The Uses and Functions of Barack Obama's Hedging Language in Selected Speeches

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Abstract

President Barack Obama's use of the hedging language is an evidence of his unique mastery of rhetorical strategies, power of persuasion and an influential speaker. The purpose of this study was to identify and retrieve the hedging devices contained in President Obama's speeches. For this purpose, his most important and decisive speeches were selected including two inaugural addresses, an annual message to Congress on the state of the Union and Presidential Nomination Acceptance Speech. These speeches were processed through Salager-Mayer's taxonomy of hedges, which facilitated the classification of their respective categories, frequencies and pragmatic functions of hedging language. The data analysis process involved a mixed method of research design, first to count the number of the hedge words, calculate their occurrence rates; and then discuss them qualitatively to identify the reasons why specific hedges, and not others, were used. The processing of the data showed that the modal auxiliary verb 'can', a catchword in Obama's campaign slogan "Yes, we can", was the most often used hedging device. This finding points to a lack of variety and complexity in political language as far as hedging devices are concerned. However, the overall number of hedging devices found in Obama's speeches is a high figure. This elicits the importance of hedging in political discourse, and proves that Obama was very mindful of his language each time he addressed the nation. His rhetorical skills found in hedging outlets of expression to fulfill some purposes but at varying degrees: possibility and persuasion, on the one hand, and fuzziness and vagueness. However, given the limited number of the speeches processed in this research, the result needs to be confirmed by the analysis of the wider corpus of Obama's pre- and post-election speeches.

Introduction

This study examines President Barack Obama's use of the hedging language and its functions in his political speeches. Obama is considered by many as an outstanding politician and an influential speaker. His speeches, produced with a unique mastery of rhetorical strategies, have such a power of persuasion that they helped him to win the presidency, the supreme political office in the United States of America. This achievement is made even greater that he is the first American president to belong to an ethnic minority.

Politicians, in general, are noted for their rhetorical use of language in their speeches to achieve a variety of objectives, such as communicating ideas and opinions, persuading audience and opposing rivals. For example, Triadafilopoulos (1999) tells us that politicians from all parties and ideologies rely on "the spoken word to contrast the benefit that arise from their leadership with the dangers that will arise from that of their political opponent." Thus, political discourse is replete with rhetorical devices and strategies aimed to achieve desired political objectives. One of those strategies is hedging, which is a tactful way of using specific linguistic items in speech. (Larson, 2018) identifies those items as being the "words or phrases whose job is to make things more or less fuzzy."

For Vaccaro, Shivakumar, Ding, Karahalios, and Kumar (2016) hedging is a significant language feature and an element of style. For other scholars Hosman (1989); Hyland (1996a, 1996b), it is a rhetorical device used by politicians to address sensitive topics or controversial issues, by restricting the amount of information provided for the media, so as to avoid responsibility and accountability. The ubiquity of hedge words and expressions in Obama's speeches prompts some questions regarding his uses of the hedging language as well as the latter's functions in his discourse:

1. What are the hedging devices most often used in Obama's speeches?
2. What are the types and functions of the hedging items in his discourse?

The research significance of the above questions lies in providing insights into the roles played by hedging items in organizing political speech as well as in identifying the strategies mobilized by politicians to foster specific effects on their intended audiences.

In the specific case of Obama's speeches, the analysis intends to figure out the extent to which his use of the hedging language helps to foster the program of change advocated in his campaign slogan "Yes, we can." This slogan is articulated thanks to the hedge word 'can' that conveys the ability to improve the life conditions of all Americans, and to renew hope and faith in the American Dream. Therefore, "Yes, we can" is not only an electoral catchphrase, but also an important part of Obama's political image centered on the idea of cooperation to achieve great things with the American public, even when the odds are against them. The slogan can thus be said to fulfil an important political function by indexing the broader message of Obama's campaign every time it was repeated in the intertextual web of public discourse.

Review of the Literature

Defining Hedging

The term "hedge" has known various definitions among linguists and other scholars over the last decades. To begin with, Crompton (1997) consider hedging as a process "whereby the author reduces the strength of what he is writing". Riccioni, Bongelli, and Zuczkowski (2021)), on the other hand, sees it as one aspect of academic discourse and defines it as "a linguistic resource which conveys the fundamental characteristics of science of doubt and skepticism." In her point of view, the uses of hedging in the language of everyday interactions are common, and these linguistic items are there to provide acceptability and possibility. Regarding the use of hedges in political discourse, Fraser (2010) believes that it is "a rhetorical strategy," and argues that there are two possible reasons for a politician to use hedging strategies: the first is to "mitigate an undesirable effect on the hearer, thereby rendering the message (more) polite"; the second is to "avoid providing the information which is expected or required in the speaker's contribution, thereby creating vagueness and/or evasion" (Fraser, 2010).

In addition to defining hedges, scholars have also explored their functions in speech and discourse. Hyland (1996a) writes that studies have shown that the use of hedges in academia "seeks to balance reader and writer's perspectives in gaining accreditation for knowledge claims." This academic use is different from the political one, wherein hedges are associated with politeness, or face-saving strategies, which are important elements of political discourse.

Salager-Meyer's Hedging Categories and their functions

In an influential paper titled *I Think That Perhaps You Should*, Salager-Meyer (1997) presents the categories, functions and frequency of hedges in academic writing. She also proposes a taxonomy of hedges which, though not "totally comprehensive nor categorically watertight," "represents the most widely used hedging categories" (p.131). This taxonomy (pp.131-133) includes the following categories (see also table 1):

i.   *Model Auxiliary Verbs*

According to Salager-Meyer (1997), model auxiliary verbs account for the most "straightforward and widely used means of expressing modality in English academic writing." The model auxiliary verbs which are most often used as hedging words are: *may, might, can, could, would* and *should*.

ii.   *Model Lexical Verbs*

Salager-Meyer (1997) refers to model lexical verbs as "speech acts verbs" that perform the acts of "doubting and evaluating rather than merely describing" (p.132). They include*: seem, appear, believe, suggest, assume*, and *indicate*. Although a large number of verbs can be used in a similar way, it is also argued that academic writing relies heavily on those verbs.

iii. *Adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrases*

Since adjectival and adverbial model phrases showcase uncertainty and denote probability and possibility, they are often used to reduce the strength of statements. Salager-Meyer (1997) also mentions the following three categories of hedging phrases: one, adjectival model phrases, such as *possible*, *probable*, *un/likely;* two, adverbial model phrases, including *perhaps*, *possibly*, *probably*, *likely*, and *presumably*; and finally, nominal model phrases like *assumption*, *claim*, *possibility*, and *estimate*.

iv. *Approximators of degree, frequency, quantity and time*

This category includes approximators such as *approximately*, roughly, *about, often, occasionally, generally, usually, somewhat* and *somehow*.

v.   *Introductory phrases*

They express doubt or direct involvement, and include examples such as: *I believe, I think, I feel, to our knowledge,* and *in my opinion*.

vi. *'If' clauses*

These are clauses introduced with the conjunction 'if', such as in: "*if true…*" and "*if anything…*".

vii. *Compound hedges*

They are phrases that combine two or more hedges, which would then take the form of a modal auxiliary with a lexical verb, or a lexical verb followed by a hedging adverb or adjective. An example of a long compound hedge can be "*it would seem somewhat unlikely*".

Salager-Meyer (1997) positivizes the use of all the above hedging categories, and explains that hedging devices fulfil several functions in academic discourse. For her, these functions express some "fundamental characteristics of modem science" (such as uncertainty, skepticism and doubt), as well the genuine degree of the researcher's confidence in his findings. Still in Salager-Meyer (1997) words, hedges also serve as a means of "protecting" the writer from eventual rebuttal and criticism, and as "a rational interpersonal strategy which both supports the writer's position and builds writer-reader (speaker listener) relationships".

One important merit of Salager-Meyer (1997) taxonomy lies in its variety, a quality which allows a careful analysis of scientific discourse, and all types of discourse eventually. However, in her paper, Salager-Meyer does not apply the taxonomy to political texts, nor does she infer the other functions hedging devices might fulfil in this type of discourse. This means that this task is yet to be explored. This study, therefore, intends to study Obama's speeches with the added objective to underline other reasons why hedging is used and, eventually, to identify political hedging strategies in political speech.

Previous Studies

Even though the study of the hedging language was initially restricted to academic discourse, in recent years, it has extended its scope to include political discourse as well. For example, Loi and Lim (2019) examined the use of hedges in political discourse in the context of American politics, by exploring President Obama's and President Bush's use of hedges in 12 of their pre-election and post-election speeches. The study has found that the uses of hedges and hedging language was higher in speeches given before the election. For Laurinaityte, the deployment of hedges in Obama's and Bush's respective speeches is largely due to "the tentative nature of political speeches" which "does not allow politicians to state their opinions conclusively".

Studies in hedging language in political discourse has extended to the Arab world, including the speeches of the region's chiefs of state and monarchs. A notable contribution is Ghaleb Rabab'ah and Ronza Abu Rumman's *Hedging in Political Discourse: Evidence from the Speeches of King Abdullah II of Jordan*. This study has found that the hedging devices mostly used in the Jordanian Monarch's speeches are modal auxiliary verbs. The authors conclude that language and culture do not affect the type or function of hedging in political discourse.

This paper continues the investigation of this subject by revisiting Obama's speeches to achieve a deeper understanding of his rhetorical strategies as far as the hedging language is concerned. Reviewing the relevant literature on hedging and political discourse makes it clear that the analysis of the uses and functions of hedges in world leaders' speeches is increasingly attracting the interest of academics. Unlike Laurinaityte's, this study does not aim to pit the President's pre- and post-election speeches against one another. It rather intends to process his hedging rhetoric in the light of his progressist ideology of change, which claims it possible for America to reform and renew itself, thanks to what he calls in one of his speeches, "restored leadership." In bringing Obama's hedging language to bear on his political program, it is hoped to understand how he manages to achieve a discursive consistency whereby the form of his messages is made to reflect their content.

Methodology

As previously mentioned, the study of Obama's uses of hedges, conducted in this article, is not intended to understand their functions in and for themselves; they are rather put in a discursive and rhetorical context to examine how they converge with, or diverge from, the broad framework of his political message. For this, a sample of his speeches is selected from HKBU corpus of political speeches, which is a political archive comprising four collections. The collection that is relevant to this research is the corpus of U.S presidential addresses, which contains speeches from U.S politicians issued between 1789 and 2015, with a total word count of 4,429,976.

For the purpose of the present study, some of President Obama's most important and decisive speeches were selected. They include: the two inaugural addresses, an annual message to Congress on the state of the Union and Presidential Nomination Acceptance Speech. The speeches selected for study are processed through Salager-Mayer's taxonomy of hedges presented in the Table 1:

Table 1. *Salager-Meyer's Taxonomy of Hedging Words*

Types of hedges	Words
1. **Modal auxiliary verbs:**	may, might, can, could, would, should.
2. **Modal lexical verbs:**	seem, appear, believe, suggest, assume, indicate.
3. **Adjectival modal phrases:**	possible, probable, un/likely.
4. **Nominal modal phrases:**	assumption, claim, possibility, estimate
5. **Adverbial phrases:**	perhaps, possibly, probably, likely, presumably
6. **Approximates of degree, quantity, frequency and time:**	approximately, roughly, about, often, generally, usually.
7. **Introductory phrases:**	I believe, to our knowledge, it is our view that, we feel that.
8. **If clauses:**	If true, if anything.
9. **Compound hedges:**	
a) **Double hedges:**	(it may suggest)
b) **Treble hedges:**	(it seems reasonable to assume that)
c) **Quadruple hedges:**	(It would seem somewhat unlikely that..)

The application of Salager-Meyer's taxonomy on Obama's selected speeches allows the identification and retrieval of the hedging devices contained within them. These devices are then classified within their respective categories to understand their pragmatic functions. The collected data was interpreted following a mixed method by counting the number of the hedge words, calculating their occurrence rates and discussing the figures qualitatively to identify the reasons why specific hedges, and not others, are used. The discussion is achieved within the framework of Obama's rhetoric of change, which is at the core of his political program.

Findings and Results

The categories and frequencies of Obama's hedging devices

Based on Salager-Meyer taxonomy, Table 2 presents the findings of Obama's uses of hedging categories and their frequency. The figures show clearly that Obama favors the use of one category of hedges over the others; this is the modal auxiliary verbs, which trumps all other categories. The findings presented in Table 2 are detailed in the next results sections.

Table 2. *The Frequencies and categories of hedging words in Obama's selected speeches*

Category	Number of hedges	Percentage
Modal auxiliary verbs	507	76.3%
Modal lexical verbs	6	0.90%
Adjective, adverbial and nominal model phrases	14	2.10%
Approximates of degree, Quantity, frequency and time	124	18.6%
Introductory phrases	13	1.9
If clauses	0	0%
Compound hedges	0	0%
Total	664	100%

a) *Modal auxiliary verbs*

As previously mentioned, modal auxiliary verbs occur in great profusion in Obama's speeches. Table 3 illustrates the number of occurrences of each sub-category:

Table 3. *The Frequency of modal auxiliary verbs*

Modal auxiliary verbs	Frequency	Percentage
May	34	6.7%
Might	12	2.3%
Can	256	50.4%
Could	38	7.4%
Would	67	13.2%
Should	100	19.7%
Total	507	100%

b) *Modal lexical verbs*

Table 4illustrates the frequencies and percentages of modal lexical hedging verbs found in Obama's selected speeches:

Table 4. *Frequency and percentage of model lexical verbs*

Model lexical verbs	Frequency	Percentage
Seem	2	**28.57%**
Appear	0	**0%**
Believe	2	**28.57%**
Suggest	2	**28.57%**
Assume	1	**14.28%**
Indicate	0	**0%**
Total	7	**100%**

c) Adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrases

Table 5 shows the distributions of the various types of this hedging category in Obama's selected speeches.

Table 5. *Frequency and percentage of adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrases*

Hedging category	Frequency	Percentage
Adjective modal phrases:		
Possible	0	0%
Probable	0	0%
Unlikely	1	7.1%
Likely	2	14.2%
Adverbial modal phrases:		
Possibly	0	0%
Perhaps	2	14.2%
Probably	4	28.5%
Like	2	14.2%
Nominal modal phrases:		
Assumption	0	0%
Claim	2	14.2%
Possibility	1	7.1%
Estimate	0	0%
Total	14	100%

d) Approximates of degree, quantity, frequency and time

In the selected speeches, Obama uses two types of degree approximates, which are *about* and *often*, and one only frequency type, which is *usually*. Table 6 shows the frequency and percentage of each.

Table 6. *The Frequency and percentage of approximates of degree, quantity, frequency and time*

	Frequency	Percentage
Approximates of degree:		
Approximately	0	**0%**
Roughly	0	**0%**
About	114	**91.93%**
Often	9	**7.2%**
Generally	0	**0%**
Quantity, frequency and time:		
Usually	1	**0.80%**
Total	124	**100%**

e) Introductory phrases

Introductory phrases are sparingly used by Obama. Only one case was found in his speeches under study (Table 7).

Table 7. *The frequency and percentage of introductory phrases*

	Frequency	Percentage
Introductory phrases:		
I believe:	13	100%
To our knowledge:	0	0%
We feel that:	0	0%
Total	13	100%

f)   If Clauses and Compound Hedges

These two hedging categories mentioned by Salager-Meyer are not found in the analyzed texts.

Discussion

The categories and frequencies of Obama's hedging devices

Table 2 describes the categories and frequencies of the hedging words used by Obama. It shows that an overwhelming majority falls within the hedging category of the modal auxiliary verbs, with a total number of 507, representing 76.5% of the hedging language in the selected speeches. This high rate indicates that the use of modal auxiliary hedges is common and significant in his discourse. On the other hand, *if-clauses* and compound hedges are the least used types of hedges, since they are not found in the transcript of the processed speeches.

a) Modal auxiliary verbs

The most frequently used sub-category of modal auxiliary hedges is *can*, which accounts for 50.4% of modal auxiliary hedging sub-category. This comes as no surprise when we remember that Obama's campaign slogan was "Yes, we can." This modal auxiliary expresses many functions, the least of which are empowerment and possibility, which are both exploited by Obama to drive positive interactions with his audiences and to embed in their minds a hopeful vision of American future. The idea of empowerment through the use of the modal auxiliary hedge *can* has to be underscored, because it contrasts with the sense of humility conveyed by academics in their use of the same device. Indeed, the profusion of the *can* hedge in Obama's speeches reflects the fundamental difference between academic and political uses of hedging, since the first is mostly tentative, whereas the former is assertive.

In the following examples (1 to 3), c*an* expresses possibility, politeness and uncertainty. Furthermore, it illustrates Obama's desire to address future expectations, plans and hopes for his country. This is why it is preceded with the inclusive pronoun *we*, which confers a sense of togetherness shared with the audience.

1)   ".. but whether we *can* work together tomorrow."
2)   "I know there have been questions about whether we *can* afford such changes in a tough economy."
3)   "What comes of this moment will be determined not by whether we *can* sit together tonight."
However, in other instances (statements 4 to 6), the use of *can* is meant to avoid absoluteness of opinions and to attenuate the strength of assertions. In other words, this use is similar to the same function in academic language highlighted by Salager-Meyer.
4)   But this crisis has reminded us that without a watchful eye, the market *can* spin out of control.
5)   Tonight, we *can* say that American leadership has been renewed and America's standing has been restored.
6)   Our problems *can* be solved. Our challenges *can* be met.

For example, in sentence (5) hedging *can* softens the weight of a very strong assertion. Indeed, to suggest that, thanks to himself American leadership and standing are now renewed and restored, is a self-congratulating statement, which might even reveal itself to be preposterous. However, due to the use of *can*, the statement's strength is dialed down, and the assertion might pass even among his opponents. Statement (6) presents a different function, because it reads like a campaign promise. In this case, Obama uses the *can* hedge to temper commitment in case, eventually, the promise of solving the problems of Americans is not kept after the elections.

On the other hand, in Obama's selected speeches, the least used modal auxiliary verbs are *might* and *may*, which occur at rates 2.3% and 6.7%, respectively. Unlike *can*, they express uncertainty, and convey the unlikely occurrence of an action or event in the future. Respectively twelve and thirty-four occurrences only in all Obama's speeches, they stand, when compared to *can*, at the other end of his discourse, based on a sense of empowerment driving the positive change the American people are aspiring to.

The examples (7 to 11) illustrate the uses and functions of *might* and *may* in the transcripts:

7) "The reality of gun ownership *may* be different for hunters in rural Ohio than for those plagued by gang-violence in Cleveland, but don't tell me we can't uphold the Second Amendment while keeping AK-47s out of the hands of criminals".
8) "Wall Street *may* be more comforted by an approach that gives bank bailouts with no strings attached and that holds nobody accountable for their reckless decisions"
9) "Some *may* still deny the overwhelming judgment of science, but none can avoid the devastating impact of raging fires and crippling drought and more powerful storms."
10) "You might not be ready for diplomacy with Beijing if you can't visit the Olympics without insulting our closest ally."
11) ".. so that we might live a better life."

Statement 7 shows Obama's use of the hedging device *may* to avoid issuing a sweeping judgement that puts all gun owners in the US in the same basket. The *may* hedge, in this context, ensures a safe distance between proponents and opponents of gun control, regarding this heated issue in American politics. In other words, Obama discriminates between hunters and criminals thanks to his use of a hedging device that expresses prudence and precision.

In statements 8 and 9, *may* expresses a level of possibility; that of Wall Street welcoming some reckless reforms, and the people denying some scientific judgments. In the two cases, the eventualities are unlikely. Statement 10 shows Obama's tactful language by strategically using the *might* hedge. Opposing those who support a hardline policy with China, he tells them that this policy would cause unwanted consequences. For this, he uses *might* to politely decline their view. The last statement (11) is a clear instance of a promise; that of a better life to happen in the future. By using *might*, Obama expresses uncertainty, while simultaneously insinuating a hope for change to take place, which means that the promise is not completely swept away.

Model auxiliaries *could*, *would* and *should*, too, are used, to express different pragmatic functions in Obama's speeches. For instance, in examples 12 and 13, the use of *could* expresses possibility; possibility for economy to crack up for a long period of time, and that for a large number of Americans to lose their homes, respectively.

12) I can assure you that the cost of inaction will be far greater, for it *could* result in an economy that sputters along for not months or years, but perhaps a decade.
13) By the end of the year, it *could* cause 1.5 million Americans to lose their homes.
14) Now, even as health care reform *would* reduce our deficit, it's not enough to dig us out of a massive fiscal hole in which we find ourselves.
15) How long *should* we wait? How long *should* America put its future on hold?

Obama's future projections and intentions are expressed by *would* modal auxiliary hedge. This is the case of statement 14 that announces his plan to reduce deficit by implementing a healthcare policy. Finally, *should*, which comes in the second position in Obama's most often used modal auxiliary verbs with a hundred occurrences representing a 19.7% rate, expresses a number of functions, the least of which is the expression of shared responsibility over future action. However, in statement 15, where it is repeated twice, it is used as a device which introduces two rhetorical questions that strengthen his claim as to the urgency of reforms along the line of his progressive ideology.

b)- Modal lexical verbs

Many linguists think that modal lexical verbs most often express a sense of "doubt and evaluation" and sometimes showcase one's personal attitudes and feelings towards a given subject (Hyland, 1998; Salager-Meyer, 1997). These meanings do not always attune with the politician's desired objectives, what may explain Obama's less frequent use of modal lexical verbs. Table 4 shows that modal lexical verbs are rarely used in Obama's selected speeches, with a total number of seven occurrences only. Among the six selected verbs, *seem*, *believe* and *suggest* occur twice each (28.57%), whereas *assume* occurs only once (14.28%), and *indicate* never occurs. Though comparatively the number of those lexical verbs is smaller than the number of modal auxiliary verbs, it is worthwhile to explore the reason why they are not used as many as the other hedging categories.

The sentences below provide some examples:

16) "I know campaigns can *seem* small, even silly sometimes. Trivial things become big distractions."
17) "When Washington doesn't work, all its promises *seem* empty."
18) "They *believe* — and I *believe* — that here in America, our success should depend not on accident of birth, but the strength of our work ethic and the scope of our dreams."
19) "Now, there are some who question the scale of our ambitions, who *suggest* that our system cannot *tolerate* too many big plans."
20) "it's tempting to look back on these moments and *assume* that our progress was inevitable, that America was always destined to succeed".

The use of lexical verbs in the examples above may be attributed to a sense of speculation by the speaker. This explanation could also apply to the verbs *believe* and *suggest*. *Assume*, on the other hand, is a different case because, according to Hyland (1998), it is a judgmental verb. This is why it is used only once in all the three selected speeches (statement 20). Interestingly, the speech's context in which it occurs shows Obama extolling his progressive ideology. However, he remains careful to temper the effect of such a strong verb by subordinating it to another hedging verb (*tempt*) that attenuates its powerful connotation.

c)- Adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrases

Adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrases are used in speech to express possibility and uncertainty, and to reduce the power of the speaker's claims. Obama does not often use these hedge categories in the analyzed data, as they only account for 2.10% of all his hedging language. Among the three types of phrases, adverbial modal is the most frequently used, accounting for 57% of all hedging phrases. The rest of the phrases are equally distributed between adjective and nominal hedges. *Probably*, for instance, figures prominently among Obama's adverbial hedge phrases. In example 21, it helps him to play down with tact governmental support for a category of American citizens, who would have resented a forthright exclusion from it. As for statement 22, it confirms that the Federal Government's resources are not enough to fulfill the government's plan.

21) "And a whole lot of folks out there would *probably* need less help from government."
22) "Still, this plan will require significant resources from the Federal Government — and, yes, *probably* more than we've already set aside."

The two adjectival modal hedges used by Obama are *unlikely* and *likely* accounting for 7.1% and 14.2%, respectively. Adjectival modal phrases are considered hedging devices when "they are used epistemically to diminish the nouns they determine". This function is fulfilled by *unlikely* in statement 23, which modifies a noun place to claim a certain mystery about hope, which is said to be found, in Obama's view, in specific places, but not at places one expects.

23) "But in my life, I have also learned that hope is found in *unlikely* places, that inspiration often comes not from those with the most power or celebrity, but from the dreams and aspirations of ordinary Americans who are anything but ordinary."
24) "studies show students grow up more *likely* to read and do math at grade level, graduate high school, hold a job, form more stable families of their own."

In example (24), Obama speaks of students who form a stable family thanks to the skills developed along the course of their studies and the job position acquired after graduation from university. However, not all graduates succeed in of embarking on a great professional career, as this dream turns sour for a good deal of them. The absence of opportunities in the job market prompts Obama to use *likely*, a hedge that expresses a certain level of improbability, so as to shield himself against the blame that jobless university degree holders might put on the political leadership of the country.

As far as nominal modal phrases are concerned, two cases only are found: *claim* and *possibility*, with the former occurring twice and the latter once. Some linguists believe that *claim* doesn't affect the truth value of statements. Nevertheless, in example (25), Obama uses *claim* to speculate on the validity of a statement made by his political opponents. As for *possibility* in (26), it expresses a degree of uncertainty about the results of restoring confidence in the American financial system.

25) "They *claim* that our insistence on something larger, something firmer and more honest in our public life is just a Trojan Horse for higher taxes and the abandonment of traditional values."

26) "We are working with the nations of the G–20 to restore confidence in our financial system, avoid the *possibility* of escalating protectionism, and spur demand for American goods in markets across the globe."

d)- Approximates of degree, quantity, frequency and time

According to Hyland (1998); Salager-Meyer (1997), approximates do not always convey a meaning of vagueness; they are sometimes used by speakers to express a lack of knowledge, more precisely an inability to access specific information. This function, however, does not really apply to all political speeches; in Obama's case, being the President of the United States, he is deemed capable of accessing all the data and information he wanted. Therefore, his use of approximates is mainly linked to the necessity to be cautious by building discourse on sure knowledge or, at least, a knowledge that cannot be easily refuted.

In the example bellow (27 and 28), Obama uses *about* next to two figures: the number of Americans who had benefitted with his employment policy, and the decreased rate in the American minimum wage since Ronald Reagan's first presidency. The two statements demonstrate that the speaker is very careful in handling figures so as to avoid eventual criticism by political opponents or subject specialists.

27) "Now, because of the steps we took, there are *about* 2 million Americans working right now who would otherwise be unemployed."
28) "Today, the Federal minimum wage is worth *about* 20 percent less than it was when Ronald Reagan first stood here."

Speaking of economic data prompts Obama to be very mindful of his language, particularly his handling of figures, by using abundantly the approximate *about*. However, this is not the case of his use of *often*, which blurs some aspects of his speech and creates a sense of vagueness about some of his statements. The sense of vagueness created by the *often* approximate is underlined by Feng, Li, Davvaz, and Ali (2010), who explains that the use of this hedging device occurs when the speaker "does not want to indicate the precise extent to which the information applies."

The following two examples of Obama's uses of the *often* approximate (Statements 29 and 30) confirm some of his statements' vagueness.

29) "Yet every so *often*, the oath is taken amidst gathering clouds and raging storms."
30) "So *often*, we've come to view these documents as simply numbers on a page or a laundry list of programs."

In the first, the hedging device is used at the beginning of a metaphoric and cryptic sentence to mean that, in front of various pressures and critiques of sorts, it is not always that easy to take up the oath of office. In the second, he carefully underlines the failure to interpret specific data provided by statistics and official committees.

In the only case where Obama uses the frequency proximate, he does so in Statement 31 which speaks of the American sense of solidarity.

31) "we were sent here to look out for our fellow Americans the same way they look out for one another, every single day, *usually* without fanfare, all across this country."

Here, *usually* allows him to praise Americans for their mutual and disinterested help during difficult moments.

e)- Introductory phrases

Salager-Meyer (1997) explains that introductory phrases, illustrated in Table 7, showcase "authors' personal doubt and direct involvement. This might explain why they are unfit for political speech and are thus mostly not used in Obama's speeches, except one type, that is *I believe*. The latter, unlike the other two types, belongs to the register of the religious language, and expresses a sense of commitment, of faith in one's words, one's promise.

The use of the introductory phrase *I believe* underlines also the speaker's responsibility and accountability for what is about to be said, and also engages one's personal belief and thought. The following examples, Statement 32 and 33, excerpted from Obama's speeches, reflect this meaning,

as both underscore his faith in change, as well as his commitment to bring it to the country.

32) "I *believe* that as hard as it will be, the change we need is coming. Because I've seen it. Because I've lived it."
33) "I *believe* we can, and I believe we must. That's what the people who sent us here expect of us."

f)- If Clauses and Compound Hedges

In a speech, *If clauses* refer to clauses such as *if true* and *if anything*, whereas compound hedges refer to *double hedges (it may suggest), treble hedges (it seems reasonable to assume that)* and *quadruple hedges (it would seem somewhat unlikely that)*. The two devices are noted for their complexity, which might explain why Obama does not use them in his speeches. In other words, political speeches, contrary to academic writing, employ short and accessible hedges so as to reach the listeners and to relate with them.

Conclusion, limitations and recommendations

The overall number of hedging devices found in Obama's speeches is a high figure. This elicits the importance of hedging in political discourse, and proves that Obama was very mindful of his language each time he addressed the nation. His rhetorical skills found in hedging outlets of expression to fulfill some purposes but at varying degrees: possibility and persuasion, on the one hand, and fuzziness and vagueness, on the other. In the two cases, Obama either expresses commitment for present and future actions, or softens some claims in order to escape criticism in case the electoral promises are not kept, respectively.

As previously underlined, modal auxiliaries are the most profusely used in Obama's speeches, but not equally distributed in the selected speeches; *can* is found to be the most frequent hedging sub-category, accounting for more than the half of all auxiliary verbs. In his speeches, Obama is also careful about figures. This is why he repeatedly uses *about* as a hedging means to report on numerical data and stats. In strategically mobilizing this hedge, he endows his discourse with a certain fuzziness and saves himself from any possible rebuttal by political opponents, subject specialists or journalists over data mishandling.

The ubiquitous presence of the *can* auxiliary hedge is in line with Obama's campaign slogan and the popular expectations raised by his candidacy, which claimed mutual empowerment between the ruler and the ruled. This means that the hedge word embedded as a catchword in Obama's slogan, which was hammered everywhere and every time during the electoral campaign, contributed to make him win the election. This function of the hedge is an interesting one, in as much as it shows that a hedge auxiliary can also help to enhance the visibility and vitality of political discourse and to win public support for campaigners. The absence or insignificance of the other hedging devices mentioned in Salager-Meyer's taxonomy show that Obama's speeches' center of gravity falls mostly on *can* and, to a lesser extent, *about*, two hedges that help give consistency to his discourse.

Given the limited scope of this study, however, it would be interesting to confirm this result by performing a corpora-based analysis that encapsulates all of Obama's speeches. On the other hand, the other reason for the absence or scarcity of specific hedging devices might be linked to the nature of political discourse which does not seem to favor variety and complexity in language. In other words, though Salager-Meyer (1997) taxonomy, inspired as it is by academic language, proves helpful in investigating Obama's speeches, an eventual corpora-based analysis would certainly specify and circumscribe more the hedging devices used in political discourse, their frequencies and their functions.

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