(UNDER)HEDGING DISCOURSE AND CREATING A POLITICAL IMAGE WITH BARACK OBAMA

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Abstract: *The purpose of this article is to investigate the (under)use of hedging in Obama's discourse in the three presidential debates with Mitt Romney. The analysis of Obama's discourse shows that the rhetorical strategy of hedging creates an effective ethos of credibility and confidence, but above all, constructs a positive political image in a dialogical and interactional process with the audience. Obama's appeal to his political image aims at carefully communicating plausible reasoning, withholding complete commitment to propositional contents and rendering messages more efficiently in a dialogic relationship between his discourse and the audience and between himself and the other, which is exemplified with various illustrations included and analyzed in the paper in the realm of the imaginary.*

Keywords*: hedging, political image, ethos, rhetorical strategy.*

Introduction

We all know that election campaigns usually involve politicians in different intense political activities with the electorate either in direct meetings or through the media. Under these circumstances such political activities come also with a large number of verbal interactional activities expressing not only politicians' ideologies but also maintaining an interpersonal relation with the electorate by means of communication. For a discourse analyst, it is particularly interesting to investigate the language used in these cases and to see how political discourse is organized to enable politicians express their standpoints and to keep the interrelation with the electorate.

Presidential election campaigns appear to be excellent sources for studying language as a means of verbalizing thoughts and political strategies. In these occasions political discourse features, in most cases, characterize the verbal activity of only the candidates running for the presidency, and as a result, discourse analysts have more control over the way discourse is organized and over its main aspects. One area of research in these instances is to explore particular discourse elements which have two functions: first, to structure discourse internally and second, to "speak of" the speaker and the speaker-hearer relation. These elements are frequently called metadiscoursal resources, one of which being *hedges*.

The aim of this study is to investigate the (under)use of hedging in Obama's discourse in the three presidential debates with Romney. The analysis of Obama's discourse shows that the rhetorical strategy of hedging creates effective credibility and confidence, but above all, constructs a positive political image in a dialogical and interactional process with the audience. Obama's appeal to his political image aims at carefully communicating plausible reasoning, withholding complete commitment to propositional contents and rendering messages more efficiently in a dialogic relationship between his discourse and the audience.

This short study follows some research I have recently conducted into different metadiscoursal resources in political discourse (Toska, forthcoming), but it is much more focused on the multifunctions of hedges, as efficient devices which enable Obama

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to build his political image. The theoretical framework adopted in this research is that of Hyland, who takes "metadiscourse as a set of features which together help explain the working of interactions between text producers and their texts and between text producers and users" (2010: 125).

The article is divided into two parts. The first part discusses briefly some theoretical issues on hedging as a process and the use of hedges in political discourse as well as on the way they enable the creation of a certain political image for the speaker. The second part analyses hedges in Obama's discourse during the presidential debates focusing on some of the major functions that these resources have. In the last part I make some general remarks on the results of the analysis.

Hedging the Political Image

Hedging is generally considered to be a (meta)linguistic process through which speakers (or writers) withhold complete commitment to propositional contents in the statements they make in discourse (Hyland, 2005). Linguistic devices such as *may*, *possibly*, *I think* or *it seems* are often employed in certain contexts to assist the speaker to construct his/her discourse, but also to facilitate the interpretation of utterance (Fraser, 2010). In this way, hedges are interactional devices which enable a constant dialogue between interlocutors and are part of the rhetorical strategy followed by the speaker (*ibidem*), which also seems to be evident enough in political discourse, "making it a dynamic process of verbal exchanges" (Quaglio, 2008: 201).

This main function (or if I may call it *hyperfunction*) of hedges is extremely important if we bear in mind that presidential debates are characterized by an intense verbal activity through which candidates "are expected to verbalize their ideological positions" (Jalilifar, Alavi-Nia, 2012: 136) and manifest a great deal of their rhetoric abilities in an attempt to persuade the electorate and win the elections (Toska, forthcoming). Hedging in these cases has certainly a role to play in their discourse and debate. Obviously, under these circumstances, withholding complete commitment to what is stated helps candidates to construct a positive political image of them, create an effective *ethos* of credibility and confidence supported by elements of plausible reasoning, as they are constantly involved in an ongoing interactional process with the audience.

As highlighted even by Hyland, the interactional dimension in verbal exchanges, and hedging in particular[1], expresses solidarity, "responding to an imagined dialogue with others" (*ibidem*: 49-50). The imagined dialogue with others, which is, broadly speaking, part of *the imaginary* concept, not only enables the "choice of relevant linguistic strategies to convey certain pragmatic meanings, as opposed to alternative ones" (Toska, 2012: 29), but also represents images of experience and perception, articulated through language and elaborated or amplified in it (*ibidem*).

Moreover, the interactional aspect of discourse reveals also much of the speaker's image in the dialogical process, because when he/she communicates with the audience, inevitably "depicts" and (re)constructs his/her image. Thus, in the presidential debates with Romney, Obama is engaged in a process of interaction involving three simulations aspects: directly communicating with Romney, indirectly communicating with the audience, and (what is relevant here) implicitly "communicating" his political

[1] For additional devices with similar characteristics and for more discussion about them, see Hyland 2005.

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image. One way of enabling this process is by hedging his discourse in the presidential debates at particular stages.

Consider examples (1) and (2) below.

(1) … one of the things *I suspect* Governor Romney and I *probably* agree on is getting businesses to work with community colleges so that they're setting up their training programs ...

Here Obama hedges his statement with *I suspect* and *probably* to sound less direct in the claim that Romney and he agree on getting businesses to work with community colleges. In this regard, he wishes that his utterance is perceived and interpreted as a "careful" statement with which his opponent might not agree. At the same time hedging the statement conveys his positive political image, since Obama attempts to soften his claim and acknowledge other alternative voices which can possibly interfere in that part of the debate.

Similarly, in example (2) below the use of *I think* conveys Obama's confident political image, although he tries to mitigate his statement to the extent that it does not sound categorical and is not perceived as a statement of fact. This rhetorical strategy allows him to invite the audience to interpret his claims as probable solutions to the growing of the economy. Even though *I think* when used as hedge in some cases conveys the idea of uncertainty by the speaker, in this case, it seems to me, it is used intentionally to keep the dialogue going with the audience and to convey a confident political image without being too direct with what is claimed.

(2) *I think* what grows the economy is when you get that tax credit that we put in place for your kids going to college. *I think* that grows the economy.

This matter will not be discussed further in this section, but will be covered more extensively in the next section during the analysis of Obama's (under)hedging, a process, as already pointed out, which enables him to create an efficient political image in the 2012 presidential debates.

Analysing Obama's (Under)hedging

As I pointed out at the beginning of the previous section, the main function of hedges in discourse is to enable the speaker to withhold full commitment from the propositional content of an utterance. This hyperfunction is almost always noticed in the hedging process of discourse and could be regarded as a metalinguistic action, through which the speaker attributes metadiscoursal properties to discourse for different reasons, one of which being the creation of a self-image. This also applies to Obama's hedging discourse. Two typical examples are (1) and (2) analysed in the previous section, although (3) and (4) seem somehow more specific to me.

In example (3) Obama employs *maybe* to make a provisional statement on what is perceived as a possible result after giving people tax cuts. So, either these people will be able to buy new cars or this action can be seen as an alternative to additional ones. Anyhow, what is important is the fact that Obama does not fully commit to this situation, and in this way, he conveys a credible self-image to the audience.

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(3) And by giving them those tax cuts, they had a little more money in their pocket, and so *maybe* they can buy a new car.

Example (4) and the claim made there is hedged with the expression *this seems*. Rather than coming up with a quick conclusion, Obama chooses to withdraw himself a little from the claim that Romney is proposing the same budged as Ryan's. Obama's withholding full commitment from this claim appears to be a rhetorical strategy to create a positive image when indirectly communicating with the audience. Although it seems to me that the use the hedge is determined also by the noun *trend* perhaps carrying some negative connotation.

(4) You know, his -- his running mate, Congressman Ryan, put forward a budget that reflects many of the principles that Governor Romney's talked about. And it wasn't very detailed. *This seems* to be a trend.

Whatever the reasons for hedging these instances or others are, it is important to remember that speakers withhold full commitment to propositions under certain circumstances and in different (pre)determined contexts, because this is a metadiscoursal function which expresses interpersonal meanings and builds a certain image, or a (positive) political image, as in Obama's case.

The following part of this section deals with some other important functional aspects of hedges, which could be seen as hypofunctions and could be considered more specific to the micro-context of discourse than the hyperfunction.

Hyland maintains that hedges are frequently used to "to recognize alternative voices and viewpoints" (*op. cit.*: 52), in which case speakers are able to present their utterances as opinions rather than facts, and at the same time to follow a rhetorical strategy which allows them to build a desired *ethos* or image, but also to interactionally involve the audience in discourse. I have extracted examples (5) and (6) to illustrate this point.

There are three hedges in the following example: *it's conceivable*, *could* and *might*. The overhedging of this sentence gives the impression that Obama, obviously, makes a tentative statement expressing his opinion and acknowledging other potential alternative voices in it. Although the focus is on Romney's inappropriate policies, Obama also concentrates on possible effects that they might create. It seems to me that the matter is slightly more complicated in this sentence, because by highlighting potential future problems with the gas prices, Obama points to a credible self-image as opposed to Romney's. The epistemic devices *could* and especially *might* are employed to recognize alternative voices, but also to point out to potential future problems with Romney's policies.

(5) So, *it's conceivable* that Governor Romney *could* bring down gas prices because with his policies, we *might* be back in that same mess.

Example (6) below is again one of the few overhedged passages in Obama's discourse. As the hedges in (5), those employed here are intended to allow other viewpoints in the passage and to challenge the claim made here: that the free enterprise system is the most efficient one in the world. After all, it should be clear that this is a presidential debate and Obama may sound too "arrogant" if he chooses to boost every part of the debate. This strategy allows him to get closer to the audience and to interact

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with it modestly. Even in this instance I would interpret his hedging as an attempt to build an acceptable political image, willing enough to consider and accept the alternative, or the imaginary.

(6) Barry, *I think* a lot of this campaign, *maybe* over the last four years, has been devoted to this nation that *I think* government creates jobs, that that *somehow* is the answer. That's not what I believe. *I believe* that the free enterprise system is the greatest engine of prosperity the world's ever known.

In some other cases, however, hedges are used less subjectively to help speakers "to convey judgments with greater accuracy and situate their positions in relation to knowledge" (Bondi, 2008: 32), as in example (7) below. Obama uses *estimated* to convey an approximate number of jobs that can be created, and this is a figure which has been probably obtained from other sources. So, the hedging process here differs from the previous two, in that it communicates reference to some external estimation, for instance, much or less based on empirical evidence, but which again enables Obama to convey a prudent self-image to the audience.

(7) If we take your advice with respect to how we change our tax codes so that companies that earn profits overseas don't pay U.S. taxes compared to companies here that are paying taxes. Now that's *estimated* to create 800,000 jobs, the problem is they won't be here, they'll be in places like China.

Very similarly, speakers also employ hedges to convey a moderate utterance claim (Jørgensen, Phillips, 2002), as in example (8), in an attempt "to communicate interactionally with the audience in a silent dialogical process with the aim of building a credible and efficient *ethos* which contributes to the persuasion of the audience" (Toska, forthcoming) and to the creation of a positive political image. It appears that politicians sometimes wish to refer to quasi-factual information that serves as premise(s) for the claims that they make in discourse. In our case, Obama wants to sound moderate as well. *Are not always* and *generally* seem to perform such a function, although I agree that not everyone would classify these items as hedges, because they may seem to contribute more to the propositional meaning rather that to the metadiscoursal one. However, I maintain that such instances are to be taken as the speaker's attempt to project himself in discourse, and consequently, they transmit the speaker's image to the audience.

(8) And I make that point because that's the kind of clarity of leadership, and those decisions *are not always* popular. Those decisions *generally* -- *generally* are not poll-tested. And even some in my own party, including my current vice president, had the same critique as you did.

Another important discursive function of hedging is to soften or even slightly modify potential unwelcomed pragmatic meanings in utterances, which can compromise the continuation of the ongoing interactional process between the speaker and the hearer. Fraser states that hedges can sometimes be used to "to mitigate an undesirable effect on the hearer, thereby rendering the message (more) polite" (*op. cit.*: 206). This strategy was followed by Obama in a few instances in the presidential debates with Romney and which is illustrated below with the use of hedges *maybe* and *probably* in examples (9) and (10).

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(9) The budget that we are talking about is not reducing our military spending. It is maintaining it. But I think Governor Romney *maybe* hasn't spent enough time looking at how our military works.

(10) Nothing Governor Romney just said is true, starting with this notion of me apologizing. This has been *probably* the biggest whopper that's been told during the course of this campaign.

Obama's hedging discourse in these and similar occasions during the debate comes not only as a linguistic act to abide by social conventions of everyday interactions, but also as a way of challenging Romney's claims politely and not to cause offence to him regarding the issue being debated. In (9) *maybe* plays the role of a mitigator and softens Obama's assessment that Romney knows little of how military works and in (10) *probably* modifies the pragmatic meaning of the big lie or fabrication Romney made. Anyway, even in these instances Obama attempts to create a modest *ethos* with a positive and proper image in front of the audience by hedging certain parts of his discourse, and as a result, by rendering his messages politely.

Hedges are also powerful linguistic tools which can be used to have control over discourse and its content, particularly on those occasions when the speaker wants to describe the reality or the world perception in discourse and at the same time keep the interaction going. In this regard hedges enable a channel of dialogue between people and reflect metalinguistic aspects in discourse by commenting "on the word-to-world fit" and "on the 'reliability' of language for coding experience" (Bednarek, 2006: 180). This can often be seen as a linguistic maneuvering which aims at manipulating discourse and making the audience perceive various situations the way the speaker does in a defined context.

In example (11) Obama has chosen to hedge his claim with *more likely* in order to make the audience believe that the approach that his government will follow is the most appropriate one in all likelihood. In this way he is able to encode in this hedge an extralinguistic situation, but also to influence the perception of the propositional content of the sentence. By being involved in discourse, the audience is likely to be focused on language and bound to interpret the conveyed message "as it is/comes", despite the fact that the approach may or not be the appropriate one. In a sense, Obama describes the reality of things by means of the linguistic device (the hedge *more likely*), in which he has encoded extralinguistic matters.

(11) … in some ways, we've got some data on which approach is *more likely* to create jobs … .

Essentially in the following illustration has much or less the same effect. It is a linguistic maneuvering device to direct the audience to a desired interpretation of the proposition in the statement. The model Romney and the one proposed are to be seen as being very similar. It appears that *essentially* carries not only such pragmatic meaning, but also helps Obama to manipulate the audience and receive a silent positive feedback from it. It is worth highlighting here, that the manipulation of discourse is relevant in this study, because it creates Obama's image, and it is irrelevant whether he succeeds to make the audience perceive discourse the way he wishes or not.

(12) ... the irony is that we've seen this model work really well in Massachusetts, because Governor Romney did a good thing, working with Democrats in the state to set up what is *essentially* the identical model and as a consequence people are covered there.

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In both instances Obama builds a political image through which he can manipulate discourse and influence the perception and interpretation of it. Of course, this does not mean in any way that it is done for deceptive purposes. As we know, politicians frequently resort to various ways to be persuasive and endeavor to include rhetorical aspects in discourse, one of which is the action of the-word-to-world-fit hedging to build the reliable image.

We have seen in this section of the paper that hedging in political discourse is a multifunctional process which can be encountered in many different situations and context for various reasons. Some of the most relevant functions were discussed here so as to get a better insight into hedging, even overhedging, as in the examples (5) and (6), and their potential effects in creating Obama's political image. The last part, however, deals with underhedging, which is also a very important point in Obama's discourse. As a matter of fact, Obama's discourse in the presidential debates with Romney, unsurprisingly though, is underhedged. Obama's text in all three presidential debates consists of almost 22,000 words and I managed to find only 48 uses of hedges, an amount which corresponds to 2.21 hedges per 1,000 words, while there were on average 7.47 boosters per 1,000 words. And this is justifiable for two main reasons discussed below.

As it has already been stated, Obama attempts to build a positive, reliable, confident political image, and this was the case in different situation through hedging. However, in most parts of the debate hedging would have been inappropriate considering the fact that he is constantly in an imagined and dialogic interaction with the electorate and hedging those parts might have had negative effects on his image. Rather, boosting was opted for instead of hedging, because hedges "very often mark uncertainty" (Hyland, 1998: 5) and "leave open doubts about a statements" (Myers, 2010: 119).

Examples (13) and (14) have been boosted with *certainty* and *of course*, because such devices "attribute an increased force or authority to statements" (Bondi, *opt. cit.*: 32) and downplay the presence of the audience (Hyland, 2005). So, *certainly* conveys a more authoritative political image rather than hedges such as *might* or *probably*, if used instead. Furthermore, Obama does not wish that the audience casts doubts on the statements he makes. We know that the audience is imaginatively present in discourse, and he chooses to decrease its presence and limit the possibility of disagreement by avoiding hedges. In example (14) *of course* has been employed instead of hedges such as *it is possible* or *possibly* that could have been used for similar purposes.

(13) What I would not have had done was left 10,000 troops in Iraq that would tie us down. And that *certainly* would not help us in the Middle East.

(14) But, *of course*, if you're a small business or a mom-and-pop business or a big business starting up here, you've got to pay even the reduced rate that Governor Romney's talking.

Another reason for avoiding hedges is because they transmit tokens of speaker's subjectivity, since they are sometimes used to convey opinions, preferences, intentions, worldview and so on. It was often been noted in Obama's discourse that infrequent uses of hedges often assist speakers to "disguise their interpretative activities behind linguistic objectivity" (Hyland, 2011: 180). This strategy allows Obama to

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manipulate discourse much or less the way as discussed above in the last two examples. I believe that this is a manner of reacting to the *in response to* element to create his political image.

In example (15) Obama asserts that Romney's strategy is[1] not the one designed to keep Americans safe. There are no uses of hedges in this statement, because I suppose that the replacement of *is* with a possible hedge can alter the interpretation of the statement. The verb *is* (instead of *may*, for instance) leaves little doubt about Obama's claim, expressed in a seemingly objective manner.

(15) … but I have to tell you that, you know, your strategy previously has been one that has been all over the map and *is* not designed to keep Americans safe or to build on the opportunities that exist in the Middle East.

The next example has been boosted with *we know*, again, for interpretative purposes and for making the audience perceive the situation as Obama is depicting it. The example Obama is referring to in the extract is going to make a difference in the 21st century, which is presented as a fact that the audience already knows. In fact, it is a bit difficult to determine whether *we* in this case is inclusive or exclusive, although it does seem that includes the audience in either case. Unlike as in the three last examples, the audience is even more present in discourse and it is invited to interpret Obama's claim the way he intends to.

(16) That*'s* not the kind of small business promotion we need. But let's take an example that *we know* is going to make a difference in the 21st century and that's our education policy.

Both examples demonstrate, in a way or another, that Obama manipulates parts of his discourse to present real situations, based on the objective language used, although this seems to be more the case with *is* rather than with *we know*. And again my claim is that when Obama disguises the interpretative activity behind objective linguistic devices attempts to build an acceptable and reliable (maybe even objective) political image. The next and last extract best exemplifies this with *every time you've offered an opinion, you've been wrong.*

(17) … I know you haven't been in a position to actually execute foreign policy -- but every time you've offered an opinion, you've been wrong.

Final Remarks

It should be said that the functions of hedges discussed in this study are only some of the most important ones that I was able to spot during the analysis of Obama's discourse in the 2012 parliamentary debates with Romney. Moreover, it is sometimes difficult to tell the functional aspects of one or another hedge, because there are several factors that can determine this, one of which is the intention of the speaker that can even be misinterpreted by discourse analysts. And not to mention that there might even be potential overlapping functions in (under)hedging discourse to create a desired political self-image.

[1] And *is* is the keyword here.

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