

## THE USE OF HEDGES IN THE SECOND OBAMA-ROMNEY PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE

Written by : Ika Wahyuniati  
 First Supervisor : Titik Sudartinah, M.A.  
 Second Supervisor : Paulus Kurnianta, M.Hum

English Literature Study Program  
 Faculty of Languages and Arts  
 Yogyakarta State University

[ikawahyuniati@gmail.com](mailto:ikawahyuniati@gmail.com)

### Abstract

This research investigates the use of hedges by the candidates of second Obama-Romney presidential debate which is held in 2012 at Hofstra University. The objectives of the research are to identify the types, functions and the impacts of the use of hedges in the debate. This research employed descriptive qualitative method. The results of the research are described as follows. (1) There are only three types of hedges used by the candidates of the debate. They are rounder, plausibility and attribution. Plausibility is the most frequent hedge to occur in the debate, while attribution is the least one. Meanwhile, adaptor cannot be found in the debate. (2) Three functions of hedges are realized in the debate. The functions are showing the speaker's uncertainty, mitigating the force of the utterances, and avoiding taking responsibility of the information given. (3) In this debate, there are two impacts of the use of hedges by the candidates. The impacts can be positive and negative. According to the data, most of the hedges give negative impact for the candidates of the debate. The negative impact occurs because most of the hedges create uncertain statements while in fact they need to convince people with their words.

**Keywords:** *hedge, presidential debate, Obama, Romney*

### INTRODUCTION

Language as a means of communication functions as a medium to deliver one's opinion and messages to others. However, one can use language not only to deliver messages and opinion, but also to express emotion, describe a situation, direct someone, give greetings and

many more. Many things can be done with language.

The problem in using language in communication is that whether a person is giving truthful information and messages or not. In the process of communication, someone needs to be cooperative by giving truthful information so that the hearer can

give the appropriate response toward the message delivered by the speaker. In some context of language use, people often avoid being cooperative and break the rule of cooperative principle by giving information in which the message is ambiguous and manipulated. It can happen because the speaker has some other purposes of communication besides being cooperative, like for face-saving strategy, avoiding answering question and signaling the lack of full commitment to the utterance. In linguistics, the manipulation of language is often delivered through hedges, which are studied under pragmatics.

In political context, hedges can also be found in debate, interview, and campaign as linguistic strategies which are used by some politicians to achieve particular purposes. In using language, some politicians often manipulate their utterances while they ought to provide facts about the political condition and their upcoming agendas. It happens both in written and oral form of language use. In some chances like interview, speech, and debates, politicians

manage their language and put hedges in their utterances which act as a linguistic device to make themselves look good in front of public.

In this study, the object which the researcher uses is The Second Obama-Romney Presidential Debate. Based on the information gathered from the official website of Commission on Presidential Debate, this American presidential debate was held on October 16, 2012 at Hofstra University (CPD, 2012). Moderated by Candy Crowley from CNN, the candidates were presenting their opinions mostly about domestic issues added with some foreign matters which revolved topics such as taxes, unemployment, national debt, energy, women's right, immigration and the attack toward U.S. Consulate in Libya. At that time, Barack Obama who came from Democrat Political Party was occupied as the current American President while Romney from Republican Political Party was the Governor of Massachusetts. The debate was won by Obama after he

had lost the first presidential debate at the same round.

This research aims to find out the kinds of hedges that are used by the candidates of Second Obama-Romney Presidential Debate. The classifications of hedges used in this research are approximators, adaptors, rounders, shields, plausibility shields and attribution shields. The classifications are proposed by Prince et al.

In addition, there are also functions for the candidates to insert hedges in their utterances which are also important to be analyzed in this research. According to some linguists which are Lakoff, Martin-Martin, Fraser and Fetzer, there are four possible functions to put hedges in speaker's utterances. They are expressing the speaker's uncertainty, mitigating the force of the utterances, avoiding taking responsibility of the information given, and expressing an opinion or belief.

The last focus of this research is to analyze the impacts of hedges to the candidates of the debate. Hedges can bring two impacts, positive and negative impacts, toward the

candidates in creating a strong statement to defeat his opponent.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This research employed descriptive qualitative method since it attempted to identify and describe the linguistic phenomenon of hedges in presidential debate. By using qualitative research method, the result of the research can give in-depth understanding on the object under study with detailed explanation (Vanderstoep and Johnston, 2009: 8).

The collected data were interpreted through analysis process. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998: 11), the collected data can consist of various forms like interviews and observation as well as films, videotapes, and documents. Further they explain that the interpretation brings the data into a nonmathematical process to code and organize the data.

The data of the research were in the form of utterances uttered by the candidates of Second Obama-Romney Presidential Debate that was held on October 16, 2012. The context of the data was the dialogue

or discussion between Obama and Romney in the presidential debate. The sources of the data were the transcript and the video of the debate. The transcript of the debate was retrieved from the official website of The New York Times and the video was downloaded from the youtube account of The New York Times.

The primary instrument of this research was the researcher herself. According to Moleong (2010: 168), what is meant by a research instrument is the tool to collect data. In qualitative research, the primary research instrument is the human or the researcher itself.

Besides the primary research instrument, this research also had a secondary instrument which was the data sheet. The data sheet existed to help the researcher collect the data and classify them. The data sheet was in the form of a table. It was filled up with the phenomenon of hedges in the Second Obama-Romney presidential debate.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

The findings of data in this research show types, functions, and impacts of the use of hedges in the second Obama-Romney Presidential Debate. Among four types of hedges, only three of them can be found in 38 data. However, some types are more frequent than the others. Plausibility hedge is the most dominant type to occur in this research with 25 data. Most of them have mitigating the force of the utterance as the function. In addition, most of the plausibility hedges lead to negative impact.

Meanwhile, there is one type of hedges which cannot be found in the debate. That hedge is adaptor. Adaptor hedge is usually used when preposition is correct or partially correct. Somehow, sentences with this hedge can be ambiguous or not exact. Thus, this type of hedge rarely appears in the debate because a politician is supposed to give exact strategies or agenda to gain supporters. Adaptor appears more in a formal or daily conversation since delivering information which is partially correct is fine. However, in a political event, such as a debate,

politicians seek for a good image in order to be chosen by people. Therefore, being not precise with their upcoming agenda is not wise to do in a debate.

The most dominant hedge, which is plausibility hedge, and its function, which is mitigating the force of the utterance, are related. Most of data with plausibility hedge found in the debate are doubtful statements from the candidates which include first speaker pronoun (i.e. *I think*). The hedge here can be seen as a strategy to modify the force of the utterance. Politician can also use this kind of strategy in order to be seen less threatening to his opponent. This strategy is used when the candidates want to deliver their opinions without being too straightforward. Prince et al (in Fraser, 2010: 20) said that the use of hedges in a speaker's statement implies the assertion is made on plausible reasons. It means that the candidates believe that their statement is true. However, still, the candidates want to make their utterances less direct and less imposing. Obama and Romney try to make their utterances less imposing

when they refute each other's statement. Their strategies are proven by the use of hedge to mitigate the force of the utterances in order to be less imposing to the opponent.

In relation to the impact of the use of hedges in the debate, most of the hedges give a negative impact to the candidates. There are only three occurrences of positive impact in this research. One impact occurs when the candidates use plausibility hedge to mitigate the force of their utterances. The hedge gives a positive impact although the function is to mitigate the force. The plausibility hedge gives positive impact because the hedge creates confident belief that the speaker will become the next president. The other two happen when the candidates use attribution hedge to avoid taking responsibility of their utterances. Attribution hedge is used when a speaker attributes information to another party or source. Therefore, the candidates entrust the truth of information to the source of the attribution. Thus, their information sound more convincing as the

candidates put reliable sources in their utterances.

## 1. Types of Hedges Used in the Second Obama-Romney Presidential Debate

### a. Approximator: Rounder

In the example, Obama responded to a question related to energy issues. Crowley asked Obama's opinion about his energy secretary's statement. Obama's energy secretary ever said that it was not the job of Energy Department to lower the gas price. In regard to that question, Obama said that the most important thing was to control their own energy. He emphasized in his explanation that he and his people made priority on natural gas. He said that it was a way to create efficient energy and keep the gas price low. In order to support his statement, Obama explained the amount of jobs created from natural gas industry and the time span of natural gas availability. His point related to natural gas was that he planned to make efficient energy in regard to their better future and stable gas price.

OBAMA: We've got potentially 600,000 jobs and 100 years' worth of energy right beneath our feet with natural gas.

(Datum 3)

In this context, Obama's statement is not certain. Obama becomes not certain because he inserts the hedge *potentially* to presume the amount of jobs and the time span of natural gas availability. He does not give a real or precise amount. The existence of the hedge *potentially* has created uncertainty in Obama's words. It sounds as if he is not certain with his statement yet. Some people may use hedge in order to limit information that they want to share. However, in this case, Obama should have given the exact amount of jobs. It is not only the number of the jobs and the time span of natural gas availability which sound uncertain, but also Obama's belief to reach that goal for jobs and natural gas availability.

### b. Shields

#### 1) Plausibility

The example of plausibility happened when the candidates were

engaged in a series of argument related to the topic of oil, gas and coal. They kept cutting each other's utterances. Previously, Romney blamed Obama on the decrease of energy production and jobs. However, Obama could not take what Romney had said as a true fact. Related to that, Romney delivered his opinion that he believed Obama was not going to make effort for oil, gas and coal.

ROMNEY: I don't think anyone really believes that you're a person who's going to be pushing for oil and gas and coal.

(Datum 8)

In this statement, Romney uses plausibility hedge *I don't think* to deliver his opinion. This hedging device shows the speaker's doubtful attitude on the statement. His strategy to make people believe him can be failed when he puts plausibility hedge in this statement. In order to gather people's trust, Romney needs to put a clear fact instead of uncertain utterances. In this statement, Romney sounds in doubt. His utterance shows what

Romney has said is not absolutely right or wrong.

## 2) Attribution

In the example, an audience asked question about Romney's plan on reducing the tax rates and eliminating some deductions. Romney had made a statement that he would not raise the tax rates for middle class people. However, he would limit some deductions in order to balance the cut in tax rates. In addition to his plan on tax rates, Romney also criticized the recent administration under Obama. He related his comments for Obama to a recent study involving Obama's administration. Romney said that a recent study found that Obama's administration had made middle class people paid higher taxes while their incomes were going down.

ROMNEY: A recent study has shown the people in the middle-class will see \$4,000.00 per year in higher taxes as a result of the spending and borrowing of this administration.

(Datum 13)

In the context of the statement, Romney delivers his explanation using attribution hedge

as he borrows the information from a recent study. He starts his statement with *a recent study has shown*. The hedge functions to avoid taking responsibility of the information. It means that Romney's doubt is expressed indirectly since he uses the attribution hedge in involving another source of information.

## 2. Functions of Hedges Used in the Second Obama-Romney Presidential Debate

### a. Showing the Speaker's Uncertainty

In the example, the candidates are in the middle of argument about permits and licenses on federal lands and federal water. Romney insisted that Obama had cut licenses and permits on federal land and federal water in half. After cutting each other's words for some times, Obama finally got the chance to explain the situation. In the following statement, Obama wanted to explain that there were actually still a lot of oil company which had leases on public lands. However, according to Obama, those oil

companies did not follow the rule in drilling.

OBAMA: You had a whole bunch of oil companies who had leases on public lands that they weren't using.

(Datum 6)

The use of rounder hedge *a whole bunch* makes Obama's statement inaccurate. The statement becomes inaccurate because there is no precise amount of the oil companies. Obama only presumes the amount of the oil companies which have leases on public lands. The lack of precise information for how many oil companies that Obama means makes his statement uncertain.

### b. Mitigating the Force of the Utterances

The example occurred when the candidates were arguing the decrease in oil, gas and coal production. Romney blamed Obama for what he had done to decrease energy production and job vacancy. Everytime Obama was about to give his response, he was always cut by Romney. Romney said that Obama



was not the one who could make effort for oil, gas and coal.

ROMNEY: And the answer is I don't believe people think that's the case, because I – I'm – that wasn't a question.

(Datum 9)

The use of hedges *I don't believe* in this statement mitigates the force of the utterance. The force of the utterance is reduced since Romney's words become less direct by including the hedge as indication of his opinion. Romney does not openly accuse Obama for not making effort for oil, gas and coal. His implicit accusation is showed when he still inserts the plausibility hedge in order to not impose Obama.

### c. Avoiding Taking Responsibility of the Information Given

The example occurred when the candidates are in the middle of argument about their immigration policy. Obama said that Romney ever called the Part of Arizona Law as a model for the nation. However, in this statement, Obama wanted to straighten up what Romney had said about his immigration policy vision. Obama thought that Romney's vision

actually would not help people to get the American citizenship. Instead, Romney would make their life more miserable.

OBAMA: Part of the Arizona law said that law enforcement officers could stop folks because they looked like they might be undocumented workers and check their papers

(Datum 26)

Obama relates his statement about Romney's immigration policy using hedges indicates that Obama does not want to take the responsibility of the information. Obama uses that information to relate to what Romney takes as something good as model for the nation.

### 3. The Impacts of the Use of Hedges in the Second Obama-Romney Presidential Debate

#### a. Negative Impacts

The example of negative impact occurred in the debate when Obama was trying to defense himself. Romney kept attacking Obama on the issue of energy policy. According to Romney, Obama's energy policy did not work resulting

in some degradation. Candid Crowley then asked Obama whether it was true that price of gasoline was high because Obama's energy policy did not work. Obama started his response for Romney's accusation by explaining that he took office during the tough times. In addition, Obama also wanted to clear off that he had actually built enough pipeline.

OBAMA: We've built enough pipeline to wrap around the entire earth once.

(Datum 12)

In the context of the statement, Obama uses the hedge *enough* to presume the amount of the pipelines. The hedge he uses has created a negative impact for him since his utterance become uncertain. Obama cannot convince Romney and audience with his uncertain statement. Moreover, Romney repeatedly mentions about the issue of not enough pipeline. It will be wise to make a clear explanation for the amount of the pipeline. Thus, Romney will not be able to ask the same topic.

## b. Positive Impacts

The example occurred after a question about Romney's plan on reducing the tax rates and eliminating some deductions. Romney had made a statement that he would not raise tax rates for middle class people. He related his explanation about tax plan to a recent study involving Obama's administration. Romney said that the recent study found that Obama's administration had made middle class people paid higher taxes while their incomes were going down.

ROMNEY: A recent study has shown the people in the middle-class will see \$4,000.00 per year in higher taxes as a result of the spending and borrowing of this administration.

(Datum 13)

In this statement, it can be seen that Romney wants to degrade Obama's image. Romney gives information about the impact of Obama's administration toward middle class people. He says that middle class people will have higher taxes when their incomes go down. Romney's statement is more trusted because he relates his statement to a

recent study about Obama's administration. The recent study becomes a supporting fact to his statement for Obama's administration. Thus, his statement creates a positive impact since he sounds assuring.

### CONCLUSION

There are only three types of hedges used by the candidates of the presidential debate, i.e. *rounder*, *plausibility* and *attribution*. The frequency for each type is different. *Plausibility* is the most frequent hedge to occur in the debate with 25 data out of 38. Almost the entire *plausibility* hedge in this debate uses *I think*. The *plausibility* hedges are mostly used when the candidates want to be seen less threatening to their opponent.

In relation to the second objective, there are three functions of hedges which can be analyzed in the debate. They are showing the speaker's uncertainty, mitigating the force of the utterances, and avoiding taking responsibility of the information given. All of the functions can be found in the debate.

Mitigating the force of the utterances is the most frequent function to occur in the debate with 25 data out of 38. This function occurs more because the candidates want to reduce the force of their utterance in the debate. The candidates want to give less imposition to their opponent.

The third objective of this research is to analyze the impacts of hedges in the second Obama Romney presidential debate. The findings of this research show that there are two impacts of hedges. The use of hedges can create either positive or negative impacts. However, most of hedges give negative impacts for the candidates of the debate. Among 38 data of hedges found in this research, only three of them can give a positive impact to the candidates of the debate. Most of the hedges create uncertain statements while the candidates need to convince people with their words. Meanwhile, the other three hedges, which are *attribution* hedge, are able to create more trust toward people by attributing the statement to a trusted source of information.

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