

# A Critical Discourse Analysis of Hedges in Chinese and American Spokespersons' Remarks at Press Conference

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Hedging is a communication strategy frequently used by the spokespersons at the press conference. This thesis intends to find out the ideologies hidden behind those hedges under the guidance of Fairclough's three-dimensional model. As a research method of linguistics, critical discourse analysis (CDA) aims to reveal the the relationship among language, power and ideology hidden behind the language. This thesis adopts Prince' classification criteria of hedges to identify and count the different types of hedges in the research data selected from Chinese and American government websites. The analysis is conducted at the following three steps: description, interpretation and explanation. The first stage is to recognize and count the hedges in two languages, then to find their similarities and differences and the last step is to find possible reasons for those similarities and differences and the ideologies behind the hedges. Analysis results show that differences in culture values and diplomatic ideology contribute to the different ideologies.

*Keywords:* critical discourse analysis, spokesperson's remarks, Hedge, Fairclough's three-dimensional model, Ideology

## 1. Introduction

In the information age, international communication gets more and more common. Press Conference can be regarded as a window through which official information such as foreign policy is transmitted. The spokespersons' remarks are not only an important source of the news media but also the carrier of their countries' policies and attitudes. At Press Conference, the spokespersons employ various language skills and strategies to answer the questions asked by journalists, among which hedges are usually used. Thus, making clear the hidden meaning of those hedges can help people better understand regular press briefing discourse and even other political discourses.

Hedges, as a linguistic term, first appeared in an article named *Hedges: A Study in Meaning and the Logic of Fussy Concept* written by George Lakoff in 1972. According to Lakoff, hedges are words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy (Lakoff, 1972). Up to now, the most influential and authoritative classification is that of Prince and his colleagues Frader and Bosk, which classified hedges into approximator and shield from the pragmatic perspective (Prince et al, 1982).

In this thesis, remarks of some Chinese and American spokespersons are selected from websites, 6 Chinese spokespersons' remarks are collected from <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn> (the website of Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China), 2 American spokespersons' remarks are collected from <http://video.state.gov/> (the website of U.S. Department of State). 6 Chinese remarks amount to 15317 words together, 2 American remarks amount to 18779 words together. According to Prince's classification criteria of hedges, hedges in the selected samples are identified, classified and counted. This thesis is aimed to reveal the ideologies hidden behind those hedges and to explain the social and cultural causes with Fairclough's three-dimensional model as the basic framework.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Previous Studies on Hedges

On the basis of Zadeh's Fuzzy-Set theory and E. Rosch's experiment report, Lakoff proposed the concept of hedges, he mainly focused on the membership degree instead of the truth-value of the statement. From Lakoff's (1972) perspective, hedges are words to make meaning fuzzier or less fuzzy. Since then, many scholars began to do research on hedges.

Fraser (1975, 1980) did research on the modal verbs in hedges with the speech-act theory as its theoretical framework. He (1975) pointed out that when some performative verbs like *apologize*, *promise* and *request* were modified by certain modal verbs or semi-modals like *can*, *must* and *should*, their illocutionary acts would reduce, such phenomenon was called hedged performative, The propose of the concept of hedged performative enriched the connotation of hedges. Other scholars like Blum-Kulka (1982,1985), Givon (1982), Holmes (1984), Meyer (1997) also have done researches from the perspective of speech act theory.

Later, scholars found that hedges could be used as a communication strategy. According to Levinson & Brown (1975), the propose of politeness principle can be used to explain why people like to use hedges to indirectly show their intention to communicate. Kasper (1979) viewed hedges as downgrades in discourse markers, in his opinion, the motivation of using hedges was to show politeness, it can leave more rooms for expression, reduce the negative effects and save face. Mayer (1989) also believed that the use of hedges was a communication strategy to show politeness.

Since 1980s, many scholars turned to investigate hedges by discourse analysis. Hyland (1988) did a lot of research on hedges in English academic papers, after analyzing, Hyland held that the identification of hedges depended on the context instead of the single words and people could never list all the hedges. For him, the research on hedges could only be conducted from discourse instead of vocabulary or syntax. This opinion was accepted by Clemen (1997, p. 237).

### 2.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

The concept of critical discourse analysis was not proposed until Fairclough published his book *Language and Power* in 1989. At the same year, Wodak published *Power and Ideology*. These two books are regarded as the symbolized works of critical discourse analysis. CDA pays more attention to the concrete social problems and analyze the functions of language in those problems, which provides a new theory and method to analyze the relationship between discourse and sociocultural development in different fields (Fairclough, 1995, p. 30).

CDA, usually approached from the angles of linguistics, sociology, psychology and communication, aims to uncover the relations between language, power and ideology through analysis of linguistic forms. The main subject of CDA is public discourse and the main topics are racial discrimination, sexual discrimination, the unfair events in the society and the public policies, Through CDA, people get to know and reveal the imbalance of power, the inequality in life and finally make an attempt to revise the use of language in life to sweep such inequality in life.

### 2.3 Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Model

Norman Fairclough is one of the founders of critical discourse analysis. His three-dimensional model is widely recognized as the most systematic and most frequently used analytical method of CDA.

The three-dimensional model put forward by Fairclough can be illustrated as follows: a discourse is constituted by text, discursive practice and social practice. Fairclough believed that text was the product of discursive practice or interactive process, discursive practice or interactive process was consisted of the production, distribution and consumption of the text, while all the production, distribution and consumption of the text were decided by the social practice (Fairclough, 1989). Later, on the basis of system-functional linguistics, Fairclough (1989) put forward three stages of CDA—description, interpretation and explanation. These three stages are greatly different, First of all, description is concerned with language features in text. Secondly, interpretation attaches importance to the production, distribution and consumption of discourse. Finally, explanation refers to explaining the discourse under certain social background. The relationship between three dimensions and the three analytical stages can be clearly illustrated in the figure below.

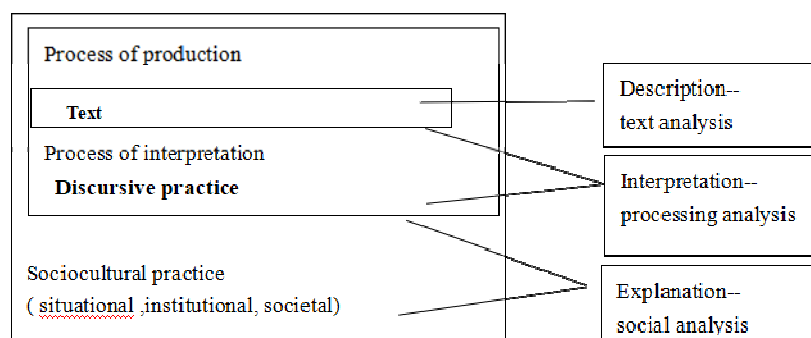


Figure 1. Three-dimensional model of discourse(Fairclough, 1992, p. 63).

## 3. Case Study of Hedges in Chinese and American Spokespersons' Remarks

### 3.1 Description

#### 3.1.1 Statistics of high-frequency words of plausibility shields in Chinese and American corpora

Plausibility shields are words used to express the speaker's personal direct guess to a proposition usually when the speaker feels the proposition is not completely right. such as *I think, I believe, I wonder, as far as I can tell*. In accordance with the frequency from high to low order, three types of subjects used by Chinese spokespersons are "Zhong fang (China)", "wo men (we)" "wo (I)" and "I", "we", "the United States" in American spokespersons' remarks. The high-frequency words of the plausibility shields expressing opinions used by Chinese spokespersons are "wo men xi wan (we hope)", "zhong fang zhi chi (China supports)" and

“wo xiang (I want to, the most frequently used one is wo xiang qiang diao (I want to stress))”. In American spokespersons' remarks, they are “we believe” and “I think”. Concrete statistics can be seen from the Table 1.

Table 1

*Frequency of Subjects in Plausibility Shields in Chinese Corpus and American Corpus*

subject	wo	Wo men	Zhong fan	I	We	The United States
Frequency/per words	10000 10	12	34	84	34	1

From the following two pie charts, great differences on the choices of subjects can be seen in Chinese and American corpus. Chinese spokesperson usually use “zhong fang (China)” as subject to express their opinions and attitudes, the frequency of “we” in the plausibility shields is relatively high. But American spokesperson are more likely to use first-person singular pronoun “I” and the frequency of pronoun referring to their country in the plausibility shields is so low that can be directly ignored.

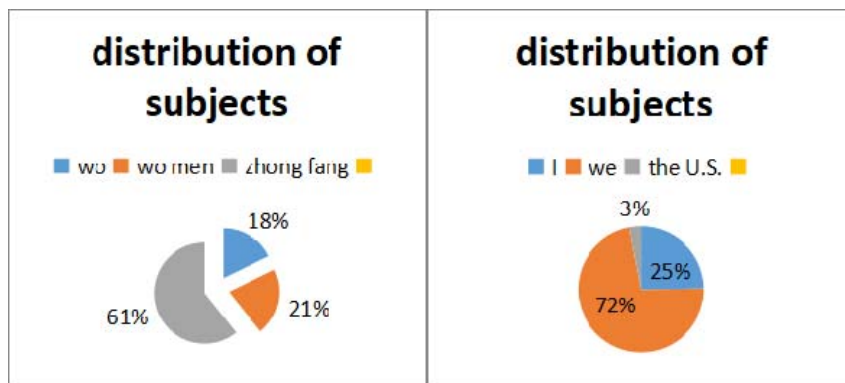


Figure 2. Distribution proportion of subject in Chinese PSPie chart 2 distribution proportion of subject in American PS.

### 3.1.4 Statistics of high-frequency words of rounders in Chinese and American corpora

Rounders are the words which set limits to the range of utterances. In this thesis, spokespersons mainly set limits to the range of the number and frequency. From Table 2 it can be seen that both Chinese and American spokespersons incline to limit the range of number. During the process of counting the total number of rounders, it is found that Chinese spokespersons are accustomed to using rounders that indicate the continuation of time, such as “bu duan (constant)”, “yi guan (consistent)”, “yi zhi (always)”. “again” ranks first in the rounders of frequency in American corpus.

Table 2

*Frequency of RN & RF in Chinese and American corpora*

	China	America
Frequencies of rounders of number/10,000words	45	89
Frequencies of rounders of frequency/10,000words	25	25

### 3.2 Interpretation

#### 3.2.1 Analysis of the high-frequency words of plausibility shields

As I have mentioned above, there are three types of subjects used in plausibility shields in the two corpora, namely, the first-person singular pronoun *wo* and *I*, the first-person plural pronoun *women* and *we*, and the pronouns referring to the country *zhong fang* and *the U.S.* the most frequently used subject used by Chinese spokespersons is *zhong fang*, the second is *wo men*, then *wo*. The most frequently used by American spokespersons is *I*, the second is *we*, then *the U.S.* One thing should be pointed out, these three types of subjects all refer to his or her identity as Chinese or American spokesperson instead of identity of the spokesperson himself or herself. What the spokesperson says is on behalf on the interest of the country behind him or her.

We can notice the huge difference in their choices of subjects, which can reflect the different pragmatic strategies and different ideologies in the spokespersons' construction of their pragmatic identities. Choosing nouns which refer to the country can raise the authority of the discourse, so the frequent use of nouns which refer to the country shows Chinese spokespersons' pragmatic strategies in which creation of national image is put at the first place. At the same time, we also hold that the overuse of nouns referring to the country could increase the power distance between spokespersons and journalists, the public, then obstruct the spread of information. This is also the reason why American spokespersons hardly use them.

The use of *wo* is less than that of *wo men* in Chinese corpus, that's because in Chinese culture collective identity is more important than personal identity. *Wo men* reflects collective identity better than *wo*. American spokespersons use the first-person plural pronoun *we* very frequently as well. Present thesis believes that four reasons contribute to the high frequency of the first-person plural pronoun *we*. First, the real spokespersons are the country and government on behalf of the interest of its people. Second, by using *we* as subject, the spokespersons indicate that their opinions and attitudes are the collective opinions and attitudes to increase the authority of their speaking. Third, under some circumstances, the subject *we* includes the listeners, which can shorten the distance from journalists and the republic and lead to a better communication. Forth, the use of *we* can increase the distance between the spokespersons and what they say, which is a kind of pragmatic strategy to reduce the spokespersons' responsibilities.

In the use of the first-person singular pronoun *I*, contrary to Chinese spokespersons, *I* is the most frequently used subject by American spokesperson. Such choice reflects their two pragmatic strategies. First, it can show the equal relationship among the spokespersons, the journalists and the public. Second, it gradually and indirectly advocates American ideology and political tendency. By using *I*, at the first sight, it seems that the American spokespersons answer the questions with the personal identities. But actually, in that fixed context, spokespersons' pragmatic identities can only be collective identities, what they say is what the government behind them wants to express to the public.

#### 3.2.2 Analysis of the high-frequency words of rounders

At the regular press conference, the spokespersons are on behalf of their own country, so they have to make the discourse accurate. Preciseness doesn't mean that the words should be all exact. When the concrete figure is lost, they use rounder to make the number vague and avoid making mistakes. In other cases, when the question raised by the reporters is related to the figures that the spokespersons cannot disclose, they would use rounders to safeguard the national interests. As what has been mentioned out, Chinese spokespersons have a

strong preference for the rounders that indicate the continuation of time, such as “yi guan”, “bu duan”. Under such circumstance, the function of rounders is to stress that China’s attitude or approach to a certain problem has never changed. But now Chinese spokespersons seem to have overused such rounders. Such fixed expression can leave the impression of primness on the republic. The most noticeable similarity is their frequent use of the rounder “zai ci”, “again” (which have the same meaning), which presuppose that the same expression must be given before.

### 3.3 Explanation

#### 3.3.1 Culture Values

Both China and America are the grand cultural nations, their distinctive histories, cultures and development models decide their different traditional culture values. Under the influence of Confucianism, respect for authority, hierarchy, priority of the interests of the country or the society in front of the personal interests, save face are Chinese core culture values. Different from Chinese collectivism, many scholars researching in American social and cultural fields believe that individualism is American core culture value. Individualism, which stresses the importance of personal freedom and democracy, is deeply rooted in every aspect of American lives since the sentence *all men are created equal* was written in the *Declaration of Independence*. What’s more, China is a high power distance nation, it stresses hierarchy and the public’s obedience and respect for authority. America is a low power distance nation, it puts more focus on the personal development and encourages the republic to challenge the authorities.

We can notice their differences in the linguistic stylistic style and the use of hedges. Chinese spokespersons’ discourse has features of written language which is precise, comprehensive and standard. In response to the journalist’ question, Chinese spokesperson uses two attribution shields to report the authorities’ words without any personal comment. American spokespersons’ discourse has features of oral language. American spokesperson uses some plausibility shields to answer the question asked by the journalist. Differences on the degrees of formality in discourse and frequencies of plausibility shields and attribution shields originate from their distinctive culture values.

#### 3.3.2 Diplomatic ideology

Diplomatic ideology guides diplomatic activities and diplomatic policy making. Chinese diplomatic ideology is the major-country diplomacy with distinctive Chinese features, whose core principles are peace, development and win-win cooperation. During the statistic process, it is found that two most frequently used subject-predicate structures in Chinese corpus are “wo men xi wan (we hope)”, “zhong fang zhi chi (China supports)”. Sentence with *wo men xi wang* as its subject-predicate structure is a kind of imperative sentence. Such sentences contain wishes that things are changing for the better, Using such sentences to express ideas can transmit positive information to the global community. Compared with the word *xi wang* (hope), the word *zhi chi* (support) presents clearer attitudes of the spokespersons. Using *zhong fang zhi chi* as the subject-predicate structure can clearly express Chinese attitudes, which is an embodiment of a great, responsible and peaceful developing country. These two high-frequency hedges present open and cooperative moods. Regular use of them is the embodiment of Chinese diplomatic ideology in regular press briefing discourse.

American core principle of its diplomatic ideology is to maintain its leader status in the world. Under the influence of Protestantism, American people believe that they are the chosen people and they have the responsibilities to spread American style ideas. Human right diplomacy is one of the most important characteristics of American diplomatic ideology.

### Conclusion

The present study analyses the hedges in Chinese and American spokesperson' remarks at press conference with the theory of Fairclough's Three-dimensional Framework. Through the three stages of analysis, the present study concludes that hedges in the two corpus reflect their ideological differences from the aspect of culture values and diplomatic ideology. This study has two perspectives of implications: the theoretical implication and the practical implication. In terms of theoretical implications, present thesis successfully applies the theory of critical discourse analysis into the research of hedges in the regular press briefing discourse. It enriches the research fields of CDA and the research perspective of hedge. As for the practical implications, this thesis can help the readers to better understand and identify the underlying ideologies through their use of hedges in the related discourses.

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