

A Study of Hedges in Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokespersons' Speeches at Regular Press Conference

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Abstract

As a tool effective in yielding special semantic and pragmatic effects through promoting linguistic fuzziness, hedges are widely applied to various discourses, and thus hold tight a high position in the fuzzy linguistics research. Based on Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson's speeches at regular press conference, the present study intends to analyze the hedges in qualitative and quantitative methods at both lexical and non-lexical levels, for the purpose of discovering the features of the usage of hedges in Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson's speeches at regular press conference and figuring out how spokesperson's speeches achieve his political meaning through hedges and the corresponding reason, hoping to help the public and foreign media comprehend Chinese foreign policy better.

Keywords: Hedges, Chinese foreign ministry spokespersons' speech, Chinese foreign policy

1. Introduction

Hedge was first put forward by Lakoff (1972:195), and it is employed both in literature and especially in daily life. Hedge is evidently vague or fuzzy, which is indispensable for daily communication and owing to its function of making the original meaning more decent and flexible, it even plays an irreplaceable role in some specific occasions, especially in political diplomatic communications or speeches. Although many Chinese scholars have studied hedges in Chinese political diplomatic language from translation perspective (Wang & Li, 2015; Pan, 2014), or made a comparison between Chinese and English hedges (Zhou, 2008; Qiu, 2015), political diplomatic language is an indication of one country's diplomatic policy, and thus the study of hedges in Chinese foreign ministry spokespersons' speeches at regular press conference is of great significance.

This paper intends to make a qualitative and a quantitative research of Chinese foreign ministry spokespersons' speeches at regular press conference to figure out how Chinese diplomatic policy is successfully demonstrated by hedges and the reasons of employing hedges in different occasions are analyzed in the light of cooperative principle, face theory and politeness principle, hoping to help the public and foreign countries to understand Chinese diplomatic policy accurately.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Hedge

Influenced by Zadeh's (1965) fuzzy set theory, Lakoff first proposed the notion of hedge. Lakoff (1972) defined hedge as an operator "whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy" from the angle of logic and truth value. Following Lakoff, Brown and Levinson (1987) describes hedges as "a particle, 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 particle true only in certain respects, or that it is more true and complete than perhaps might be expected." Meanwhile, Yule (1996) thought hedges as "cautions notes expressed about how an utterance is to be taken." Matthews (1997:160) proposed the concept of "hedge" as "any linguistic device by which a speaker avoids being compromised by a statement that turns out to be wrong, a request that is not accepted." Though the definitions of hedge vary from scholars to scholars, they are all basically consistent with the original definition given by Lakoff. This paper adopts Lakoff's definition of hedge.

And the classification of hedge also varies for different scholars study it from different angles, such as grammatical perspective, semantic perspective, and pragmatic perspective (Prince, Frader & Bosk, 1982; Chen & Li, 1994; Wu, 1999). This paper adopts the most influential and authoritative classification -- the classification of Prince et al. (1982), which tries to classify hedges from the perspective of pragmatics. According to Prince et al, hedges can be clarified into two categories: approximators and shields.

Approximators can modify the original meaning of utterance to some degree or change the original meaning; that is to say, it can change the truth-condition of a proposition. And approximators can be further divided into adaptors and rounders. Adaptors refer to the vague

words which can change the degree of truth value of the utterance. It can make the utterance more specific and decent and more close to reality. Rounders refer to the vague words which can limit the range of the original utterance.

As for shields, they cannot change the original meaning of a proposition and the truth-condition of a proposition. It can indicate the degree of speaker's commitment to the whole proposition or the truth-value. Shields are also further divided into two types: plausible shields and attribute shields. Plausible shields are the words indicating speaker's speculation or his hesitation for his utterance directly, whereas attribute shields are the words indicating speaker's attitude or opinion indirectly by quoting the third party's opinion.

Based on Lakoff's definition of hedge and Prince et al.'s classification of English hedges, this paper clarifies Chinese hedges into these four categories. To make it clear, the classification of hedges is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Classification of hedges

	Classification		Example	
			English	Chinese
Hedge	Approximator	adaptor	sort of, kind of, really, somewhat, quite, in a way, more or less...	在一定程度上; 有一点儿; 几乎; 差不多; 完全/不完全; 接近于.....
		rounder	approximately, roughly, essentially, something between X and Y, about...	在某些方面; 接近于; 相当于; 左右; 上下; 介于.....和.....之间; 大概; 在一定范围内.....
	Shield	plausible shield	I/we think, I'm afraid, I wonder, I suppose, seem, probably, hard to say.....	我/我们觉得; 好像; 我想; 我认为; 我猜测; 可能; 很难说.....
		attribute shield	according to one's estimates, someone says that, presumably, as is known, the possibility would be...	有人推测; 据推测; 有人说; 众所周知; 可能性是; 可能出现的情况是.....

2.2 Cooperative Principle

Cooperative principle, proposed by Grice (1967), is one of the important conversational principles in pragmatics. Grice claimed that "in making a conversation the participants must first of all be willing to be cooperative; otherwise, it would not be possible for them to carry on the talk" (cited in He & Ran, 2009:97). Among all the pragmatic principles, the cooperative principle plays an essential role in studying hedges. The cooperative principle

includes mainly four maxims listed as follows:

Table 2. Four maxims of cooperative principle

The Maxim of Quantity	(i) Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purpose of the exchange). (ii) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
The Maxim of Quality	(i) Do not say what you believe to be false. (ii) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
The Maxim of Relation	Be relevant.
The Maxim of Manner	Be perspicuous.

Spokespersons' speeches, which are political discourses, would usually influence the whole atmosphere of a particular country and have a profound effect on the global environment. Therefore, statesmen are requested to be extremely cautious in using appropriate expressions to guarantee that right and related information should be conveyed and in some situations, their expressions are ambiguous or indirect, which violate the maxim of cooperative principle.

2.3 Face Theory

In the article *On Face Work*, Goffman (1963) put forward the term "face" first. He pointed out that how face, which refers to the process that people present themselves in social situations and people's entire reality, is constructed through social interactions. Goffman (ibid) held that "face is maintained by the audience, not by the speaker. We try our best to maintain the face we have created in social situations". And in 1987, based on the study of Goffman, Brown and Levinson put forward Face Theory. Brown and Levinson (1987) define face as the public self-image of an individual, which includes positive face and negative face. The former refers to the desire to be accepted, appreciated and respected by others or the wants to be treated as a member of the same group; whereas the negative face means the need that you do not want to be imposed on yourself by others, that your actions are not hindered by the interference of others, and that you have the freedom to choose your actions. And Chinese foreign ministry spokespersons' speeches are highly related with the friendship and relation between two or more countries and the global political background, so spokespersons should avoid face-threatening acts or languages to guarantee better communications and cooperation with other countries. Face theory can explain why spokespersons' answers are sometimes not absolute and clear.

2.4 Politeness Principle

On the basis of the concept of "face" proposed by Goffman and face theory, Leech (1983) put

forward politeness principle. According to Leech (ibid), politeness principle is further divided into six main maxims as follows:

Table 3. Six maxims of politeness principle

Tact Maxim	(i) Minimize cost to other (ii) Maximize benefit to other
Generosity Maxim	(i) Minimize benefit to self (ii) Maximize cost to self
Approbation Maxim	(i) Minimize dispraise of other (ii) Maximize praise of other
Modesty Maxim	(i) Minimize praise of self (ii) Maximize dispraise of self
Agreement Maxim	(i) Minimize disagreement between self and other (ii) Maximize agreement between self and other
Sympathy Maxim	(i) Minimize antipathy between self and other (ii) Maximize sympathy between self and other

Similarly, in order to save one's face and be polite to others, politeness principle should be observed. For foreign ministry spokespersons, the usage of hedges mainly reflects on two aspects. First, hedges are employed to save hearers' or other countries' face. Second, hedges are used to protect spokespersons' own face or the country's face by refraining from taking full responsibility of the statement. Approximators' modification on the original meaning of the utterance and the degree of the utterance would be demonstrated mainly in Tact Maxim, Modesty Maxim and Agreement Maxim. And shields which can influence the type and degree of speaker's commitment would be shown in Approbation Maxim, Generosity Maxim and Sympathy Maxim.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Question

This paper is intended to make a qualitative and quantitative research of Chinese hedges in foreign ministry spokespersons' speeches to figure out how Chinese diplomatic policy is successfully demonstrated by hedges and why these hedges are used. So in order to achieve these goals, the following questions will be answered:

- 1) What's the feature of the hedges in Chinese foreign ministry spokespersons' speeches?
- 2) How are various hedges employed on the basis of the pragmatic principles in foreign ministry spokespersons' speeches?

3) What are the pragmatic functions of hedges in foreign ministry spokespersons' speeches?

3.2 Instrument

The instruments of this study are Microsoft Word and Microsoft Excel. Microsoft Word is used for searching hedges and counting the number of hedges. Microsoft Excel is used for calculating the frequency and percentage of hedges. The figures would show the feature of hedges in Chinese foreign ministry spokespersons' speeches.

3.3 Data Collection

The data were collected from the website of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, the most influential and authoritative in foreign ministry affairs and widely acknowledged over the world. The speeches are from the regular press conference which is held five times a week and the spokespersons are Geng Shuang, Lu Kang and Hua Chunying. The duration of the speeches is from January 1st to February 30th to guarantee the timeliness of the data, And 15 texts are chosen randomly from the Chinese press conference from the website of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, which amounts to 32,693 words together.

3.4 Data Analysis

Once data collection has been done, data analysis needs to be continued. First, hedges of different categories were marked in different colors. Then the total number of hedges and the number of each type were counted and the corresponding frequency is calculated. What's more, all the hedges can be classified into lexical hedges including lexical noun, lexical adjectives, lexical adverbs and modal verbs and non-lexical hedges. So the final step is to calculate the percentage of the distribution of four types of hedges according to the classification of lexical hedges and non-lexical hedges.

4. Results and Discussion

After calculation and analysis of the corpus, the features of the spokespersons' speeches are showed as follows:

4.1 Frequency of Hedges in Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokespersons' Speeches

According to the data collected and data analysis, the frequency of hedges in Chinese foreign ministry spokespersons' speeches can be found clearly in the following table.

Table 4. Percentage of total hedges in speeches

Item	Speeches
Total number of words	32,693
Total number of hedges	884

Percentage	2.70%
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From [table 4](#), we can see that the corpus is made up of 32,693 words, in which 884 words are hedges, taking the percentage of 2.70%. It is evidently clear that hedges are an essential part of the foreign ministry spokespersons' speeches. And in next part, this paper would talk about percentage of approximators and shields in the corpus.

The next part will talk about the frequency of different types of hedges in Chinese materials.

Table 5. Percentage of approximators and shields in speeches

		Percentage in hedges		Percentage in speeches
Approximators (380 words)	Adaptors(18)	2.04%	42.99%	1.16%
	Rounders(362)	40.95%		
Shields (504 words)	Plausible shields(278)	31.45%	57.01%	1.54%
	Attribute shields(226)	25.56%		

Table 5 lists the number of different kind of hedges in speeches and the percentage which they take respectively. As the table shows, the number of approximators is 380, 42.99% of the hedges, while that of shield is 504, 57.01% of the hedges. And in approximators, the number of adaptors is 18, taking the percentage of 2.04%; whereas that of rounders reaches 362, occupying 40.95% of all the hedges. As for shields, 278 words are plausible shields, occupying 31.45%; 226 words are attribute shields, occupying 25.56%. And for the whole speeches, approximators take the percentage of 1.16%, and shields take the percentage of 1.54%.

The statistics indicate that the frequency of shields is higher than that of approximators. And in approximators, the frequency of rounders is greatly higher than that of adaptors and it is the highest among these four types of hedges, while the frequency of adaptors is the lowest. And in shields, the frequency of plausible shields is higher than that of attribute shields. When answering the journalists' questions, Chinese spokesperson prefer using rounders like “在某些方面”, “有关方面” to leave some room for the complicated current political affairs. And plausible shields like “我们认为” and attribute shields like “据统计” are very common, which can make the speeches more mitigatory.

4.2 Distribution of Hedges in Chinese Foreign Ministry Spokespersons' Speeches

To make the distribution of hedges more specific, hedges first can be classified in terms of lexical hedges and non-lexical hedges. The former can be subdivided into verbs, adjectives, adverbs, verbs, nouns, pronouns, quantifiers and modal verbs. The detailed information about

the distribution is demonstrated below:

Table 6. Distribution of hedges in materials

Types of hedges	Hedges		
	Total number	884	Percentage
Lexical hedges (558 words)	Lexical nouns	188	21.27%
	Lexical pronouns	93	10.52%
	Lexical verbs	45	5.09%
	Lexical adjectives	33	3.73%
	Lexical adverbs	130	14.71%
	Lexical quantifier	41	4.64%
	Model verbs	28	3.17%
Non-lexical hedges (326 words)		326	36.87%

According to the table, the total number of hedges is 884, in which the number of lexical hedges is 558, taking up 63.13%, while the number of non-lexical hedges is 326, taking up 36.87%. In lexical hedges, the number of lexical nouns is the largest, which is 188, taking up 21.27%. And the number of lexical adverbs rank second, which is 130, taking up 14.71%. And lexical pronouns, verbs, adjectives, quantifiers and model verbs are far less than lexical nouns and adverbs. This table shows that spokespersons are inclined to use lexical hedges, especially lexical nouns, adverbs and pronouns. They also employ non-lexical hedges.

Table 7. Percentage and distribution of four types of hedges

Types of hedges		Adaptors (18)		Rounders (362)		Plausible shields (278)		Attribute shields (226)	
		Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage	Number	Percentage
Lexical hedges	Lexical nouns	0	0	162	44.75%	0	0	26	11.50%
	Lexical pronouns	0	0	78	21.55%	0	0	15	6.64%

	Lexical verbs	0	0	0	0	32	11.51%	13	5.75%
	Lexical adjectives	5	27.78%	28	7.73%	0	0	0	0
	Lexical adverbs	10	55.55%	45	12.43%	0	0	75	33.19%
	Lexical quantifier	0	0	41	11.33%	0	0	0	0
	Model verbs	3	16.67%	0	0	25	8.99%	0	0
Non-lexical hedges		0	0	8	2.21%	221	79.50%	97	42.92%

As is shown in table 7, we can see the percentage and distribution of four types of hedges according to the classification of lexical hedges and non-lexical hedges. As for adaptors, there are lexical adjectives, lexical adverbs and model verbs, among which the percentage of lexical adverbs is the highest, reaching 55.55%. And for rounders, there are lexical nouns, lexical pronouns, lexical adjectives, lexical adverbs, lexical quantifier and non-lexical hedges. And lexical nouns take up the most, while non-lexical hedges are the least. When it comes to plausible shields, there are lexical verbs, model verbs and non-lexical hedges, among which non-lexical hedges have the highest proportion, up to 79.50%. And for attribute shields, there are lexical nouns, pronouns, verbs, adverbs and non-lexical hedges and also non-lexical hedges have the highest proportion.

According to table 7, it is clear that rounders and attribute shields are realized mainly by lexical nouns and pronouns; only shields would use lexical verbs and approximators would use lexical adjective; only plausible shields would not use lexical adverbs and only rounders would use lexical quantifier; there are model verbs in adaptors and plausible shields; only adaptor would not use non-lexical hedges.

As for the reasons of the usage of different hedges, this paper would give a more detailed explanation in next part on the basis of cooperative principle, face theory and politeness principle with some examples.

4.2.1 Adaptors

As is mentioned above, adaptors are used to present the degree of differences in the truth condition of the proposition. They are the kind of hedges that make certain modification on the original meaning of the utterance according to the actual situation. In Chinese, there are many words included in adaptors, like “在一定程度上”, “有一点儿”, “几乎”, “差不多”, “完全/不完全”, “接近于”. And there are some examples in Chinese foreign ministry spokespersons’ speeches.

(1) 我想强调，中国和以色列建交以来，两国在包括经贸、科技、人文等各个领域的务实合作不断取得积极成果。(Geng Shuang, Jan 5th)

(2) 下步，中国公安、海关、工商、林业等部门将进一步加大对违法加工销售、运输、走私象牙及制品等行为的打击力度。(Geng Shuang, Jan 3rd)

(3) 我们坚决反对任何制造“两个中国”和“一中一台”的企图，我们对日方在台湾问题上采取的消极举措表示强烈不满。(Geng Shuang, Jan 3rd)

From these examples, we can see that the three words “不断” “进一步” “强烈” are all adaptors, which can avoid subjective assertion. In example (1) and (2), “不断” and “进一步” fail to show how much progress has been made and how Chinese would crack down on illegal activities and crimes, and thus they violate the maxim of quantity. But these two words succeed in conveying the right amount information, and there's no need to show the details because spokesperson only wants to focus on that China is making cooperation with Israel and China will continue to strike illegal and criminal activities. “不断” and “进一步” also obey the modesty maxim of politeness principle. They indicate that the spokesperson minimize the praise of China. In example (3), it is a tough and serious problem about the relationship between China and Taiwan. And Japan violates the one-China principle, therefore China should restate his position of one-China principle and condemn Japan's inappropriate act. Meanwhile, owing to the complicated political background and the relationship with Japan, Geng Shuang uses “强烈”, which means “quite”, to show his disagreement, and this word avoids assertion for the whole interests of the two nations, instead of using other words which may destroy the relationship between them and threaten Japan's face. And this word also abides by sympathy maxim for it minimizes antipathy between China and the other country.

4.2.2 Rounders

Rounders refer to the vague words which can limit the range of the original utterance. Rounders are frequently used when people measure things. In Chinese, such words and expressions like “在某些方面”, “接近于”, “相当于”, “左右”, “上下”, “介于.....和.....之间”, “大概”, “在一定范围内”, are all rounders. Rounders often co-occur with numbers in actual situation. Sometimes it is difficult to get precise numbers immediately or there is no need to get precise number to help understand the topic. Consequently, rounders are used to avoid the unnecessary mistake and achieve preciseness. There are many examples we can get from the corpus.

(4) “一带一路”倡议提出 3年多来，在国际社会引发积极反响和支持。目前已有 100 多个国家和国际组织对该倡议表示支持，40 多个国家和国际组织同中国签署与“一带一路”相关的合作协议。(Lu Kang, Feb 3rd)

(5) 中国驻印使馆已在 2013 年为老人颁发了为期 10 年的中国护照，并从那时起每年向其提供一定的生活资助。(Lu Kang, Feb 6th)

(6) 我们多次说过，钓鱼岛及其附属岛屿自古以来就是中国的固有领土。中国海警船编队在钓鱼岛海域进行正常巡航，是中方的固有权利，外人无权说三道四。(Geng Shuang,

Feb 14th)

In example (1), we should have provided precise number to obey the maxim of quantity of cooperative principle, but the precise number is irrelevant for the public to understand the topic, so approximate number marked by “多” is enough. It violates the maxim of quantity of cooperative principle, but it is more real and close to the truth, and thus it is more convincing. In example (2), “一定的”, which means “some”, is also appropriate for there is no need of the precise number of money. Example (3) uses a pronoun “外人” to imply that the related countries have no right to intervene in Chinese domestic affairs about Diaoyu Islands. But China shows his attitude indirectly and wants to save the related countries’ faces and don’t want to make the relationship with these two countries worse and shows its politeness to the other two countries. And in the corpus, “有关方面” “有关国家” “任何人” “一切形势” are also rounders and they are the same as “外人” and they all obey sympathy maxim for avoiding the direct conflicts with some countries or related organizations and saving their face.

4.2.3 Plausible Shields

Plausible shields are the words indicating speaker’s speculation or his hesitation for his utterance directly. And in Chinese, “我/我们觉得”, “好像”, “我想”, “我认为”, “我猜测”, “可能”, “很难说” are all plausible shields. And here are some examples in the speeches.

(7) 中方重视中韩关系发展, 愿同韩国各界保持沟通交流。我们欢迎韩国民主党国会议员代表团来华访问, 希望访问有助于双方加强沟通, 增进理解。(Geng Shuang, Jan 3rd)

(8) 中方认为, 协议是六国与伊朗共同达成的国际协定, 并经联合国安理会正式核可。各方都应继续认真履行义务, 坚持通过协商解决分歧, 确保协议执行不断向前推进。(Hua Chuanying, Jan 17th)

(9) 据了解, 香港特区政府正按照相关法律法规处理此事.。(Hua Chuanying, Jan 17th)

In these examples, the words underlined are all plausible shields. “愿” in example (7) means “中方愿意”; “希望” means “我们希望”, and “我们” is equal to “中方”. They are all indicating speakers’ speculation and hesitation. And in example (8), the modal verb “应” which means “should”, also shows speaker’s wish not demand. And the language is more mitigatory and persuasive, and there is also room for how to do this thing. In example (9), “据了解” means “据中方了解”, which shows the attitude of speakers. These words may violate the maxim of quantity of cooperative principle, but obey the maxim of quality and are more polite. These words can minimize antipathy between self and other. Also, they can make the statement more exact and indicate a personal attitude towards the proposition and make the proposition less absolute and assertive. These words all comply with tact maxim and they make the tone softer and make the statement more acceptable.

4.2.4 Attribute Shields

Attribute shields are the words indicating speaker’s attitude or opinion indirectly by quoting the third party’s opinion, like “有人推测”, “据推测”, “有人说”, “众所周知”, “可能性是”, “可能出现的情况是”. And here are some examples in the speeches.

(10) 事实上，联合国发布的《2016 世界投资报告》表明，中国仍然是全世界第二受欢迎的投资目的地。根据中国商务部统计，去年欧盟 28 国对华实际投资同比增长 41.3%。(Lu Kang, Feb 7th)

(11) 中方作为东北亚国家，作为安理会常任理事国和国际社会负责任的成员，一直在为推动解决问题作出自己的努力，这也是有目共睹的。(Geng Shuang, Feb 13th)

Example (10) quotes the third party's opinion, and “联合国发布的《2016 世界投资报告》表明” and “根据中国商务部统计”，which violate the maxim of quantity, **make** the statement more authoritative and convincing. Also, they can make up for the spokesperson's deficiency of some professional knowledge. In example (11), “有目共睹” is an attribute shield, which means “everyone knows”. And it makes the statement more objective and more modest. And the speaker would not take the full responsibility for the proposition. The attribution shields can save the speaker's face to some extent.

5. Conclusion

This paper intends to show the features of hedges in Chinese foreign ministry spokespersons' speeches and the pragmatic reasons why hedges can be employed in speeches under the theoretical framework of cooperative principle, face theory and politeness principle. We can see it clearly that in Chinese foreign ministry spokespersons' speeches, hedges are employed very frequently, among which shields are more than approximators and rounders take the largest proportion. And lexical hedges are more than non-lexical hedges in the speeches and lexical nouns take the highest percentage of lexical hedges while modal verbs take the lowest percentage. Besides, different hedges are showed by different lexical or non-lexical hedges.

As for the pragmatic functions of the hedges in Chinese foreign ministry spokespersons' speeches, there are three points: **1)** the statement would be more authoritative, convincing and objective and thus more supports will be won; **2)** it can save other countries' face and keep polite; **3)** it can make the statement more mitigatory so as to avoid taking full responsibility of the statement and thus save China's face better. The present study of hedges in Chinese foreign ministry spokesperson's speeches at regular press conference aims to figure out how spokesperson's speeches achieve his political meaning through hedges, and thus help the public and foreign media comprehend Chinese diplomatic policy better.

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