

## **A Pragmatic Study of Hedges in President Muhammadu Buhari's 2015 Inaugural Address**

**Idowu, Olubunmi**

*Corresponding Author, Department of Languages and Literary Studies  
Babcock University, Ilishan Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria  
E-mail: owuyemercy@gmail.com*

**Owuye, Mercy**

*Department of Languages and Literary Studies, Babcock University  
Ilishan Remo, Ogun State, Nigeria*

### **Abstract**

Political leaders are saddled with the responsibility of presenting full-strength, accurate and unadulterated information on national issues about the state of affairs of the country on national security, health care, economy and internal relations and one of the ways of transmitting this is through political speeches. However, studies have shown that hedges are used to avoid categorical commitment. This study, therefore, examined the pragmatic use of hedges and the contextual reasons for hedging in the inaugural address of President Muhammadu Buhari (PMB). The study adopted the Salager-Meyer (2007) classification on hedges and excerpts were purposively extracted for in-depth and textual analysis. Findings revealed that the preponderant hedging device was modal auxiliary verbs: will, should, would, can, might and may. The hedging devices employed were 50% representing 10 has modal auxiliary verbs, 25% representing 5 has approximators, 10% are epistemic verbs, 5% are hypothetical construction and 10% are adverbials. The contextual reasons for hedging were to: express uncertainty and imprecision; mitigate direct criticism and provocation; save the public self-image of PMB. The study concluded that there is a significant relationship between hedging and modality. The study, recommends the use of hedges for positive self-imagining and national development.

### **Introduction**

The power of speech is an imperative aspect of human existence. Human beings communicate thoughts, ideas, and innovations through language. Thus, several scholars (Beard, 2000; Haugen, 1974; Holmes, 1990; Hyland, 1998 & Moulton, 1974) have tried to define language, however the working definition for this study is the definition propounded by Osisanwo (2003) that language is human vocal noise or the arbitrary representation of this noise, used systematically and conventionally by members of a speech community for the purposes of communication. This definition is clear and appropriate for this study because it presents not just the language form but its functional aspects. Consequently, since the focus of this study is not just the form of language in political speeches but its functions in a particular context; the appropriate subfield of language for this study is pragmatics.

Watson and Hill (1993) postulated that pragmatics studies the view point of the user, especially the choices, the constraints met with in employing the use of language and the effects the use has on the communication situation. Therefore, it can be concluded that identifying the context of an utterance before concluding what the language user used it for and the meaning of the message is akin to

pragmatics. As a result, it is not only essential for a language user to be grammatically proficient, but also to be pragmatically competent.

Pragmatic competence is achieved when there is the ability to communicate an intended message strategically with all its nuances and sociocultural context, in order to interpret the message of an interlocutor as it was intended. However, in speech, speakers sometimes tend to mitigate the impact of what is said to reduce commitment to the truth value. The pragmatic devices that afford this opportunity are called hedges, which constitute an imperative aspect of communicative competence; consequently, an aspect of pragmatic competence is the ability to hedge when necessary. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to investigate the use of hedging in political discourse using the 2015 Inaugural Address of President Muhammadu Buhari's (henceforth PMB).

## **Hedging Phenomena**

Throughout the research literature, hedges have eluded any widely-accepted definition. Fundamental to the problem of definition is the divergence in approach to the nature and realisation of hedging. Traditionally, hedges were considered to be semantic modifiers or approximators in the spirit of the original definition by Lakoff (1972:195), who coined the term 'hedge' to describe a word or phrase 'whose job it is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy'. Lakoff is concerned with hedges in terms of the semantic contribution they make to the statements in which they occur (Loewenberg 1982:196), in that hedges can weaken or strengthen the illocutionary force of an utterance.

According to Webster's II, New Riverside Dictionary (1984), a hedge is any deliberately ambiguous statement or any equivocal statement. House and Kasper (1981) included hedges among other mitigating devices in their politeness marker category. They called these devices hedges, play-downs, understaters, downtoners, or minus committers. Hedging has received much attention in relation to conversational rules as a means to facilitate turn-taking, show politeness, mitigate face-threats, but it is also considered a means of conveying vagueness purposely. Politeness and hedging have become forms of social interpretation of verbal and non-verbal behaviour revolving around the concept of saving face, thus playing a crucial role in social interaction strategies. According to Swales (1990), hedges are rhetorical devices used for projecting honesty, modesty and proper caution in self-reports and for diplomatically creating space in areas heavily populated by other researchers.

However, in academic writing, hedging is most appropriately described as either a lack of complete commitment to the truth value of an accompanying proposition, or a desire not to express that commitment categorically (Hyland, 1998). In Myers' (1989) discussion of the use of politeness in scientific writing, he groups all such linguistic devices under his category of negative politeness and hedging, focusing less on the description of the linguistic devices themselves than on their purpose or motivation. He stated that hedging is a politeness strategy when it marks a claim, or any other statement, as being provisional, pending acceptance in the literature, acceptance by the community- in other words, acceptance by the readers. Myers (1989) went on to point out that hedging can be realized in many different linguistic forms, and gives examples of the use of conditional statements, modifiers, verb choice, framing statements that indicate the weight a statement should have or the degree of doubt involved, and even statements of personal opinion.

According to Hübler (1983) hedges are used to increase the appeal of the utterance, to make it more acceptable to the interlocutor and thus increase the probability of acceptance and reduce the chances of negation. This could also explain the actual term hedge as the attitude of the speaker trying to protect him/herself from potential rejection on the part of the interlocutor. House & Kasper believe (1981) that both these functions- one defensive and ego-oriented, the other protective or alter-oriented are fulfilled by politeness.

## The Classification of Salager-Meyer on Hedges

Salager-Meyer (2007) proposed the following classification of hedges:

- i. modal auxiliary verbs, the most tentative ones being: may, might, can, could, would, should.
- ii. modal lexical verbs (or the so-called —speech act verbs used to perform acts such as doubting and evaluating rather than merely describing) of varying degree of illocutionary force: to seem, to appear (epistemic verbs), to believe, to assume, to suggest, to estimate, to tend, to think, to argue, to indicate, to propose, to speculate. Although a wide range of verbs can be used in this way (Banks, 1994), there tends to be a heavy reliance on the above-mentioned example especially in academic writing:
- iii. adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrases:
- iv. probability adjectives: e.g., possible, probable, un/likely
- v. nouns: assumption, claim, possibility, estimate, suggestion
- vi. adverbs (which could be considered as non-verbal modals): e.g., perhaps, possibly, probably, practically, likely, presumably, virtually, apparently.
- vii. approximators of degree, quantity, frequency and time: e.g., approximately, roughly, about, often, occasionally, generally, usually, somewhat, somehow, a lot of.
- viii. introductory phrases such as: I believe, to our knowledge, it is our view that, we feel that, which express the author's personal doubt and direct involvement.
- ix. if clauses: if true, if nothing.
- x. compound hedges. These are phrases made up of several hedges, the commonest forms being:
  - a. modal auxiliary combined with a lexical verb with a hedging content (it would appear), and
  - b. lexical verb followed by a hedging adverb or adjective where the adverb (or adjective) reinforces the hedge already inherent in the lexical verb (it seems reasonable/probable). Such compound hedges can be double hedges (it may suggest that; it seems likely that; it would indicate that; this probably indicates); treble hedges (it seems reasonable to assume that); quadruple hedges (it would seem somewhat unlikely that, it may appear somewhat speculative that), and as can be seen all the forms presented above imply that the statements in which they appear contain personal beliefs based on plausible reasoning (or empirical data). Without these strategic stereotypes, readers would imply that the information conveyed pertains to universally established knowledge.

Majeed (2010) proposed the semantic functions of hedges. Although there are no clear literal meaning exists for most of these expressions, but in one way or another they all indicate something about the speaker's commitment toward what he/she is saying. The semantic functions are:

1. Weakeners/softeners of the speaker's commitment,
2. Strengtheners of the speaker's commitment,
3. Broadeners/looseners/wideners of the speaker's commitment,
4. Narrowers the speaker's commitment.

Therefore, the semantic functions of hedges proposed by Majeed (2010) were utilised for analysis in this study.

## Methodology

The study utilized the mixed method research design in order to account for the qualitative and quantitative (percentage) analyses. The data for this study was the 2015 Inaugural address of President Muhammadu Buhari, the incumbent President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. Samples were analysed using the purposive sampling technique. The study adopted the pragmatic hedging and the selected samples were analysed using tools emanating from the Salager-Meyer (2007) classification on hedges.

## Result and Discussion

### Excerpt 1

*I would like to thank the millions of our supporters who believed in us even when the cause **seemed** hopeless.*

The excerpt above performs an expressive act of thanking those who supported him and believed in his aspirations. The epistemic 'seemed' is the hedging device used to qualify the state at which his bid for presidency was at. The hedging device functioned as a softener; that is, to soften the fact that his candidacy was at some point in a hopeless state.

### Excerpt 2

*I salute their resolve in waiting long hours in rain and hot sunshine to register and cast their votes and stay all night **if necessary** to protect and ensure their votes count and were counted.*

The hedge device used was hypothetical construction 'if' which functions as a broadener because PMB tried to cut off the source of disagreement and thereby presenting the clause as a conditional statement. This means that he broadened his claim about his supporter's resolve in waiting long hours in rain and hot sunshine to register and cast their votes and stay all night when necessary; this means that PMB does not want to categorically claim that they did or did not; the situation is quite uncertain for PMB to make an absolute statement.

### Excerpt 3

*A **few** people have privately voiced fears that on coming back to office I shall go after them.*

The hedging analysis revealed an approximator 'A few' which functions as a narrower and a softener. This hedge helps PMB to avoid being specific of those who he is referring; to narrow the claim and make it seem like they are not many; and also to soften the claim he has made against them thereby saving their face.

### Excerpt 4

*There **will** be no paying of old scores*

The hedging device used was the modal auxiliary verb 'will' which functions as a softener and a narrower. The hedge indicates the PMB's attitude to the truth of the statement. Firstly, he softens the claim so as not to seem aggressive and authoritative and secondly he narrows the idea of trying to get back at those that have offended him by assuring them that he would not retaliate. Thirdly, he saves the face of those he was referring to.

### Excerpt 5

*Our neighbours in the Sub-regions and our African brethren **should** be rest assured that Nigeria under our administration **will** be ready to play any leadership role that Africa expects of it.*

The modal auxiliary verbs 'will' and 'should' are used as hedging devices to strengthen the commitment of PMB to the truth propositions of the statement; thereby, reassuring his commitment to play any leadership roles that Africa expects of his administration.

### Excerpt 6

*Insecurity, pervasive corruption, the hirtherto unending and **seemingly** impossible fuel and power shortages are the immediate concerns.*

The hedging device used was the adverbial 'seemingly' which functions as a softener and narrower. The hedge 'seemingly' helped to depict the problems enumerated as though they are ineffective and powerless thus softening the impact of the problems mentioned to the force of the

utterance and the ‘unending’ and ‘impossible’. The hedge also helps PMB to politely voice out his opinions about these concerns.

### Excerpt 7

*Nigerians **will** not regret that they have entrusted national responsibility to us.*

PMB tries to attract the trust of Nigerians by strengthening his promise of commitment with the modal auxiliary verb ‘will’ and promises are usually indefinite thus, it is not categorically certain that he would do as he has promised it only reveals his intention. Also, he somewhat tried to use this to win the vote of confidence of Nigerians. He also avoids being overly confident and conceited.

### Excerpt 8

*We **can** fix our problems*

The hedging device in the excerpt is the modal auxiliary verb ‘can’ which functions as a strengthener and softener. The hedge ‘can’ helps PMB to strengthen his assertion that the problems of Nigeria can be resolved. It also helps to weaken the illocutionary force of the claim so as not to make the President seem overly confident and cocky.

### Excerpt 9

*Nigerian leaders **appear** to have misread our mission.*

The hedging device used in Excerpt A13 is the epistemic verb ‘appear’ which functions as softener. This hedge helps to weaken the illocutionary force of the assertion, save or mitigate the face of the ‘Nigerian leaders’ being referred to and to also make the judgment seem harmless.

### Excerpt 10

*They **might** have differed in their methods or tactics or details, but they were united in establishing a viable and progressive country.*

The hedging device used is the modal auxiliary verb ‘might’, it functions as a narrower, to narrow the speaker's commitment toward whether or not the founding fathers of Nigeria had different methods or approaches in making Nigeria better.

### Excerpt 11

***Some** of their successors behaved like spoilt children breaking everything and bringing disorder to the house*

The hedging analysis in this Excerpt revealed the approximator ‘some’ as a device that made the expression manner-related hedge and also functions as a softener and narrower. The hedging device ‘some’ did the following

- i. Softened the commitment of PMB to the assertion
- ii. Reduced the illocutionary force of assertiveness
- iii. Constricted the number of the successors to make it seem like they are not many
- iv. Helped to avoid being specific about the number
- v. It also helped to achieved and reduce the negative face act of accusing the successors as spoilt children

**Excerpt 12**

*Constitutionally there are three limits to powers of each of the three tiers of government but that should not mean the federal government should fold its arm and close its eyes to what is going on in the states and local governments.*

The hedging devices used are the adverbial 'constitutionally' and modal auxiliary verb 'should'. They function as narrowers and strengtheners. Specifically, they do the:

- i. They reduce the illocutionary force of the utterance
- ii. The adverbial narrowers the claim by tilting the source to the constitution
- iii. It helps PMB to avoid being the source of the claim
- iv. It strengthens the commitment of PMB
- v. It helps PMB to present the information objectively

**Excerpt 13**

*As far as the constitution allows me I will try to ensure that there is responsible and accountable governance at all levels of government in the country.*

The hedges in this excerpt are hypothetical construction 'As far as' and modal auxiliary 'will'. This makes the expression a quality-related hedge and it functions as a narrower and strengthener. The hedging devices show the following:

- i. The modal auxiliary verb 'will' helps to strengthen the illocutionary force of the utterance since it is a commissive act indicating promising
- ii. With the hypothetical construction 'As far as' PMB narrows his commitment to claim to show that it is only the constitution that could hinder him from achieving his goals of creating an accountable and responsible administration
- iii. The modal auxiliary verb 'will' shows indefinite ability to the promise

**Excerpt 14**

*For I will not have kept my own trust with the Nigerian people if I allow others abuse theirs under my watch.*

The hedging devices found in this excerpt are the modal auxiliary verb 'will' and the hypothetical constructions 'if' and they are functioning as softener. The hedges show the following:

- i. The hedges helps PMB to sell himself as a trust worthy and honest person by using the conditional clause
- ii. He would not allow corruption in his own administration
- iii. His ability to stop corruption
- iv. He is obligated to stop corruption

**Excerpt 15**

*This government will do all it can to rescue them alive.*

The hedges here are the modal auxiliary verbs 'will' and 'can'. The hedging devices function as softener and strengthener. They also reveal the following:

- i. Strengthen the commitment of PMB to the promise made which is to rescue the Chibok girls alive
- ii. Strengthen the illocutionary force of the commissive act
- iii. Expresses an indefinite possibility
- iv. Expresses probability which means that they might not succeed but they did all they could do to save those girls
- v. Help PMB does not to appear overly confident thus softening his commitment to his utterance

**Excerpt A16**

*No single cause **can** be identified with to explain Nigerians poor economic performance **over** the years than the power situation*

The hedging device used is the modal auxiliary verb ‘can’ and approximator ‘over’. The hedging devices function as a softener. The hedging analysis also revealed the following:

- i. PMB uses the modal auxiliary verb ‘can’ as a strategy to weaken the illocutionary force of the utterance
- ii. It also helps to reduce the intensity of magnitudinal impact of the poor power situation on Nigeria’s economic performance
- iii. It also makes the utterance less direct
- iv. It also expresses possibility

**Excerpt A17**

*Our situation **somehow** reminds **one** of a passage in Shakespeare’s Julius Caesar.*

The hedging devices are Adverbial ‘somehow’ approximator ‘one’ they function as a softener and narrower. Specifically:

- i. ‘somehow’ functions as a softener to reduce the force of the referring to the situation of Nigeria.
- ii. ‘one’ functions as a narrower and to limit being specific about who is being reminded about the Nigerian situation hence, we cannot categorically say that he or someone else performs this act
- iii. The hedges help to reduce the illocutionary force of the utterance
- iv. The hedges also shows that PMB lacks a complete commitment to what he says
- v. PMB does not want to express his commitment categorically and the Adverbial ‘somehow’ helped him to achieve this

**Excerpt 18**

*I extend my hand of fellowship to them so that we **can** bring peace and build prosperity for our people.*

The hedging device used was the modal auxiliary verbs ‘can’ and the hedge functions as a strengthener. Additionally, the analysis revealed that:

- i. ‘can’ is used as an hedge to attenuate the force of the statement
- ii. ‘can’ expresses an indefinite possibility where in togetherness peace and prosperity can be achieved
- iii. PMB mitigates commitment to this statement to avoid being proven wrong; the modal auxiliary verb ‘can’ strengthens PMB’s commitment to the truth value of the proposition
- iv. If there had been no ‘can’ then the statement would have been treated as an absolute statement or situation
- v. The hedges are in the rheme so the information about the theme is hedged
- vi. PMB presents an almost impossible situation diplomatically so as to inspire hope and confidence

Hedging Devices		
	Frequency	%
Modal Auxiliary Verb	10	50
Approximator	5	25
Epistemic Verb	2	10
Hypothetical Construction	1	5
Adverbial	2	10
<b>Total</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>100.0</b>

Source: Researchers’ Computation (2019)

The Table above shows the distribution of the hedging devices as it relates to this study. 50% representing 10 has modal auxiliary verbs, 25% representing 5 has approximators, 10% are epistemic verbs, 5% are hypothetical construction and 10% are adverbial. The result shows that out of all the hedging devices, modal auxiliary verb has the highest number of occurrences.

## Conclusion

Hedging devices are words that belong to different parts of speech such as nouns, verbs, adverbs, adjectives and so on. They function pragmatically as hedges and their meanings can be derived not only structurally but contextually. Therefore, not all words can be categorised as hedges especially when they do not perform pragmatic functions. 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. Pragmatic competence is necessary if one is to communicate effectively in a language. This includes mastering the art of hedging, one feature of this pragmatic ability. The study asserts that, from the pragmatic point of view, political leaders use modality in order to persuade the hearers, or the voters, that what they do is right and reasonable, even though there is often no firm evidence which would support their claims.

## Recommendation

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.

## References

- [1] Beard, A. (2000). *The language of politics*. New York: Routledge.
- [2] Holmes, J. (1990). Hedges and boosters in women's and men's speech. *Language & Communication*, 10(3), 185-20
- [3] House, J. & Kasper, G. (1981). Politeness markers in English and German. In Coulmas, F (Ed.). *Conversational Routine: Explorations in Standardized Communication Situations and Prepatterned Speech*. The Hague: Mouton.
- [4] Hubler, A. (1983). *Understatements and hedges in English*. Amsterdam: John Benjamins.
- [5] Hyland, K. & Tse, P. (2004). Metadiscourse in academic writing: A reappraisal. *Applied Linguistics*, 25(2), 156 –177.
- [6] Hyland, K. (1998a). *Hedging in scientific research articles*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- [7] Hyland, K. (1998b). *Hedging in scientific research articles*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.
- [8] Lakoff, G. (1972). Hedges: A study in meaning criteria and the logic of fuzzy concepts. *Chicago Linguistics Society Papers*, 8(2) 183-228.
- [9] Martin-Martin, P. (2008). The mitigation of scientific claims in research papers: A comparative study. *International Journal of English Studies*, 8(2), 133-152.
- [10] Meyers, G. (1989). The pragmatics of politeness in scientific articles. *Applied Linguistics*. 10(1), 1-35.

- [11] Osisanwo, W. (2003). *Introduction to discourse analysis and pragmatics*. Lagos: Femolus-Fetop Publishers.
- [12] Osisanwo, W. (2003). *Introduction to discourse analysis and pragmatics*. Lagos: Femolus-Fetop Publishers.
- [13] Panamah, E. & Sharndama, E. (2012). Hedging in professional legal texts. *British Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 4(1), 41-64.
- [14] Swales, J. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- [15] Yang, Y. (2013). Exploring linguistic and cultural variations in the use of hedges in English and Chinese scientific discourse. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 50(4), 23-36.