

Saving Faces the U. S Presidents: A Pragmatic Analysis of Hedging as a Politeness Strategy

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Abstract: *Saving face has often been explored from a political perspective. Many researchers have been conducted on the pragmatic functions of politeness in one U. S Presidential speech, but little research on hedging as a politeness strategy from several U. S Presidential speeches. Based on that reason, pragmatic analysis is conducted to reveal U. S Presidential intentions in using hedging as a politeness strategy to save their faces from the opponents. The study used a qualitative method using 22 U. S Presidential speeches from the millercenter.org website. The researcher referred to Hyland's metadiscourse theory (2005) and Brown & Levinson's Politeness Strategy (1987). The findings revealed that (1) positive politeness was most frequently used by U.S Presidents to build positive self-images (2) U. S Presidents saved their faces by using positive and negative politeness as an effective way to gain public approval.*

Keywords: *saving face, politeness strategy, hedging, U.S Presidential speeches, political linguistics*

1. Introduction

In political linguistics, there were many types of research on saving politicians' faces (e.g., Nair, 2019; Njuki, E & Ileri, H.K. 2021), and the study found that writers focused on saving the face of the politician to build a positive self-image or nation. Despite the numerous studies on saving face in political discourses some gaps remain. First, the writer strengthened the function of the hedge as an evasion for a politician, but there was no comparison between a politician who derived from different ideological political parties (Chovanec, 2020). Second, there was less discussion on politeness as one of the rhetorical tools in saving face in the U. S presidential debates and his opponents (George W. Bush, Jimmy Carter, Sarah Palin, and David Coltart) during the TV interview on BBC and CNN from the period of Dec 2002 to Oct 2008 (Jalilifar & Alavi-Nia, 2011). Third, the study didn't reveal the influence of the U.S. President's ideological political party (Alavidze, 2019). Thus, we cannot compare the intention of the U.S President as a representative of his political party. At last, most research has focused on political interaction on television or based on interviews.

The face is the most relevant concept in the study of politeness as argued by many linguistics researchers (e.g., Searle., R. John, Kiefer, F & Bierwisch, M, 1980; Leech, 1980; Brown & Levinson, 1987; Hyland, 2005; Barbora, S, 2013; Mansoor, 2019; Njuki & Ileri, 2021). The face is defined as 'the public self-image' that deals with self or social 'identity' or 'reputation'. Everybody wants to save his face to build a good self-image. Brown & Levinson (1987: 61) argued that a face can be maintained, it can get lost, it may be fascinating, and it needs to be present all the time in the interaction. Therefore, a

speaker needs to maximize the saving face acts by referring to one of these politeness levels (do the face-threatening act (FTA) by softening or strengthening the speeches, off record, representing the positive politeness to embrace the public with perlocutionary act, referring the negative politeness to be free from imposition, or don't do FTA at all). The U. S President adopted these theories by delivering his speeches with caution and precision. He applied hedging as a politeness strategy to create a positive self-image in accomplishing his political goals. U. S Presidents needed to persuade, convince and get public approval when they aimed to pass a new policy or other political intention.

Politeness theory as argued by Brown and Levinson (1987), is a polite way to deliver a speech in an interaction to save one face from a conflict. A speaker tends to speak as politely as possible to get a good response from the hearer to achieve the perlocutionary effect. The public perceives politeness in interaction to make a stance or a closeness. Brown & Levinson (1987: 103) classified the politeness strategy into positive and negative politeness:

1.1 Positive Politeness

Brown & Levinson's argument indicated that a speaker used positive politeness aimed at being liked, being admitted, be accepted, and understood in an interaction, it can be used as an 'intimate language use' to get others' attention. It was relevant to the political purpose since the U.S Presidential candidate has to make promises to engage the voters. As the result, the elected President needed to prove his commitment using a politeness strategy.

1.2 Negative Politeness

On contrary, whenever a speaker needed to be free of action, free of disagreement, and freedom from imposition, he used negative politeness to make a stance. Negative politeness is applied to highlight the action, instead of the actor. Hence, a speaker frequently used impersonal subjects to form negative politeness to reduce personal agitation.

Hedging is a speaker's way of limiting his speeches using the expression of hedges or boosters. Hyland (2005:49) argued that hedge was a crucial expression of 'possibility rather than presumption'. Its role was to mitigate 'the force of the statement'. It was mostly used in spoken interactions such as speech. In contrast, the booster is used to show the speaker's optimistic attitude toward his commitment by strengthening 'the force of the statement' (Hyland, 2005). Moreover, Chovanec (2020) found that politicians used hedges as an evasion of racist speech. Despite many investigations of the pragmatic function of politeness in spoken and written text (e.g., Barbora, S, 2013; Mansoor, 2019; Njuki & Ileri, 2021), there is still more to study.

Illuminated by these findings, the present study was designed to explore the pragmatic functions of hedging as a politeness strategy to save the U.S Presidential faces through their speeches. The research questions are as follows:

- (1) How do the U.S Presidents save their faces in political speeches?
- (2) What are the pragmatic function of hedging as a politeness strategy in U.S Presidential speeches?

2. Methodology

This study used qualitative research methodology (Tracy, 2013) using 22 U.S Presidential speeches sourced online from the millercenter.org website. The data was taken in the period from January 12 to July 31, 2021. To build the data, one research assistant, and the authors used various titles of speeches from four different U.S Presidents: (1) 8 President Bill Clinton's speeches (1993-2001), (2) 5 President George W. Bush's speeches (2001-2009), (3) 6 President Barack Obama's speeches (2009-2017), and (4) 3 President Donald Trump's speeches (2017-2021)

2.1 Data Analysis

The present study only focuses on the pragmatic function of hedging as a politeness strategy using modal verbs of ‘will’, ‘must’, ‘need’, ‘shall’, ‘can’, ‘may’, ‘might’, ‘would’, ‘could’, ‘should’ in the U.S Presidential speeches. Hence, the results are presented in the findings and discussion section in the form of a table. They were composed of columns that provided the types of modal verbs as politeness strategy, the number of modal verbs, and the use of modal verbs in the form of percentages.

3. Findings and Discussion

3.1 The Most Frequently Used of Politeness Forms in U. S Presidential Speeches

TABLE 1. The most frequently used politeness in the U.S Presidents’ speeches

No.	Types of modal verbs	Number of modal verbs	Percentage
1.	will	959	27.01
2.	can	427	12.06
3.	must	323	9.13
4.	would	170	4.80
5.	need	135	3.81
6.	should	109	3.08
7.	could	86	2.43
8.	may	69	1.95
9.	might	28	0.79
10.	shall	9	0.25
Total		2.315	

According to table 1, it was indicated that the U.S Presidents frequently used the modal verb ‘will’ (27.01%) to show their commitment to fulfilling their promise (Hyland, 2005). The modal verb ‘will’, ‘must’ and ‘need’ have roles as boosters to increase the force of the statement. However, the modal verbs ‘would’, ‘could’, ‘should’, and ‘might’ have roles as hedges to reduce the force of the statement. These modal verbs are also used to show the U.S. Presidents’ self-commitment by highlighting the positive attitudes towards his opponents. Meanwhile, the modal verbs of ‘can’ and ‘may’ indicate assumption, possibility, or uncertainty used as a hedging opinion by entitling the public in making a decision.

In general, the U.S Presidents frequently used the modal verbs ‘will’ and ‘must’ to show positive politeness by being optimistic about their promises aimed to get public approval as shown in the examples (10):

(Example 1) *By buying the services of space transportation -- rather than the vehicles themselves -- we can continue to ensure rigorous safety standards are met. But we will also accelerate the pace of innovations as companies -- from young startups to established leaders -- compete to design and build and launch new means of carrying people and materials out of our atmosphere* (BO: 35)

In example 1, BO used the modal verb ‘will’ as a booster (Hyland, 2005: 49). The role of the booster is to intensify the force of the statement. He used the modal verb ‘will’ to indicate an optimistic attitude toward his commitment to involving the public in his government policy. We concluded that President Barack Obama applied positive politeness on saving his face by convincing the public to agree with the government’s decision of buying the new technology.

Another finding indicated that the U.S. President attempted to build a positive self-image by using the modal verbs of ‘would’, ‘could’, and ‘should’ as attitude markers. They also used modal verbs ‘can’ and ‘may’ as hedging opinions to form positive politeness (Brown & Levinson, 1987) to engage with the US citizens as shown in the examples (2, 3, and 4):

(Example 2) *...to accept the nomination of my party and to make a promise to people of all parties that I would do all that I could to give every American the chance to make of their lives what they will; to see their children climb higher than they did* (BO:31)

In example 2, the U. S President conveyed a strong attitude toward himself by using the personal pronoun 'I' as the attitude marker (Hyland, 2005) in his speech aimed to showcase a good, responsible, and principal personality. He reduced the force of the statement by using modal verbs 'would' and 'could' as hedges to show politeness in creating a good self-image. Thus, President Barack Obama conveyed his effort in making a good relationship with all U.S. citizens. He did a perlocutionary act in delivering the good news by showing compassion not only to his adherers but also his opponent political parties.

(Example 3) *We are all joined together as one American family, and your suffering is our burden also. No child, no teacher, should ever be in danger in an American school. No parent should ever have to fear for their sons and daughters when they kiss them goodbye in the morning* (DT: 39)

In example 3, President Donald Trump mitigated the pragmatic force of U. S citizen obligations by using the modal verb 'should' to move the negative image of the U.S. leader on the issue of the shooting in Parkland, Florida, on 25 February 2018. The U.S. president involved the citizens in the speech acts to save both his face and the citizen's faces. He used solidarity and commonality speech as an act of politeness to indicate a clear identity as one nation. It was also indicated by using the personal pronoun 'we' to engage with the public. President Donald Trump intended to gain citizen attention by shifting the focus from 'obligation' to 'recommendation'.

(Example 4) *It's up to you, the citizens of Hamilton, to make sure no child is left behind. And the federal government can spend money we can help set standards, and we can assist upon accountability* (GB: 25)

In example 4, the U.S President saved his face and citizen faces by using hedging opinion. He ambiguated the uncertainty offers by giving more autonomy to the public in making a national decision. President George Bush attenuated the force of the statement by requesting citizens to follow the government's recommendation using the modal verb 'can'.

In contrast to positive politeness, the U.S Presidents also conveyed their political intentions using negative politeness to be free of imposition by using impersonal subjects, abstract rhetoric, and passive voice (Brown & Levinson, 1987).

(Example 5) *It must be clear that Afghans will have to take responsibility for their security, and that America has no interest in fighting an endless war in Afghanistan* (BO: 33)

In example 5, President Barack Obama saved the face of America as part of the United Nations by using an impersonal subject to avoid disagreement or imposition toward the policy of Afghanistan's responsibility. Obama needed to clarify that his government policy has done the best for Afghanistan.

In sum, U. S Presidents frequently used positive politeness to save their faces from a negative self-image. They used politeness strategies to save not only their faces but also other faces who were involved in the making of government policy. The U. S Presidents used politeness strategy by attenuating or strengthening the pragmatic force of a speech. Thus, U. S President's government shifted the obligations and orders into recommendations or requests. As the result, the citizen felt that they have entitled to make their own decision without being forced (perlocutionary acts).

3.2 The Pragmatic Function of U. S Presidential Speeches in Using Hedging as A Politeness Strategy

3.2.1 Booster

U.S Presidents used the modal verb 'will' or 'must' as a booster to intensify the pragmatic force of a speech. They showed an optimistic attitude toward their commitments (i.e., *But we will also accelerate the pace of innovations as companies --*) (Example 1). We hypothesized that President Barack Obama believed that U. S government fulfilled the public expectation over a new aerospace technology and he requested the citizens' support. It was strengthened by the of using the personal pronoun 'we're as an engagement marker to involve the public in making the decision.

3.2.2 Attitude Marker

The present study also revealed that U.S. President conveyed a strong attitude toward his commitment to serving the citizen. We concluded that President Barack Obama represented a positive

image of his political party (Democrat) by using the personal pronoun 'I' as the attitude marker (Hyland, 2005) to show his commitment to all U. S citizens from different ideological political parties. Moreover, he emphasized himself as a representative of his political party by reducing the pragmatic force of a speech using the modal verb 'would' and 'could' as hedges to embrace all parties (e.g., *...to accept the nomination of my party and to make a promise to people of all parties that I would do all that I could to give every American the chance to make of their lives what they will; to see their children climb higher than they did*) (Example 2).

3.2.3 Hedging Opinion

Another function of politeness in U. S Presidential speeches was to move personal responsibility into joint responsibility by reducing the pragmatic force of a speech using the modal verb 'can' as the hedging opinion to entitle the citizen with more rights in making a decision (i.e., *It's up to you, the citizens of Hamilton, to make sure no child is left behind. And the federal government can spend money and we can help set standards, and we can assist upon accountability*) (Example 4). We assumed that President George Bush used politeness to involve the citizen in the making of the government's decision by using the personal pronoun 'we' as an engagement marker in branding a personal positive image (Hyland, 2005).

3.2.3 Shield

President Donald Trump used politeness as a shield to save his face from the negative image as a leader and to pull the citizen attention by shifting the focus from security issues to solidarity as a nation. He attenuated the perlocutionary act by using the modal verb 'should' (e.g., *We are all joined together as one American family, and your suffering is our burden also. No child, no teacher, should ever be in danger in an American school. No parent should ever have to fear for their sons and daughters when they kiss them goodbye in the morning*) (Example 3).

3.2.4 Stance

In contrast to positive politeness, U.S. President used negative politeness to be free of action and mitigate personal agitation. Obama used impersonal subjects to minimize the personal agitation or FTAs if the statement is unproven due to his policy (e.g., *It must be clear that Afghans will have to take responsibility for their security, and that America has no interest in fighting an endless war in Afghanistan*) (Example 5). We inferred the use of an impersonal subject was to save the speaker's face from personal embarrassment.

4. Conclusion

Based on the result of the research findings, writers argued that U. S Presidents used hedging as a politeness strategy to save their faces in various ways. We inferred that U. S President as a leader of a country should have the adequate political experience to picture himself as optimistic, logical, ambitious, independent, and confident, in making a promise to the citizen. Moreover, U. S President is supposed to be a responsible, trustworthy, reliable, and compassionate person to gain public sympathy. Thus, he has to build a positive self-image. Referring to these personal qualities, they have to set a strategy for defeating the opponent in terms of 'electable' (Cisneros, 2020). They have to set an example of positive leadership by selecting appropriate politeness. Hedging as a politeness strategy is an effective way to present political discourses.

From the findings of the present study, we concluded that U. S Presidents determined to protect their faces by using the modal verb 'will' as the most frequently used positive politeness. This study revealed that the U. S Presidents used the modal verbs 'will', 'must', and 'need' as boosters to show an optimistic attitude toward their commitment (Hyland, 2005). Moreover, the modal verbs 'would', 'should', 'could', and 'might' were used by the U. S Presidents as attitude markers using the personal pronoun 'I' to show personal commitment by mitigating the force of the statement to form positive politeness. While the use of modal verbs 'can' and 'may' were indicated as hedging an opinion to entitle the U. S citizen to make a decision. Conversely, U. S Presidents also used negative politeness to highlight the action and to be free from citizen imposition. They used impersonal subjects to minimize personal conflict. The

U. S President's intention in using the politeness strategy was to engage with the citizen, to share the government's responsibility, to get public agreement, and to show personal commitment.

Admittedly, there are some limitations in the explanation of the research findings. Thus, we have selected examples that represented the pragmatic function of hedging as a politeness strategy in the U. S Presidential speeches, in particular. Hopefully, the findings and discussion will give a better understanding and raise the consciousness of political linguistics readers.

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