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ABSTRACT

In the light of critical discourse analysis (CDA) and the classic categorization of hedges, this study analyzes the pragmatic functions of hedges in the transcripts of the 2016 US presidential debates between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. The results show that among the four types of hedges, plausibility shields and adaptors are frequently used, whereas rounders and attribution shields are rarely employed by the candidates. Trump uses significantly more approximators than Clinton, while Clinton uses shields more frequently than her rival. On the whole, Trump uses hedges more frequently than Clinton in the debates. In such political communication, hedges have multiple pragmatic functions, namely emphasizing proposition, establishing common ground, increasing credibility, avoiding responsibility, and showing politeness. It is found that Trump tends to use hedges to emphasize propositions, while Clinton often employs hedges to show politeness and closeness with the voters. This use of hedges reveals the different ideologies of each candidate.

Keywords: Trump, Clinton, hedge, presidential debate, critical discourse analysis

1. Introduction

Hedges, as defined by Lakoff (1973), are “words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy.” Typical examples of hedges are sort of, more or less, probably, etc. As common devices in daily communication and essential indicators of pragmatic competence (Hyland, 1996), hedges have been studied in various discourses, including academic writing (Chen & Zhang, 2017; Hyland, 1998; Salager-Meyer, 1994), second language learning (Hinkel, 2003), book reviews (Itakura, 2013), legislation (Vass, 2004), and science (Myers, 1989). The use of hedges in political discourse is a relatively underexplored area despite the fact that hedges are frequently employed as mitigating devices in such discursive contexts. Moreover, most of the extant research on hedges focuses on written texts (e.g., Chen & Zhang, 2017; Itakura, 2013) rather than oral texts (e.g., Ahmed & Maros, 2017). To fill these gaps, this study, focusing on the 2016 US presidential debates between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump, aims to reveal how the candidates use hedges to fulfill certain pragmatic functions, and how their use of hedges reflects their ideologies.

Since their first use in the campaign arena in 1960, televised presidential debates have become an institutionalized part of US presidential campaigns (Friedenberg, 1994). Likened to the Super Bowl of American democracy, presidential debates attract the largest number of viewers among all televised campaign events (McKinney & Carlin, 2004), offering voters the chance to compare the candidates’ ideas, characters, and performance in a direct and convenient way.
Indeed, numerous studies have found that debate viewing has direct or indirect effects on voter turnout and vote preference (Benoit, Hansen, & Verser, 2003; Blais & Perrella, 2008; McKinney & Carlin, 2004).

The present study focuses on the 2016 US presidential debates. The debates broke the viewership record in US presidential debate history by attracting 84 million viewers of the first debate alone. The popularity of these events may stem from the electorate’s curiosity about a face-to-face battle between the Democrat candidate Hillary Clinton, the first female nominee of a major political party who had been working for the US government for decades, and her Republican opponent Donald Trump, a real estate mogul with no government experience at all. There are so many differences between Clinton and Trump, and in this regard some researchers have conducted studies comparing their gender-based communicative styles (Grebelsky-Lichtman & Katz, 2019; McDonnell, 2020), personalities (Nai & Maier, 2018), social media strategies (Lee & Lim, 2016), and visual presentation styles (Stewart, Eubanks, Dye, Eidelman, & Wicks, 2017). Some scholars have paid particular attention to the linguistic features of the candidates. For example, Savoy (2018) analyzes the style of the two candidates in the 2016 presidential election and concludes that Clinton’s rhetoric comprises many cognitive words, while Trump’s contains more negative emotions and exclusive terms (Savoy, 2018). However, we note that despite the frequent use of hedges in the discourse of the candidates, no study has examined this special linguistic device as it was used by the two candidates, while exploring hedges in political communication is surely meaningful in both theoretical and practical terms.

In light of such gaps, this study, employing critical discourse analysis (CDA) and combining quantitative and qualitative analyses, describes and analyzes the two candidates’ choice of hedges and the pragmatic functions of hedges in this special context, and further examines how their use of hedges reveals the speakers’ ideologies. Specifically, we intend to address the following research questions:

1. What is the distribution of different types of hedges in the 2016 US presidential debates?
2. What are the pragmatic functions of hedges in the sampled presidential debates?
3. How do the employed hedges reveal the ideologies of each candidate?

Searching for answers to the above questions, we endeavor to enrich the literature on hedges, political communication, and discourse studies. Meanwhile, the current study also sheds some light on the linguistic strategies that may be employed in future US presidential debates, as well as other political debates.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Presidential debate discourse

Televised presidential debates play a pivotal role in presidential election campaigns and political communication. They enable citizens to see candidates from major parties displaying their ideas on important issues (Holbert, Hansen, Caplan, & Mortensen, 2007). Presidential debates have been studied by researchers from various aspects. While many studies focus on the candidates themselves, such as their personalities and viewpoints (Grebelsky-Lichtman & Katz, 2019; Turcotte & Paul 2015), some discuss candidates’ language use in the debates. For example, Benoit et al. (2002b) analyze the content of debates and conclude that there are three functions in candidates’ utterances, namely acclaiming, attacking, and defending. Some other studies on debate language involve style and rhetoric (Savoy, 2018), interruption and co-construction (Jacobsen, 2019), semantic network (Doerfel & Connaughton, 2009), and personal deixis (Blas Arroyo, 2000). In addition, other scholars have investigated the effect of presidential debates (e.g., Benoit & Hansen, 2004; Blais & Perrella, 2008). For instance, Benoit and Hansen (2004) find that debates can increase viewers’ issue knowledge, change their impressions of the candidates, and strengthen their confidence in their vote choice.

As an indispensable part of American democracy, US presidential debates in particular have received much scholarly attention. Some studies investigate primary debates within the parties (Benoit, McKinney, & Stephenson, 2002a; Sclafani, 2015), whereas others examine general debates between nominees from different parties (Grebelsky-Lichtman & Katz, 2019; Jacobsen, 2019). The 2016 general election debates between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump
set historical ratings records and have triggered significant research interest. For example, after analyzing the candidates’ verbal and nonverbal communication patterns, Grebelsky-Lichtman and Katz (2019) conclude that Trump presents mostly masculine communicative patterns, while Clinton mainly exhibits feminine communicative patterns. In another study, Jacobsen (2019) investigates interruption and co-construction in the first Trump-Clinton debate and compares the conversation analytic approach with an intertextual approach.

To summarize, although televised presidential debates, especially important US presidential debates, have been widely discussed and analyzed in the extant literature, there is still room for more exploration from special linguistic perspectives. It is to be expected that these will enrich our understanding of such debates and political communication in general. Thus, the current study analyzes the hedges used in the 2016 US presidential debates, and conducts comparisons between the two candidates.

2.2 Definition and classification of a hedge and its use in political discourse

As the first to define this special linguistic element, Lakoff (1973) considers hedges mainly from a semantic perspective, and claims that oftentimes natural language sentences cannot be viewed as entirely true, false or nonsensical; rather, they are somewhat true and somewhat false. Later, Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 145) interpret hedging as a speech act and define a hedge as “a particle, word or phrase that modifies the degree of membership of a predicate or a noun phrase in a set, and says of that membership that it is partial or true only in certain respects, or that it is more true and complete than perhaps might be expected”. In a more recent study, Fraser (2010a) argues that hedges can be in linguistic or non-linguistic forms, and they can not only express levels of uncertainty about propositions, but also mitigate the force of speech acts. It is obvious that the definition of a hedge has undergone a shift from a more semantic perspective to a more pragmatic one.

There is no unanimous classification of hedges, since the understanding of hedges is highly dependent on “institutional, professional and linguistic contexts” (Hyland, 1996). Previous empirical studies on hedging are mainly based on written texts, with the consequence that formal or formal-functional classifications of hedges are often adopted (e.g., Chen & Zhang, 2017; Crompton, 1997; Itakura, 2013; Salager-Meyer, 1994). In terms of oral texts, which are relatively under-researched, the most commonly-used taxonomy was developed by Prince, Frader, and Bosk (1982) in the context of oral medical discourse. Basing on a functional approach, they divide hedges into two categories: approximators and shields. Approximators are hedges which can affect the truth value of the proposition, and they can be further divided into two subcategories: adaptors and rounders. Adaptors modify class membership (e.g., almost, some, kind of), and rounders always appear with a specific number (e.g., about, around, roughly). Shields refer to those hedges which do not affect the truth value of the proposition but which do influence the speaker’s commitment to the statement. Shields also have two subcategories: plausibility shields and attribution shields. Plausibility shields indicate that the speaker is not fully committed to the truth of the proposition (e.g., I think, as far as I can tell, probably), whereas attribution shields attribute the belief to another person (e.g., it is said that, according to, it is assumed that). In this study we adopt Prince, Frader, and Bosk’s (1982) categorization of hedges, since it is oral-based and functional-oriented (see Table 1).
As crucial linguistic devices in communication, hedges have been studied in varied contexts. For instance, Salager-Meyer (1994) draws on a corpus of 15 English research articles in five medical journals to investigate how different textual communicative purposes influence the frequency and distribution of hedges. Itakura (2013) examines how praise is hedged in English and Japanese book reviews respectively, and finds that compared with English book reviews, Japanese book reviews use more impersonal syntactic structures to hedge praise. Moreover, Vass (2004) looks at hedging in two legal discourse genres, applying socio-cognitive knowledge from an intra-disciplinary perspective. He claims that the differences in hedging between the two genres can be related to the prototypical features of the genres themselves, including context and communicative purposes.

In addition to written discourse, hedges in oral discourse have also been probed by a few scholars. For example, after analyzing audio material and a questionnaire, Ahmed and Maros (2017) come to the conclusion that Arab EFL students use a large number of hedges when talking to their supervisors, despite the fact that they are not entirely aware of the pragmatic functions of the hedges. In another study based on peer-tutoring discourse, it was found that tutees learn better when tutors hedge their instructions and comprehension-monitoring in tutoring (Madaio, Cassell, & Ogan, 2017).

Despite all the scholarly attention in other contexts, the use of hedges in political communication is a relatively under-researched area. Given the highly sensitive and tentative nature of political discourse, hedges are frequently employed by the addressee as mitigating devices. Fraser’s (2010b) research is one of the earliest attempts in this area. Choosing the Bush 2007 press conference speech as data, he finds that in these press conferences, hedges are mainly used to indicate a lack of precision rather than for evasion or politeness functions. Taweel et al. (2011) analyze hedging strategies in spoken discourse of political interview in Arabic and English and the results show that hedging is a common device for avoiding criticism. However, studies that focus on hedges in political debates are scant. Jalilifar and Alavi-Nia (2012), adopting a bottom-up analysis, partly fill the gap by analyzing hedges and boosters used by the winners of Iranian and American presidential elections in the presidential debates.

### 2.3 Critical discourse analysis (CDA)

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) “primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context” (van Dijk, 2001, p. 352). CDA regards discourse as produced and shaped by ideologies. According to van Dijk (1998), ideologies are systems of beliefs shared by members of a social group, which play a key role in “the legitimization of power abuse by dominant groups” (van Dijk, 2006, p. 729). Ideologies can be reflected at all levels of discourse, including meaning, rhetoric, style, coherence, and speech acts. It is almost universally acknowledged that CDA requires a multidisciplinary and multi-
methodological approach (van Dijk, 1998; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Given that political discourse is highly ideological, many scholars have adopted CDA in political discourse analysis (Kim, 2014; Reyes, 2011), but only a few have looked into political debates (Cheng, 2020; Khalil & Abbas, 2018). In the light of CDA, Elhambakhsh and Jalalian (2015) discuss hedges and boosters in the 2013 Iranian presidential debates, and find great differences in the use of hedges and boosters between the two candidates.

According to Wodak (2007), pragmatic theories and methodologies ‘can be fruitfully applied in contemporary CDA research’, and pragmatic devices are effective tools of discourse analysis in understanding hidden and coded meanings. Therefore, this study tries to illuminate the use and pragmatic functions of hedges in the 2016 US presidential debates, adopting a CDA approach. We assume that the candidates’ preferences for and purposes in using hedges are closely associated with their ideologies, and CDA enables us to reveal these ideologies underlying their discourse. It is noteworthy that unlike Elhambakhsh and Jalalian’s (2015) study which focuses on the Iranian context, the current article analyzes hedges in the English context of political debates, for the purpose of further enriching hedging and CDA research.

3. Data and Method

The objectives of this study are to reveal the patterns in the two candidates’ use of hedges and draw conclusions about the pragmatic functions of hedges in political discourse. To achieve these goals, we draw upon naturally occurring data and conduct both quantitative and qualitative analyses of hedges in the sampled presidential debates.

This study analyzes the 2016 US presidential debates between the Democrat candidate Hillary Clinton and the Republican candidate Donald Trump. The three debates were held on September 26 at Hofstra University, October 9 at Washington University, and October 19 at the University of Nevada. The debate subjects cover a wide range of issues, including war, the economy, healthcare, immigration, and job creation. The debates attracted a record high number of viewers, probably because the two candidates had so many contrasting traits and were both plagued by scandal. As the former First Lady, a Senator, and the Secretary of State, Clinton was seen as a career politician who was experienced, conscientious, and emotionally stable (Nai & Maier, 2018). However, an FBI investigation of her email activity posed a huge challenge to her presidential candidacy. In contrast to Clinton, Trump, a businessman with no political experience on his résumé, was assessed as narcissistic, angry, and untruthful (McAdams, 2016). In fact, not only his personality and professionalism were controversial, but also his morality and decency were seriously doubted when his lewd remarks to and about women were revealed.

The transcripts of the three debates were downloaded from the official website of the Washington Post (www.washingtonpost.com). We compared the transcripts with the video tapes of the debates to ensure correctness. After removing the utterances of the hosts and audience, the respective word count of each candidate in each debate may be seen in Table 2. There are a total 15,055 words in the first debate, 13,588 words in the second debate, and 13,608 words in the third debate. The total word count over the three debates is 42,251. In the corpus, Clinton accounts for 19,573 words and Trump accounts for 22,678 words, indicating that Trump utters 15.86% more words than Clinton.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Clinton</th>
<th>Trump</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Debate 1</td>
<td>6378</td>
<td>8677</td>
<td>15055</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debate 2</td>
<td>6272</td>
<td>7316</td>
<td>13588</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Debate 3</td>
<td>6923</td>
<td>6685</td>
<td>13608</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>19573</td>
<td>22678</td>
<td>42251</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. The word counts of the two candidates
Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were adopted to analyze the transcribed debates. First, following Prince, Frader, and Bosk’s (1982) classification of hedges, the frequency and distribution of the four types of hedges used by the two candidates were calculated respectively. In order to ensure the reliability and credibility of the data, the hedges were classified and calculated through careful manual work, with the help of AntConc 3.2.4w. After that, the pragmatic functions of hedges in the current context were analyzed with some typical examples highlighted.

4. Analysis

4.1 Distribution of hedges in the sample debates

Figure 1. Distribution of four types of hedges

Figure 1 shows the distribution of the four types of hedges in the debates, with adaptors, rounders, plausibility shields, and attribution shields accounting for 42.43%, 2.47%, 47.15%, and 7.95% respectively. Adaptors and plausibility shields are the two most frequently used types of hedges in the debates, accounting for about 90% of all the hedges, whereas rounders and attribution shields are used much less frequently. The results indicate that in political debate discourse, plausibility shields account for the largest proportion of hedges. By using plausibility shields such as I think and maybe, candidates express their ideas on political issues in a more conservative and modest way, which substantially reduces the risk of being criticized by the audience and thus minimizes the threat to face. Apart from plausibility shields, adaptors are another frequently utilized type of hedge in this corpus. It is understandable that when addressing political issues, candidates tend to use a number of adaptors such as intensifiers and softeners to emphasize or mitigate their claims. In addition, rounders and attribution shields are rarely used by the candidates, which is not surprising because in political debates candidates do not talk much about numbers or the ideas of others; instead, they spend the most time talking about their own opinions on political issues.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidates</th>
<th>Clinton</th>
<th>Trump</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Approximators</td>
<td>Adaptors</td>
<td>371</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rounders</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shields</td>
<td>Plausibility shields</td>
<td>503</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Attribution shields</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>988</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The distribution of hedges used by the two candidates is shown in Table 3. It can be seen that Trump employs significantly more approximators than Clinton, while Clinton uses shields more frequently than her opponent. On the whole, Trump uses hedges more frequently than Clinton in the debates.
Table 4. Most frequently used hedges of two candidates

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Clinton Hedge</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Trump Hedge</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I/we think</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>0.55</td>
<td>very</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>0.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>will</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>0.53</td>
<td>will</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>0.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>would</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>can</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>0.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>can</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>0.43</td>
<td>I/we think</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>0.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>very</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>0.31</td>
<td>would</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>(as) you know</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>0.27</td>
<td>should</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>more</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>many (of)</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>0.30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>a lot (of)</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>so</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>0.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>some (of)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>much</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>third person+say</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>third person+say</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>0.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The two candidates’ most frequently used hedges are presented in Table 4, from which some similarities and differences may be noted. It is found that very, I/we think, can, will, and would are the five most used hedges for both candidates, albeit with some differences in rank. Clinton uses the plausibility shield I/we think more than Trump, probably because as an experienced politician and public speaker she is aware of the potential criticism she could receive if her statements were found to be false or sounded too assertive. What is more, compared with Trump, Clinton uses should less in the debates, maybe because it displays a stronger tone than other modal verbs such as can or would.

As for Trump, it can be seen that his favorite hedge is very, which occurs 155 times comparing with Clinton’s 62 times. It is also found that Trump often uses hedges like very and many repeatedly in the same sentence to stress his statements; this pattern is not found at all in Clinton’s corpus. During the campaign Trump was still a successful businessman whose words were rather straightforward, and he seemingly cared little about maintaining a conventional political image. By repeatedly uttering hedges like very and many, Trump attempts to emphasize his statements so as to impress and convince the audience.

4.2 Pragmatic functions of hedges in presidential debates

The distribution analyzed in the previous section shows the frequent use of hedges in the sampled presidential debates, and thus indicates that it is necessary to analyze the pragmatic functions of hedges in the discourse and conduct further comparisons between the candidates. To this end, we use CDA, trying to find out the candidates’ purposes in using hedges and their ideologies as reflected in their hedging strategies.

4.2.1 Emphasizing proposition

Some hedges, usually adaptors and plausibility shields, are used by the candidates to emphasize their propositions. This strategy is frequently adopted by Trump. By using a large number of hedges, especially intensifiers, he attacks his opponent Clinton for making a lot of bad political decisions.

(1) TRUMP: And it’s really a shame. And it’s politicians like Secretary Clinton that have caused this problem. Our country has tremendous problems. We’re a debtor nation. We’re a serious debtor nation. And we have a country that needs new roads, new tunnels, new bridges, new airports, new schools, new hospitals. And we don’t have the money, because it’s been squandered on so many of your ideas. (Debate 1)

In example 1, Trump uses adaptors like really, tremendous, so, and many to express his strong dissatisfaction with Clinton’s work as Secretary of State. Although Clinton is not President, Trump tries to blame as many problems as possible on his political rival. He points out that the debt crisis, one of the biggest challenges the country was facing
at that time, should be attributed to many terrible ideas proposed by Clinton. In this way, Trump successfully stirs up the electorate's negative emotion towards Clinton while displaying his specialty in the business field.

(2) TRUMP: I think you have to knock out ISIS. Right now, Syria is fighting ISIS. We have people that want to fight both at the same time. But Syria is no longer Syria. Syria is Russia and it's Iran, who she made strong and Kerry and Obama made into a very powerful nation and a very rich nation, very, very quickly, very, very quickly. (Debate 2)

Trump accuses Clinton of letting Syria become a very powerful nation which has provided fertile ground for ISIS to grow rapidly. In the debates, he points out several times that Clinton should not have supported the war in Iraq, and once in Iraq, she should not have withdrawn leaving no troops behind. By saying that, Trump magnifies Clinton's bad judgment on the issues of the Iraq War and ISIS, in order to incite voters' distrust in Clinton. In example 2 Trump uses the hedge very six times in a sentence to emphasize the dangerous situation in the Middle East that he suggests was caused by Clinton.

(3) TRUMP: She shouldn't be allowed to run. It's crooked – she's – she's guilty of a very, very serious crime. She should not be allowed to run. (Debate 3)

In example 3 Trump attacks Clinton that she should not be allowed to run for President in the first place due to the ongoing FBI email case. He uses the adverb very twice to emphasize his proposition that what Clinton has done is a serious crime. Moreover, by employing the plausibility shield should, Trump tries to further convince the audience that Clinton is an unqualified presidential candidate.

4.2.2 Establishing Common Ground

Another function of hedge is establishing common ground with the addressee, which is often accomplished through attribution shields such as you know. According to Brown and Levinson (1987), "common ground" means the specific wants, such as goals and values, that are shared by the addresser and the addressee. A method of establishing common ground is claiming common perspectives with the addressee (Brown & Levinson, 1987). In this corpus, we find that compared with Trump, Clinton is better at using hedges to establish common ground with the addressee.

(4) CLINTON: So he has a long record of engaging in racist behavior. And the birther lie was a very hurtful one. You know, Barack Obama is a man of great dignity. And I could tell how much it bothered him and annoyed him that this was being touted and used against him. (Debate 1)

In this excerpt, Clinton accuses Trump of engaging in racist behavior and gives the example of him suspecting the birth place of President Obama. By employing the hedge you know, Clinton not only expresses her confidence and admiration toward Obama, but also establishes common ground with Obama's supporters, most of whom are educated people and members of minority groups, so as to earn more votes from them.

(5) CLINTON: Mr. Carter, I have tried my entire life to do what I can to support children and families. You know, right out of law school, I went to work for the Children's Defense Fund. And Donald talks a lot about, you know, the 30 years I've been in public service. I'm proud of that. You know, I started off as a young lawyer working against discrimination against African-American children in schools and in the criminal justice system. (Debate 2)

One of Clinton's biggest advantages in the campaign is her experience, and she is fully aware of this. In example 5 she mentions her professional background in law and public service, in order to acclaim her rich legislative and executive experience. By uttering the attribution shield you know, Clinton presupposes that the voters have already learned about her professional background and have recognized her service to the country, which narrows the distance between her and the voters.

(6) CLINTON: I'm just amazed that he seems to think that the Iraqi government and our allies and everybody else launched the attack on Mosul to help me in this election, but that's how Donald thinks. You know, he always is looking for some conspiracy. (Debate 3)

In example 6 Clinton defends herself against Trump's attack when he said that the action in Mosul was for the benefit of her election. Here, the hedge you know is used by Clinton to imply that her election has nothing to do with
the action in Mosul, and to suggest that everybody knows that Trump is good at creating conspiracy theories.

4.2.3 Increasing Credibility

Some hedges have the function of making the statement more objective and hence increasing the credibility of the proposition. Among the four types of hedges, attribution shields are frequently employed by the speaker to provide reference from a third party to make a statement more convincing. In the debates, both candidates show great skill in using attribution shields to enhance the credibility of their claims.

(7) TRUMP: So the worst of all things has happened. We owe $20 trillion, and we’re a mess. We haven’t even started. And we’ve spent $6 trillion in the Middle East, according to a report that I just saw. Whether it’s 6 or 5, but it looks like it’s 6, $6 trillion in the Middle East, we could have rebuilt our country twice. (Debate 1)

In this excerpt, Trump uses the attribution shield according to cite data from an unnamed report to increase the authority and credibility of the figures he is quoting. By illustrating the huge amount of money spent in the Middle East by the government which Clinton worked for, Trump tries to leave the audience with an impression that Clinton is incompetent at dealing with national finance.

(8) TRUMP: No, you are the one that’s unfit. You know, WikiLeaks just actually came out – John Podesta said some horrible things about you, and, boy, was he right. He said some beauties. And you know, Bernie Sanders, he said you have bad judgment. You do. (Debate 3)

In example 8, Trump employs attribution shields by quoting two persons’ negative comments on Clinton, for the purpose of making his statement more objective and credible. For the audience, the criticisms from Clinton’s own campaign chairman and fellow Democratic candidate sound much more convincing than Trump’s own words.

(9) CLINTON: And, indeed, he said women should be punished, that there should be some form of punishment for women who obtain abortions. And I could just not be more opposed to that kind of thinking. (Debate 3)

For women candidates, talking about issues related to women’s welfare can strike a chord with female voters who are closely related to these issues (Turcotte & Paul, 2015). It should be easy for Clinton to win support from female voters since her opponent Trump has been accused of making sexually aggressive comments towards women. In the above example, Clinton uses the hedge he said to quote Trump’s harsh attack on women who obtain abortions. Referring to Trump’s words enhances the credibility of Clinton’s statement, and successfully provokes anger toward Trump in most female voters.

4.2.4 Avoiding responsibility

Another important pragmatic function of hedges in the debates is to avoid responsibility. Trying to avoid criticism by the audience and the opponent, it is common for candidates to make their statements more imprecise and indefinite, or to shift responsibility to others. All four types of hedge can serve this function, and both Clinton and Trump frequently use hedges to avoid responsibility.

(10) CLINTON: So you’ve got to ask yourself, why won’t he release his tax returns? And I think there may be a couple of reasons. First, maybe he’s not as rich as he says he is. Second, maybe he’s not as charitable as he claims to be. (Debate 1)

In the above example, Clinton uses plausibility shields I think, may, and maybe to express her own doubt about Trump’s unreleased tax returns. By using these hedges, Clinton actually manages to convey three negative messages about Trump to the audience. First, Trump may not be very rich; second, Trump may not be very charitable; and third, Trump could be a liar. Her use of hedges protects Clinton from the risk of being criticized for drawing incorrect conclusions or being too assertive.

(11) CLINTON: You know, your campaign manager said that you built a lot of businesses on the backs of little guys. (Debate 1)

In the above example, Clinton uses the attribution shield to cite the words of Trump’s campaign manager in
order to suggest that Trump has built his business through bullying the weak. The quotation from a third party, who is a key person in Trump's team, not only increases the credibility of the suggestion, but also protects Clinton from shouldering direct responsibility for making such a claim.

(12) TRUMP: Well, I told you, I will release them as soon as the audit. Look, I've been under audit almost for 15 years. I know a lot of wealthy people that have never been audited. I said, do you get audited? I get audited almost every year. (Debate 1)

In this excerpt, Trump defends himself from Clinton's attack on his audit issues. By using the rounder almost, he gives an approximate number of years during which he has been audited. If he releases his tax returns later and the number of years is not precisely 15 but around 15, say 12 or 13, he will receive less criticism because he has used the hedge almost. In addition, Trump uses the adaptor a lot of to demonstrate that many wealthy people like him has never been under audit, while successfully avoiding offering the names of those people.

4.2.5 Showing politeness

For presidential candidates, it is of great importance to build and maintain a good public image. Therefore, they should choose their words carefully to show politeness in the public arena. During the debates, adaptors and plausibility shields are frequently used by the candidates to reduce the threat to face and maintain politeness. It may be observed that by using more hedges such as I think, Clinton shows more politeness than Trump.

(13) CLINTON: I think we come at it from somewhat different perspectives. I understand that. You know, Donald was very fortunate in his life, and that's all to his benefit. He started his business with $14 million, borrowed from his father, and he really believes that the more you help wealthy people, the better off we'll be and that everything will work out from there. (Debate 1)

In example 13, Clinton criticizes Trump for helping the rich while squeezing the poor, meanwhile providing an explanation for his behavior. Clinton uses the plausibility shield I think to present her own subjective view and save Trump's negative face, thus showing negative politeness. By using the adaptor somewhat, Clinton lessens the contradiction with Trump and therefore shows positive politeness. Clinton also employs the adaptor really to indicate that Trump's opinion on investment is wrong but his intention is good, which to some extent saves Trump's positive face. By adopting these politeness strategies, Clinton achieves her purpose of exhibiting a polite and modest image to the audience.

(14) TRUMP: Number two, Michelle Obama. I've gotten to see the commercials that they did on you. And I've gotten to see some of the most vicious commercials I've ever seen of Michelle Obama talking about you, Hillary. So, you talk about friend? Go back and take a look at those commercials, a race where you lost fair and square, unlike the Bernie Sanders race, where you won, but not fair and square, in my opinion. (Debate 2)

In the above example, Trump retorts Clinton by proving that she and Michelle Obama are not friends indeed. He also points out that she did not beat Bernie Sanders fair and square, which is another “crime” of Clinton. By using the plausibility shield in my opinion, Trump manages to mitigate the threat to Clinton's face and shows positive politeness, which in turn saves his own face.

(15) CLINTON: And among the ones that he has suggested are people who would reverse Roe v. Wade and reverse marriage equality. I think that would be a terrible mistake and would take us backwards. (Debate 2)

As is seen in example 15, Clinton informs the audience that if Trump should be elected, he would appoint people who are against Roe v. Wade and marriage equality as Supreme Court justices. She then claims that this would be a terrible mistake and would take the country backwards. Clinton mitigates the force of her claim by using the plausibility shields I think and would, so as to maintain politeness in front of the public.
5. Findings and Discussion

Following Prince, Frader, and Bosk’s (1982) classification of hedges, this study has examined the distribution of four types of hedges used by the candidates in the 2016 US presidential debates. Results show that in the debates, prudence shields are the most commonly used type of hedges, with adaptors in second place. By contrast, rounders and attribution shields are used significantly less by the candidates.

Comparing the two candidates’ uses of hedges, we noted some similarities and differences. First, it was found that very, I/we think, can, will, and would are the five most commonly used hedges for both candidates, only with slight differences in rank. Second, Trump uses significantly more approximators than Clinton, while Clinton uses shields more often than her rival. On the whole, Trump uses hedges more frequently than Clinton. Third, we found that Clinton likes using the prudence shield I/we think to mitigate the force of her claims, probably because it can help her avoid responsibility and maintain politeness. Finally, Trump uses the adaptor very much more frequently than Clinton does, and often he uses hedges such as very and many repeatedly in a sentence, probably because this is an economic way to emphasize his statements.

Apart from the distribution of hedges, we have illustrated five pragmatic functions of hedges in the debates. First, hedges can be used to emphasize propositions. This function is usually realized by adaptors and prudence shields; Trump frequently adopts this strategy to attack his opponent. Second, attribution shields such as you know are used in the debates to establish common ground. Clinton is fonder of this strategy than Trump. Third, some hedges have the function of increasing the credibility of the statement. Certain attribution shields can fulfill this function, and both candidates favor this strategy. Fourth, avoiding responsibility is a common function of hedges in the debates, and all the different types of hedge can be used to achieve this purpose. We notice that both Clinton and Trump frequently use hedges to avoid responsibility. Fifth, certain hedges such as adaptors and prudence shields can be used to show politeness. It is found that by using hedges such as I think, Clinton shows more politeness than Trump in an attempt to maintain a good public image.

6. Conclusion

Analyzing the candidates’ hedging patterns using a CDA approach, we can reveal and compare the ideologies of each candidate. In view of Benoit et al’s (2002b) three functions of utterances in debates, the results indicate that Trump generally uses hedges as a weapon to attack his opponent. By using a large number of hedges, especially adaptors like very and many, Trump succeeds in emphasizing Clinton’s mistakes so as to deepen voters’ bad impressions of her. As for Clinton, she mainly uses hedges to defend and acclaim. For instance, she employs many prudence shields such as I think to deliver ideas in a more conservative and less aggressive way. What is more, compared with Trump, Clinton uses the attribution shield you know more often, which enables her to emphasize her rich government experience and helps narrow the distance and establish common ground with the voters. These tendencies have confirmed the findings of previous research that incumbent candidates (Clinton is regarded as the incumbent in this case, since she is the former Secretary of State) tend to focus on the present issues and defend and acclaim more often, while challengers (in this case, Trump) are more likely to attack the incumbent by pointing out the mistakes made by the incumbent administration, promising a better future to the audience (Benoit, 2000; Hellweg, Pfau, & Brydon, 1992). Moreover, in terms of the debate issues, Trump mostly attacks Clinton on economy and foreign policy issues, while Clinton concentrates on issues such as women’s rights and social equality, to demonstrate her political correctness.

In summary, the present study not only contributes to the empirical literature on political discourse in communication and discourse studies, but also provides practical linguistic strategies for using hedges in presidential debates. It is hoped that the current study may help to enlighten candidates about their use of linguistic strategies in future US presidential debates, as well as other political debates and general political communication.
References


