

Navigating Political Discourse: A Cross-Sectional Study of Hedging in American Presidential Speeches

Noureddine Derki*

Department of Foreign Languages, Mustapha Stambouli University of Mascara, Algeria

Ghaleb Rabab'ah, Sharif Alghazo

Department of Foreign Languages, University of Sharjah, United Arab Emirates
Department of English Language and Literature, The University of Jordan, Jordan

Drissi Otmane Abdelkader

Department of English Language and Literature, Dr. Moulay Tahar University of Saida, Algeria

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Abstract

This cross-sectional study examines the use of hedging devices in American presidential discourse, analyzing speeches from four U.S. presidents with differing political affiliations. It aims to identify and categorize hedging strategies employed during their presidency, using a corpus of 52 randomly selected speeches totaling over 265,000 words. A mixed-methods approach, integrating quantitative and qualitative analyses, was employed, utilizing AntConc and Sketch Engine software. The analysis is grounded in Salager-Meyer's (1997) framework of hedging devices and Rabab'ah and Abu Rumman's (2015) taxonomy of hedging functions. Findings indicate a predominant use of approximators and modal auxiliaries, which varied across presidents and played a crucial role in mitigating commitment and conveying uncertainty. This variation was linked to political ideology and the specific socio-political contexts of each presidency. Democratic presidents relied more on hedging for diplomatic flexibility, whereas Republican presidents exhibited a preference for direct assertion. The study highlights hedging as a strategic rhetorical tool in political communication, allowing leaders to balance persuasion, adaptability, and authority.

Keywords: Hedging, political discourse, ideology, American presidents.

1. Introduction

Political discourse plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion and policy, making the careful selection of language a fundamental aspect of political communication. One of the key linguistic strategies employed in political speech is hedging, which allows speakers to express uncertainty, avoid direct commitments, or introduce nuance in their statements. While political figures often aim for persuasive and authoritative speech, they also strategically employ hedging to navigate complex political situations, minimize accountability, and manage public perception.

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* Corresponding Author: derkinoureddine@yahoo.com

Despite the extensive body of research on hedging in academic writing and general discourse, there is a notable gap in the systematic analysis of hedging strategies in high-stakes political speeches, particularly across different U.S. presidents over an extended period. While some studies have examined hedging used by individual political figures (e.g., Vass, 2004; Ayodapo 2007; Vazques & Giner 2008), few have conducted a comparative analysis spanning multiple administrations. Given the evolving political landscape and global crises that influence presidential rhetoric, it is essential to investigate how hedging strategies vary between different leaders and political contexts.

This study addresses this gap by analyzing the use of hedging devices in speeches delivered by four consecutive American presidents—George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden—over a 20-year period (2003–2024). By examining their public addresses, this research aims to determine the extent to which these presidents rely on hedging as a rhetorical tool and how their strategies are shaped by political ideology and leadership style. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the common hedging devices frequently used by President G. W. Bush, B. Obama, D. Trump, and J. Biden?
2. What similarities and differences exist in the hedging strategies employed by these four presidents? and why?

2. Literature review

2.1 Theoretical background

Different classifications of hedging have been proposed (e.g., Salager-Meyer 1994; Hyland 1996; Rabab'ah & Abu Rumman 2015). Although Salager-Meyer's (1994) model for hedging was initially developed for academic and non-political contexts, various researchers (e.g., Rabab'ah & Abu Rumma, 2015; Mansour & Alghazo 2021) applied the same taxonomy to investigate political speeches successfully. To provide a more solid theoretical foundation for this study, key discussions previously introduced in the introduction have been incorporated here. Salager-Meyer (1994) proposed five categories of hedging devices:

- Shields include modal verbs that express possibility, such as *can* and *may*, semi-auxiliaries like *able to* and *going to*, probability adverbs including *certainly* and *probably*, and epistemic verbs such as *seem* and *appear*.
- Approximators involve stereotyped adaptors such as *sort of* and *more or less*, as well as rounders of quantity, time, degree, and frequency, such as *many*, *almost*, *quite*, and *seldom*.
- Expressions of personal doubt and direct involvement of the speaker, such as *we believe*, *hope*, and *try*, are also categorized as hedging devices.
- Intensifiers include words used to attract attention, such as *surprisingly*, *of particular importance*, *unexpectedly*, and *suddenly*.
- Compound hedges involve expressions that combine multiple hedging devices, such as *it could suggest that...* and *it is possible that we may....*

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Usually, hedges are used for distinct purposes depending on the type of devices utilized (e.g., Lakoff 1972; Hyland 1994; Salager-Meyer 1997). Nevertheless, most scholars agree that hedging devices function to show caution and avoid confrontation (e.g., Lakoff 1972a, 1975b; Brown & Levinson 1987; Hyland, 1994; Fraser, 2010). More recently, Rabab'ah and Abu Rumman (2015, 175-179) identified five key pragmatic functions of hedging in political discourse, including mitigating claims by expressing doubt and uncertainty, expressing a lack of full commitment, using politeness strategies to seek acceptance, avoiding direct criticism, particularly when discussing future consequences, and requesting the listener's involvement and collaboration.

Recent research has expanded on the traditional understanding of hedging by emphasizing its strategic role in political discourse. Beyond its function in signaling uncertainty, hedging is increasingly recognized as a persuasive tool that enables political figures to manipulate audience perception and control the direction of discourse (Veselá 2021; Almutairi et al. 2022). This broader perspective positions hedging not only as a means of caution but also as a rhetorical device that enhances credibility and influence.

2.2 Related Studies

The use of hedging has recently received attention from researchers and discourse analysts in both written and spoken forms of language. This attention spans various discourse genres, including academic discourse (e.g., Haufiku 2016; Anh 2018), scientific and social discourse (e.g., Hamood 2015; Elheky 2018), and political discourse (e.g., Jalilifar & Alavi 2012; Pellby 2013; Shusharina 2018). To ensure a more comprehensive literature review, this section has been expanded to include additional studies that examine hedging strategies in different political contexts.

While research on political discourse is extensive, certain aspects remain underexplored. Most studies focus on the frequency and functions of hedging devices in different political settings, such as press conferences (e.g., Fraser, 2007; Idowu & Owuye, 2019), interviews (e.g., Jalilifar & Alavi, 2012; Taweel et al. 2011; Griбанова & Gaidukova 2019), political writings (e.g., Heravi & Sawari, 2015; Hmood 2022), political speeches (e.g., Miššikova 2007; Laurinaityte 2011; Rabab'ah & Abu Rumman 2015), presidential debates (e.g., Abdul Majeed 2010; Al-Rashady 2012), and inaugural addresses (e.g., Truong, 2010).

Fraser (2010) analyzed President George Bush Jr.'s use of hedging during his 2007 press conferences, hypothesizing that hedging would be less common in such settings due to their structured nature. However, findings indicated that hedging was used divergently, often to signal vagueness rather than politeness. Similarly, Al-Rashady (2012) examined hedging in the 2008 presidential debates between Barack Obama and John McCain, confirming that hedging serves multiple rhetorical functions beyond uncertainty, including credibility reinforcement.

Building on this, recent studies have examined the evolving nature of hedging in contemporary political discourse. Veselá (2021) investigated the persuasive strategies in modern political speeches, highlighting how hedging is strategically employed to subtly shape audience perception rather than merely expressing doubt. Almutairi et al. (2022) analyzed Barack Obama's speeches and found a high

frequency of modal auxiliary verbs such as *can*, yet they noted a shift toward simplicity and clarity, challenging earlier claims that hedging necessarily adds complexity to political rhetoric. Mansour and Alghazo (2021) explored hedging in Donald Trump's speeches and identified three additional functions beyond traditional hedging categories: power assertion, emphasis, and multifunctional hedging. These findings indicate that hedging is no longer used merely as a defensive or mitigating strategy but serves a more dynamic rhetorical purpose in modern political discourse.

The literature primarily focuses on individual politicians, often limiting generalizability. Additionally, most studies examine single political contexts, such as debates, interviews, or press conferences, and often adopt a synchronic approach by analyzing hedging within specific timeframes. Most previous works also rely on limited corpora, with datasets that frequently do not exceed 20 speeches. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, only Truong (2010) conducted a diachronic analysis of 44 U.S. Presidents' speeches from 1789 to 2009, offering a historical perspective on hedging. However, there remains a scarcity of research adopting a long-term, comparative approach.

Building on these gaps, this study extends previous research by adopting a cross-sectional perspective and analyzing hedging from 2003–2024. Unlike previous studies that focus on single political discourse types, this research examines hedging across various political contexts, including interviews, debates, press conferences, and addresses to the Council. By incorporating a broader dataset, this study provides a more comprehensive understanding of how hedging is employed in political rhetoric. Given the limited availability of extensive cross-sectional studies on hedging in political discourse, the findings are expected to offer deeper insights into the use of these linguistic devices.

3. Methods and Procedures

A total of 52 speeches were randomly selected from the Miller Centre database (<https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches>), which archives a vast collection of materials related to all 47 American presidents, including speeches, interviews, and public events. The selection includes 13 speeches from each of four consecutive U.S. presidents—George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden—spanning different periods within their respective terms to ensure coverage across various years in office. Using the option (on the website), which allows users to consult the transcribed version of the speech, the speeches were copied and saved to a Microsoft Word document to be used in the analysis. The general timeline of the study takes place between the years 2003 and 2024, as different speeches from each year were selected to be examined. The corpus of the study consists of more than 265,000 words (39 hours of speech) and an average of 9.9 hours and 66,311 words per president. The topics of the selected speeches covered themes related to domestic and foreign policy, social issues, war, economy, and healthcare.

Furthermore, AntConc and Sketch Engine were selected as corpus linguistic tools due to their complementary strengths in textual analysis. AntConc provides robust keyword frequency analysis, enabling the identification of hedging devices. Its collocation analysis allows for the study of word relationships within presidential rhetoric, helping to uncover patterns in political discourse. Sketch Engine, on the other hand, offers advanced corpus query capabilities and word sketching features, making

it ideal for examining phrase structures, semantic tendencies, and diachronic changes in language use across presidential terms. By combining both tools, the study ensures a more comprehensive linguistic analysis of hedging devices in the corpus.

4. Data Analysis

The present study used content analysis to pinpoint the type of hedging devices in addition to qualitative analysis to determine the frequency of use. Following Salager-Meyer's (1997) framework on the categorisation of hedging devices, the researchers employed two techniques to retrieve the hedging devices. Below are the categories of hedging devices that are used in Salager-Meyer (1997, 131-133):

- Modal Auxiliary verbs: e.g. *may, might*,
- Modal Lexical verbs: e.g. *to seem, to believe, to assume*,
- Adjectival, adverbial and Nominal modal phrases: e.g. *possible, probable, un/likely*,
- Approximators of degree, quantity, frequency and time: e.g. *approximately, occasionally*,
- Introductory phrases: e.g. *I believe, to our knowledge, it is our view that, and we feel that*.
- “If” clauses: e.g. *if true, if anything*.
- Compound hedges (double, triple or quadruple): e.g. *it would appear, it seems reasonable/probable*,

The researchers manually entered the set of the devices as proposed by the framework into the AntConc software where frequencies of occurrences were recorded and examples about their occurrence were retrieved. Sketch Engine, which is an online text analysis tool, was also used to confirm the results of the initial analysis. After that, all frequencies and percentages were manually calculated. Rabab'ah and Abu Rumman's (2015, pp. 175-179) framework was also employed to explore the pragmatic functions of the devices used. The researchers carefully examined each device's context and verified whether it complied with the description assigned by Rabab'ah and Abu Rumman's (2015) framework.

5. Results

4.1. What are the common hedging devices frequently used by President G. W. Bush, B. Obama, D. Trump, and J. Biden?

This section presents the results of the study. First, we explore the overall use of the different types of hedging devices as used by the four presidents. Then, we move to an in-depth analysis where each subcategory is handled separately. The frequency analysis also incorporates a discussion of the different pragmatic functions. Finally, a discussion of the main similarities and differences is presented. Table (1) below shows the overall frequencies and percentages of hedging devices recorded among all four presidents.

Table 1: Overall frequency and percentages of hedging devices per president

Hedging Device	Bush	Obama	Trump	Biden	Average (%)
<i>Modal Auxiliary</i>	931	1448	868	797	40%
<i>Approximators</i>	741	1296	1033	1066	41%
<i>If-clause</i>	76	207	163	157	6%
<i>Modal Lexical Verbs</i>	19	41	15	36	1%
<i>Introductory Phrases</i>	113	246	121	144	6%
<i>Adj, Adv & Nom Modal Phrases</i>	25	31	39	22	1%
<i>Compound-Hedges</i>	79	84	167	136	5%
Total	1984	3353	2406	2358	100

The data presented in Table 1 reveals that **approximators** were the most frequently utilized hedging devices among all presidents, with an overall average of **41%**. Notably, **President Obama exhibited the highest usage**, with **1,286 instances**. Approximators, as defined by Salager-Meyer (1994), serve to indicate a lack of precise information—a characteristic feature of political discourse, where strategic ambiguity is often employed.

The second most prevalent hedging devices were **modal auxiliaries**, comprising **40%** of the total hedges identified in the dataset. Once again, **President Obama led in the use of this category**. Rabab'ah and Abu Rumman (2015, 165) highlight that modal auxiliaries play a crucial role in hedging, as they allow speakers to **express uncertainty, mitigate assertions, and signal hesitation**, thereby reducing the strength of their commitments.

4.1.1. Conversely, **adjectival, adverbial, and nominal phrases, along with modal lexical verbs, were the least frequently employed hedging strategies**, accounting for only **1%** of all instances across the dataset. This minimal usage suggests that, while these forms of hedging exist in political rhetoric, they are far less favored compared to approximators and modal auxiliaries. **Frequency and Percentages of Hedging Subcategories**

Modal Auxiliary

Most researchers (e.g., Salager-Meyer 1994; Hyland 1994) agree that modal auxiliary verbs such as *can*, *would*, *may*, and *should* are commonly used to express a decrease in commitment to certain propositions. Table 2 presents the frequency and percentage of the six modal auxiliaries found in the data, namely, *may*, *might*, *can*, *should*, *would* and *could*.

Table 2: Frequency and percentages of modal auxiliaries

Modal Aux	Bush	Obama	Trump	Biden	Average (%)
<i>May</i>	36	57	16	30	4%
<i>Will</i>	500	622	396	311	46%
<i>Could</i>	48	59	52	37	5%
<i>Might</i>	12	19	13	7	1%
<i>Would</i>	95	119	97	84	10%
<i>Can</i>	184	431	212	275	27%
<i>Should</i>	56	141	82	53	8%
Total	931	1448	868	797	100

Table 2 indicates that the modal auxiliary "will" exhibited the highest frequency among the four presidents, with an average of 457 occurrences, constituting 46% of all modal auxiliaries used. President Obama recorded the highest usage, with 622 instances.

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The second most frequently employed modal auxiliary was "can," appearing 275 times on average and accounting for 27% of the total modal auxiliaries. Once again, Obama led in its usage, with 431 instances.

1. This pattern aligns with the nature of political discourse, which frequently serves as a platform for articulating future plans, commitments, and intentions. As Veselá (2021) suggests, political leaders often aim to persuade their audiences by promising future actions, making "will" a crucial linguistic tool in their rhetoric. This explains its predominance in the dataset. The following examples from the corpus illustrate how modal auxiliaries function as hedging devices within political speech. "And I **will** allow no one to place a dagger at the throat of our democracy." *Biden, (January 6th, 2021)*
2. "The establishment of a free Iraq at the heart of the Middle East **will** be a watershed event in the global democratic revolution." *Bush, (November 6th, 2003)*

The extensive use of 'can', too, might be attributed to the fact that this modal auxiliary is associated with the possibility of an action to happen Mansor & Alghazo (2020), as shown in the following examples:

3. "Together, we **can** break decades of political stalemate." *Trump, (February 5th, 2019)*
"But know this, America -- our problems **can** be solved." *Obama (September 7th, 2012)*
4. "[...] and I **might** add that we're in the process—and, in some cases, have already done it—ordered a large number of respirators, just in case." *Trump, (March 13th, 2020)*
5. "The United States made military and moral commitments in Europe and Asia, which protected free nations from aggression, and created the conditions in which new democracies **could** flourish." *Bush, (January 20th, 2005)*
6. "That [about the rise of cost] **would** be worse for our deficit, worse for business, worse for you, and worse for the next generation." *Obama, (April 13th, 2011)*

"Members of the U.N. Security Council, including the United States, **should** consistently uphold and defend the U.N. Charter and refrain—refrain from the use of the veto, except in rare, extraordinary situations, to ensure that the Council remains credible and effective." *Biden, (September 23rd, 2022)*

Modal Lexical Verbs

Salager-Meyer (1997, 109) proposed that modal lexical verbs are speech act verbs used to doubt and evaluate rather than describe illocutionary force degrees. Employing this type of hedging devices is particularly useful when quoting/reporting others or to indicate that the speaker's statement is a personal opinion. Table 3 below presents the frequencies and the percentages of certain modal lexical verbs.

Table 3: Frequencies and the percentages of certain modal lexical verbs

Modal Lexical Verbs	Bush	Obama	Trump	Biden	Average (%)
Assume	3	1	0	0	5
View as	0			15	10
Claim	4	3	0	1	8
Suggest	0	2	1	3	3
Promise	12	35	14	17	74
Total	19	41	15	36	100

7. Table 3 shows that the modal lexical verbs did not record high frequencies as the majority were between (1 and 7) occurrences, except for promise, which recorded an average use of (73) occurrences, accounting for roughly (74%) of use rate across the four presidents as shown in the below examples: “I cannot **promise** a new variant won’t come. But I can **promise** you we’ll do everything within our power to be ready if it does.” *Biden, (March 1st, 2022)*

8. “We must **assume** that our enemies would use these diseases as weapons, and we must act before the dangers are upon us.” *Bush, (January 28th, 2003)*

9. “Now, there are also those who **claim** that our reform efforts would insure illegal immigrants. This too is false.” *Obama, (September 9th, 2009)*

“Well, I didn’t **suggest** that it could happen, but I can tell you it’s an industry that was very badly impacted by what’s going on with the virus.” *Trump, (May 26th, 2020)*

Adjectival, Adverbial and Nominal Modal Phrases

The use of adjectival and adverbial modal phrases weakens claims as they signify possibility, probability, and uncertainty. Table 5 presents the frequencies and the percentages of adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrases that were registered in the speeches of the George Bush (GB), Barack Obama (BO), Donald Trump (DT) and Joe Biden (JB).

Table 4: Frequencies of adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrases

Adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrases														
Adjectival					Adverbial					Nominal				
Type	GB	BO	DT	JB	Type	GB	BO	DT	JB	Type	GB	BO	DT	JB
<i>Possible</i>	11	0	0	14	<i>Perhaps</i>	3	9	14		<i>Potential</i>	5	13	15	2
<i>Likely</i>	2	6	3	5	<i>Possibly</i>	4	1	5	1					
					<i>Potentially</i>		2	2						
Total	36				41					35				

As shown in table 4, although distributed differently, there was an almost equal use of these types of hedging devices with a slight preference for adjectival and adverbial modal phrases, accounting for (36) and (41) occurrences compared to (35) occurrences of nominal modal phrases, respectively as shown below:

10. “These are for people that are terminally ill. And there are very, very good-looking combinations of things, or pills, medicines, **potential** cures.” *Trump, (March 19th, 2018)*

11. “My friends say, what is it like to deal with the press corps? I said, these are just people trying to do the best they **possibly** can.” *Bush, (January 12th, 2009)*

12. “We already have all this debt, we already have these big deficits; this is **potentially** going to compound it.” *Obama, (November 3rd, 2010)*
13. “But based on studies, records, and accounts,—the **likely** number is much more, in the multiple of hundreds [on number of murders].” *Biden, (June 2nd, 2021)*

Salager-Meyer (1991, 1994, 1998) reported that adjectival/adverbial modal phrases are useful tools for convincing people of the importance and/or truth of the propositions expressed by disclosing the speaker's emotional state.

Approximators of Degree, Quantity, Frequency and Time

Salager-Meyer (1994, 7) stated that “[there] are some approximators indeed used when exact figures are irrelevant or unavailable or when the state of knowledge does not allow the scientists to be more precise.” This category represents the largest category of hedging used in the corpus. Table 5 shows the frequency and the percentage of approximators concerning degree, quantity, frequency and time that were revealed as hedges.

Table 5: Frequencies and percentages of approximators of degree, quantity, frequency and time

Approximators	Bush	Obama	Trump	Biden	Average (%)
<i>About</i>	100	167	175	181	15%
<i>Almost</i>	10	10	24	11	1%
<i>Often</i>	13	13	5	17	1%
<i>Quite</i>	1	1	4	0	0%
<i>Some</i>	91	161	98	55	10%
<i>Many</i>	95	108	16	45	7%
<i>Several</i>	3	11	9	79	2%
<i>Always</i>	29	44	38	28	4%
<i>Ever</i>	15	39	75	68	6%
<i>Never</i>	54	67	95	65	7%
<i>Much</i>	29	57	151	56	7%
<i>Few</i>	16	40	24	18	2%
<i>Little</i>	7	20	25	25	2%
<i>Less</i>	10	26	20	26	2%
<i>More</i>	201	384	155	262	24%
<i>At least</i>	10	11	7	15	1%
<i>Over</i>	57	137	112	109	10%
Total	741	1296	1033	1060	100

14. Table 5 shows that ‘more’, which is an approximator of indefinite quantity, recorded the highest frequency averaging (250) occurrences, accounting for an average of (24%). It is followed by ‘about’, which recorded an average use of (150) instances, i.e., (15%). Varttala (2001) reported that the use of these adverbs makes the proposition “less than absolute,” as shown in the below examples: “You probably all saw that commercial on Snickers bars. And you get — you get charged the same amount, and you got **about**, I don’t know, 10 percent fewer Snickers in it.” *Biden, (March 11th, 2024)*
15. “No one has shown **more** contempt for other nations and for the wellbeing of their own people than the depraved regime in North Korea.” *Trump, (September 18th, 2017)*

Varttala (2001, 132) indicated that approximate terms, such as almost, about, and some, are primarily used with numerical expressions. As a result, it shows vagueness.

16. “In the last 2 years, our brave ICE officers made 266,000 arrests of criminal aliens, including those charged or convicted of **nearly** 100,000 assaults, 30,000 sex crimes, and 4,000 killings.” *Trump, (February 5th, 2019)*

17. “Our international coalition against these killers is strong and united and acting. European nations have frozen **almost** \$50 million in suspected terrorist assets, and that's important.” *Bush, (April 17th, 2003)*

“Many Gulf States have enjoyed great wealth as a consequence of oil, and **some** are beginning to focus it on broader development.” *Obama, (June 4th, 2009)* **Introductory Phrases**

According to Salager-Meyer (1994, 7), introductory phrases such as ‘we know,’ ‘we believe,’ and ‘to our knowledge’ convey the authors’ personal doubt and involvement. Table 6 displays the frequency and percentage of these phrases.

Table 6: Frequencies and percentage of introductory phrases

Introductory phrases	Bush	Obama	Trump	Biden	Average (%)
<i>I believe</i>	24	50	4	20	15%
<i>We believe</i>	8	25	4	1	5%
<i>I know</i>	13	62	19	52	22%
<i>We know</i>	15	43	10	19	13%
<i>You know</i>	53	66	84	52	45%
Total	113	246	121	144	100

18. The table 6 above shows that the introduction phrases of ‘you know’ and ‘I know’ were the most frequently used hedging devices among the four American presidents accounting for an average use of (45%) and (22%) respectively, as manifested in the below examples: “**I know** that debate will be difficult. I know it will take time. But tonight, let’s agree to make that effort.” *Obama, (January 25th, 2011)*

19. “**You know**, after seven years of saying repeal and replace Obamacare, we have a chance to now do it. They better do it. Hopefully they’ll do it.” *Trump (July 25th, 2017)*

20. “**I believe** all these things because freedom is not America's gift to the world, it is the almighty God's gift to every man and woman in this world.” *Bush, (September 3rd, 2004)*

“**We know** here, in this hallowed place, we simply can’t bury pain and trauma forever.” *Biden, (June 2nd, 2021)* **If Clauses**

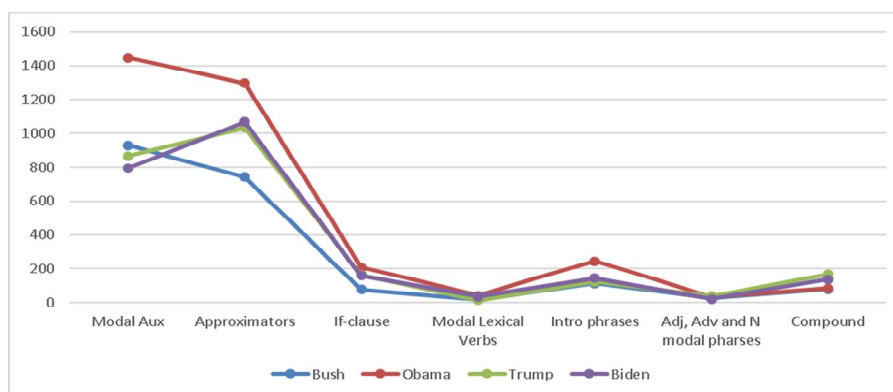
21. According to Salager-Meyer (1994, pp. 109–110), ‘if clauses’ are used as hedging strategies to convey doubt and ambiguity about a statement. Data analysis showed that ‘if clauses’ were among the least used hedging devices as they recorded an average occurrence of (150) instances accounting for only (5%) of the devices used among all four presidents, as shown in the examples below: “**If anybody in this room thinks Putin will stop** at Ukraine, I assure you: **He will not.**” *Biden, (September 20th, 2024)*

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22. “No people on Earth yearn to be oppressed or aspire to servitude or eagerly await the midnight knock of the secret police. **If anyone doubts this, let them look to Afghanistan**, where the Islamic "street" greeted the fall of tyranny with song and celebration.” *Bush, (February 27th, 2003)*
23. “But a peaceful resolution of this issue is still possible, and far better, and **if Iran changes course and meets its obligations, it can rejoin the community of nations.**” *Obama, (January 25th, 2012)*
- “First, we must protect the American people, the homeland, and our great American way of life. This strategy recognizes that **we cannot secure our nation if we do not secure our borders.**” *Trump, (December 19th, 2017)* **Compound Hedges**
24. For Salager Mayer (1994, p. 154), this type of hedging consists of multiple hedging devices occurring together in one proposition, such as ‘could suggest that...’ This implies the possibility of having double, triple, or even more combinations of hedges simultaneously. Table (1) above shows that such a category is low in terms of frequency as the four presidents employed such a type in an average of (5%) of their speeches, as shown in the examples below: “There should be no fear – we are protected, and we **will always** be protected.” *Trump, (January 23rd, 2017)*
25. “This "cultural condescension," as Ronald Reagan termed it, has a long history. After the Japanese surrender in 1945, a so-called Japan expert asserted that democracy in that former empire **would never** work.” *Bush, (November 6th, 2003)*
26. “I know campaigns **can seem** small, even silly sometimes.” *Obama, (September 7th, 2007)*
- “The research shows when a young child goes to school—not daycare—they are far **more likely** to graduate from high school and go to college or something after high school.” *Biden (April 29th, 2021)*

What similarities and differences exist in the hedging strategies employed by four presidents?

Figure (1) below highlights some similarities and differences. The most obvious difference occurs at the level of modal auxiliaries and approximators. President Obama ranked first in terms of using modal auxiliaries as hedging devices, with more than (1400) instances of occurrence, followed by President Bush with almost (1000) instances and President Biden as the person with the least frequency, which is about (800) instances.



27. **Figure 1. Line chart for the overall use of hedging devices (per president)** A similar trend can also be noticed in terms of the use of the ‘if clause’ as a hedging device, at a relatively lower rate of (200)

and (150) instances of occurrence, respectively. “His agenda focused on what he **could** destroy — not what he **could** build.” *Obama (May 19th, 2011)*

28. “Higher education can’t be a luxury — it is an economic imperative that every family in America **should** be able to afford.” *Obama, (January 24th, 2012)*

29. “Companies **must** also be held accountable. The Department of Justice recently created a task force to coordinate investigations.” *Trump, (March 19th, 2018)*

“I ask you to give lower income Americans a refundable tax credit that **would** allow millions to buy their own basic health insurance.” *Bush, (January 20th, 2004)* The above examples concur with Al Rashady’s (2008, 35) claim that a speaker’s argument looks to be far more persuasive when they employ modal auxiliaries. Furthermore, his study revealed a similar trend, as President Obama used a higher rate of auxiliary verbs than other hedging devices. This was, according to the researchers, attributed to President Obama’s ability to focus on every word he uses. Such consciousness is reflected in the number of modal auxiliaries used to indicate certainty about his agenda.

In terms of the approximators, we notice that again, President Obama outperformed the rest with more than (1200) recorded use, followed by President Biden at almost (1100) instances of occurrence. We notice that President Bush was the only person with the least frequency use of approximators at a rate of almost (750) instances.

30. “I have **often** said that history will look back and determine that which could have been done better, or, you know, mistakes I made.” *Bush, (January 12th, 2009)*

31. “I had a long meeting with the entire team and **several** Cabinet-level officers the other night. We’re going to be moving, within the next — within the next week, **over** 100,000 — I mean, 1,000 people out of the Border Patrol into safe, secure beds and facilities.” *Biden, (March 25th, 2021)*

32. “But because we’re now independent, energy-wise — we’re energy independent — we have very **few** boats going over the Middle East.” *Trump (September 25th, 2019)*

33. “If we accomplish that, then there will be time for politics later, but over the next year I think we can solidify this recovery and give people a **little more** confidence out there.” *Obama, (November 4th, 2010)*

34. Our examples confirm what Andriani (2019, p. 34) concluded about the use of approximators in political discourse as a strategy to safeguard the speaker from disclosing information he/she is not sure about. Figure (1) above also shows how all presidents recorded scarce use of hedging devices like modal lexical verbs and adjectival/adverbial/nominal phrases. “Now, even as we prosecute two wars, we’re also confronting **perhaps** the greatest danger to the American people, the threat of nuclear weapons.” *Obama, (January 27th, 2010)*

“But the ultimate penalty has to be the death penalty. Now, maybe our country is not ready for that. It’s **possible**—it’s **possible** that our country is not ready for that.” *Trump, (March 19th, 2018)* The examples above fall within Al Rashady ‘s (2008, p. 41) conclusion that adjectival/adverbial phrases enable political speakers, i.e., presidents, to sound more confident in their speech and, therefore, become more appealing and convincing to their audience. Concerning the last type of hedging ‘compound’, we notice that President Trump outperformed the other presidents with (167) instances, followed by

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President Biden (136), President Obama (84) and President Bush (79). Although not conclusive, different researchers have different results on this type of hedging. While Rabab'ah and Abu Rumman (2015) recorded zero use of compound hedging in the speeches of King Abdullah II, other researchers showed that there exists (although not significant) use of such device (e.g., Al Rashady 2008; Wahyuniati 2017; Andriani 2019 Masnour & Alghazo 2021; Veselá 2021). Such contradictions can be attributed to the complexity of such devices, as highlighted by Rabab'ah and Abu Rumman (2015, 165).

Based on Figure (1) above, we can conclude that President Obama and President Biden use more hedging devices than President Bush and President Trump. This could be traced back to a variety of reasons, including their political affiliations. President Bush and President Trump are Republicans who are known for their controversial opinions and beliefs. This latter is reflected in the type of discourse which is often patriotic, i.e., excluding others. Such political views require the lesser use of hedging devices since their goal is to boast about such views and not suppress them by being vague. Furthermore, our data showed that compared to the other three presidents, President Obama relied heavily on various types of hedging devices, notably (auxiliaries, approximators and introductory phrases). This confirms the findings of (Al Rashady 2008; Wahyuniati 2017; Mansour & Alghazo 2021) as they all showed a higher use of auxiliaries in presidential speeches to necessity, emphasis, power and authority. On the other hand, President George W Bush exhibited the opposite tendency, as his speech contained the least frequency of hedging devices. This, according to researchers, can be traced back to the stance adopted by the president, which is to be firm and decisive.

Discussion

The findings reveal that hedging plays a crucial role in political discourse, shaping how U.S. presidents convey uncertainty, manage risk, and maintain political legitimacy. The variation in hedging frequency and type among Bush, Obama, Trump, and Biden highlights fundamental differences in rhetorical strategies, leadership styles, and political contexts.

Hedging serves multiple pragmatic functions, including softening commitments, avoiding direct accountability, and allowing for strategic ambiguity. The prominence of approximators and modal auxiliaries suggests a deliberate effort to maintain flexibility in policy discussions and public statements. These linguistic strategies create room for interpretation, enabling politicians to adjust their positions based on public reception or evolving circumstances. The relatively high use of modal auxiliaries by Obama and Biden aligns with previous findings that link hedging to diplomatic discourse, where leaders must appear open to negotiation while maintaining authority. This supports Hyland's (1994) assertion that hedging in political speech functions as a mechanism for balancing persuasion with caution.

The lower reliance on hedging by Bush and Trump, particularly in modal auxiliaries and introductory phrases, suggests a preference for directness and assertion. This pattern aligns with research on conservative political rhetoric, which often prioritizes certainty and conviction over ambiguity (Al Rashady 2008). The minimal use of hedging by Trump, despite his reputation for unpredictability, underscores a rhetorical strategy focused on projecting confidence rather than deliberation. His

comparatively higher use of compound hedges, however, indicates a tendency to reinforce statements with multiple layers of qualification, potentially to strengthen persuasion while still maintaining plausible deniability.

The use of approximators by all four presidents, particularly Obama and Biden, reflects an awareness of the political consequences of absolute claims. Political speech, unlike scientific discourse, often requires calculated vagueness to avoid alienating specific voter demographics. Varttala (2001) noted that approximators help speakers navigate sensitive issues without committing to definitive stances. The significant reliance on these hedges by Biden and Obama may be attributed to their leadership approach, which emphasizes coalition-building and broad appeal. The lower use of approximators by Bush and Trump suggests a preference for assertiveness, which aligns with their ideological emphasis on strong leadership and decisiveness.

The relatively infrequent use of modal lexical verbs across all four presidents suggests that explicit markers of uncertainty, such as *assume* or *suggest*, are less desirable in political discourse. This aligns with Salager-Meyer's (1994) argument that political figures must project confidence, even when expressing doubt. The notable exception is the verb *promise*, which was significantly more frequent than other modal lexical verbs. This indicates that while presidents may avoid markers of uncertainty, they actively employ hedging to create conditional commitments, allowing them to inspire confidence while retaining rhetorical flexibility.

The patterns observed in the use of introductory phrases provide additional insight into the rhetorical strategies of each president. The frequent use of *you know* and *I know* suggests an appeal to shared knowledge or experience, fostering a sense of familiarity and connection with the audience. Obama's and Biden's extensive use of these phrases aligns with their more conversational and inclusive rhetorical styles. In contrast, Bush and Trump relied less on these markers, possibly due to a preference for a more authoritative and declarative tone.

Political ideology appears to be a key factor influencing hedging patterns. Democratic presidents exhibited a higher tendency to hedge, particularly through modal auxiliaries and approximators, which supports the notion that liberal political rhetoric often emphasizes negotiation and inclusivity. Republican presidents, by contrast, showed a preference for direct assertion, which aligns with conservative political messaging that prioritizes decisiveness and strength. This supports previous research indicating that political affiliation influences linguistic choices in presidential rhetoric (Al Rashady 2008; Rabab'ah & Abu Rumman 2015).

Beyond individual leadership styles and ideological leanings, the political context in which each president operated may have influenced their use of hedging. Presidents governing during periods of heightened uncertainty—such as economic crises or global conflicts—may hedge more frequently to account for unpredictable developments. The higher reliance on hedging by Biden, for instance, may reflect the challenges of addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, where uncertainty was a dominant feature of political communication. Likewise, Obama's extensive use of hedging could be linked to his administration's emphasis on diplomatic engagement and consensus-building.

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The relatively low frequency of if-clauses and compound hedges suggests that explicit conditionality is not a dominant feature of presidential speech. However, the fact that Trump used compound hedges more than the other presidents indicates a unique rhetorical approach. While he generally favored assertiveness, his tendency to combine multiple hedging devices in a single statement suggests an effort to reinforce credibility while allowing for interpretative flexibility. This finding aligns with Veselá's (2021) argument that political figures with populist tendencies may simultaneously project certainty and create ambiguity, depending on their strategic needs.

The results also highlight how certain types of hedging devices, such as adjectival and adverbial modal phrases, remain underutilized compared to other forms. The avoidance of these hedges suggests that presidents prefer more subtle methods of hedging that do not overtly signal doubt. This finding supports Salager-Meyer's (1997) claim that overt hedging is generally avoided in authoritative discourse, where projecting confidence is paramount.

The comparative analysis of hedging strategies across the four presidents suggests that rhetorical choices are influenced by a combination of personal leadership style, political ideology, and the broader political climate. Obama and Biden, as Democratic presidents, relied more heavily on hedging to maintain diplomatic flexibility and appeal to a broad audience. Bush and Trump, as Republican presidents, exhibited a more direct and assertive rhetorical style, minimizing hedging except in cases where strategic ambiguity was necessary.

These findings contribute to the broader understanding of political communication by demonstrating how linguistic choices reflect deeper ideological and strategic considerations. Future research could explore how these hedging patterns compare to those of non-U.S. political leaders, particularly in different cultural and linguistic contexts, to assess whether these trends are specific to American political discourse or indicative of broader global patterns.

5. Conclusion

This study highlights the crucial role of hedging devices in shaping political discourse, demonstrating how U.S. presidents strategically use language to balance assertiveness and ambiguity. The analysis of speeches by George W. Bush, Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden reveals that hedging is not merely a rhetorical tool but a reflection of political ideology, communication style, and audience engagement.

A key takeaway is that Democratic presidents (Obama and Biden) employ hedging devices more frequently than their Republican counterparts (Bush and Trump). This aligns with the observation that Democratic rhetoric often emphasizes inclusivity, diplomacy, and flexibility, requiring linguistic strategies that convey caution, open-endedness, and negotiation. Conversely, Republican presidents, known for more direct and assertive rhetoric, use fewer hedging devices, favoring certainty and decisiveness.

Furthermore, the study underscores the significance of modal auxiliaries and approximators as dominant hedging strategies, reflecting the necessity of maintaining political credibility while allowing

room for maneuvering. The minimal use of modal lexical verbs and adjectival/adverbial modal phrases suggests that presidents avoid overtly signaling personal doubt or evaluation, instead favoring structures that subtly introduce uncertainty without weakening their stance.

These findings contribute to the broader understanding of political language and persuasive communication. Future research could explore hedging strategies in a cross-cultural context, examining whether similar linguistic patterns appear in speeches of leaders from different political systems. Additionally, analyzing hedging in spontaneous versus scripted political discourse could further illuminate how political figures adapt their language based on context and audience expectations.

Ultimately, this study reaffirms the intricate relationship between language and power in political communication, demonstrating that even subtle linguistic choices can shape public perception and influence political narratives.

توجيه الخطاب السياسي: دراسة مقطعية حول استخدام التلطيف في خطابات الرؤساء الأمريكيين

نور الدين درقي

قسم اللغات الأجنبية، جامعة مصطفى طامبولي بمسكارا، الجزائر

غالب ربابعة، شريف الغزو

قسم اللغات الأجنبية، جامعة الشارقة، الإمارات العربية المتحدة

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها، الجامعة الأردنية، الأردن

دريسي عثمان عبد القادر

قسم اللغة الإنجليزية وآدابها، جامعة الدكتور مولاي طاهر، صيدا، الجزائر

الملخص

تسلط هذه الدراسة المقطعية الضوء على توظيف وسائل التلطيف في الخطاب الرئاسي الأمريكي، وذلك من خلال تحليل خطابات أربعة رؤساء أمريكيين ينتمون إلى تيارات سياسية مختلفة. وترمي إلى تحديد استراتيجيات التلطيف المستخدمة خلال فترات رئاستهم وتصنيفها، وذلك بالاعتماد على مدونة لغوية تضم 52 خطاباً مختاراً عشوائياً، يبلغ مجموع كلماتها أكثر من 265,000 كلمة، تم اعتماد منهجية بحثية مختلطة تجمع بين التحليلين الكمي والنوعي، باستخدام برمجيات AntConc و Sketch Engine، ويستند التحليل إلى مقارنة سلاغار ماير Salager-Meyer (1997) في تصنيف أدوات التلطيف، علاوة على تصنيف أبو رمان وربابعة Rabab'ah & Abu Rumman (2015) لوظائف التلطيف، وقد خلص البحث إلى جملة من النتائج أهمها أن أكثر أدوات التلطيف شيوعاً هي أدوات التقريب وأفعال المساعدة بصيغة الاحتمال، مع تباينات في استخدامها بين الرؤساء، حيث أدت دوراً أساسياً في تقليل حدة الالتزام ونقل درجة من عدم اليقين. وقد ارتبطت هذه الاختلافات بالأيديولوجية السياسية والسياقات الاجتماعية والسياسية الخاصة بكل رئاسة حكومة. كما أظهرت الدراسة أن الرؤساء الديمقراطيين استخدموا التلطيف لتحقيق مرونة دبلوماسية، في حين فضل الرؤساء الجمهوريون أسلوب التصريح المباشر. وتبرز الدراسة التلطيف كأداة بلاغية استراتيجية في الخطاب السياسي، تمكن القادة من تحقيق توازن بين الإقناع والتكيف والسلطة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التلطيف، الخطاب السياسي، الأيديولوجيا، رؤساء أمريكيون.

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