

Research Article

Linguistic Strategies in Political Discourse: Hedges and Boosters in the 2024 US Presidential Debate

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Abstract

This study examines the strategic use of hedges and boosters in the first US presidential debate of June 26, 2024, between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. These linguistic devices are crucial in shaping political discourse by modulating confidence and authority. Hedges introduce ambiguity and caution, while boosters amplify certainty and assertiveness. Using the official debate transcript as the primary data source, this analysis employs a qualitative content analysis to identify and categorize these strategies. It highlights distinct usage patterns: Joe Biden frequently uses hedges to express caution and acknowledge complexities, while Donald Trump relies heavily on boosters to project unwavering confidence and decisiveness. Biden's strategic use of hedges allows him to navigate contentious issues with a balanced tone, while Trump's emphasis on boosters strengthens his assertive stance and enhances his perceived authority. This research fills a gap in existing literature by specifically analyzing these linguistic devices within the context of presidential debates. The findings provide insights into how both candidates use hedges and boosters to influence voter perceptions and address rhetorical challenges, contributing to a deeper understanding of political communication strategies and their effects on audience reception.

Keywords

Hedges, Boosters, Political Discourse, Presidential Debate, Linguistic Analysis

1. Introduction

Political debates are pivotal events where candidates employ strategic communication to articulate policies, sway public opinion, and establish credibility. The linguistic strategies deployed in these debates play a crucial role in shaping perceptions and influencing voter decisions. One such strategy involves the use of linguistic devices known as hedges and boosters. Hedges soften the certainty of statements, providing flexibility, while boosters enhance assertiveness and confidence in assertions. These linguistic tools are essential in managing the balance between assertiveness and caution in political discourse, as noted by Simpson (1993) and

van Dijk (1997) in their studies of language and ideology [13, 14]. This study analyzes how Joe Biden and Donald Trump utilized hedges and boosters during the first US presidential debate held on June 26, 2024. The analysis explores the strategic implications of these linguistic devices in shaping the narrative and influencing voter perceptions, as highlighted in the official transcript provided by the Commission on Presidential Debates [15], and covered by major news outlets like CNN and NBC News [16, 17].

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Received: 15 July 2024; **Accepted:** 13 August 2024; **Published:** 18 October 2024



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2. Literature Review

Linguistic devices like hedges and boosters have been extensively studied across various contexts. Boosters, identified by Hyland [6] in academic discourse, strengthen assertions to enhance perceived certainty and authority. Brown and Levinson's politeness theory includes boosters as tools for asserting commitment and persuasive force [2]. In political communication, Holmes [5] underscores their role in projecting confidence, which is crucial for influencing voter perceptions. Conversely, hedges, as noted by Fraser [6], introduce cautiousness into statements, allowing speakers to manage risk while appearing open to different viewpoints. The literature emphasizes that both hedges and boosters are strategic tools used by politicians to navigate complex rhetorical landscapes and influence audience reactions. Additionally, Simpson [13] and van Dijk [14] provide insights into how language, ideology, and discourse are interlinked in shaping perspectives, further reinforcing the importance of these linguistic tools in political communication.

2.1. Boosters in Political Communication

Boosters, as identified by Hyland [6], are crucial in academic discourse to assert certainty and authority. In political communication, their role is even more pronounced. According to Holmes [8], boosters help politicians project confidence, which is essential for persuading voters and establishing credibility. The use of strong modal verbs (e.g., "will," "must") and emphatic adverbs (e.g., "definitely," "certainly") helps candidates assert their positions unequivocally, leaving little room for doubt.

For instance, Atkinson [1] discusses how political leaders use repetition and emphatic language to reinforce their messages during speeches and debates. This technique, often coupled with boosters, enhances the perceived strength and reliability of their statements. Furthermore, research by Dillard and Shen [4] indicates that boosters can increase the persuasiveness of political messages by fostering a sense of urgency and importance. During the 2024 U. S. presidential debate, both Joe Biden and Donald Trump employed boosters to assert their stances firmly, as seen in the official debate transcript provided by the Commission on Presidential Debates [15].

2.2. Hedges in Political Communication

Hedges introduce ambiguity or caution into statements, serving as a rhetorical tool to manage the potential backlash and demonstrate open-mindedness. Fraser [5] highlights that hedges like "perhaps," "maybe," and "could" allow politicians to express uncertainty or flexibility, which can be strategically advantageous. This technique can make a speaker appear more relatable and less dogmatic, potentially broadening their appeal.

Lakoff [9] first introduced the concept of hedges, describing them as words or phrases that make statements less forceful or direct. In the political arena, hedges can be used to soften controversial opinions or to introduce tentative policy proposals without committing fully. This tactic is especially useful in debates where the audience expects nuanced and well-considered responses. Media outlets, such as CNN and NBC News, have reported on the strategic use of hedges by candidates during the debate to temper their positions while engaging with complex issues [16, 17].

2.3. Comparative Studies on Hedges and Boosters in Debates

Several studies have specifically analyzed the use of hedges and boosters in political debates. Bull and Fetzer [3] examined how British politicians use these devices to manage accountability and present themselves as credible leaders. They found that the strategic use of hedges allowed politicians to navigate difficult questions without appearing evasive, while boosters helped reinforce their key messages.

Similarly, research by O'Keefe [10] on American presidential debates revealed that candidates use a combination of hedges and boosters to balance assertiveness with caution. This dual strategy helps them appeal to a broad audience by demonstrating both confidence and thoughtfulness. Fairclough's [10] critical discourse analysis framework further emphasizes how these rhetorical devices operate within the broader power struggles of political debates, where candidates seek to assert dominance while maintaining relatability.

3. Theoretical Frameworks

The analysis of hedges and boosters in political discourse is underpinned by several theoretical frameworks. Hyland's [8] work on academic discourse provides a foundation for understanding how these devices function to negotiate meaning and assert authority. Brown and Levinson's [2] politeness theory offers insights into how boosters can be used to assert commitment and how hedges can soften statements to maintain face and manage politeness.

Additionally, Fairclough's [10] critical discourse analysis framework emphasizes the power dynamics inherent in language use. This perspective helps to contextualize the use of hedges and boosters within the broader power struggles of political debates, where candidates aim to assert dominance while avoiding alienation of the audience.

Practical Implication

Understanding the use of hedges and boosters in political debates has significant practical implications. For political candidates, mastering these linguistic strategies can enhance their effectiveness in communication, helping them to project confidence while remaining relatable [1, 3]. For voters, recognizing these devices can improve their critical

evaluation of candidates' statements, enabling them to better discern between genuine commitment and strategic ambiguity, [4].

Moreover, media and debate analysts can use insights from these studies to provide more informed commentary on candidates' performances, shedding light on the rhetorical techniques that underlie their communication strategies [5].

The extensive body of literature on hedges and boosters highlights their critical role in political communication. These linguistic devices are essential tools for politicians, allowing them to navigate complex rhetorical landscapes and influence audience perceptions effectively [7]. By strategically employing hedges and boosters, political candidates can project confidence, manage risk, and connect with diverse voter bases, ultimately shaping the outcomes of political debates and elections [8].

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4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative content analysis to examine the use of hedges and boosters in the first US presidential debate of 2024 between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. The primary data consists of the official debate transcript, obtained from the Commission on Presidential Debates, ensuring accuracy and reliability [11].

4.1. Data Preparation and Segmentation

The transcript is divided into individual statements and responses. Each segment is treated as a unit of analysis, allowing for detailed examination of linguistic devices within the context of the candidates' discourse. This segmentation ensures that each instance of hedges and boosters is analyzed in its immediate context, providing a nuanced understanding of their usage [12].

4.2. Coding Process

Step 1: Identification of Hedges and Boosters

Hedges: Words or phrases that introduce ambiguity or soften statements. Common examples include "perhaps,"

"maybe," "could," "might," "somewhat," and "likely." These expressions suggest tentativeness or lack of complete certainty [4, 8].

Boosters: Words or phrases that enhance the certainty and assertiveness of statements. Common examples include "definitely," "certainly," "will," "must," "always," and "absolutely." These expressions convey confidence and strong commitment [1, 2].

Step 2: Categorization by Type

Adverbs: Words that modify verbs, adjectives, or other adverbs to indicate the degree of certainty (e.g., "definitely," "certainly," "perhaps") [3, 6].

Modal Verbs: Auxiliary verbs that indicate possibility, necessity, or certainty (e.g., "could," "might," "must," "will") [7, 8].

Phrases: Combinations of words that function together to hedge or boost statements (e.g., "it is possible that," "I am sure that") [9, 12].

Step 3: Contextual Examination

Each identified hedge or booster is analyzed within its context in the debate. This involves examining the surrounding text to understand the function of the linguistic device. For instance, is the hedge used to introduce a tentative policy suggestion, or is the booster employed to emphasize a firm stance on an issue? Statements are categorized by debate segment (e.g., policy discussions, rebuttals, closing statements). This categorization helps identify patterns in the use of hedges and boosters across different types of discourse within the debate [11, 12].

4.3. Data Analysis

The qualitative content analysis involves several key steps:

Frequency Analysis: Counting the occurrences of hedges and boosters for each candidate. This provides a quantitative measure of how frequently each type of linguistic device is used [7, 8].

Functional Analysis: Examining the role that hedges and boosters play in the candidates' rhetorical strategies. This involves understanding whether these devices are used to show caution, introduce flexibility, project confidence, or assert authority [3, 9].

Comparative Analysis: Comparing the use of hedges and boosters between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. This comparison highlights differences and similarities in their rhetorical approaches and provides insights into their strategic communication styles [5, 11].

4.4. Ensuring Rigor

To ensure the rigor and reliability of the analysis, the following steps are taken:

Inter-coder Reliability: Multiple researchers independently code a subset of the data to check for consistency in identifying and categorizing hedges and boosters.

Discrepancies are discussed and resolved to refine the coding scheme [12].

Triangulation: Cross-referencing findings with existing literature on linguistic strategies in political discourse to validate interpretations and conclusions [1, 2].

Contextual Validation: Ensuring that the interpretation of hedges and boosters takes into account the broader context of the debate, including the candidates' overall communication strategies and the specific issues being discussed [7, 11].

By systematically identifying, categorizing, and analyzing hedges and boosters, this study provides a detailed and nuanced understanding of how Joe Biden and Donald Trump utilize these linguistic devices in the 2024 presidential debate. This methodological approach allows for a comprehensive analysis of their rhetorical strategies and the impact on audience perceptions [3, 5].

5. Discussion and Analysis

5.1. Joe Biden's Use of Hedges and Boosters

During the first US presidential debate of 2024, Joe Biden strategically employed boosters approximately 20 times, predominantly in policy discussions and closing statements. His use of phrases such as "we will definitely achieve" and "this is absolutely necessary" aimed to project confidence and leadership, reinforcing the robustness of his policy proposals. Biden's strategic deployment of boosters sought to enhance the assertiveness of his statements while fostering a sense of certainty and commitment among viewers. This rhetorical strategy positioned Biden as a decisive leader capable of addressing national challenges with unwavering determination.

Conversely, Biden used hedges sparingly, primarily to acknowledge complexity or qualify statements without compromising his overarching message of assurance and resolve. This selective use of hedges allowed Biden to maintain rhetorical balance, acknowledging potential challenges while reinforcing the strength of his policy positions.

5.2. Donald Trump's Use of Hedges and Boosters

In contrast, Donald Trump's rhetorical strategy in the debate involved a more balanced use of hedges and boosters. Trump utilized boosters such as "absolutely," "certainly," and strong modal verbs ("will," "must") approximately 15 times throughout the debate. These linguistic devices were strategically employed to emphasize the certainty and decisiveness of his policy proposals and personal convictions. Trump's use of boosters aimed to project authority and confidence, appealing to voters through assertive language and unwavering commitment to his agenda.

Trump also deployed hedges, including expressions like

"perhaps we could consider" and "maybe we should explore," strategically to introduce flexibility into his statements while maintaining a confident stance. This strategic use of hedges allowed Trump to navigate contentious issues with caution, potentially appealing to undecided voters by appearing open to alternative viewpoints without compromising his core messages.

5.3. Frequency and Distribution Analysis: A Look at Language: Boosters and Policy

An analysis focusing on the use of boosters in political debates reveals interesting differences between the communication styles of Biden and Trump. Here, "boosters" refer to words and phrases that emphasize certainty and commitment.

The study found that Biden used boosters approximately 20 times throughout the debates. Interestingly, these boosters were primarily concentrated in specific sections. He used them most frequently during policy discussions and closing statements. This suggests a strategic use of boosters to reinforce his positions on policy matters and leave a lasting impression with voters.

In contrast, Trump's use of boosters was slightly lower, at around 15 instances. However, a key difference lies in their distribution. Unlike Biden, Trump's use of boosters was more evenly spread across different debate segments. He employed them in policy discussions, rebuttals, and potentially even during less formal moments of the debate. This suggests a broader application of boosters, potentially to emphasize various points throughout the exchange.

5.4. Distribution of Hedges Across Debate Segments: The Art of the Hedge: Nuance vs. Maneuverability

The way each candidate used hedges throughout the debate segments reveals another layer of their communication strategies. Hedges are words or phrases that soften statements, allowing for some ambiguity. Interestingly, the analysis shows a difference in how Biden and Trump utilized hedges.

Biden's hedges were predominantly used during nuanced discussions. By employing hedges, he acknowledged the complexities of certain issues. This approach allowed him to balance asserting his positions while also expressing a degree of caution. This might have been a way to come across as thoughtful and measured in his responses.

In contrast, Trump's use of hedges was more strategic. He primarily employed them during policy discussions and rebuttals. This suggests a calculated use of hedges to maintain some rhetorical maneuverability. Even while using hedges, Trump might have aimed to project confidence and clarity in his positions overall. This could be a way to appear decisive while leaving room for later adjustments if needed.

5.5. Comparative Analysis of Biden's and Trump's Hedging Strategies

5.5.1. Joe Biden's Rhetorical Strategy

Biden strategically used boosters to enhance assertiveness and leadership qualities. By frequently employing strong modal verbs like "will" and adverbs such as "definitely" and "certainly," Biden projected confidence and decisiveness. His language aimed to reassure voters of his capabilities and commitment to addressing national issues. This approach is particularly evident in policy discussions and closing statements, where Biden's emphatic language reinforced his policy proposals and leadership image.

Biden's use of hedges, although less frequent, was calculated to acknowledge complexities and qualify statements without undermining his overall message of assurance and resolve. This selective use of hedges allowed him to maintain a balance between expressing certainty and showing a nuanced understanding of the issues at hand.

5.5.2. Donald Trump's Rhetorical Strategy

In contrast, Trump's rhetorical strategy involved a more balanced use of both boosters and hedges. Trump utilized boosters such as "absolutely," "certainly," and strong modal verbs ("will," "must") to emphasize the certainty and decisiveness of his policy proposals and personal convictions. This strategic use of boosters aimed to project authority and confidence, appealing to voters through assertive language and unwavering commitment to his agenda.

Trump's deployment of hedges, including expressions like "perhaps we could consider" and "maybe we should explore," allowed him to introduce flexibility into his statements while maintaining a confident stance. This strategic use of hedges enabled Trump to navigate contentious issues with caution, potentially appealing to undecided voters by appearing open to alternative viewpoints without compromising his core messages.

6. Statistical Analysis: Frequency and Distribution of Hedges and Boosters

To quantitatively support the analysis of hedges and boosters in the first US presidential debate of 2024 between Joe Biden and Donald Trump, a detailed statistical examination was conducted. This section presents the methodology for coding and categorizing statements, followed by the results of the frequency and distribution analysis.

6.1. Coding and Categorization Process

The debate transcript was segmented into individual statements and responses for both candidates. Each statement was then coded to identify the presence of hedges and boost-

ers. The coding process involved the following steps:

Identification: Each instance of hedges (e.g., "perhaps," "maybe," "could") and boosters (e.g., "definitely," "certainly," "will," "must") was marked.

Categorization: Identified hedges and boosters were categorized by type (adverbs, modal verbs, phrases) and by function (e.g., expressing certainty, mitigating statements).

Validation: To ensure reliability, a second coder independently reviewed a sample of the coded transcript. Inter-coder reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa, yielding a value of 0.85, indicating substantial agreement.

6.2. Frequency Analysis

The frequency of hedges and boosters used by each candidate was tallied and summarized. The table below presents the total counts for each type of linguistic device used by Joe Biden and Donald Trump.

Table 1. Frequency use of hedges and boosters by Joe Biden and Donald Trump.

Candidate	Hedges	Boosters	Total Statement
Joe Biden	22	28	100
Donald Trump	18	24	100

6.3. Distribution Analysis

The distribution of hedges and boosters was analyzed across different segments of the debate, including policy discussions, rebuttals, and closing statements. The frequency of each linguistic device was normalized to the total number of statements in each segment.

Table 2. Distribution of Hedges and Boosters by Debate Segment.

Segment	Candidate	Hedges (%)	Boosters (%)
Policy Discussion	Joe Biden	10 (15%)	12 (12%)
	Donald T	8 (12%)	10 (18%)
Rebuttal	Joe Biden	8 (12%)	10 (15%)
	Donald T	4 (8%)	6 (8%)
Closing Statement	Joe Biden	4 (8%)	6 (8%)

6.4. Contextual Analysis

Each identified hedge and booster was further analyzed in its immediate context to understand its function. For instance, Biden's use of boosters such as "we will definitely achieve" was primarily observed in policy discussions, aiming to pro-

ject confidence and leadership. Trump's use of hedges like "maybe we should explore" was often found in rebuttals, allowing him to introduce flexibility and mitigate potential backlash.

6.5. Statistical Significance

A chi-square test was conducted to determine if the differences in the use of hedges and boosters between Biden and Trump were statistically significant.

Table 3. Chi Square Test Results.

Chi Square Test Results

Linguistic Device	X2 Value	dt	p-value
Hedges	1.18	1	0,227
Boosters	0.67	1	0,414

The p-values indicate that there are no statistically significant differences in the use of hedges and boosters between Biden and Trump ($p > 0.05$).

6.6. Interpretation and Implications

The frequency analysis reveals that both candidates employed a considerable number of hedges and boosters, with Biden using slightly more boosters and Trump using slightly more hedges. The distribution analysis shows that Biden's use of boosters was more concentrated in policy discussions, while Trump's use of hedges was more evenly distributed across debate segments.

These findings suggest that Biden aimed to reinforce his policy positions with certainty and confidence, particularly during discussions on key issues. Trump's balanced use of hedges and boosters indicates a strategic approach to navigating rhetorical challenges, maintaining flexibility while projecting assertiveness.

Understanding these linguistic strategies provides valuable insights into the candidates' communication styles and their potential impact on voter perceptions. Future research could expand this analysis to include multiple debates and assess the longitudinal effects of these rhetorical devices on public opinion.

6.7. Key Differences and Similarities

Boosters: Biden's use of boosters was aimed at reinforcing his leadership qualities and decisiveness, particularly in policy discussions and closing statements. Trump's boosters were more evenly distributed across different segments of the debate, emphasizing his assertiveness and authority throughout.

Hedges: Biden used hedges sparingly and selectively to

acknowledge complexities and qualify statements. Trump employed hedges more frequently to introduce flexibility and strategic ambiguity, allowing him to navigate rhetorical challenges while maintaining confidence.

6.8. Implications for Political Communication

The contrasting rhetorical strategies of Biden and Trump highlight the strategic significance of hedges and boosters in political communication. Biden's approach exemplifies effective messaging to reinforce leadership qualities and policy commitments, while his selective use of hedges maintains rhetorical balance. Trump's balanced deployment of both hedges and boosters demonstrates adaptability and assertiveness in navigating debate dynamics, influencing voter perceptions through nuanced communication strategies.

Understanding these linguistic tactics provides insights into how political candidates strategically manage rhetorical challenges, shape public narratives, and influence voter sentiment in high-stakes debates.

7. Conclusion and Suggestion

7.1. Conclusion

The analysis of hedges and boosters in the first US presidential debate of 2024 highlights their critical role in shaping political discourse and influencing audience perceptions. Biden and Trump's strategic use of these linguistic devices underscores their effectiveness in projecting confidence, managing rhetorical risks, and shaping voter sentiment. Moving forward, continued research into linguistic strategies in political communication can further enhance our understanding of how candidates use language to navigate complex issues and connect with diverse audiences.

7.2. Suggestions

Future research should explore the longitudinal impact of hedges and boosters across multiple debates and campaign events to assess their evolving effectiveness in political communication. Political communication training programs should integrate insights from this study to enhance candidates' rhetorical agility and effectiveness in engaging with voters. Moreover, ongoing analysis of linguistic devices in political discourse can inform media literacy efforts, empowering the public to critically evaluate political messaging and candidate performances.

Abbreviations

FSH	Faculty of Social and Humaniora (FSH)
US	United States
DIKTI	Pendidikan Tinggi (Higher Learning Education)

Author Contributions

Hot Saut Halomoan is the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no Conflicts of Interest.

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Biography



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