

On the Pragmatic Functions of Hedges in Public Speeches

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Abstract: Fuzzy language is widely used in human communication, and as the most common and typical form of fuzzy language, hedges are a major linguistic strategy. From both theoretical and practical perspectives, this paper analyzes the pragmatic functions of the text taken from Barack Obama's public speech with the discourse analysis approach based on the pragmatic theory. Firstly, the definition, classification and semantic features of hedges are elaborated; secondly, a brief introduction to public speeches is given; finally, the pragmatic functions of hedges in public speeches are analyzed in detail. The conclusion is that with the proper use of hedges, public speakers can make their words more credible and polite, so as to avoid unnecessary responsibility or criticism and to achieve their speech goals better.

Keywords: Hedges; Pragmatic Function; Public Speech

1. Introduction

Fuzzy language research is an emerging field of linguistic research based on the "fuzzy-set theory" of the American scholar Zadeh. Fuzzy language refers to natural language that is vague, or the imprecision of linguistic expressions. In communication, language is sometimes fuzzy, but it does not affect effective communication, and its rich semantic connotations and pragmatic functions can often have an expressive effect that precise language cannot.

As the study of fuzzy language keeps progressing, hedges, an essential part of fuzzy language, have gained the attention of linguists[1]. The study of the pragmatics of hedges began around the early 1980s. Brown and Levinson proposed the "politeness principle", viewing hedges as a means of avoiding disapproval, a negative politeness strategy to save face for the speaker or listener. Leech and Nikula examined hedges from a

discourse analysis perspective. Franken [2] discussed hedges in relevance theory.

Based on the linguistic and application value of hedges, it is necessary to explore them in depth. It is helpful to gain a comprehensive understanding of them and apply them appropriately, proficiently, and reasonably in communication; maintain a harmonious relationship between the two parties and achieve the communicative purpose well.

2. On Hedges

2.1 Definition of Hedges

Hedges are a linguistic strategy used to avoid absolute statements. Lakoff [1] firstly defined hedges as words which made things fuzzier or less fuzzy, which implied that speakers were not completely faithful to their speeches. Such words are "very, much, more or less, essentially, sort of, kind of", etc. The presence of such special words suggests that the speaker is not expressing complete certainty about what is being said, thereby making the conversation both less definite and more appropriate.

There are a large number of hedges in English that conform to the Lakoff definition, such as modal auxiliary verbs: "may, might, can, could, would, should"; adjectives, nouns and adverbs with modal meaning: "possibly, likely, assumption, claim, practically, presumably, virtually, apparently"; words or phrases that express degree, quantity, frequency, time: "approximately, roughly, about, often, occasionally, generally, somewhat, a lot of"; introductory phrases that express the speaker's doubt or direct involvement: "I believe, I suppose, I assume, I wonder, to our knowledge, it is our view that, we feel that"; if clauses: "if true, if possible, if anything"; and some compound hedges: "it would appear, I should think, it may indicate, it seems likely that, it seems reasonable to assume that", and so on.

In short, these words modify or limit the

content of the discourse with regard to the degree of truth or the scope of the discourse involved, indicating thereby that the speaker is not quite sure of the content of the discourse, but is somewhere between certainty and uncertainty, which in turn reflects the speaker's subjective perception and evaluation.

2.2 Classifications of Hedges

Depending on the criterion of whether the hedges can alter the truth conditions of the discourse, or whether they can change the original meaning of the discourse structure, they are divided into two categories: approximators and shields [3, 4].

2.2.1. Approximators

Approximators change the original meaning of a discourse, or modify the meaning of the original discourse to some extent, or set a range of variation to the original discourse. Approximators are subdivided into adaptor and rounder.

Adaptor indicates a change in the degree of truth of a statement, including sort of, more or less, very, somewhat, highly, slightly, quite, etc. It restricts the fuzziness of words and makes precise concepts fuzzy. For example, the fuzzy domain of "long" in "a long river" is very wide, but after being modified by "very" the fuzziness of "long" in "a very long river" is obviously narrowed; and "at nine" is a precise concept of time, but "at about nine" the concept of time becomes fuzzy. Adaptor could even produce the exact opposite meaning of the fuzzy word being modified. For example, the meaning of "a few" is "more than one but indefinitely small in number", but when the adaptor "quite" is added in front of it, the meaning of "quite a few" is "a lot of". In practice, adaptor could make something that is close to correct, but is not sure to be

completely correct, sound appropriate and avoid arbitrary and absolute statements.

Rounder limits the range of variation and is commonly used to measure things, such as roughly, approximately, about, around, something between a and b, etc. Such words are used in communication to give the listener a range of topics within which he can understand; in addition, they make the discourse more objective. As in example (1) (*italics indicate hedges, as below*):

(1) His salary is something between 5,000 and 6,000.

2.2.2 Shields

Shields do not alter the original meaning of the discourse but indicate that it is the speaker's own or a third party's view of something or a proposition, making the original tone moderate from certainty. There are two types of shields: plausibility shields and attribution shields.

The former includes "I think, I believe, I guess, probably" etc. It is often used when the speaker is not sure of the true extent of something, to make an estimate of something that is not quite certain, to give a preliminary opinion, or to make plans or attempts.

The latter quotes a third party's opinion and thus indirectly expresses the speaker's attitude, and is therefore called attribution shields, for example, "it is said that, somebody says that, according to somebody", etc. Attribution shields are terms commonly used in media reporting. When a speaker employs attribution shields as a basis for his or her statement, he or she should agree with it to varying degrees, but it is not apparent on the surface of the discourse, as in example (2). In closing this topic, table 1 will be given to present a clearer picture of the classification of hedges.

(2) According to the doctor, she is suffering from insomnia.

Table 1. Classification of Hedges.

Hedges		Function	Examples
Approximators	Adaptors	Making some revision to the original discourse.	some, very, kind of, a little bit, almost, somewhat, more or less, quite, etc.
	Rounders	Providing a range of topics for the listener.	about, approximately, over, around, roughly, something between A and B, etc.
Shields	Plausibility shields	Doing a direct speculation, or all certain attitude the speaker holds towards the topic.	I think, I wonder, I suspect, probably, as far as I can tell, etc.
	Attribution shields	Expressing the speaker's attitude indirectly.	It is said that, according to, as it is well known, the probability would be, etc.

2.3 Semantic Features of Hedges

Both pragmatics and semantics are concerned with the study of the meaning of words. Semantics refers to a narrow sense, that is, logical semantics, which specialises in the study of the meaning of sentences and words themselves, and in the conditions of truth and falsity of propositions. Therefore, the study of semantics is concerned with the cognitive meaning of sentences, a meaning that is not influenced by context.

In contrast, pragmatics studies meaning in the context of speech, the meaning of discourse behaviour, meaning that can only be determined in context. Hence, when we analyse the semantic features of hedges, we do so from their pragmatic point of view, not from the point of view of the meaning of the words themselves, which is the focus of this section. From a pragmatic point of view, there are four main semantic features of hedges, which are, respectively, cancellability, markedness, indefiniteness, and indirectness, and they will be covered separately [5].

2.3.1. Cancellability

Cancellability is caused by two factors. Firstly, a premise is added to the proposition; secondly, the proposition is placed in a specific context, which must reflect the intention of the speaker to eliminate the meaning of the original discourse. Hedges also possesses this kind of cancellability and can negate the meaning in the original discourse. As shown in example (3), due to the hedges “kind of”, the speaker’s intention for Lucy to win is somewhat weakened or cancelled. Next, as depicted in example (4), the original proposition is “Mary is a fish”, but with the addition of the hedges “regular”, the original proposition is cancelled. Because Mary is a person, she cannot be a fish. The purpose of the hedges here is that Mary has a certain characteristic of a fish such as she can swim fast and therefore resembles a fish. Therefore, the example means that “Mary is a good swimmer”.

(3) I kind of want Lucy to win the race, since I have bet on him.

(4) Mary is a regular fish.

In general, the cancellability of hedges is manifested in two aspects: semantically or logically, hedges can change the truth conditions of a discourse; furthermore, hedges can eliminate the original meaning of a discourse through the use of context.

2.3.2. Markedness

The second semantic feature of hedges is that it is marked. Markedness refers to the fact that certain components of language have distinguishing features that distinguish them from other components. For example, the sentence “I like books” is considered unmarked, whereas “I like English books” is marked. Applying markedness theory to the study of hedges, we tend to find the important rule: the features of non-hedged sentences often include those of hedged sentences, while hedged sentences cannot include non-hedged sentences. As in the example above, the unmarked “books” can include the marked “English books”, but the vice versa does not hold true. It is the markedness of hedges that enables the marked component to be distinguished from the general concept.

2.3.3. Indefiniteness

When a speaker describes a matter or talks about his or her opinion on an issue with hedges, uncertainty appears, and the certainty of the discourse may appear less precise or accurate. Knowledge of this critical feature of hedges is essential for the proper appreciation and usage of hedges.

For one thing, the uncertainty of hedges reflects the fuzziness of the language. It is precisely because of this semantic feature of hedges that it is possible to change the truth conditions of a discourse, to eliminate the original discourse in a given context and to enable the listener to comprehend the conversational implicature.

For another, the uncertainty of hedges indicates the entire or partial cognitive and psychological process by which a speaker performs in a speech act. Specifically, when a speaker is describing something or expressing an opinion or viewpoint, he or she may feel uncertain, and therefore tends to use hedges to obscure the uncertainty of his or her words. Hedges is then given this psychological and meaningful uncertainty. As in example (5), the speaker knows that the moon is made of rock, but he does not know what kind of rock it is made of. The addition of “some sort of” conceals his lack of knowledge and uncertainty.

(5) The moon is made of some sort of rock.

2.3.4. Indirectness

In verbal communication, indirectness refers to randomness. This allows hedges to create a

polite and favourable atmosphere during communication. For example, when inviting someone to your home, people often say “would you please come to my home at your convenience?” or “please come to my home if you have time”. It is thanks to this indirectness, or randomness, that the listener has more choice. He can choose to go or not to go as a guest, as well as to choose his own convenient and leisure time to do so, and the speaker does not mean to impose the invitation on the listener. It is a friendly, pleasant, and relaxed atmosphere for both parties to achieve the purpose of communication.

From a pragmatic point of view, the semantic features of hedges have been briefly discussed, and it can be observed that hedges are a very useful communicative technique for communication, and the following part of the paper turns from theory to practice to explore how hedges fulfil their pragmatic function in real public speeches.

3. On Public Speeches

In this section, a brief introduction to public speech is given in terms of both definition and purpose. Public speeches mean the speeches with certain purposes and motivations on certain issues. The purpose of public speeches mainly lies in the following aspects: Firstly, getting people to know, making people believe, exciting the audience, empathizing with the speaker emotionally, moving the audience, and creating a desire to act together with the speaker; secondly, fostering interpersonal relationships between speakers and the public, lecturers can reach out to a wide range of people from all walks of life and regions, thereby broadening their social circle and influence; thirdly, dispelling evil or excluding dissent, creating right public opinion or an atmosphere favourable to the interests of the orator's group, and consequently and successfully promoting his or her public ideas; fourthly, the moral sentiments of the group are used to infect the listeners, so as to nurture and influence their emotions and promote the development of society; fifthly, arousing the audience to action and practice. The ultimate aim of a successful speech, apart from enlightening the mind, spreading the truth and cultivating emotions, is to evoke action and practice in the audience, so that they will engage in social activities that transform the

subjective and objective world. In general, the orator is the transmitter of the message, and the audience is the recipient of the message. The goal of public speeches is to persuade the audience to change their attitudes and to act in accordance with the orator's intentions.

In order to achieve the above-mentioned purposes of public speeches and exert a strong role in shaping public opinion, the use of certain hedges in speeches is beneficial from a pragmatic point of view. In the following, taking Barack Obama's address as an analytical text, it explores how hedges are used in public speeches and their pragmatic functions, with the aim of deepening comprehension of hedges application [6-11].

4. Functions of Hedges in Public Speeches

4.1. Adding Credibility and Gaining Conviction

In public speeches, the orator often has to "convince" not just some people, of course, but the majority of the audience, and this requires the orator to adopt strategies to emphasize what he or she is saying and to increase its credibility. In English, orators often use words or phrases to achieve this goal, such as “I firmly believe”, “I surely believe”, “to the best of my knowledge”, “to the best of my belief”, “it certainly will”, etc. Consider the following examples from (6) to (10):

(6) We remain a young nation, but in the words of Scripture¹, the time has come to set aside childish things.

(7) For we know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness.

(8) We cannot help but believe that the old hatreds shall someday pass.

(9) To the people of poor nations, we pledge to work alongside you to make your farms flourish and let clean waters flow.

(10) This is the source of our confidence — the knowledge that God calls on us to shape an uncertain destiny.

The quotation in the example (6) adds credibility to his views by relying on the power of well-known sayings. And Obama's quotation follows the beliefs of the majority of his audience, and therefore increases the credibility of his speech and convinces his audience.

In example (7), the use of “we know that” builds the perception of the speaker and the

audience on the same level, pointing out that this is something that we all know, that it is common knowledge, that it is indisputable, and that almost everyone agrees with the point Obama is making in this statement, which therefore wins the support of the audience.

The use of the phrase “cannot help but” in example (8) reinforces the affirmative meaning through double negation, conveying the meaning of “we firmly believe”; and in the main clause, the subject is “we” instead of “I”, and the referent of the subject is hedged, subtly conveying that we all believe this, not just me, which naturally makes the listener convinced from the audience’s point of view.

The example (9) uses the fuzzy phrase “we pledge to” to make a promise to the audience in the interests of the common people, making it clear that the speaker has everyone’s best interests at heart and that he is thinking of and working for everyone’s benefit, hence they will listen carefully to the speaker’s proposal, be confident in his words and work together with him.

In the example (10), the fuzzy phrase “the knowledge that” indicates that it is something that is well known to everyone, and using a viewpoint that is accepted by everyone to propose and appeal is more likely to arouse everyone’s empathy and fellow feelings, reflecting that he wants to listen to what the public wants and can express the voice of the public, so it will be easier to get everyone’s trust and conviction.

4.2. Making Words Secure and Avoiding Absolutes

In the course of communication, the speaker always has to state facts, express an attitude of opinion or take a position. This is particularly true in public speeches. In order to achieve it safely and fully and to avoid the extremes and absolutes of discourse, speakers often use hedges or employ fuzzy strategies so that the intensity of their speech acts is weakened and made less likely to be denied by the audience. This leaves the audience with a choice to consider, while at the same time relieving the speaker of responsibility for the ideas and conclusions he or she presents and is often regarded as a common communicative tactic and diplomatic tool. Consider the following examples:

(11) At these moments, America has carried

on not simply because of the skill or vision of those in high office, but because we the people have remained faithful to the ideals of our forebears, and true to our founding documents.

(12) Some celebrated but more often men and women obscure in their labor, who have carried us up the long, rugged path towards prosperity and freedom.

(13) Time and again these men and women struggled and sacrificed and worked till their hands were raw so that we might live a better life.

(14) Now, there are some who question the scale of our ambitions — who suggest that our system cannot tolerate too many big plans.

(15) Our challenges may be new, instruments with which we meet them may be new.

In the above examples, fuzzy expressions such as ‘not simply, some, might, may be’ are employed. The use of “not simply”, as in example (11), does not attribute all the achievements to those in power, but a large part of them to the people, which is favourable to inspire the people to continue their struggle; on the contrary, if the orator does not mention the efforts of the people and attributes all the credit to those in power alone, it will lose the hearts of the people and be detrimental to the future development of the country.

In examples (12) and (14), the word “some” makes the orator’s expression less absolute, as not all of us celebrated and doubt of our ambitions, but only a small number of people, and the word “some” is therefore suitable to limit it.

In examples (13) and (15), using hedges makes the expression less extreme, as one may be able to live a better life through effort, but not necessarily; the challenges faced may be new and not encountered before, but they may also have been encountered a long time ago and have simply been forgotten. For this reason, with the use of “may be, might”, the speaker is given plenty of space, which means that even if future goals are not achieved or the country does not develop well, he will not be denied or criticized.

4.3. Promoting Own View and Denying the Other Side Politely

In some public speeches, speakers need to express their dissatisfaction with the views, policies or guidelines of the other part and hope to successfully present their part’s views.

In such cases, the proper use of hedges can facilitate this. The following example will better illustrate this point.

(16) As for our common defense, we reject as false the choice between our safety and our ideals.

(17) Those ideals still light the world, and we will not give them up for expedience's sake.

(18) We will not apologize for our way of life, nor will we waver in its defense, and for those who seek to advance their aims by inducing terror and slaughtering innocents, we say to you now that our spirit is stronger and cannot be broken; you cannot outlast us, and we will defeat you.

(19) And to those nations like ours that enjoy relative plenty, we say we can no longer afford indifference to the suffering outside our borders.

By analysing the above examples, it can be found that in examples (16), Obama declares his claims to the audience through fuzzy expressions, while euphemistically rejecting some previous guidelines, views, and practices.

In examples (17)-(19), Obama expressed his policy in a fuzzy way, and at the same time showed to the audience his determination and the way forward. For instance, he uses the phrase "we say to you now that" to convey his views euphemistically, rather than the more aggressive expression such as "we warn you", which maintains a harmonious relationship between the two sides and does not lead to conflict.

4.4. Saving Face for Both Sides

Saving face on both sides is also a very noticeable point in public speeches. Public speakers often encounter situations in their speeches where both sides are so sensitive about an issue that each side avoids direct reference to it as much as possible, and at the same time does not want the other side to talk about it so as not to cause unnecessary harm to either or both sides. If there is a need to refer to a certain issue, the speaker has to adopt some fuzzy tactics. This is the point made in Brown and Levinson's "face-saving theory", which states that when a speaker asks a question or says something that is likely to threaten or embarrass the listener, the speaker should try to be vaguer and give the listener options to save face. Reflect on the following

examples:

(20) For they have forgotten what this country has already done; what free men and women can achieve when imagination is joined to common purpose, and necessity to courage.

(21) To those leaders around the globe who seek to sow conflict, or blame their society's ills on the West — know that your people will judge you on what you can build, not what you destroy.

(22) To those who cling to power through corruption and deceit and the silencing of dissent, know that you are on the wrong side of history.

In examples (20)-(22), Obama uses fuzzy expressions such as "they, those leaders, those" to refer to the person or groups he wants to criticize, without directly naming them or their affiliations, saving face for the other party and avoiding embarrassment and harm to the other party, which is a tactful language strategy.

4.5 Creating a Better Vision

In Obama's inauguration speech, the modal verb "will" is applied in many sentences in order to create a wonderful vision of what people want and the purpose is to persuade the public to act together.

(23) The state of the economy calls for action, bold and swift, and we will act — not only to create new jobs, but to lay a new foundation for growth.

The use of "we will" is yet another promise, which will be used to improve people's lives. The proper employment of hedges leaves a good impression in front of the public and his rhetoric is therefore more acceptable to the public.

In this chapter, the pragmatic functions of hedges in public speeches are explored. In general, the rational and appropriate use of hedges in public speeches can serve five functions: increasing the persuasiveness of the speech and convincing the audience; making the speech safe and avoiding absolute expressions; pushing one's own point of view smoothly and denying the other side euphemistically; saving face for both sides of the communication; and creating a beautiful vision.

5. Conclusion

This paper selects Barack Obama's speech as

the analysis text and provides a comprehensive description of hedges from the perspective of pragmatics. Combining the characteristics of hedges and a brief introduction to public speeches, the paper explores in detail the functions of hedges in public speeches. Therefore, it is concluded that appropriate use of hedges in public speeches can make the discourse more secure and polite, which can effectively regulate and maintain the equal and cooperative relationship between two parties and better accomplish the communicative task; a proper employment of hedges can greatly enhance the softness and tension of language; the employment of hedges can make the speech more credible, sound and euphemistic, thus help the orator to fulfil the purpose of the speech better.

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