well as requesting the listeners' involvement. The sixth linguistic feature that is "if" clause is found for showing that the speaker tries to achieve the function of avoiding direct criticism especially when predicting future events or consequences. The last linguistic feature that is compound hedge is realized for both expressing a lack of full commitment and searching for being

accepted and expressing politeness.

### **Suggestions**

Based on the conclusions above, the researcher offers several suggestions for readers in general, linguistic students, and future researchers which are presented as follows.

#### 1. To readers in general

Hedges are important for having conversation since it can be used for weakening the statement which is thus not seen as too assertive. Being lack of the use of hedges in using language may lead to be seen as being impolite too. Therefore, after reading this research, the readers in general are suggested to learn and get a deeper understanding about hedges. Moreover, the readers are also expected to apply their knowledge in their everyday activities when they want to soften their statements and show that they are not certain about the information delivered.

#### 2. To linguistic students

Students majoring in linguistics who are interested in pragmatics are suggested to learn about hedges. The students can learn many things since there are many topics besides hedges. Moreover, they can find other theories in analyzing the use of hedges in terms of its linguistic features and functions in order to get a better insight and understanding. Additionally, the students can refer to this research as a reference related to pragmatics and hedges during their study.

#### 3. To future researchers

There are still very few researchers who are interested to analyze the use of hedges especially in the university where the researcher comes from that is Yogyakarta State University. Thus, it is hard to look for a detailed reference for analyzing hedges since researcher only finds one research under the topic of the use of hedges. Therefore, it will be very challenging for other researcher to conduct a study on the use of hedges. The object being analyzed can be broadened into some other context such as the use of hedges in the contexts of academic writing, courtroom conversation, or even business letter. It will be useful since it will give a significant contribution to the field of the study. Furthermore, the future researcher can apply different theories and approaches with the intention to enrich the analysis. Some other aspects can also be employed like the use of intonation when hedges are realized.

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