



Hedging in Political Discourse: A Pragmatic Analysis of Barack Obama's 2024 DNC Speech

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DOI: [10.33329/rjelal.14.3.271](https://doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.14.3.271)



Article info

Article Received: 28/07/2026
Article Accepted: 26/08/2026
Published online: 29/08/2026

Abstract

Hedging is crucial linguistic feature of political speeches as it allows speakers to qualify their claims, indicate degrees of certainty, and present their political views cautiously. This study investigates the use of hedging devices in Barack Obama's 2024 DNC speech. A qualitative descriptive data-based approach supported by frequency analysis is used in this study. In his model of political hedging, Hyland (1996) provides the principal theoretical framework, namely his understanding of hedging as a rhetorical and interpersonal tool that speakers make use of to qualify their commitment to their claims. Hedging devices are identified by their linguistic realization and examined by their discourse roles in context. The results show that approximating expressions, are more common in the chosen speech, unlike lexical adverbs such as "maybe" "usually", and "pretty" which are less frequently used to indicate tentativeness, probability, or limitation on generalization. Modal auxiliaries and lexical hedges are sparingly used to express low probability and personal believes. According to the study, hedging is crucial pragmatic device that enables speakers to maintain a persuasive tone while regulating the degree of commitment to their claims.

Keywords: Hedging; Political discourse; Modal auxiliaries; Lexical hedges; Epistemic modality.

1. INTRODUCTION

Political discourse plays a crucial role in influencing public opinion, expressing political views, and building connection between the politicians and the audience. Politicians have to peruse their audience with their political views and opinions while managing a degree of

commitment towards their claim. Political language often includes statements about unpredictable events, future actions, policies, and social issues, in contrast to everyday communication. For this reason, politicians use different linguistic devices to communicate uncertainty, possibility, approximation, and

avoid presenting definitive facts and claims. Hedging is one of the key language devices used for this purpose. speakers can make use of it to show a suitable degree of commitment and reduce the categorical force of their claims. Hyland (1996: 433–454) describes hedging as rhetorical and interpersonal tool that enables speakers to qualify their claims and predict future disagreement. therefore, hedging is seen as a device that helps speakers control their relationship with their audience and present their views cautiously for the goal of persuading their audience.

For example, the statement "*The policy will benefit citizens*" indicates a strong commitment to the claim. while, "*The policy may benefit citizens*" leaves room for alternative interpretations and as a result maintain a lower degree of commitment. Similarly, expressions such as "*I believe*" can present a proposition as the speaker's personal belief rather than as an unquestionable fact. Hyland (1994: 239–256) argues that hedging helps language users to convey degrees of uncertainty and appropriately place themselves in relation to their propositions and audiences. This kind of linguistic mechanism is quiet helpful in political discourse as politicians seek to integrate persuasion with caution. It allows them to express their political views confidently while avoiding complete commitment. Investigating the concept of hedging can give an insight into the way politicians build their messages and interact with their audience.

The present study looks into hedging in Barack Obama's speech at the 2024 Democratic National Convention. The study examines the pragmatic functions of hedging and their occurrence in the selected speech. Through this analysis, the study aims to demonstrate how Obama's political communication benefits from the use of hedging and how the selected speech expresses different degrees of commitment.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Political Discourse

Political discourse is seen as an important area of discourse analysis since language is a fundamental tool through which politicians communicate their ideas, assemble identities, persuade their audience, and build relationships with the audience. Fairclough (2001: 3), argues that discourse needs to be viewed as a type of social practice where language is used to build and negotiate social relations and identities. Accordingly, discourses are communicative tools that politicians used to influence the audience's understanding and views of events, social problems, and proposed solutions. Similarly, Chilton (2004: 3) puts great emphasizes on the relations between language and politics, pointing out that political discourse can be examined using linguistic choices that represent political relations and goals. As a result, when it comes to vocabulary, pronouns, modality, evaluation, and other linguistic tools, political speakers make deliberate decisions. Politicians try to present political positions while, at the same time, building credibility and solidarity with the audience. Therefore, they need to balance assertiveness with caution. A politician may face criticism if their words are very definitive, while their authority may be undermined if they are overly ambiguous. One linguistic mechanism for achieving this balance is hedging.

2.2 Hedging

Hyland (1996: 251–281) explains hedging as a method used to qualify categorical commitment and anticipate possible future disagreement. Hence, hedging is a linguistic strategy used to reduce the categorical force of a proposition and permit speakers to express possibility rather than certainty. Hedges can therefore be used to modify the level of commitment attached to a proposition. For example: *The policy will succeed* indicates a strong commitment, whereas: *The policy may succeed* views success as a possibility.

Hyland (1996: 433–454) further argues that hedging allows speakers to make precise and cautious claims and be prepared for any possible disagreement with their claims.

2.3 Hedging and Epistemic Modality

Both hedging and epistemic modality include expressing degrees of commitment to propositions, so they are related. However, hedging functions as a practical method for qualifying a proposition, while epistemic modality focuses on the speaker's evaluation of the proposition's status or likelihood (Crompton, 1997: 271–287). Crompton argues that the idea of hedging is mostly related to the expressions of epistemic modality and markers of provisionality. Similarly, Hyland (1996: 433–454) deals with hedging as a tool for qualifying commitment and cautiously indicating claims. In the sentence (*The policy may succeed*) *may* indicates possibility and reduces the categorical force of the proposition. Hence, it can work as both an epistemic modal and a hedging tool. Nevertheless, context should be adopted when investigating linguistic forms. Crompton (1997: 271–287) stresses that not all expression related to uncertainty or indirectness should be categorized as hedges.

2.4 Forms of Hedging

Hyland (1996: 251–281) presents a number of linguistic forms the writers can utilize to qualify their claims. These include modal expressions and lexical forms that express degrees of possibility and commitment and as follows:

- **Modal auxiliaries'** express possibility and lessen the degree of commitment. They include (may, might, could).
- **Epistemic lexical verbs** demonstrate information as a belief, interpretation, and tentative conclusion. They include (believe, suggest, seem, appear).

- **Epistemic adverbs** directly signify degrees of uncertainty. They include (perhaps, possibly, probably).
- **Approximating expressions** decrease the categorical nature of a statement. They include (about, approximately, nearly).

2.5 Hedging as an Interpersonal Strategy

Besides its role in expressing uncertainty, Hedging can be used as an interpersonal strategy by allowing speakers to demonstrate their connection with the audiences. Hyland (1996: 433–454) states that hedging is a crucial rhetorical device that enables writers to make claims with caution and anticipate future disagreement. In political discourse, this role can be especially important since politicians should often create balance between the need to communicate persuasively and, at the same time, avoid excessive commitment. For this purpose, politicians can make a great use of qualified statements to achieve this goal with caution and assurance.

2.6 The Analytical Model and The Data

The present study adopts Hyland's approach to hedging as its principal theoretical basis, particularly his treatment of hedging as a means of qualifying commitment and expressing possibility rather than certainty (Hyland, 1996: 251–281). The present study presents an analysis of Barack Obama's 2024 DNC speech. Each potential hedge in Obama's speech will be investigated contextually and identified based on its linguistic form and pragmatic function.

3. Data Analysis

The analysis makes use of the four types of hedging device based on Hyland's (1996). Crompton (1997) is also utilized to ensure that possible hedges are analyzed contextually and not mechanically, while Palmer (2001) is used to help make the distinction between epistemic modality and other modal meanings.

1. Modal auxiliary Hedges

No.	Hedge	Context	Function
1	would	"a tax cut that would mostly help him"	Hypothetical possibility
2	would	"a deal that would've helped secure our southern border"	Counterfactual possibility
3	might	"despite what our politics might suggest "	Possibility
4	may	"that approach may work for the politicians"	Possibility

Different levels of qualification are displayed here. Might and may are the most obvious as they are used to indicate that the event is probable rather than certain. The two occurrences of would take place in a hypothetical or counterfactual case which lessen the propositions' categorical nature. This use aligns with Palmer's (2001: 24–69) distinction

between modal possibilities and factual claims. Other models such as should, will, can are mentioned in the data, however, they are not classified as hedges, they indicate obligation, prediction, or ability rather than uncertainty. This contextual analysis follows Crompton (1997).

2. Epistemic Lexical verbs

No.	Hedge	Context	Function
1	I think	" I think most Americans understand that"	Personal assessment
2	I believe	" I believe that's what we yearn for"	Personal belief
3	I believe	" I believe that's why"	Personal belief
4	seem	"all of us ... seem so quick to assume the worst"	Tentative observation

Obama's hedging clearly contains an interpersonal component due to lexical verbs. *I think* and *I believe* Present propositions as the speaker's subjective opinion rather than as objective truths. In a similar vein, the expression

seem is used to avoid making a categorical claim. Hyland (1996: 433–454) thinks of these expressions as helpful in managing potential conflict and qualifying.

3 Epistemic Adverbs

No.	Adverb	Context	Function
1	pretty	"has always been pretty good"	Degree reduction
2	pretty	"sometimes pretty tough years"	Degree reduction
3	pretty	"gotten pretty stale"	Degree reduction
4	usually	"the sequel is usually worse"	Reduced generalization
5	maybe	"and maybe learn something"	Possibility
6	maybe	"maybe a little encouragement"	Possibility
7	occasionally	"if a parent or grandparent occasionally says something"	Frequency qualification

8	mostly	"Mostly it's because..."	Partial qualification
9	pretty	"can feel pretty naive right now"	Degree reduction

Obama uses qualifying and epistemic adverbs to avoid absolute formulations. He uses the epistemic adverb *maybe* the most as it

expressly adds possibility. He also uses *Usually* and *occasionally* to limit the generality of the claim rather than presenting it categorically.

4. Approximators

No.	Approximator	Context	Function
1	some	" some common Irish blood"	Imprecise quantity
2	a lot of	" a lot of Americans"	Approximate quantity
3	some	" some of the outdated laws"	Non-specific reference
4	some	" some of the tired, old debates"	Non-specific quantity
5	some	" some books somewhere"	Imprecise reference
6	a little	"maybe a little encouragement"	Reduced degree
7	a little	"the world's a little brighter"	Reduced degree
8	a little	"the world's a little dimmer"	Reduced degree
9	a lot of	"I've spent a lot of time"	Approximate quantity
10	a lot in common	"did not have a lot in common "	Approximate degree
11	a lot	"didn't pay a lot "	Approximate quantity
12	somewhere in between	" somewhere in between "	Approximate position
13	as much as	" As much as any policy or program"	Approximate comparison
14	pretty much	" pretty much what they please"	Approximate degree
15	countless	"in countless ways"	Non-specific quantity

Obama uses Approximators to avoid exact numerical, quantitative, or categorical limitation. In his speech, he makes use of

expressions such as *some*, *a lot*, *a little*, and *pretty much* to make the claims less absolute and more adaptable.

5. Overall Frequency

Type of Hedge	Frequency	Percentage
Modal auxiliaries	4	13 %
Epistemic lexical verbs	4	13 %
Epistemic adverbs	9	27 %
Approximators	15	47 %
Total	32	100%

3.1 Analysis of the Overall Results

The results show that Obama uses approximators are most frequently in his speech with a percentage of 47% of the identified hedging devices. This suggests that Obama often chooses to qualify his statements with ambiguous quantity and degree over direct expressions of uncertainty. Epistemic adverbs come next with a percentage of 28%. Modal auxiliaries and epistemic lexical verbs occur less frequently, with a similar percentage of 13% out of the detected data.

The limited usage of explicit epistemic devices is due to the persuasive nature of the political discourse. Obama uses hedging when addressing possibilities, generalizations, or subjective opinions. Other than that, he introduces his political positions with confidence. This validates Hayland's (1996) theory hedging not only used when expressing uncertainty, but also as a rhetorical device to control commitment.

4. RESULTS

The analysis found 32 hedging frequencies. It shows that Approximators are the dominant category (47%), followed by epistemic adverbs (28%), while modal auxiliaries and epistemic verbs are the weakest categories with a percentage of (13%) each. These findings mark that Obama relies on hedging as one of the primary strategies to use in his speech. He depends on hedging to achieve qualification and reduce the degree of commitment. Obama uses expression such as *some*, *a lot*, *a little*, and *pretty much* to refrain him from using extremely categorical formulations. While he uses, *I think*, *I believe*, and *seem* are used to indicate personal evaluation and reduced commitment, *might* and *may* are primarily used to indicate possibility. Hedging, then, is utilized to fulfil both an epistemic and interpersonal purposes.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The study comes to conclusion that hedging is an important pragmatic tool which is heavily used in Obama's 2024 DNC speech.

Despite speech's powerful persuasiveness, Obama does not rely solely on categorical statements. Rather, he utilizes a variety of linguistic devices to control the intensity and scope of his claims. Generally, the results of the study show that hedging can be used in the political discourse to maintain the balance between political confidence and linguistic caution. This supports the theory that defines hedging as a tool for managing commitment and reducing the possible future conflict working as an indicator of uncertainty. The use of hedging does not weaken the persuasive nature of the speech, on the contrary, it enables Obama to present his opinions with flexibility while avoiding overly broad generalizations. Relying on this technique is especially helpful when discussing political expectations, social conditions, and future expectations.

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