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Abstract
This study aims to examine the use, frequencies and pragmatic functions of hedges found in US politicians' press conference speeches. In particular, we compare the scripted and the spontaneous components of the selected speeches as well as compare the use of hedges by female politicians with that by male politicians. To test Lakoff's (1973; 1975; 1990) claim on 'women's language', a frequent interpretation of which is that women use more tentative language than men, it was hypothesised that, in the speeches examined, women would use more hedges than men. To this aim, a corpus of 22 press conference speeches given by a number of US politicians was compiled, and the hedges identified were examined using Salager-Meyer's (1997) taxonomy. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were applied. The findings reveal that the approximators were most frequently used, followed by modal auxiliary verbs, introductory phrases, and modal lexical verbs. In contrast, adjectival, adverbial and nominal phrases, if-clauses and compound hedges were used the least. All hedges function as linguistic tools to generalise information, convey uncertainty, save speakers' face and express an opinion. Comparison by gender suggests that male politicians used more hedges than female politicians. Further studies on the use of hedging devices in press conference speeches may incorporate further criteria, such as prosodic information as well as geographical differentiation and may also be directed at verifying the existence of the relationship between the use of hedges and the success of persuading the audience.

Key words
Discourse marker; hedge; press conference speech; political discourse; face-saving; gender

1. Introduction

1.1 Hedges as a subcategory of discourse markers

Discourse markers, which are lexical units providing contextual information that the hearer will use to enrich the meaning of the sentence, have been one of the most controversial objects of linguistic investigation to date, as they are directly linked to the construction of argumentation in discourse (Schourup 1982; Blakemore 2002; Trujillo-Saez 2003; Cuenca & Degand 2022; Farahani & Ghane 2022; Rocha et al. 2024). They are also referred to as 'discourse connectives'

(Blakemore 1987), 'discourse particles' (Schourup 1982) and 'pragmatic connectives' (van Dijk 1979; Stubbs 1983), all terms hinting at their functional significance. One of the categories of discourse markers is *hedges*.

The concept of 'hedge' was popularised by Lakoff, who defines the hedge as a linguistic tool 'to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy' (1972: 195). Here *fuzzy* means unclear or indistinct, lacking clarity or precision. Lakoff (1972) uses this term to refer to how hedges can be used to make the language less precise or definitive, thereby introducing language that leaves room for interpretation or uncertainty. Others have noted that hedges convey politeness, lack of total commitment, indirectness, vagueness, indefiniteness, and tentativeness (Brown and Levinson 1987; Salager-Meyer 1994, 1997; Hyland 1996, 1998ab; Fraser 2010). According to Brown and Levinson (1987), hedges are:

> [a] particle, a word or phrase that modifies the degree of membership of a predicate or a noun phrase in a set; it 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. (145)

Thus, hedges are a linguistic tool that reduces the strength of an expression by modifying words or phrases within a proposition or minimises one's degree of commitment to the propositional content. The pragmatic function of reducing the propositional content is tied with illocutionary acts, which are primarily used in spoken discourse and whose aim is to help save the speaker's face and, in particular, the politeness function (Brown and Levinson 1987; Myers 1989; Hyland 1995; Martin-Martin 2008). Politeness is further subdivided into positive and negative politeness. *Positive politeness* is a strategy where the speaker makes an effort to maintain a close relationship with the audience while trying to minimise the threat to face and maintain rapport with the interlocutors (Gribanova & Gaidukova 2019). Meanwhile *negative politeness* is a strategy used to defer, mitigate, or attenuate, rather than to enforce, opinion and help to maintain distance between people of different social status (Cameron 2003: 80). Brown and Levinson (1987) attribute hedges to negative politeness strategies because of their nature to keep the statements vague and to help save the speaker's face from possible criticism. Thus, hedging signals that the speaker reduces the strength of their statement in terms of content or authority (Salager-Meyer 1997; Fraser 2010).

Scholars have approached hedges in terms of their discourse function, viz., their pragmatic contribution to the proposition, or their formal properties, viz., their morphosyntactic denomination (Šinkūnienė 2011). Classifications based on functional criteria look into ways hedges are used to preserve the speaker's or the hearer's face by either distancing the speaker's from the proposition in attitudinal terms or attenuating the truth value of the proposition itself. One of the earliest classifications of hedges within this dimension has been proposed by Prince et al. (1982), with hedges divided into two large classes, *approximators* and *shields*, the former aimed at mitigating the propositional content of a statement and the latter aimed at saving the speaker's face with respect to what they say (cf. Hyland 1998b: 93) distinction into *content-oriented* and *reader-oriented* hedges).

Overviewing the range of meanings hedges may convey, Hyland (1998a) posits their primary meaning as the expression of doubt, which is manifested through "an explicit qualification of writer's commitment", the particular hedges used helping convey "opinion... deference, humility, and respect for colleagues views" (Hyland 1998a: 351).

This branching is related to the systemic functional distinction of the ideational and the interpersonal function of language, given that the author, by choosing specific hedging (or, for that matter, boosting) mechanisms, essentially *measures* the knowledge they share with the audience (Halliday 1985; Varttala 2001; cf. Holmes 1990). Additionally, in some approaches to the analysis of hedges (Zarza 2018; Kashiha 2022), one may also see incorporation of the Hallidayan textual function, in the case when hedges are examined together with other discourse devices, such as conjunctions or, more broadly, connectors, which help maintain textual cohesion.

In a recent study within this strand, Kashiha (2022) develops an analysis of meta-discourse markers used in Barack Obama's speeches, focusing on hedges as persuasive markers, as well as their role in the construction of cohesion in speeches. The study examines how textual cohesion is constructed and differentiates between interactional vs. interactive meta-discourse markers, as well as speaker-oriented vs. listener-oriented markers. In this study, hedges are examined alongside other categories such as self-mentions, boosters, transitions, evidentials, and frame markers, and are not identified as a prevailing category used in the context where persuasion of the audience is the objective. Another finding of the study is the acknowledgement that the meaning of meta-discourse markers is highly dependent on the context in which they are used. Reflecting on this observation with respect to analysis of hedges alone, it has been noted that the functional approach is problematic overall since pragmatic functions of hedging devices tend to overlap, making it difficult to differentiate between one another (Šinkūnienė 2011: 9).

The other way to classify hedges is by analysing them by their formal. For instance, Hyland (1998b), based on how hedges surface in the sentence, divides them into "lexical and strategic hedges" (103). Lexical hedges include single-word lexical items, such as modal auxiliary verbs, epistemic lexical verbs, which are further subdivided into speculative, deductive, quotative and sensory; and epistemic adverbs, adjectives, and nouns (ibid., 105–141). Given that several hedges may be used jointly as a phrase, the syntactic dimension is further distinguished, resulting in the category of strategic hedges with "phrasal or syntactic realisations" that modify the strength of assertions (ibid., 107).

While Hyland's research is focused on the written medium, scholars examining spoken medium remark on the significance of prosody (Holmes 1990, Frazer 2010). For instance, Frazer (2010: 203–205) incorporates elements of the speech act theory into his taxonomy of hedges, distinguishing between propositional hedges, that is, hedges that modify the propositional content of a statement (e.g., *about, typically, very*), and illocutionary force hedges which modify the illocutionary force of the speaker's intent. The latter may be of various classes, ranging from single words (e.g., *one*, *assumption, possibly*) to entire constructions

(e.g., *indirect speech acts* as in "Could you speak a little louder", reversal tags, e.g., "He is coming, isn't he").

Opinion on the most appropriate taxonomy varies per linguist and, even despite the ample array of studies on the subject, there is no uniform agreement on what the category of hedges comprises. In this study, we adopt one of the earliest classifications on hedges proposed by Salager-Meyer (1997).

Salager-Meyer's (1997: 150) taxonomy is based on the core premise that hedges are related to vagueness and tentative speech, which may raise addressees' scepticism and doubt about the truthfulness of the statement made. The pragmatic function of tentativeness may be manifested through a number of means. *Auxiliary verbs* (e.g., *might*) are the most widely used devices to express modality (1997: 131). *Modal lexical verbs* (e.g., *appear*, *seem*, *suggest*), which emphasise the vagueness of the statement and may be used instead of auxiliary verbs (ibid., 116). Similar to *modal lexical verbs*, *adjectival*, *adverbial*, and *nominal* modal phrases, such as *possible*, *perhaps*, *and possibility*, weaken or negate the force of the statement (ibid., 132). *Introductory phrases* (e.g., *I believe*, *we feel that*), show doubt and personal involvement in the statement (ibid., 110). It should also be noted that introductory phrases appear only in the initial position of the sentence; consequently, they are analyzed as discrete categories when used in the mid-sentence position. *Approximators of degree*, *quantity*, *frequency*, and *time*, such as *approximately*, *less* (*than*), and *often* act as a tool to generalise the data; thus, they indicate a greater precision of the proposition. *Compound hedges* involve a modal auxiliary used together with a lexical verb with hedging content (e.g., *it would appear*) and a lexical verb followed by a hedging adverb or adjective (e.g., *it seems reasonable/probable*) (ibid., 133). Lastly, *conditional clauses* (e.g., *if anything*) refer to hypothetical situations and offer possibilities (ibid., 133). Salager-Meyer's (1997) taxonomy is particularly relevant in this study as it offers a comprehensive classificatory framework of hedges in light of their impact on the perceived certainty and authority encoded in the linguistic expressions of uncertainty.

A recent application of a modified version of the formal criteria-based taxonomy is Zarza's (2018) analysis of hedges and boosters used in the editorials of two newspapers. Zarza additionally incorporates the steps and moves approach of genre analysis to identify preferred categories and locations of hedges and boosters, thereby demonstrating the applicability of Salager-Meyer's taxonomy in different discourse genres.

To further elaborate on the inconclusiveness of classificatory distinctions highlighted above, we can say that, similarly to Kashiha's (2022) study, Zarza (2018) examines hedges as comprising concession-marking devices (e.g., *but, though, if, unless* (Zarza 2018: 44). Zarza (2018) concludes that the use of hedging and boosting devices is linked to the communicative purpose realized at both macro- and micro-levels. Meanwhile Kashiha (2022) examines all types of conjunctions (viewed under the broader category of transitions (ibid., 85)) *and* hedging devices as discrete categories within the umbrella notion of metadiscourse markers.

1.2 Research on hedges in political discourse

Political discourse is a non-scientific genre which expresses probability, different degrees of certainty, and commitment by the speaker or writer (Rabab'ah and Rumman 2015: 159). This genre comprises speeches, interviews, panel discussions, and other rhetorical subcategories that deal with political and social interaction (Roth, 2014: 1). One of its most characteristic features is purposeful use of linguistic devices by politicians, who aim to shape citizens' thoughts to meet their political goals (Graber 1993).

Research on hedges in political discourse has been done before (Fraser 2010; Jalilifar and Alavi 2011; Al-Rashady 2012; Hidayati and Dallyono 2015; Arshad et al. 2020). For instance, Al-Rashady's (2012) study develops an analysis of three presidential debates in 2008 between Barack Obama and John McCain and identifies that nominal, adverbial and adjectival phrases, modal auxiliary, and lexical verbs have been used the most. Examining hedges in the speeches of King Abdullah II of Jordan, Rabab'ah and Rumman (2015) find that the modal auxiliary *can* is used the most, which helps the speaker to express a lack of total commitment to a number of prepositions. In a more recent paper, Almutairi et al. (2022) aims to see what hedges Barack Obama uses in his interactions with the audience. The results indicate that modal auxiliary verbs together with approximators are used the most as these are the easiest means to express modality and uncertainty and to avoid direct criticism. From a functional perspective, hedges have been identified as helping Obama to report statistical data, express future actions and to soften the claims to save his face.

After examining four political interviews conducted with George W. Bush, Jimmy Carter, David Coltart, and Sarah Palin, Jalilifar and Alavi (2012) establish that the quantity and quality of hedges used in political interviews has a strong correlation with the degree of power they hold. Thus, the more important the politicians are, the fewer hedges they will use.

A study by Hidayati and Dallyono (2015) investigates speeches by three Indonesian ministers on the government's policy of raising fuel prices. The results demonstrate that speeches mostly contain adverbs used as hedges and modality expressions, which help express possibility and thereby mitigate the meaning of the statements made, especially when addressing sensitive issues. In a study examining Benazir Bhutto's speeches, the findings suggest that people in politics prefer hedges when discussing issues or problems they are not sure about. Additionally, the use of hedges such as 'may' 'feel' invites the audience to acknowledge the speaker's introspection (Arshad et al. 2020). This perspective is also reflected in an analysis of President George W. Bush's 2007 press conferences by Fraser (2010). The author concludes that many hedge-like linguistic features may not operate as hedging devices. Rather, Fraser suggests that *neutral hedging*, that is, statement of universal truths, is the most frequently used tool to create vagueness or to avoid an outright answer to the question (Fraser 2010: 207). The following example illustrates the point:

1) '[w]e *don't believe* freedom is just confined to our neighbourhood; we *believe* freedom is universal in its application' (Fraser 2010: 207).

Consequently, the common feature shared by previous studies within the political dimension is that hedges are an integral constitutive component of the genre of political communication. As an interactional metadiscursive tool, hedges serve in two main dimensions. First, hedges help engage with the audience in a broad spectrum of persuasive negotiations, ranging from direct avoidance of certainty to covert manipulation or mitigation, all while expressing vagueness in order to secure public support or avoid backlash. Second, hedges function as a presentational tool for the speaker, demonstrating their introspective reasoning and facilitating the establishment of common ground with the audience.

1.3 The genre of political press conference speeches

One of the subcategories of political discourse is press conference speeches. A press conference is a tool for organisations or companies to communicate their message to the public (Olariu and Nichifor 2015: 122). The interviewer represents a media organisation (e.g., BBC), and the interviewee a political organisation (e.g., the government, a political party) (McNair 2011: 25). Press conferences start with politicians presenting the news, and this is where the speech is prepared in advance and is expected to be well-organised and less spontaneous (Gribanova and Gaidukova 2019: 90). Likewise, the text is presented directly from the paper and conveys objective information (Rosanti and Jaelani 2015: 29). Hereinafter, such text is referred to as *scripted speech*. In contrast, spontaneous speech is the interview part of the press conference, where speakers respond to journalist's questions on the spot (Halliday 1985: 46; Cornish 2014: 1). Journalists start with warm-up questions, and, as the interview progresses, increasingly controversial questions are asked (Hill 2022). The politicians' answers vary between a direct answer or a hedged one, the latter motivated by the politician's intention to avoid responsibility (Lakoff 1973). Alternatively, the politician may even refer the question to somebody else (Stanton 2019). Given the unpredictability as to the questions asked, politicians may opt for a significant number of a broad range of hedges, in the intention to soften the impact of their remarks and sound minimally definite (Gribanova and Gaidukova 2019). Furthermore, the responses provided in the interview section are often subjective (Tannen 1982: 195; Rosanti and Jaelani 2015: 29). Hereinafter, this question-and-answer part of the speech is referred to as *spontaneous speech*. In this study, we explore hedges used both in the scripted and the spontaneous parts of the speech.

1.4 Gender and politics

In light of the objectives of this study, a brief mention should also be made about studies of language by male and female politicians.

Generally, ample research has been done on hedges in the political discourse regarding men's speeches (Fraser 2010; Ismail 2012; Khajavi et al. 2020; Tian

2021), women's speeches (Lakoff 1973; Lakoff 1975; Lakoff 1990; Arshad et al. 2020), or comparing them both (Carli 1990; Holmes 1990; Roth 2014).

These research papers challenge Lakoff's (1973; 1975; 1990) 'women's language' phenomenon regarding the use of hedges. Lakoff (1975) argues that the reason for women's underrepresentation and discrimination is the way women are taught to use language. If a girl talks with boyish mannerisms, she will be made fun of and scolded (1973: 47). That is how women grow up not being able to express themselves, hold power, and that is how they speak in the so-called 'women's language' (ibid., p. 48). This phenomenon occurs in the choice and frequency of lexical items, the rising intonation in places where the falling intonation would be expected, repetitions; women tend to use more tag questions and adverbs as intensifiers and/or hedges that weaken the strength of a statement (Lakoff 1973, 1975; Carli 1990).

Lakoff (1973: 54–55) observes that overall, women tend to use tentative language where it is not expected or necessary, which ultimately leads to a perception that "women's speech sounds much more 'polite' than men's" (Lakoff 1973: 56). In her discussion of prior research stemming from Lakoff's views, Holmes (1990: 195) comments on how Lakoff's ideas are to be interpreted: rather than merely using more tentative language, "women express themselves tentatively without warrant or justification more often than men".

Exploring the perception of women's tentative language by male and female audiences, Carli (1990) concludes that, while perceived as "trustworthy and likable" by men (949), women using tentative language will be trusted less by female audiences. Countering Lakoff's views, Holmes (1990) highlights the significance of prosodic factors, such as intonation, in the analysis of hedging devices. Holmes concludes that, rather than employing hedges as a device to express uncertainty, women use hedges to help them express their opinion confidently and positively.

More recently, in her study of six interviews with six Canadian politicians, Roth (2014) finds that both women and men politicians use hedges in largely similar ways, thereby countering Lakoff's (1973, 1975) perspective on women's language. In her dissertation, Kozubíková Šandová (2010) further backs up this idea by stating that female politicians struggle to present their viewpoints to the point in a clear-cut way as much as men politicians do.

Consequently, Lakoffean expectation for linguistic differences as reflecting broader societal expectations and stereotypes associated with gender and power, where women are expected to be more cautious, and men to be more assertive, seems not to withstand the test of time. Situations in which these views are still voiced may be indicative of conservative stereotypes (Friedman et al. 2017: 146).

1.5 Questions for the study

To examine the use of hedges by women and men politicians, we stem from much-quoted Lakoff's (1973; 1975; 1990) view on 'women's language', whereby women are expected to be prominent in using tentative language tools. In the context of this study, we hypothesise that women will use more hedges than men. The research questions we seek to answer are as follows:

1. What is the use and frequency distribution of hedges in press conference speeches?
2. What pragmatic functions do hedges have in press conference speeches?
3. What is the tendency of hedge use in the scripted and the spontaneous parts of the speech?
4. What is the hedge use and frequency distribution amongst genders?

The next section will present the methodology for the study.

2. Methodology

2.1 Data

The data for the study comprises 22 press conference speeches collected from the White House official page (https://www.whitehouse.gov) and the transcription companies https://www.rev.com and https://factba.se since all are very popular and are freely accessible. The corpus includes speeches by both elected politicians from 2022 (e.g., President Joe Biden, Governor of New York Kathy Hochul, Congressperson Nancy Pelosi) as well as institutional spokespersons such as press secretaries and national security advisors. While the latter were not elected officials, they nevertheless engage in high-level political communication and thus often respond to journalists' questions, informing them on official positions their respective institutions. Given formal public expectations for credibility, managing media relations, and upholding policy narratives, the linguistic choices of these officials are consequently shaped by strategic and institutional arrangements similar to those of politicians. Future research could investigate whether there are any systematic differences in the hedging strategies employed by spokespersons and elected officials.

The topics discussed in the selected speeches comprise the following:

- the global pandemic COVID-19,
- healthcare problems,
- alarmingly high inflation levels,
- oil conflict with Iran,
- Russia-Ukraine war.

The topics listed pertain to highly relevant agenda of the time. Consequently, the range of topics addressed may influence hedge distribution, given the high stakes and the need for cautious language to avoid controversy or criticism. A comparative study, contrasting topical and not-so-topical issues, could be a worthy consideration for future research.

Each press conference was to be of at least 4,500 words (this word count corresponds approximately to half an hour of speaking non-stop) and was to exceed an hour-long meeting and involve journalists who asked politicians questions.

Since the aforementioned websites were the primary source for the speeches, the variation of politicians was limited. The 22 speeches have the overall break-

down of two speeches per each politician; however, since there were not enough women speakers found on these websites, three speeches by Nancy Pelosi and Karine Jean-Perrie each were included instead of two.

Another limitation of the study is that we only focus on written transcripts of the speeches and apply Salager-Meyer's (1997) formal criteria for hedge identification. Consequently, prosodic factors, which, while significant in interpreting hedges in spoken discourse (such as intonation, pitch and stress) and defining a given item as a hedge or a booster (e.g., Holmes, 1990, 1995), are not included. We assume that, given the high-stakes agenda and globally a fairly unanimous response to the topics raised in the speeches under analysis, prosodic peculiarities leading to classificatory discrepancies are kept to the minimum. Meanwhile, prosodic variation that allows interpreting a given hedge as a booster would be expected in more contested topics, such as those where the speaker seeks to highlight their contrastive position to the accepted one and intonationally foregrounds their stance. We thus leave the incorporation of prosodic features into hedge analysis for further study.

2.2 *The procedure of analysis*

The structure of a press conference speech suggests that two different corpora need to be created: a corpus for the scripted sections and a corpus for the spontaneous sections of the selected speeches. These two corpora were further subdivided into two more subcorpora: one for female politicians and the other for male politicians. The total word count of all speeches is 98,895 and, as shown in *Table 1* below, spontaneous speeches were lengthier than scripted speeches.

For the quantitative analysis of the data, raw frequencies of the identified hedging devices were normalised into the number of occurrences per 1,000 words, the latter hereinafter given in bold in the parentheses. It should also be mentioned that normalised frequencies in the text are presented by adding the results from both the scripted and the spontaneous components to see on how many occasions each hedge appeared in total in women's and men's speeches.

Table 1. Sizes of corpora

Speech component	**Females**	**Males**
Scripted speech	10,797	8,723
Spontaneous speech	39,757	39,618
Total	50,554	48,341

To test for statistical significance, we use the log-likelihood test (Rayson and Garside 2000; Rayson n.d.), its calculator being available at Lancaster University website (https://www.lancaster.ac.uk/fss/courses/ling/corpus/blue/l08_4.htm), with the standard parameters of $p < 0.05$ and the critical value of the test of 3.84. During our study, the frequencies of hedges found in men's and women's speeches are compared using the log-likelihood test and then the data was analysed

qualitatively. We will discuss our findings in section *3.8. Discussion of frequencies and LL values* below.

After the quantitative analysis, the qualitative analysis was conducted. As has already been mentioned the empirical study analysed in this research involved the collection and interpretation of data from ten different speakers. Also, along the way the results were compared to the works of other scholars.

To build the corpora, our data were homogenised. Firstly, the speaker's name, journalists' questions and inaudible or crosstalk speech that appeared in the square brackets were deleted from the transcripts. Then, contractions such as *haven't* were transformed into their full forms. Finally, the data was processed using *Sketch Engine* software (Kilgarriff et al. 2004; Kilgarriff et al. 2014), viz., its *Concordance* tool, where each word was individually analysed to determine whether it is a hedge or not.

Collected hedges were classified according to Salager-Meyer's (1997) taxonomy. This classification is used in order to identify the specific linguistic features produced by politicians when they speak in public, such as *modal verbs*, *conditional clauses*, and *introductory phrases*. Although this is not its main asset, this classification also allows the researcher to reveal the social and political implications of using hedges, illuminating the relationships between the speaker, the audience, and the message.

To ensure uniformity of data presentation and consistency of analysis, the original classification by Salager-Meyer (1997), specifically with respect to the distinction of *auxiliary verbs, modal lexical verbs, introductory phrases* and *compound hedges*, was reviewed and elaborated on. As is known, there may be instances of overlaps in between these categories, for instance, with regard to the verb *believe*, which may be classified both as a lexical verb and part of the introductory phrase (Salager-Meyer 1997: 132–133). In our study, we supplemented these four classes with formal descriptors. Following Martin-Martin (2008: 138–139), the category *introductory phrases* will comprise combinations *pronoun* (e.g., *I*) + *hedging lexical verb* (e.g., *believe*) in the sentence-initial position. A subsequent complication within the category of introductory phrases is that such phrases may also function as *boosters*, that is, lexical items that strengthen the meaning of a proposition (Hinkel 2005; Zarza 2018). This is why, during the analysis stage of our data, every introductory phrase was read carefully to ensure that it conveyed the meaning of hedging and all booster-like items were removed from further analysis.

In line with Salager-Meyer (1997: 133), the category of *compound hedges* consists of several hedges used simultaneously and functioning as a single whole. This category comprises combinations like *modal auxiliary + hedging lexical verb* (e.g., *it would appear* that), *lexical verb + hedging adverb/adjective* (e.g., *it seems reasonable/probable* that), *lexical verb + hedging adjective + lexical verb* (e.g., *it seems reasonable to believe* that), etc. Thus, a compound hedge may also be referred to in terms of the number of its component parts, e.g., a *treble hedge*. Combinations whose composition did not conform to either of these constructions, were treated as discrete categories, that is, *modal auxiliary verbs*, *lexical verbs*, or *hedging adverb/adjective*.

As is known, *modal auxiliary verbs* are also problematic in that they may not only act as a hedge, but also express theoretical possibility. Literature on this topic suggests introduction of groupings that capture the epistemic meaning:

a) *Could* functions as a hedge when used in the construction: *could + be + adjective/noun*; *could + perfect infinitive* (Alexander 2003: 215).
b) *Should* conveys epistemic probability in the constructions *should + be, should + perfect infinitive* (Hall and Foley 1998: 14).
c) *Will* and *would* are recognised as hedges when expressing possibility in the future (Hall and Foley 1998: 28).
d) *Can* was not considered as a hedge in this study on the grounds that it expresses theoretical possibility rather than the speaker's likelihood of the statement (Šinkūnienė 2011: 14).
e) *May* was treated as a hedge when it conveyed the epistemic meaning and not a theoretical possibility (Šinkūnienė 2011: 14). For example, in the statement '[n]evertheless it *may* be observed that in the earliest phases of the life of the Cowdery's Down settlement <...> the majority of bone and cereal recovered came from buildings straddling the fence' (Ruud 2014: 8), *may* is viewed as conveying the dynamic meaning, i.e., theoretical possibility, and consequently is not a hedge. Whereas the epistemic meaning – of *may* acting as a hedge – may be found in another example provided by Ruud (ibid.): '[t]he organisation making the most economic use of nurses *may* expect to have a good proportion of its staff on part-time contracts.'

Due to the constraints of our study, we limit our discussion to ten most frequently used hedges. The categories in the tables in the Findings and Discussion section below descending order of popularity and appear in the following order:

> approximators of degree, indefinite quantity, frequency and time > modal auxiliary verbs > introductory phrases > modal lexical verbs > adjectival, adverbial and nominal phrases > if-clauses > compound hedges.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Approximators of degree, indefinite quantity, frequency and time Approximators of *degree*, *quantity*, *frequency* and *time* were the most frequently used category of hedges, resulting in a total of 505 cases used in the selected speeches (Table 2):

Table 2. Distribution of approximators of degree, quantity, frequency and time

Approximators of degree, indefinite quantity, frequency and time	Scripted speech		Spontaneous speech	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Many	20 (**1.85**)	12 (**1.38**)	60 (**1.19**)	17 (**0.30**)
Some	14 (**1.30**)	7 (**0.80**)	30 (**0.76**)	53 (**1.34**)
More	17 (**1.57**)	12 (**1.38**)	29 (**0.73**)	12 (**0.30**)
A lot of	0 (**0**)	5 (**0.57**)	19 (**0.48**)	39 (**0.98**)
Over	7 (**0.65**)	1 (**0.11**)	4 (**0.10**)	25 (**0.63**)
Few	6 (**0.56**)	7 (**0.80**)	9 (**0.23**)	10 (**0.25**)
Much	5 (**0.46**)	2 (**0.23**)	10 (**0.25**)	13 (**0.33**)
Little	3 (**0.28**)	0 (**0**)	12 (**0.30**)	2 (**0.05**)
Most	0 (**0**)	2 (**0.23**)	5 (**0.13**)	13 (**0.33**)
About	4 (**0.37**)	1 (**0.11**)	6 (**0.15**)	7 (**0.18**)
Total	76 (**7.04**)	49 (**5.61**)	184 (**4.32**)	191 (**4.69**)

One of the most frequently used approximators is *many*, viz., 3.35 times in total in women's corpus and 1.81 times in total in men's corpus (hereinafter, normalised results will be presented in the abbreviated form in parentheses, e.g., *(3.35w/1.81m)*). Nevertheless, the high frequency can be explained by the fact that *many* as well as *few*, *little*, *most*, *over*, *several* and *some* can be attributed to multiple approximator categories, rather than just one. Such adverbials were not discriminated into individual subcategories and were jointly referred to as *approximators of quantity* and *approximators of frequency and time*. Examples below illustrate the point:

(1) We have engaged Afghan technocrats with the Central Bank for **many** months regarding measures to enhance the country's macroeconomic stability <...>. (Ned Price 2020, August 17)

(2) And many of you raised your eyebrows at that; **many** people out in the public raised their eyebrows at that. (Jake Sullivan 2022, April 4)

In examples (1) and (2), *many* is used to avoid clear-cut numbers or frequencies and give a general overview. It should be noted that speakers using approximators neither reduce certainty nor withhold commitment to the statement. Also, approximators are multifunctional; as Hyland (2012) states, these hedges can modify objects like in example (2), or concrete numbers, as in (3) below:

(3) I told them on the eastern flank, if, in fact, he does invade, we are going to – I have already shipped **over** $600 million worth of sophisticated equipment, defensive equipment to the Ukrainians. (Joe Biden 2022, January 19)

In example (3), Joe Biden uses the approximator *over*, which helps the speakers not to commit to categorical assertations or to exact figures when precision is not necessary as Varttala (2001: 129) comments. Presenting a general overview rather technicalities and details is a general feature of approximators. Nevertheless, within Salager-Meyer's (1997) taxonomy, approximators do not obscure the information so that it loses any kind of precision. With regard to the political speeches examined, we can conclude that, when using approximators, politicians do not say less than they intend, but rather, do not overstate the data.

3.2. Modal auxiliary verbs

In the 22 political press conference speeches analysed, 237 *modal auxiliary verbs* were found (Table 3). As can be seen, the modal *would* was used the most and *may*, on the other hand, was used the least.

Table 3. Distribution of modal auxiliary verbs

Modal auxiliary verbs	Scripted speech		Spontaneous speech	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Would	4 (**0.37**)	6 (**0.69**)	53 (**1.34**)	90 (**2.27**)
Should	4 (**0.37**)	2 (**0.23**)	15 (**0.38**)	15 (**0.38**)
Might	2 (**0.19**)	0 (**0**)	8 (**0.20**)	11 (**0.28**)
Could	2 (**0.19**)	0 (**0**)	5 (**0.13**)	11 (**0.28**)
May	1 (**0.09**)	3 (**0.34**)	3 (**0.08**)	2 (**0.05**)
Total	13 (**1.20**)	11 (**1.26**)	84 (**2.12**)	129 (**3.26**)

The high frequency of the hedge *would* (1.71w/2.96) may be explained by its role as a direct marker of possibility. For example, in (4) below, Nancy Pelosi discusses national debts and their impact on the economy in a hypothetical rather than a direct manner:

(4) And any of the proposals that we put forth, whether it was 3.5 or 1.75, or whatever it was, we always had the thought that we **would** be reducing the national debt in all of that. (Nancy Pelosi 2022, June 16)

Consequently, *would* acts as a tool to help the speakers to avoid possible criticism and minimise the 'threat-to-face' (Salager-Meyer 1997: 129, Hyland 1996).

Should (0.75w/0.61m) was used to indicate references to the future, as in (5), or logical inference, as in (6):

(5) And I also think that we **should** be making sure that we have the ability to provide for two years of education beyond that whether it is apprenticeships or community colleges. (Joe Biden 2022, November 9)

(6) The will of the people of Brazil **should** be respected, and that is what we believe. (Karine Jean-Perrie 2022, November 2)

In example (5), Joe Biden discusses the educational system in America and the problem of Asian Americans getting into schools. In order not to explicitly state promises, the usage of *should* is viewed here as expressing cautious predictions (Hyland 1998b:113). Contrarily, in (6), Karine Jean-Perrie does not predict the future but implies a sense of obligation and consideration. Her statement suggests that the will of the people is to be respected – which is also the righteous thing to do – while the idea itself is formulated not as a requirement, but rather, as a suggestion. Thus, selecting *should*, the speakers sound less categorical and more tentative, or as Chen and Zhang (2017) add, express less certainty regarding the possibility of the event.

According to Palmer (2001) and Hyland (1998b: 116; 127), the modal auxiliary verbs *might*, *could*, and *may* express a high degree of tentativeness and possibility, of which *might* can introduce several possibilities when the context is ambiguous (Hyland 1998b: 117). However, these kinds of cases were not identified in the speeches examined. Overall, sentences with modal auxiliaries provide for a straightforward and common way to express hesitation and avoid direct criticism (Coates 1983). For example:

(7) I know you are – you want me to answer to a potential result that we **might** see next week, so I want to be very careful here. (Karine Jean-Perrie 2022, November 2)

In example (7), Karine Jean-Perrie is unsure of the project's outcome and wants to consider any possible challenges or obstacles that may arise before giving a confident answer. The hedge *might* used here is a polite way of expressing caution and leaving room for other interpretations or possible outcomes.

Our data contain are few instances of *could* while the difference between the women's and men's corpora is insignificant (0.32w/0.28m). In the contexts examined, *could* was used to present the speakers' observations and discuss possible future outcomes. For example:

(8) So, it **could** be an effort to just see if they could divert Ukrainian armed forces to that part of their border so that they cannot be used elsewhere in the Donbas or in the south, and that could be a tactic here. (John Kirby 2022, October 20)

In example (8), John Kirby suggests that it may be possible that Russia is trying to cause a diversion of Ukrainian armed forces away from other areas, such as the Donbas or the south, but he is not sure. Without the hedge *could*, the statement would have been overly assertive and too direct. Hence, *could* helps John Kirby to avoid being too confident and not to inflict false pessimism or optimism on the audience (Varttala 2001: 259).

May appeared the least in this category (0.17w/0.39m) in the form as shown in (9) below:

(9) I would note that we also take additional precautions and steps. I would expect that he **may** wear a mask when he is not speaking. (Jen Psaki 2022, April 27)

In example (9), Jen Psaki believes that Joe Biden would wear a mask when he is not speaking. Similarly to the hedge *could* we discussed earlier, *may* is used to talk about the future to avoid false optimism or pessimism (Varttala 2001:258). *May* is also used to lessen assertiveness by mitigating the importance of the situation. Somewhat surprisingly, this hedge was found to be the most predominant type of the modal auxiliary verb in Butler's (1990) study regarding the use of hedges in research articles and Varttala's (2001) study of research articles and popular science articles. The reason for a very low number of occurrences in the use of *may* in the genre of press conference speeches could be that politicians merely avoid using hedges like *may*, as the genre of the press conference speech by a politician presupposes a generally confident way of expressing opinions. Since hedges signal uncertainty or caution, politicians may consciously avoid them in formal interactions with the audience to project an authoritative image.

3.3. Introductory phrases

In total, there were 229 occurrences of *introductory phrases* identified, consisting of a pronoun and a modal lexical verb. As shown in *Table 4,* the combinations *pronoun + think* and *pronoun + know* were used the most with *pronoun + believe* third in line. The combinations *pronoun + feel*, *pronoun + view*, and *pronoun + imagine* were used the least, resulting in just a couple of entries.

Table 4. Distribution of introductory phrases

Introductory phrases	Scripted speech		Spontaneous speech	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Pronoun + *think*	4 (**0.37**)	3 (**0.34**)	63 (**1.59**)	56 (**1.41**)
Pronoun + *know*	0 (**0**)	5 (**0.57**)	42 (**1.06**)	26 (**0.66**)
Pronoun + *believe*	2 (**0.19**)	3 (**0.34**)	10 (**0.25**)	8 (**0.20**)
Pronoun + *feel*	1 (**0.09**)	0 (**0**)	3 (**0.08**)	0 (**0**)
Pronoun + *view*	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	2 (**0.05**)	0 (**0**)
Pronoun + *imagine*	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	1 (**0.03**)
Total	7 (**0.65**)	11 (**1.26**)	120 (**3.03**)	91 (**2.30**)

Referring to Martin-Martin's (2008: 138–139) definition of *the introductory phrase*, the combination *pronoun + think* was used the most. The combination *I think*

alone appeared as a hedging device (1.96w/1.75m), and, according to Holmes (1990:187), may express either uncertainty or certainty. In our data, this combination was used in both contexts. Examples below illustrate the point:

(10) <...> **I think**, was a mistake, but you still see thousands and thousands of people who work for major corporations having to be tested as a consequence of the decision made by the corporation, not by the standard I said that is there**. I think** you see that increase, not decrease, number one. (Joe Biden 2022, January 19)

(11) One of the things **I think** that the President may say, I do not have this as a fact, is that we will use the Defense Production Act to speed up diversification <...>. (Nancy Pelosi)

In (10), Joe Biden displays a high degree of confidence and certainty while pointing out that the view expressed is his personal opinion. Likewise, Simon-Vandenbergen (2000) in his study finds that when *I think* is used in a statement, it expresses the speaker's personalised attitude and opinion. Based on the findings of her study, Kozubíková Šandová (2010) adds that *I think* is employed in politicians' speeches to denote subjectivity and to increase their degree of involvement in the discussion. Kashiha (2022: 93) notes that this introductory phrase is used to help the audience feel involved in the discussion.

Meanwhile in (11), the situation outlined is highly tentative itself, and the speaker Nancy Pelosi feels she needs to highlight the tentativeness of her belief by using the hedge *I think*. Since the broader context lacks precision and is of hypothetical nature, we interpret this occurrence of the hedge as assisting in the expression of uncertainty.

Next is the combination *pronoun + know* phrase, which appears more frequently in men's speech than in women's, suggesting a gendered pattern in how knowledge is presented. From all pronoun combinations, *you know* was the most commonly used phrase, especially characteristic of informal discourse. For example:

(12) **You know**, the cost of college education has increased fourfold. (Joe Biden 2022, November 19)

The phrase *you know* in example (12) helps establish an informal conversational tone, implying a recognition of shared knowledge between the speaker and the audience. This phrase can add a sense of intimateness to the conversation and invite the listener to join in on the conversation. It also serves as a way for the speaker to emphasise their point and ensure clarity, assuring the listener that the speaker has thought through their opinion. Occasionally, different types of words (adverbs, adjectives, interjections, conjugations, e.g., *again*, *and*, *but*, *so*, *well*) may be found in front of introductory phrases.

Both *we know* and *I know* serve similar functions in political speech and are often used to soften claims or build solidarity. In the collected women's and men's corpora, they, too, conveyed a similar meaning—viz., helping politicians

save face and express positive politeness (Holmes 1995: 89). For example, in (13) below, Joe Biden uses *I know* as a form of evasion, responding to journalists' questions on budget reallocation:

(13) **I know** that the two people who opposed, on the Democratic side at least, support a number of things that are in there. (Joe Biden 2022, January 19)

The construction *pronoun + believe* appears similarly in both corpora (0.44w/0.54m). According to Hyland (1998a:366), speakers use *pronoun + believe* phrases to stress the subjectivity of their statement. Apparently, *we believe* is used the most (0.33w/0.43m) in both corpora. For example:

(14) **We believe** any movement of forces from around Kyiv is a redeployment and not a withdrawal. (Kate Bedingfield 2022, March 29)

Kate Bedingfield, by using *we believe* in the example (14), softens the tone of the statement that follows, making it subjective, more polite, and tactful. In Kashiha's (2022: 93) study, Obama's use of phrases such as *I believe* in softening his arguments is viewed as aimed at meeting the expectations and perspectives of his audience and, consequently, as a means of persuasion. For Obama, this move was necessary as the audience members were United Nations and political experts of the US Congress. Thus, the possible reason for the small number of *pronoun + believe* phrases in our corpus is that, during a press conference, the audience is made up by journalists rather than high-ranking politicians, while the speaker has to retain their authority, rather than position themselves as standing on a part with their listeners.

The combinations *pronoun + feel*, *pronoun + view*, *pronoun + imagine* will not be discussed in further detail as their frequencies are low, while functions and meanings are largely synonymous. To motivate their low occurrence in the corpus, we suggest that the shades of meanings they convey – viz., those of tactile and intuitive nature – may potentially weaken the status of the politician, should they overtly rely on their feelings and imagination, rather that information-based opinion.

3.4. Modal lexical verbs

Modal lexical verbs, or as Salager-Meyer (1997: 132) refers to them, 'speech act verbs', which have varying illocutionary force (Hyland 1998b: 23), resulted in 185 cases in total. *Table 5* presents top ten most frequently used modal lexical verbs across women's and men's speeches. As can be seen, many verbs in the table, such as *think, believe, consider, suggest*, refer to mental processes, and may be jointly referred to as *cognitive verbs* (Halliday and Matthiessen 1999: 95). Evidently, *think* (here in expressions other than *pronoun + think* in the front position, which was considered an *introductory phrase*) was used the most often (0.81w/1.47m).

Table 5. Distribution of modal lexical verbs

Modal lexical verbs	Scripted speech		Spontaneous speech	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Think	3 (**0.28**)	4 (**0.46**)	21 (**0.53**)	40 (**1.01**)
Try	4 (**0.37**)	8 (**0.92**)	8 (**0.20**)	23 (**0.58**)
Believe	2 (**0.19**)	0 (**0**)	14 (**0.35**)	11 (**0.28**)
Consider	0 (**0**)	1 (**0.11**)	7 (**0.18**)	3 (**0.08**)
Seek	1 (**0.09**)	3 (**0.34**)	1 (**0.03**)	5 (**0.13**)
Suggest	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	1 (**0.03**)	6 (**0.15**)
Attempt	0 (**0**)	2 (**0.23**)	1 (**0.03**)	2 (**0.05**)
Indicate	0 (**0**)	3 (**0.34**)	0 (**0**)	2 (**0.05**)
Propose	4 (**0.37**)	1 (**0.11**)	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)
Appear	0 (**0**)	1 (**0.11**)	2 (**0.05**)	1 (**0.03**)
Total	14 (**1.30**)	23 (**2.62**)	55 (**1.4**)	93 (**2.36**)

Palmer (2001) states that such verbs can signal the speaker's level of confidence in a statement, while Bybee (2015) highlights their role in the construction of knowledge claims. In our corpus, politicians use modal lexical verbs for different goals: to interpret information, to form an opinion, or even to make a decision. For example:

(15) And obviously, he has spoken to this over the last several days, multiple times, and I **think** he will continue to. (Jen Psaki 2022, May 5)

In example (15), Jen Psaki does not want to put words into Joe Biden's mouth by stating that he will do something. Thus, by using *think* as a hedge, the speakers avoid making a straightforward statement and leave the sentence free for interpretation as the speaker informs about alternative views on the subject. Note also that there is also a combination *and I think*, which we commented on shortly above in our discussion of introductory phrases. In the way it appears in (15), we treat this combination as a phrase *I think* and a conjunction, however, on the grounds of its positioning in the middle of the sentence, albeit in the clause-initial position.

Try was the third most popular lexical verb in this category (0.57w/1.50m) and acted as a tool to express possibility and uncertainty while saving speakers' face. For example:

(16) This is, again, a continued discussion of our strategic priorities as we **try** to move forward on our agenda. (Kate Bedingfield 2022, March 30)

In terms of their semantic contribution, *try* and its synonym *attempt* refer to a physical, rather than mental, undertaking, without guaranteeing the success of the

action described, thereby signalling uncertainty. *Seek* is similar to this subgroup, but additionally encodes the willingness of the intent on the speaker's part. Just like these verbs, *indicate* and *appear* have low frequencies, too, and their overall insignificant use in the political context may be motivated by the fact that they do not help construct the personality of the politician as a knowledgeable, authoritative, and accountable person. One might argue that *indicate* could well be used in this context, however. Given our findings, we may suggest that its low occurrence is suggestive of a distancing effect the verb may have, being much more characteristic of scholarly discourse where impartiality and self-distancing are at the core.

3.5. Adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrases

Adjectival, *adverbial* and *nominal modal phrases* occurred 163 times. Modal adverbs were used the most (1.74w/2.06m), while nominal modal nouns, on the contrary, did not act as hedges; thus, this is why this subcategory is not presented in *Table 6* and will not be discussed in further detail.

Table 6. Distribution of adjectival, adverbial and nominal phrases

Adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrases	Scripted speech		Spontaneous speech	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Adjectival modal phrases				
Potential	1 (**0.09**)	0 (**0**)	11 (**0.28**)	13 (**0.33**)
Possible	1 (**0.09**)	2 (**0.23**)	4 (**0.10**)	4 (**0.10**)
Likely	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	1 (**0.03**)	4 (**0.10**)
Broad	0 (**0**)	2 (**0.23**)	4 (**0.10**)	0 (**0**)
Normal	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	3 (**0.08**)	0 (**0**)
Adverbial modal phrases				
Kind of	1 (**0.09**)	1 (**0.11**)	5 (**0.13**)	7 (**0.18**)
Probably	3 (**0.28**)	1 (**0.11**)	5 (**0.13**)	5 (**0.13**)
In a way	4 (**0.37**)	1 (**0.11**)	3 (**0.08**)	2 (**0.05**)
Potentially	0 (**0**)	1 (**0.11**)	4 (**0.10**)	5 (**0.13**)
Likely	0 (**0**)	5 (**0.57**)	2 (**0.05**)	3 (**0.08**)
Quite	1 (**0.09**)	0 (**0**)	3 (**0.08**)	5 (**0.13**)
Broadly	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	3 (**0.08**)	4 (**0.10**)
Hopefully	2 (**0.19**)	0 (**0**)	3 (**0.08**)	1 (**0.03**)
Sort of	1 (**0.09**)	1 (**0.11**)	0 (**0**)	3 (**0.08**)
Perhaps	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	3 (**0.08**)	1 (**0.03**)
Total	14 (**1.29**)	14 (**1.58**)	54 (**1.4**)	57 (**1.47**)

According to Salager-Meyer et al. (2003), *adjectival modal phrases* specify the degree of possibility, ability, or necessity of a situation, and *adverbial modal phrases* provide information about the speaker's attitude. Rather than just providing factual information, these modal phrases highlight the speaker's evaluation of the situation.

In the analysed speeches, *adjectival modal phrases* functioned as a tool to save the speakers' faces and express uncertainty, as illustrated below:

(17) We know the risk of potential surges, even as a **potential** new variant or sub variant remains. (Jen Psaki 2022, April 27)

In (17), the adjective *potential,* which had the highest number of occurrences in this category (0.37w/0.33m), helps Jen Psaki to emphasise the uncertainty associated with the risk of new Covid-19 variants and a surge in the spread of the virus. Consequently, the speaker's negative face is protected.

According to Rabab'ah and Rumman (2015: 170), adverbial modal phrases express various degrees of probability and uncertainty, as well as the truth or falsity of a proposition. For example:

(18) So I think when you see all of these documents come together in their totality, the – you will see **kind of** where the overall issue of nuclear posture and the role of nuclear weapons fits in. (Jake Sullivan 2022, October 12)

Kind of (022w/0.29m) is a hedging device, which, according to Holmes (1990:188), carries an affective function and helps to reduce the social distance between the speakers. Like other hedges, it serves a face-saving function. Hence in (18), *kind of* is used to create a connection between the interviewer and Jake Sullivan by making his conclusion open for interpretation. Also, it implies that the speaker is not confident in the validity of his statement or prediction and is open for further discussion. Thus, *kind of* functions as a device to save negative face.

Similarly, *probably* (0.41w/0.24m) creates a level of uncertainty and makes a sentence fuzzy. For example:

(19) Look, I did not over promise and what I have **probably** outperformed what anybody thought would happen. (Joe Biden 2022, January 19)

It is evident that *probably* in example (19) makes the statement vague and fuzzy as a hedged statement allows Joe Biden to express his opinion without seeming too attached. Also, speakers using *probably* can express a high level of confidence without appearing overly boastful.

3.6. If-clauses

Table 7 presents the data on *if-clauses* used by politicians in the press conference speeches analyzed. All in all, 60 hedges in the form of conditionals were found, of which *type 0 conditionals* were used most frequently (0.65w/0.77m). *Type 3 conditionals*, on the contrary, were used the least (0w/0.03m).

Table 7. Distribution of if-clauses

If-clauses	Scripted speech		Spontaneous speech	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Type 0	4 (**0.37**)	5 (**0.57**)	11 (**0.28**)	8 (**0.20**)
Type 1	3 (**0.28**)	3 (**0.34**)	11 (**0.28**)	4 (**0.10**)
Type 2	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	5 (**0.13**)	5 (**0.13**)
Type 3	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	1 (**0.03**)
Total	7 (**0.65**)	8 (**0.91**)	27 (**0.69**)	18 (**0.46**)

Type 0 conditionals convey general truths that take place in hypothetical or possible situations, which explains their frequent use. Their highest occurrence among the other types of *if*-clauses in this class suggests that politicians aim to generalize relevant actions as naturally and inevitably occurring in the circumstances presented, much like physical reactions. In doing so, they exert manipulative influence on the hearers, encouraging them to take the cause-and-effect relation depicted for granted. The presence of the hypothetical situation Clemen (1997: 243) is reduced to a natural outcome of the situation. For example:

(20) **If you are dependent on a country like Russia, your security depends on you having that energy**. (Nancy Pelosi 2022, March 31)

Type 0 conditionals are very effective for the speakers as they help reduce the possible outcomes of the situation depicted to the one presented overtly in the *if*-less part of the sentence and thus present even unlikely or undesirable situations as logically following from the circumstances outlined.

Conditionals of type 1 conditionals take the second place and have a slightly higher occurrence in women's speeches than in men's (0.56w/0.44m). According to Alexander (2003: 273), these types of *if*-clauses are used to talk about something that has high possibility of happening in the future. In example (21) below, using *conditionals of type 1*, Jen Psaki refers to a hypothetical future when referring on the funding of COVID-19 vaccines. Also, here the balance of possibility and likelihood is maintained:

(21) **If we do not get this funding, we will have fewer vaccines, treatments and tests**. (Jen Psaki 2022, May 5)

Conditionals of type 2 ranked third and were used equally by both women and men. As is known, this type of *if-clause* expresses a lesser degree of certainty in the present time. For example:

(22) He said **if he was in here in office, he would do it better**; it would not happen under him. (Jake Sullivan 2022, April 4)

In (22), Jake Sullivan uses *type 2 conditional* to express a condition contrary to fact. The speaker is repeating what Donald Trump claimed in the past: if he were in the office, the situation in Ukraine would be different. Thus, this type of clause expresses an unreal situation as the situation described is unlikely or not even possible.

Conditionals of type 3, dealing with imagined situations in the past Alexander (2003: 273), were the least frequent and were only used by men. For example, in (23), discussing Iran's political situation, which is a considerable concern in USA's political world, Price uses his authority to outline the possible, yet unfulfilled, alternative to the situation currently holding:

(23) If all sides, **if the Iranians had demonstrated a seriousness of purpose from the earliest days of this, we would have been able to achieve a mutual return to compliance with the JCPOA in relatively short order**. (Ned Price 2022, August 17)

This way of reasoning demonstrates the openness of American political world and readiness to respond to all types of situations arising. Overall, however, the low number of occurrences of this type of conditionals can be viewed as the politicians' reluctance to contemplate over the past events. Instead, they prefer to focus on ongoing occurrences and act in a straightforward, here-and-now manner, thereby avoiding revealing any weaknesses or instability of the political architecture they represent.

3.7. Compound hedges

As seen in *Table 8*, a total of 65 occurrences of compound hedges formed by the constructions *modal auxiliary verb + lexical verb* and *lexical verb + hedging adjective/adverb* were found in women and men speakers' speeches. Interestingly, all instances occur exclusively in spontaneous speech.

No hedges following the patterns *lexical verb + hedging adverb* and *lexical verb + hedging adjective* were found; hence, they are not included in Table 8.

Table 8. Distribution of compound hedges

Compound hedges	Scripted speech		Spontaneous speech	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Modal auxiliary + Lexical verb				
Double hedges				
Would refer	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	12 (**0.30**)	18 (**0.45**)
Would tell	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	11 (**0.28**)
Would say	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	7 (**0.18**)	7 (**0.18**)
Would think	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	2 (**0.05**)
Could speculate	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	1 (**0.03**)
Would argue	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	1 (**0.03**)	0 (**0**)
Would normally	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	1 (**0.03**)	0 (**0**)
Would potentially	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	1 (**0.03**)	0 (**0**)
Would suggest	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	1 (**0.03**)
Treble hedges				
Think + most + pronoun + lexical verb	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	2 (**0.05**)
Would tend to believe	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	1 (**0.03**)
Lexical verb + hedging adverb				
Lexical verb + hedging adjective				
Total	0 (**0**)	0 (**0**)	22 **(0.57)**	43 **(1.1)**

The subcategory of compound hedges *modal auxiliary + lexical verb* was used the most and was divided into *double* and *treble hedges* categories. The former ranked first, with *would refer*, *would say*, and *would tell* being the most frequently used phrases. Interestingly, the function of the phrase *would refer* (0.30w/0.45m) differs from the other compound hedges as it redirects the question to another person. *Would say* or *would tell*, on the other hand, are speaker-focused and serve to express opinion. Example (24) below shows one of the rhetorical strategies that the speakers use when they seek to avoid commitment to a stance on a controversial or complex subject. This allows them to evade possible criticism by attributing the question to someone else (Hyland 1996):

(24) So, I **would refer** you to them in terms of the status. (Patrick Ryder 2022, November 10)

Other double hedges helped to save speakers' face by keeping the propositions vague. For example:

(25) I do not have any specifics. I **could speculate** from here, but I am not going to do that. (Patrick Ryder 2022, September 7)

It is evident that in example (25), Pat Ryder refuses to give speculations and tones down his statement to save his negative face. The speaker's refusal to provide an elaboration on their words enhances their credibility, conveying an idea that they are unwilling to make unsupported claims. The phrase also provides an escape from committing to any particular viewpoint, allowing the speaker to remain neutral.

Treble hedges appeared only in men's speeches (0w/0.08m). Their extremely low occurrence may be explained by politicians' avoidance of overly tentative and vague propositions, as this undermines the goal of persuading the audience. For instance:

(26) I **think most** observers **would** like to get back to a point where Iran's breakout time is not dangerously low. (Ned Price 2022, August 17)

The use of the treble hedge in (26), allows Ned Price to soften his statement and make it less direct as there could be other perspectives to what observers think. By layering hedges (*I think, most observers, would like*), Price distances himself from a firm assertion and frames the statement as an external viewpoint rather than his own. This strategy helps shift responsibility onto an unspecified group ("most observers") while indicating uncertainty about the speaker's stance. Nevertheless, as noted earlier, the overall frequency of treble hedges remains low, likely because excessive tentativeness can undermine a politician's persuasive intent.

3.8. Discussion of frequencies and log-likelihood values

Table 9 below provides an overview of the quantitative analysis of hedge use in the speeches analyzed. There were 1415 hedges found in total, which results in hedges being used about every 70 words and take up approximately 1.4% of the speeches. Comparing hedge use by gender, hedges take about 1.5% of men's speeches and 1.3% of women's speeches. In women's scripted speeches, hedges occur about every 82, and in spontaneous speeches, every 73 words. In men's speeches, the respective numbers are 75 and 64 words. Hence, we can see that in the analyzed speeches, men use hedges more frequently than women. The difference is statistically significant with LL = 6.07.

Contrary to Lakoff's (1973, 1975) claim that women use more hedges due to social conditioning toward tentative speech (to the effect that their language may potentially be perceived as 'illogical' (Lakoff 1990: 203)), our findings indicate that male politicians hedge more frequently than their female counterparts. One possible explanation for this may lie in the fact that female politicians are historically subjected to greater scrutiny regarding their perceived authority (Carli, 1990; Holmes, 1990) and thus may put conscious efforts at monitoring their use of hedges to project confidence and decisiveness.

On the contrary, male politicians, who have traditionally been associated with direct and authoritative speech, may strategically opt for hedging to signal

adaptability, diplomacy, or openness to negotiation. This idea is supported by previous research suggesting that rhetorical strategies are not merely gendered but are rather shaped by the societal expectations of leaders and their political positioning (Friedman et al. 2017). Our findings thus contribute to an evolving understanding of political discourse, in which traditional gender-based linguistic differences are being renegotiated in response to shifting societal and professional norms.

Table 9. Distribution of hedges in total

	Scripted speech				Spontaneous speech				Total	
	Women		Men		Women		Men			
	RF	NF	RF	NF	RF	NF	RF	NF	NF w/m	LL
Approximators of degree, quantity, frequency and time	76	7.04	49	5.61	184	4.32	191	4.69	5.14/4.96	0.16
Modal auxiliary verbs	13	1.20	11	1.26	84	2.12	129	3.26	1.92/2.90	**9.89**
Introductory phrases	7	0.65	11	1.26	120	3.03	91	2.30	2.50/2.11	1.73
Modal lexical verbs	14	1.30	23	2.62	55	1.4	93	2.36	1.36/2.40	**14.27**
Adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrases	14	1.29	14	1.58	54	1.4	57	1.47	1.34/1.40	0.27
If-clauses	7	0.65	8	0.91	27	0.69	18	0.46	0.67/0.54	0.74
Compound hedges	0	0	0	0	22	0.57	43	1.1	0.44/0.89	**7.88**
Total	131	12.13	116	13.24	546	13.53	622	15.64	**13.37/15.2**	**6.07**

The rightmost column of Table 9 lists the log-likelihood values for the specific categories of hedges as used by women and men. As can be seen, there are three categories where the LL value is significant. These are the categories of *modal auxiliary verbs*, *modal lexical verbs* and *compound hedges*. Modal auxiliary verbs take second place in usage; the LL value is 9.89 and, based on normalised frequencies, in the spontaneous speech, women used nearly 1.5 times fewer modal auxiliary verbs than men. Hence, we conclude that women relied on being more assertive while men politicians opted for making their statements vague and free for interpretation so as to avoid criticism and possible backfire.

Another notable finding is that in spontaneous speeches, auxiliary verbs appeared almost twice as often among women and 2.5 times as often among men compared to their use in the scripted speeches. The difference may be explained by the nature of the constituent components of the press conference speech genre: while scripted speeches undergo thorough revision and editing beforehand, the question-and-answer segment is delivered on the spot. In this setting, the speakers may often need to search for a neutral way to express their opinions rather than simply present a predetermined position of the establishment.

Our assumption that revision of scripted speeches reflects the institutional influence rather than an individual politician's choice was also the reason for incorporating spontaneous speeches into analysis: namely, to ensure validity of the examination conducted. Additionally, as stated earlier, given the high topicality of the speeches analyzed and a globally fairly uniform response to the events they address, we assume that potential discrepancies between the present study and a study based on data produced in purely spontaneous conditions would be minimal. We also see a contrastive study of hedges used explicitly in institutional and spontaneous speeches as a potential topic for future research.

Modal lexical verbs resulted in the most significant LL values at 14.27, with women using half as many these hedges as men in both the scripted and the spontaneous speech components (1.36w/2.4m). This finding suggests that women speakers have been more confident and straightforward in their language use, which aligns with evolving societal perceptions of gender and leadership. As more women occupy high-ranking political positions, expectations for their communication style may also be changing, encouraging them to opt for direct and confident language. Meanwhile, male politicians' increased use of hedging may be indicative of strategic ambiguity, which allows them to appear flexible and adaptable without committing to declarative statements that could be perceived as too bold or risky. Additionally, both genders use significantly more modal lexical verbs in spontaneous speeches than in scripted ones, suggesting that politicians may be willing to purposefully hedge their statements when speaking off the cuff. This may be due to various factors, including the politicians' desire to avoid adopting overly definitive stances that could later be used against them, or simply a tendency to opt for less formal language in spontaneous settings so as to appear more approachable and maintain an intimate relationship with the audience.

These findings highlight the inherent properties of political rhetoric, which may not be immediately observable – such as the voicing of the institutional, rather than personal, position – and how politicians use language to shape public opinion. The differential use of hedging strategies could also influence media portrayal and public perception of politicians. Prior research suggests that women in politics are often framed as less authoritative when they hedge (Carli 1990; Holmes 1990), whereas men using hedges may be perceived as engaging or diplomatic. The findings of this study provide empirical evidence to revisit such claims and explore whether contemporary political discourse exhibits a gender-based rhetorical shift.

Finally, compound hedges were used the least and, for both genders, only in spontaneous speeches. Men used these phrases twice as often (0.89m/0.44w,

LL=7.88). We interpret this tendency by suggesting that men in positions of power may opt for hedging to protect themselves from potential criticism or backlash. Compound hedges allow politicians to soften their statements and avoid making direct assertions, which may be perceived as less risky or polarising. Additionally, men may be socialised to prioritise their authority and to avoid appearing too vulnerable or uncertain in their language, which results in their resorting to hedging strategies more often than female politicians. Further, compound hedges appear exclusively in spontaneous speech, which reflects the nature of this genre. On the one hand, politicians no longer have the unquestionable backing for their words from the stakeholders they represent and hence select more cautious ways of presenting their views. On the other hand, they may thus seek a more intimate connection with their audience. Conversely, scripted speeches, designed to represent the official opinion of the establishment and to deliver a message from a knowledgeable authority, seem to deliberately avoid compound hedges as the latter are ineffective in conveying the message in an authoritative way. Future research could examine how these patterns affect audience reception, particularly in relation to political persuasion and credibility. Studies incorporating prosodic and contextual analyses could further elaborate on the nuanced role of hedging in contemporary political speech.

4. Conclusions

The present article examined the use of hedges in press conference speeches by US politicians, applying Salager-Meyer's (1997) taxonomy. Based on Lakoff's (1973; 1975; 1990) claim on 'women's language', it was hypothesised that, in the analysed speeches, women would use more hedges than men. Our quantitative and qualitative analysis of 22 speeches revealed that, overall, hedges account for approximately 1.4% of the speeches, with men using slightly more hedges than women (1.5% vs. 1.3%, respectively). In terms of frequency, men's speeches contained hedges approximately every 75 words in scripted speech and every 64 words in spontaneous speech, while women used hedges every 82 words in scripted speeches and every 73 words in spontaneous speeches. This disproves the initial hypothesis, suggesting that men tend to use hedges more frequently than women, especially in spontaneous speech.

Further, significant differences were observed in the categories of modal auxiliary verbs (LL = 9.89), modal lexical verbs (LL = 14.27), and compound hedges (LL = 7.88). The use of modal auxiliary verbs is notably higher in men's speeches, particularly in spontaneous interactions, where they are used almost 2.5 times more often than in scripted speeches. This finding supports the hypothesis that men tend to use hedges to introduce vagueness, allowing their statements to remain open to interpretation and avoiding direct assertions that might invite criticism. In contrast, women's use of auxiliary verbs is more prominent in spontaneous speech, which may reflect their need to navigate unpredictable interactions with the press and find neutral ways to express their views, rather than presenting a predetermined position of the establishment.

In terms of specific categories of hedges, approximators were used the most in both women's and men's speeches, followed by modal auxiliary verbs, introductory phrases, and modal lexical verbs. Adjectival, adverbial, and nominal phrases, if-clauses, and compound hedges were used the least. The distribution by gender indicates that men have a greater preference for using modal auxiliaries and lexical verbs, adjectives, adverbial and nominal phrases, if-clauses, and compound hedges than women. Such results suggest that men tend to be more cautious, avoid making direct assertions and leave statements open to interpretation. Women, in contrast, used fewer hedges in their speeches, which might make them appear more straightforward and overly confident when speaking and answering questions directly. This supports Holmes' (1990) interpretation of Lakoff's perspective

There are also differences in how hedges are used in the scripted and spontaneous parts of a press conference speech. Approximators, if-clauses and adjectival, adverbial and nominal phrases predominate in the scripted component of the speeches. This tendency is due the fact that the introductory part of the speech is prepared prior to the conference, and speakers are more cautious in their remarks. As a result, hedging devices help the speakers to avoid making inaccurate statements and to appear less committed to their statements. Meanwhile in the spontaneous part of the speeches, modal auxiliary verbs, lexical verbs and introductory phrases appeared most frequently, but to a lower degree in women's speeches, suggesting their preference for a more direct and assertive language. Additionally, in spontaneous speech, men used compound hedges twice as often as women, reinforcing the idea that men hedge more often to mitigate risk.

Since the study was only limited to written transcripts of the speeches, only formal criteria were consulted, and prosodic information was not included, assuming that, given the high-stakes agenda, the speaker's perspective would align with the globally fairly unanimous response, with no contrastive patterns expected. Further research could include analysis of intonation patterns so as to verify the pragmatic functions of the hedges used, for instance, following Holmes' (1990) criteria. Another research possibility is to expand the scope of the present study to include press conference speeches produced by NATO leaders, European Union leaders, or local Parliament leaders, to develop further insights on whether US politicians' language differs from that of leaders of other national and international institutions.

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