

Hedging In Politics: A Cooperative Principle Approach to President Muhammadu Buhari's 2016 Democracy Day Address

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Abstract: Political leaders, in communicating their intentions to the citizenry, use hedges to assert their integrity, honesty, commitment and transparency. Several studies in discourse analysis, sociolinguistics and pragmatics have investigated the relevance of various linguistic elements to political discourses. However, not much of the pragmatic studies have employed hedging from the perspective of cooperative principles in analysing Nigerian political discourse for the purpose of asserting the positive self-images of the political leaders. Thus, this study examined hedges and the hedged cooperative principles using Grice's Cooperative Principle as its theoretical framework. The study utilised the qualitative research design while purposive sampling technique was used to select sentences laden with hedges in President Muhammadu Buhari's (PMB) 2016 Democracy Day Address. Also, the study investigated the contextual reasons for hedging in President Muhammadu Buhari's (PMB) 2016 Democracy Day Address. Findings revealed that the preeminent hedged conversational maxim was the maxim of manner; there was no hedged maxim of relation. The contextual reasons for hedging were to express uncertainty; avoid direct criticism which would affect the public self-image of PMB; make predictions; avoid precision and deflect responsibility. The study concluded that PMB adopted the use of hedges to assert his integrity, honesty, commitment and transparency. The study recommends the use of hedges for positive self-imaging and national development in politics.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Language is a means of interaction in both private and public spheres of life. This implies that while it can be used for filial purposes amongst family members, friends and neighbours or colleagues in a workplace; it can also be used as a tool for the dissemination of public information such as advertisements, sermons, lectures, national broadcasts and political campaigns to ensure organisational, community, national or even global peace. The power of speech is an imperative aspect of human existence.

LeeKaid (2004) asserted that politics, as an ongoing conversation about social issues, encompasses a broad scope of political communication and demonstrates the ubiquity of political communication in contemporary life and in non-electoral periods. Internal and external political communication channels are the nerves of any government. Political systems cannot function without effective networks of such channels capable of transmitting political messages. Hence, there is much concern about political communication as most political actions and power relationships operate to create a properly functioning democracy.

A political speech is not necessarily a success because of a correctness of truth; rather it is a matter of presenting arguments (Beard, 2000). A political speech serves as a text, as an output and as a process which may be spoken or written. Political speeches are part of the political state of affairs (Qudah, 2016). Thus, when an elected president faces the daunting task of public speaking like acceptance speeches and occasional speeches, they are part of the numerous speeches he/she is expected to deliver. Communication stems from a composition of symbols, gestures, numbers, words, and pictures among others which are carried either by interpersonal interaction or through electronic media or the print media. All these provide occasions and channels to exchange information, elucidate issues, and assist in opinion-forming and decision-making on matters of common interest to individuals, groups or societies.

Schaffner (1996) opined that any political action is prepared, accompanied, controlled and influenced by language. In countries where true democracy is practised, politicians can only come to power after effective campaigning. Therefore, for any political speech to be successful there has to be a creative use of language by the politician because words and expressions are used to impact meaning in different ways (Dylgjeri, 2017). Language is used by politicians to convince their followers, and make their intentions known to them. In

political speeches, ideas and ideologies are conveyed through language so that they are agreed upon by the listening audience as well as by others who may read or hear parts of the speech afterwards in the media.

In conclusion, the objective of public communication is to transmit messages targeting the public and enabling it to have an overall view, while at the same time it is able to retain its distance from the general strategy and the central messages being transmitted by government so as to achieve its goals and policies. This way allows the public to make discoveries about the government that may impress them as either positive or negative. Therefore, this study investigated the political speeches of PMB in order to discover how communicative effectiveness is achieved.

In the words of Osisanwo (2003, p.54), hedges are cautious words, notes and expressions applied by a speaker or writer to warn the listener or reader about how much of what is being said or written should be taken. Osisanwo (2003) further stated that hedges are used to avoid commitment to a proposition. Therefore, when such devices are used in communication the speaker or writer is hedging. Hedging is an aspect of communicative competence that gives an interlocutor the opportunity to express a level of commitment to what is said. Consequently, a study of hedging in political speeches exposes the certainty and uncertainty of divergence of information in communicating intentions. Regrettably, most people are unaware of the strategy and most times get the wrong information or a wrong impression about the information itself, the political leaders and their intentions. Therefore, this study explored the use of hedging devices, the frequency of their occurrence and the contextual reasons for hedging in the selected political speeches of President Muhammadu Buhari (henceforth, PMB).

In Nigeria today, leaders are saddled with the responsibility of communicating their intentions, integrity, honesty, commitment and transparency by presenting full-strength, accurate and unadulterated information about the state of affairs of the country on national security, health care, economy and internal relations to the citizenry (Idowu & Owuye, 2019). However, Majeed (2010) observed that in political discourse, political leaders sometimes modify the authenticity of the information presented to the public. They avoid full commitment to their statements through the use of hedging devices. An empirical review of several studies (Al-Mudhafar, 2014; Jalilifar & Alavi, 2011; Laurinaityte, 2011; Abdul Majeed, 2010; Rabab'ah & Rumman, 2015; Taweel, Emad, Husseni & Saidat, 2011 & Teng, 2015) has shown that political speeches are characterised with hedges. Therefore, this study is designed to assess the use of hedges in the selected political speeches of President Muhammadu Buhari, the current President of Nigeria.

Additionally, Skeleton (1988) stated that without hedging, the world is purely propositioned, rigid and rather a dull place where things are either the case or not. This implies that with a hedging system, language is rendered more flexibly and the world more subtle. In view of this, the study also investigated if the act of hedging could be measured as a positive or negative. This is based on the practice of democracy which hinges on the principle of freedom of speech and expression. This democratic norm is fully displayed within political speeches from which practical expressions of ideologies and intentions come to the fore. However, such political speeches are sometimes characterised by unguarded expressions with implications that could lead to war, insurgency, insubordination, wrong perception of the nation, religious and ethnic conflicts, economic and political instability amongst other vices.

Also, according to Simon-Vandenberg (1996), politicians do not only use the negative strategy of avoidance of commitment, they also employ the positive strategy of inspiring confidence by sounding fully committed to the truth of their claims. This type of cognitive commitment is expressed by hedges. Therefore, this study focused on how cognitive certainty and emotional and social commitment are expressed through hedging in President Muhammadu Buhari's 2016 Democracy Day Address. Also, communication relies on numerous principles for it to be said to be effective. Grice's cooperative principles (CP), among others, bring to bare the pattern for an effective communication and whose major interest is in the interlocutor's cooperation. This implies that for any communication process to be successful or for a communicative event to be fluent without a breakdown altogether, there is a need to make use of the Grice's cooperative principles which consist of four pragmatic sub-principles or maxims. Incidentally, hedges may be used to evade these maxims. Consequently, the nature of the information packaging can be modified and this may affect the credibility of a political speech delivered. Therefore, it would be incomplete to examine hedging in language use without accounting for the hedged cooperative maxims and its effect on the information disseminated.

Language and Politics

Discourse in general, and political discourse in particular play a pivotal role in communication across cultures which no one can downplay. As a matter of fact, the study of political discourse has been a perennial theme of discussion amongst researchers from time immemorial (Qudah, 2016). This, undeniably, is because political language is basically used as a powerful tool in winning the support, as well as the consent of both the public and national lawmakers. Accordingly, everywhere in the world, political discourse, particularly speeches given by Presidents, Governors, and Prime Ministers, are used for realising a predetermined goal. Achieving this

goal entails pushing across the entire and exact meaning of their message to their target audience (Enyi & Chitulu, 2015).

An important determinant of the political figures' success in reaching their goals and winning the public consensus in this continuous power struggle is an ability to persuade and impress their audience (Owuye & Idowu, 2019). Due to the role of political discourse in the portrayal, reproduction and legitimisation of power and domination, several studies have employed critical discourse studies to investigate political text and talk. Different studies have utilised different frameworks as the basis of their analyses. Hence, the linguistic study of the political discourse under investigation.

Language and politics have become inseparable to an extent that language is an indispensable tool in politics. An inquiry of the language of politics helps us to gain insight into how language is used by those who wish to gain power, those who wish to exercise power and those who wish to keep power. This appears to be in consonance with the claim that language is a vital process of setting the personality and the programme of the candidates to the public with the primary aim of gaining their support and mobilising them to participate in the process of securing and controlling power (Opeibi, 2001).

Hedges and Paul Grice's Cooperative Maxims

Language users sometimes do not actually communicate what they mean, or sometimes they mean more than they say. Speakers also might consciously or unconsciously express thoughts and feelings they would have liked to suppress (Leech, 1991). However, communication relies on numerous principles for it to be said to be effective. Grice's cooperative principles (CP), among others, bring to bare the pattern for an effective communication and whose major interest is in the interlocutor's cooperation. For any communication to be successful, that is, for a communicative event to flow without a breakdown altogether, we need to make use of Grice's cooperative principles which consist of four pragmatic sub-principles or maxims; hedges may be used to evade these maxims. This section will discuss how hedges perform their communicative duties in language use by observing or flouting the CP. Grice formalises his observation that when we communicate with one another, we try to be cooperative by means of what he has elevated into a notion called the Cooperative Principle. Grice's suggestion is that there is a set of over-arching assumptions guiding any conduct of conversation (Levinson, 1983). He identified four basic maxims of conversation which jointly constitute a general CP:

1. The maxim of quantity:
 - a. Make your contribution as informative as required.
 - b. Do not make your contribution more informative than required.
2. The maxim of quality:
 - a. Do not say what you believe to be false.
 - b. Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
3. The maxim of relation:
 - a. Make your contribution relevant
4. The maxim of manner:
 - a. Avoid obscurity.
 - b. Avoid ambiguity
 - c. Be brief
 - d. Be orderly.

Compliance to these maxims is the foundations of an effective communication. The social goal of any cooperative principle is to make communication easy and understandable.

In the realm of hedging in political debates and speeches, some studies have been conducted Al-Rashady (2008), Rabab'ah & Rumman (2015), Pellby (2013), Delzendehrooy (2015), Toska (2013), Teng (2015) and Abdul Majeed (2010) using several approaches to the study of hedging. Al-Rashady (2008) investigated how hedging devices serve a function as discourse politics strategy. Specifically, it focuses on the analysis of the three presidential debates between Barack Obama and John McCain during the 2008 US election cycle. Using the descriptive quantitative research design, hedging devices and their functions are qualitatively and quantitatively treated following the frameworks of Hyland (2005), Salager-Meyer (1997), and Martin-Martin (2008). The study revealed that hedging devices are also prominently used in the spoken discourse specifically in the context of politics or political debate and that they can be categorized into different types such as modal auxiliary verbs; modal lexical verbs; adjectival, adverbial, nominal modal phrases and approximators, among others. As indicated, some types are more dominant than the others. Another is that hedging devices also serve different functions depending on the intention or purpose of the speaker. Furthermore, the frequent use of certain hedging devices including can, will, should, I think, among others, appears to significantly promote the effectiveness of a speaker's argument.

Rabab'ah & Rumman (2015) reported on the findings of a study that aimed to identify the linguistic items which act as hedges in the speeches of King Abdullah II of Jordan, as well as to examine the pragmatic functions of these devices. Twenty-five political speeches of King Abdullah II were randomly selected from the official and analysed adopting Salager-Meyer's (1994) taxonomy. The study revealed that the most frequently used hedging device in King Abdullah's speech is modal auxiliaries and the most frequently used hedging device subcategory is the modal auxiliary *can*. The findings suggest that these hedging devices fulfil several pragmatic functions. These findings contributed to understanding that speaking a second language (Arabic, in the case of King Abdullah II) neither affected the types of hedging devices nor the functions these devices perform. Moreover, contrary to scientific discourse the research concluded that political discourse as a non-scientific genre resorts to hedging devices to express indirectness, politeness, lack of commitment and probability.

Pellby (2013) investigated the usage of hedges in political discourse in the Tampa City Council for the purpose of examining whether or not women hedge more than men in this area. An analysis of the occurrence of hedges illustrated that women hedged more than men for various purposes in this meeting. These occurrences mostly involved the epistemic modal function and shields which indicate uncertainty about the utterance and certainty about the utterance respectively. The results also illustrated how political discourse is still an area dominated by men in the sense that men had significantly more speech time than women during this meeting. However, the results also disprove Lakoff's claim that women hedge simply to signal uncertainty and tentativeness.

II. METHODOLOGY

This study examined hedges and the hedged cooperative principles using Grice's Cooperative Principle as its theoretical framework. The study utilised the qualitative research design while purposive sampling technique was used to select sentences laden with hedges in President Muhammadu Buhari's (PMB) 2016 Democracy Day Address. Also, the study investigated the contextual reasons for hedging in President Muhammadu Buhari's (PMB) 2016 Democracy Day Address.

III. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Excerpt 1

I believe we can also learn from the obstacles we have overcome and the progress we made thus far, to help strengthen the plans that we have in place to put Nigeria back on the path of progress.

The hedging devices in excerpt B1 are the introductory phrase 'I believe' and modal auxiliary verb 'can'. This makes the expression quality-related hedge which function as softener and strengthener. Specifically,

- [1]. Due to the hedge in the form of an introductory phrase, that is, 'I believe', in excerpt B1, the statement is presented as an opinion rather than as a categorical, indisputable statement.
- [2]. By specifying a personal source, PMB leaves room to show less responsibility towards the huge controversy in the country
- [3]. It also helps to weaken the illocutionary force towards the assertion
- [4]. It also reflects that PMB is expressing a personal opinion and thus helps to reduce future criticism of this claim
- [5]. The hedging device 'can' also helps to strengthen the indefinite ability expressed by PMB

Excerpt 2 & 3

The past years have witnessed huge flows of oil revenues.

Huge debts owed to contractors and suppliers had accumulated.

The hedging devices in excerpt 2 and 3 are adverbials 'Huge' which makes it a manner related hedges which also functions as broadeners of commitment to the truth value of the proposition. Specifically, the hedges do the following in excerpt A17:

- i. The hedge portrays PMB as an achiever Nigerians, that is, since he got to power Nigeria has experienced a tremendous flow of revenue through oil.
- ii. The hedge there exempts PMB from the debts accrued by the government as though he had nothing to do with him
- iii. The hedges also broadens his commitment to the proposition by being vague
- iv. The hedges also help PMB to avoid being specific and rather vague; reveals the enormity of the issues

Excerpt 4

I believe the way forward is to take a sustainable approach to address the issues that affect the delta communities.

The hedging device used is introductory phrase 'I believe' and the hedged maxim is quantity-related which functions as a narrower. 'I believe' in excerpt 4 presents PMB's own points of view and opinion therefore makes the statements less harmful as everyone is allowed to have an opinion and that is why the hedge functions as a narrower. Additionally, it helps to avoid what could have been an absolute statement.

Excerpt 5

*The measures we must take, **may** lead to hardships.*

The hedging analysis revealed that the hedging device used is the modal auxiliary verb 'may' which is a quantity related hedge and functions as a softener. The hedging device did the following:

- i. The modal verb used as hedging device helps PMB lack of knowledge, high degree of uncertainty and some degree of probability.
- ii. It also softens the commitment of PMB to the truth value of the proposition
- iii. The modal auxiliary verb 'may' helps PMB to avoid direct criticism in a way incase Nigerians face problems in future because of the measures they are taking to eradicate corruption and take Nigeria to the next level and they want to blame him.
- iv. The hedge helps PMB prepare the minds of Nigerians towards the improbable future.

Excerpt 6

*But only **if** they are strong and incorruptible.*

The hedging analysis revealed that the hedging device used is the hypothetical construction 'if' which makes it a manner related hedge and it functions as a narrower. Specifically the hedging does the following:

- i. Creates an uncertain conduction for the arms of government in order for them to carry out their duties strongly and incorruptibly.
- ii. PMB's narrows is commitment to what he says
- iii. The hedge helps him to reduce the illocutionary force of the assertion.

Excerpt 7

If the militants and vandals are testing our resolve, they are much mistaken.

The hedging device used is the hypothetical construction 'if' which is a quality related hedge which functions as a strengthener. Specifically, PMB strengthens his assertion and also strengthens is claim about the militants and vandals. The hedge also helps PMB to present a conditional situation as though he is not certain about the intention of the militants and vandals. Also, the hedge expresses PMB as unafraid of militants and vandals. Therefore, PMB expresses uncertainty about the intentions of the militants and vandals

Excerpt 8

*Their work is **almost** done.*

The hedging device used is an approximator 'almost' which makes it a manner related hedge. The hedge helps PMB avoid being specific about when the work of the armed forces would be over. Also, it softens the enormity of what the armed forces are going through to secure the peace of Nigeria. it expresses an indefinite time.

Excerpt 9

*I am very worried about the conditions of those still captured **might** be in.*

The hedge evades the maxim of quantity. Specifically, it broadens or enlarges the situation in which the Chibok girls are. Its either they are in a precarious situation or not. PMB uses the hedge to express his uncertainty about the present situation of the missing girls since he is not there with them and there is no visible update about the situation. It also helps PMB to express his concern for the Chibok girls that were captured. They might be in either a good or bad condition

Excerpt 10

*No girl **should** be put through the brutality of forced marriage*

The hedging device used is the modal auxiliary verb 'should' which is a manner related hedge. The hedge functions as a strengthener and softener. Specifically, the hedge strengthens the assertion made by PMB and at the same time softens the illocutionary force of the expression and makes it less dictatorial. It also expresses speculation on what ought to be.

IV. CONCLUSION

Findings revealed that the preeminent hedged conversational maxim was the maxim of manner; this finding suggests that President Muhammadu Buhari in communicating his intentions to the citizenry, use hedges to intentionally express ambiguity and thereby increase the extenuation and mitigation of commitment to the truth value of their assertions in order to avoid being held accountable, blamed or liable. The findings also revealed that the contextual reasons for hedging were to express uncertainty; avoid direct criticism which would affect the public self-image of PMB; make predictions; avoid precision and deflect responsibility. The study concluded that PMB adopted the use of hedges to assert his integrity, honesty, commitment and transparency. The study recommends the use of hedges for positive self-imagining and national development in politics.

It can be concluded that hedging as an operational feature of political discourse, allows politicians to express some level of commitment towards their claims in order to gain acceptability and self-protection as they intend to present their own face and reduce the threats which questions their status as political leaders. In the bid to avoid absoluteness and strengthen commitments to assertions, political leaders use hedging devices, their citizens should be aware of this fact. There is a difference between predicting the future, stating a probable possibility and avoiding absoluteness versus stating a fact. Thus, knowing this fact would help the masses trust their leaders more and adequately save the public self-image of political leaders. More attention should be given to teaching hedging techniques to future or practicing political speech writers and political leaders.

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