

GENDER AND HEDGING IN POLITICAL SPEECH: A CASE STUDY ON DONALD TRUMP AND HILLARY CLINTON IN US PRESIDENTIAL PUBLIC ELECTION OF 2016

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Abstract: This paper is a study which investigates the use of hedges in the campaign speeches and debates of Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential election. As such, this study aims first at comparing the gender differences in the use of some categories of hedges and then look at the pragmatic functions that they convey in communicative situation. Afterwards, the study also examines carefully how the use of these devices help the candidates to save their image before the audience. Thus, about 63.52% versus 51.80% of the modality auxiliary verb “Will” and 36.47% versus 48.19% of “Can” are respectively identified in the speeches of Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. As for the three types of Approximators; approximator of degree, approximator of frequency and time and approximator of indefinite quantity, the study shows that approximators of indefinite quantity are mostly used by candidates before election regardless of their gender. Indeed, on the functional plane, both male (Trump) and female (Clinton) employ hedges to emphasize propositions, show uncertainty and express possibility. Lastly, the hedges allow the speakers to create good image before audience and maintain addressees face wants.

Keywords: Hedges; Gender; Speech; Pragmatic Functions.

Résumé: Cette étude présente une analyse des haies ou les stratégies d’atténuations dans les discours de campagne d’Hillary Clinton et de Donald Trump, y compris leurs trois débats télévisés durant l’élection présidentielle de 2016. Ainsi, cette analyse vise à comparer l’usage de certaines catégories de ces outils rhétoriques utilisées par Hillary Clinton et Donald Trump et s’intéresse également aux fonctions pragmatiques qu’ils transmettent en situation de communication. Par la suite, cette réflexion examine aussi la manière dont ces stratégies d’atténuations permettent aux candidats d’être crédibles face au publique. Ainsi, environ 63,52% versus 51,80% du verbe auxiliaire de modalité ‘Will’ et 36,47% versus 48,19% de celui de ‘Can’ sont respectivement identifiés dans leurs discours. Quant aux trois types des Approximateurs tels les Approximateurs de fréquence et temps ; de degré et de quantité indéfinies, l’étude montre que les Approximateurs de quantité indéfinies sont plus employés par les deux candidats sans tenir compte de leur sexe. De plus, au plan fonctionnel, Trump et Clinton utilisent les stratégies d’atténuation pour exprimer l’emphase dans leurs discours, exprimer l’incertitude sur un sujet donné et la possibilité de leurs actions. Enfin, les haies donnent aux politiciens de se construire une image positive face au publique et ainsi protéger la face de leurs interlocuteurs.

Mots clés : Atténuations, Genre, Discours, Fonction Pragmatique.

Introduction

Gender difference in language use has very early gained scholarly interests in many social sciences like anthropology and linguistics. So, with the participation of women in political activities particularly in campaign speeches and political debates once considered as men's stuffs seem to crystalize the attention of researchers, especially the linguists. This reflexion deals with the contrastive analysis of hedges in men and women's discourse during the US 2016 presidential election. In fact, this paper explores the use of hedges in each of the candidate's campaign speeches and debates with regard to the argumentative power of these devices. As J. Coates (2004) explains it, hedges are linguistic forms such as *I think, I'm sure, you know, sort of and perhaps*, which express the speaker's certainty or uncertainty about something. In other words, hedges are used to express things in an unassertive or a noncategorical way so as to minimize the illocutionary power of the speech acts.

As regard to the way hedges soften speakers' utterances, some scholars contend that hedges are specifically women's language features. Therefore, men tend to avoid their use (R. Lakoff, 1973). So, this paper aims at exploring gender difference in the use of hedges during the 2016 American presidential election. To do so, it compares some categories of hedges employed by Trump and Clinton in the pre-electoral period. On the other hand, it highlights the discursive functions of hedges used by female and male candidates and how these devices help them to create a good image of themselves before the audience. Hence, the research questions to be discussed in this paper are the following: What are the differences and/or similarities between the types of hedges used by Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in pre-electoral campaign speeches and debates? Who is dominant in using hedges between Trump and Clinton? What are the discursive functions of these hedges? What is the impact of the use of these hedges in Trump-Clinton pre-electoral speeches?

1. Literature Review

1.1. *Hedging in political discourse*

The way women and men use language to communicate opinions, externalize their feelings and converse with one another has been at the heart of many empirical researches in the domain of anthropology, sociology, sociolinguistics, and discourse studies. In short, scholars have early been interested to what extent gender constitutes a factor of linguistic variation. Several researchers have investigated the use of hedges in political discourse (e.g., Fraser, 2010; Miššikova, 2007; Majeed, (2010); Alavi, 2011;

Laurinaityte, 2011; Taweel et al., 2011; Al-Rashady, 2008; and Pellby, 2013). Fraser explored hedging in the 2007 Press Conferences held by President George W. Bush and the study revealed that many hedges did not serve as hedging devices. Moreover, Fraser noticed many instances of “neutral hedging” which did not affect the topic being argued. Fraser asserted that there was no indication that hedging was used “for evasion or politeness purposes but rather conveying a lack of precision”.

Miššikova (2007) examined the association between Grice’s Maxims and the use of hedging devices. She investigated hedges in English and Slovak speeches that were delivered by Tony Blair and Mikulaš Dzurinda in order to examine the particular usages of hedging devices and to explore the conversational strategies that are used in each political speech. The study asserted that hedging in political discourse was an indicator of “diplomacy, politeness and respect”.

On the other hand, Miššikova (2007) reported that the vast majority of hedging items were those concerned with “truth-telling”, by using phrases such as *a sort of, actually, kind of, etc.* The second group of hedges is concerned with indicating the awareness of quantity maxims where these devices differentiate between more or less information along with showing the quality maxim. On the other hand, the minimum numbers of hedges indicate the maxim of manner and relation, such as “*as I said before*” (Miššikova, 2007, p. 76-79).

The relationship between gender and the use of hedging devices was also studied by many scholars (Lakoff; Holmes). Lakoff proposed that women used hedges more than men in order to show “uncertainty”. Holmes (1990) found that women used hedges and tag questions more than men, and asserted that hedges had many functions depending on the context and intonation. They could show politeness in some situations while uncertainty in other ones.

Pellby (2013, p. 29) investigated the use of hedges in political discourse in the Tampa City Council in Florida in order to find out whether or not women hedge more than men in this domain. She used a taxonomy based on the different functions of hedges, viz., the epistemic modal function, the affective function, hedges which seek confirmation and shields. She concluded that women hedge more than men for some reasons, such as signalling uncertainty. The researcher indicated that the mostly used hedging devices on the part of women are “the epistemic modal function and hedges which seek confirmation, indicating that women signalled uncertainty and wanted confirmation more often than men”. The results also showed that men dominate the

political discourse more than women as men are given more time for speaking than women during the council meeting in question.

The literature on the use of hedging devices in political discourse has primarily focused on identifying the linguistic expressions that function as hedges, and examined them in terms of syntax, semantic and pragmatic functions. Despite the extensive research carried out on hedging, there are just a few studies that addressed the issue of gender and hedging in political discourse. Thus, the current study analyses the hedges used in the 2015 candidacy announcement speech and 2016 US presidential debates, and conducts comparison between the two candidates' use of hedges.

1.2. Definition and classification of a hedge and its use in political discourse

As the first to define this special linguistic element, Lakoff (1973) considers hedges mainly from a semantic perspective, and claims that oftentimes natural language sentences cannot be viewed as entirely true, false or nonsensical; rather, they are somewhat true and somewhat false. Later, Brown and Levinson (1987, p. 145) interpret hedging as a speech act and define as "a particle, word or phrase that modifies the degree of membership of a predicate or a noun phrase in a set, and says of that membership that it is partial or only in a certain respect or that it is more true and complete than perhaps might be expected". In a more recent study, Fraser (2010a) argues that hedges can be linguistic and non-linguistic forms, and they can not only express levels of uncertainty about propositions, but also mitigate the force of speech acts. It is obvious that the definition of a hedges has undergone a shift from semantic perspective to a more pragmatic one.

There is no unanimous classification of hedges, since the understanding of hedges is highly dependent on "institutional, professional and linguistic context" (Hyland, 1996). Previous empirical studies on hedging are mainly based on written texts, with the consequence that formal and formal-functional classifications of hedges are often adopted (e.g., Chen & Zhang, 2017; Crompton, 1997; Itakura, 2013; Salager-Meyer, 1994).

In this study, one has adopted Salager-Meyer's taxonomy of hedges presented in Table 1. This model was adopted because it includes the most widely used hedging categories expected to be found extensively in political speeches. This model presents hedges in relation to their grammatical categories as shown below.

Table 1: Salager-Meyer's²¹ Taxonomy of hedging words

Table 1. Salager

Category	Hedging words
1. Modal Auxiliary verbs	<i>will – may – might – can – could – would – should</i>
2. Modal Lexical verbs	<i>seem – appear – believe – suggest – assume – indicate</i>
3. Adjectival, adverbial and nominal modal phrases:	
a) Adjectival modal phrases:	<i>possible – probable – un/likely</i>
b) Nominal modal phrases:	<i>assumption – claim – possibility – estimate</i>
c) Adverbial phrases:	<i>perhaps – possibly – probably – likely – presumably</i>
4. Approximators of degree, quantity, frequency and time	<i>approximately – roughly – about – often – generally – usually...</i>
5. Introductory phrases :	<i>I believe to our knowledge – it is our view that – we feel that</i>
6. If clauses	<i>If true – If anything</i>
7. Compound hedges:	
a) Double hedges:	<i>(it may suggest)</i>
b) Treble hedges:	<i>(it seems reasonable to assume that)</i>
c) Quadruple hedges:	<i>(it would seem somewhat unlikely that)</i>

²¹ Source: Salager-Meyer's Taxonomy of hedging words (1994).

1.3. Cooperative Principle of Grice

According to Grice, persons involved in a conversation or discourse are essentially rational beings who cooperate with each other in order to achieve the purpose of the conversation or discourse. Thus, in the context of Gricean cooperative principle, interlocutors are expected to make conversational contribution such as what is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which they are engaged (Grice, 1975, p. 45). Consequently, the Gricean cooperative principle was divided into four maxims which include maxims of quantity, maxims of quality, maxims of relevance, and maxims of manner. The maxims of quantity expect the interlocutors to give as much information as required while the maxims of quality require interlocutors to say only what they believe to be true. On the other hand, the maxims of relevance instruct interlocutors to provide only relevant information while the maxims of manner expect interlocutors to avoid obscurity of expression and ambiguity.

Observing the four maxims in a mere daily conversation or in political situation seems not always possible for the speakers and hearers. In this study the cooperative principles together with Salager-Meyer's classification of hedges will help highlight the crucial role of hedges use of the two candidates to create good image before audiences and maintain communication.

2. Choice, Justification and description of the corpus

The paper uses a qualitative research method to account for the use of hedges in the debate. Besides, a quantitative method is applied to highlight the occurrences of hedges in the two candidates' discourses. The corpus is composed of (05) speeches delivered during their candidacy announcement speeches and the three debates for the 2016 election on November, 2016. In fact, the whole corpus was downloaded on 'Time' web site. The choice for selecting the announcement and debate speeches is because both are pre-electoral speeches; a type of speech throughout which candidates are constantly trying to persuade people to gain their vote. To meet their goal, they make use of tremendous rhetorical strategies of communication full of promises just to convince or coax the public to their advantage. Among those styles of communication one focuses on the way each of them make use of hedging.

The selection of the materials was also motivated by the candidates' political achievements as well as the diversity of topics that could be raised in their interviews. They comprised such themes as the American citizens improvement of economy, race,

attacks, nuclear weapons, islamophobia, refugees, war in Syria, abortion, immigration, politician's opinion about the possible outcome of the elections...The diversity of the topics lent themselves to different types of hedges, and this is exactly what reveals the nature of hedges, that is highly-context-sensitive.

2.1. *Method of data collection and procedure of analysis*

Both quantitative and qualitative approaches were adopted to analyze the transcribed materials (candidacy announcement and debates speeches). First, focusing on Salager-Meyer's (1994) classification of hedges, the frequency and distribution of two main categories of hedges (Modal Auxiliary Verbs and Approximators) used by the two candidates were respectively calculated. In order to ensure the reliability and credibility of the data, the hedges were classified and calculated through careful manual work, with the help of Antconc¹ 3.2.0. Besides, the pragmatic function of hedges in the current context were analyzed with some typical examples highlighted.

2.2. *Data analysis*

The following are frequencies and occurrences of the **Modal auxiliary verbs** and **Approximators** types of lexical hedging devices used in Clinton and Trump's exchange in their 2015 US announcement candidacy speeches and 2016 presidential debates:

Table 2: Hilary/Trump Modal Lexical Verbs hedging devices and their frequency.

CATEGORIES	Frequency		Percentages (%)	
	D. Trump	H. Clinton	D. Trump	H. Clinton
WILL	202	115	63.52	51.80
CAN	116	107	36.47	48.19
Total	318	222	100%	100%

¹ Antconc 3.2.0. is a program for analyzing electronic texts (that is, corpus linguistics) in order to find and reveal patterns in language

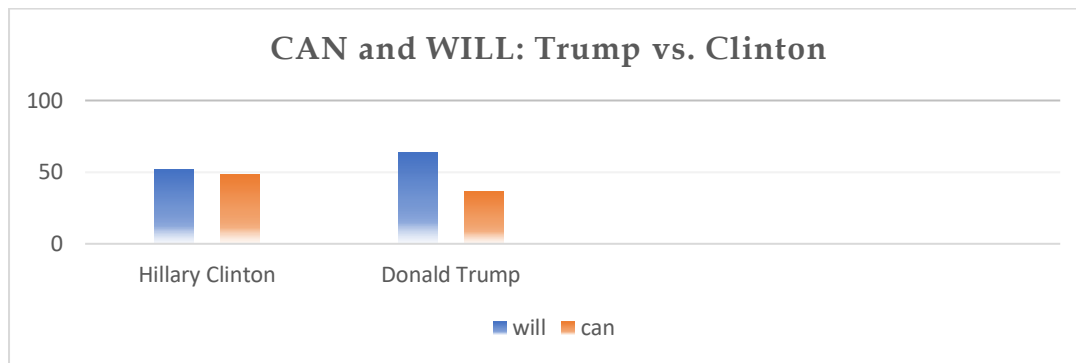


Figure 1: Trump and Hillary's frequency of WILL/CAN (verbatim).

In the light of the above (figure 1), we can note that both Trump and Clinton preferred using a lot “will” in their speeches. This was probably due to the fact that, according to Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, “will” is used for “talking about or predicting the future”. Political speeches, especially the ones delivered before the election, i.e. campaign speeches and debates, in fact deal a lot about predicting the future; therefore, “will” is often used. Obviously according to our data (*table 2*), it appears that Donald Trump “predicted” the future more frequently than Hillary Clinton did; the difference was quite significant: about 12% extra-average of the hedge subcategory “will” was observed in the speeches of Donald Trump contrarily to his opponent Hillary Clinton, meaning (0.12 modal *will* per one hundred words). Apparently, Donald Trump discussed more about probability of changes than Hillary Clinton (changes that he wants to bring in the whole US policy system like economy, army, health etc.) so that he finally offered it as a persuasive strategy.

As for the second mostly used Modal Auxiliary Verb “Can”, it recorded a total frequency of (107 occurrences), accounting for 48.19% in Hillary verbatim, while only 36.47% of the same subcategory “Can” was registered in all Trump’s address. The extensive use of “Can” might also be attributed to the fact that this modal auxiliary is associated with possibility. Moreover, “Can” was used significantly and more frequently in our candidate’s speeches because these speeches were delivered in a context of presidential electoral campaign in which the candidates have to prove their capacity and possibility of being the deserving leader to conduct the whole great American nation.

Table 3: Hilary/Trump Approximators of degree, indefinite quantity, frequency and time devices and their frequency.

CATEGORIES	Frequency		Percentages (%)	
	D. Trump	H. Clinton	D. Trump	H. Clinton
Approximators of Degree	69	109	16.38%	13.73%
Approximators of indefinite quantity	374	447	67.12%	74.55%
Approximators of frequency and time	58	109	16.37%	11.45%
Total	501	665	100%	100%

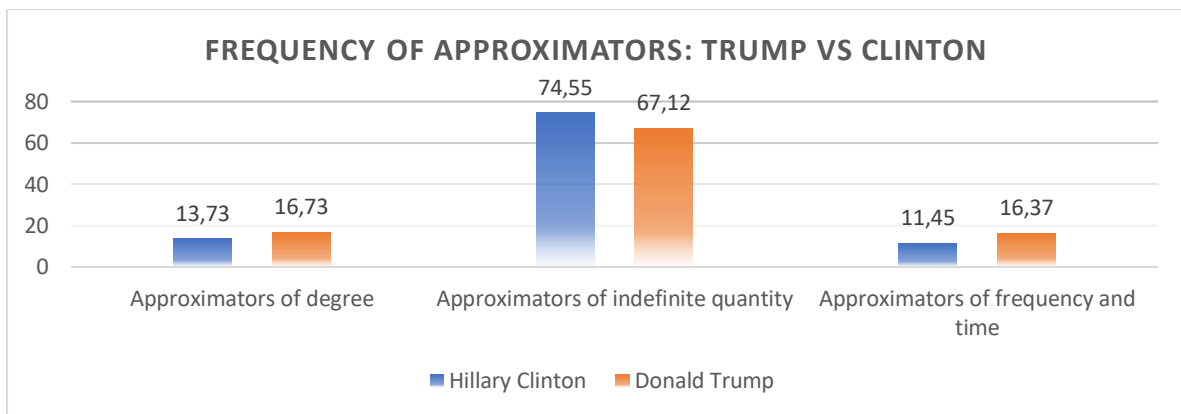


Figure 2: comparative histogram of approximators of degree, indefinite quantifiers and indefinite frequency and time in the overall corpus.

1,166 Approximators of degree, indefinite quantity, indefinite frequency and time were found in the five (05) political speeches delivered by Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. This subcategory was the greatest used of all subcategories of hedges compared to other types of hedges. The reason may be due to the meaning they denote, i.e. indefiniteness. (Table 3) above shows that out of the 1,166 Approximators, Donald Trump used up to 665 approximators accounting for 57.03% while Hillary Clinton registered 501 items, representing 42.96%.

Table 3 and its figure 2 show that among the three types of approximators, *approximators of indefinite quantity* prevailed in Trump’s and Clinton’s speeches. Apparently, the campaign speeches and debates deal with what may or may not happen in the future as well as indefinite quantities of something; moreover, politicians tend to speak about indefinite frequency and time; this might certainly be what justify the great usage of this type of Approximators. (Table 3 and figure 2) show that Clinton was a little bit more indefinite than Trump though the difference is not so significant (**74.55% of indefinite quantifiers** for Hillary Clinton against **67.12%** for

Donald Trump). In sum, they are fairly appropriate to be used in political speeches, especially for ones delivered before the election such as campaigns rallies and debates to make indefinite quantity of promises.

The distribution of Modal Auxiliary Verbs and Approximators of degree, indefinite quantity and frequency and time is shown in set table 2/figure 1 and table 3/figure 2. The evidence is that Trump and Clinton employ extensively modal auxiliary verbs “will” and “can”. They used them more significantly and frequently in their speeches. Trump uses “will” more extensively than Clinton, whereas “can” is used more by Hillary Clinton contrarily to her opponent.

As for the *Approximators of degree, indefinite quantity and frequency and time*, the remark is that *Approximators of indefinite quantity* has been the preference for Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. The high occurrence of this specific type of *approximator of indefinite quantity* could be explained by the position of candidates who are running for the 2016 Presidential. Strategically, during pre-electoral speeches, candidates are used to make lots of promises in some indefinite quantity in the quest to reach their goal. With the help of Antconc 3.2.0.; 374 instances/67.12% of *Approximators of indefinite quantity* for Trump was registered VS. 447/74.55% for Hillary Clinton.

Approximators of degree and approximators of frequency and time are not much used by the candidates during the pre-electoral discourse.

2.3. Pragmatic function of “can”, “will” and “approximators” in the speeches.

2.3.1. Showing the Speaker’s Uncertainty

(1) HILLARY CLINTON: *There are the independent hacking groups that do it mostly for commercial reasons to try to steal information that they can use to make money.*

(1st presidential debate. September, 26th 2016)

Example (1) shows some kind of uncertainty. Hillary Clinton softens her claim by using the modal auxiliary “Can” while giving the information about the operating mode of the independent hacking groups. Hillary’s tone is moderated with the modal verb “can” indicating her doubt and uncertainty of what these hackers really do with stolen information from US government .

2.3.2. Expressing possibility or prediction

(2) DONALD TRUMP: *I will be the greatest jobs president that God ever created. I tell you that. I’ll bring back our jobs from China, from Mexico, from Japan, from so many places. I’ll bring back our jobs, and I’ll bring back our money.*

(Candidacy announcement speech. June 16th, 2015)

(3) *HILLARY CLINTON: I will rewrite the tax code so it rewards hard work and investments here at home, not quick trades or stashing profits overseas*

(Candidacy announcement speech. April 14th, 2015)

The modal auxiliary “will” is used to predict something in the future. As shown in Example (2) and (3) above, during their candidacy announcement speeches, both Trump and Hillary are using extensively this modal auxiliary “will” as a rhetorical strategy to predict that each of them is the able and suitable candidate to give a new image to the great America and will make that image come back with all changes so as to offer US citizens, profits and stability in many domains of activity like social security, health, economy etc.

2.3.3. *Emphasizing proposition*

(4) *DONALD TRUMP: Syria is no longer Syria. Syria is Russia and it's Iran, who she made strong and Kerry and Obama made into a very powerful nation and a very rich nation, very, very quickly, very, very quickly.*

(2nd presidential debate. October 9TH 2016)

In example (4), Donald accuses Hillary of allowing Syria become a very powerful nation which has provided fertile ground for ISIS to grow faster. In the excerpt of the debate, he highlights several times that Hillary shouldn't have backed the war up in Iraq and once in Iraq, she shouldn't have withdrawn leaving no US troops behind. By saying this, Trump exposes Clinton's bad judgment on the issue of the Iraq war and ISIS, in order to incite voters' distrust in Clinton by implicitly proposing himself as the credible candidate. In the example, Trump uses the Approximator indefinite quantifier “very” six times in a sentence to emphasize the dangerous situation in the Middle East that he suggests was caused by former secretary of state Hillary Clinton.

3. Findings and interpretation

Following Salager-Meyer (1994) classification of hedges, on the one hand and the cooperative principles of Grice requiring the full observance of the four maxims by speakers in conversation on the other hand, it stands out that problems occur when this breaking in communication happens. Therefore, one result this study finds is the positive and negative impacts that the use of hedges create and help political leaders to display credibility before audience.

3.1. *Positive impact of the use of hedges*

The example occurred during Trump's candidacy announcement speech where he made some drastic statements to prevent against any threats the country could face, like ISIS, Iran with its nuclear weapons. Donald Trump shows himself before his fellow citizens to bring assurance in their heart and reinforce confidence between his fellows and himself.

(5) DONALD TRUMP: *I will stop Iran from getting nuclear weapons.*

In this statement, it can be seen that Trump wants to give value to one's image. Trump makes statements about accurate decisions to protect his country. He says that he would stop Iran from getting nuclear weapons, he would be tougher on ISIS matter and that he would build great walls on the southern border of MEXICO. Donald Trump's statements are more trusted because he relates his statements to the commitment of the speech act verbs '*I will stop*', which becomes a supporting fact to his statement for candidacy. Thus, his statement creates a positive impact since he sounds assuring.

3.2. *Negative impact of the use of hedges*

The next illustration happened when the candidates are involved in the discussion of tax release. Mr Holt asked whether the candidates were able to release their taxes just to let people know they are trusty as potential president. Donald Trump mentions that his lawyers prevented him to do so. Therefore, Hillary Clinton retorts stating that Donald Trump is a great debt-holder.

(6) HILLARY CLINTON: *Third, we don't know all of his business dealings, but we have been told through investigative reporting that he owes **about** \$650 million to Wall Street and foreign banks*

(1st presidential debate. September 26Th, 2016)

In this statement, the approximator of degree hedge *about* used by Hillary indicates the lack of certainty of the speaker. Hillary only presumes the amount of Trump's debt to Wall Street and Foreign Bank using the hedge *about*. The statement does not really support Hillary Clinton in convincing the audience. Thus, the statement creates a negative impact since Clinton becomes uncertain along with the existence of the hedge. She will be able to create a strong objection to Trump's taxes if she does not use this type of hedge.

Conclusion

Analyzing the candidates' hedging patterns using a cooperative approach, one can highlight the way these linguistic devices behave in the gender-based political speeches. The first objective of the work was to know whether difference and/or

similarities exist between the candidates' linguistic behaviour. To answer, one has come to the result that there is no difference between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in terms of using hedges. Rather the analysis of "can", "will" and the "approximators of degree, indefinite quantity, frequency and time" in tables together with their respective figures show that the difference resides in the frequency usage of these devices. Therefore, the second guiding question as to who is the most dominant, one could assert in regard to the limit of the study taking into account modal auxiliary verbs 'can', 'will' and the 'approximators of degree, indefinite quantity, frequency and time' that neither Donald Trump nor Hillary Clinton dominate in the usage of hedges. Trump used 63.52% of "will" against 51.80% for Clinton, while Hillary surpasses Trump with 48.19% vs. 36.47% of the use of "can". As for the "approximators of indefinite quantity", Antconc has helped register 74.55% for Clinton versus 67.12% for Donald Trump.

The study also reveal that when using these devices in their pre-electoral speeches, pragmatic functions are conveyed like expressing prediction with "will" to make lots of promises during campaign and debates; show uncertainty about a situation and emphasize their propositions when attacking their opponents.

As for the results, this study has brought the evidence that the use of hedges is connoted with positive or negative impact for the speaker, that is, they help either maintain good image of the leader or be rejected by the audience.

To sum up, one could state that modal auxiliary verbs 'will', 'can' and approximators of indefinite quantity hedges are extensively used by politician candidates during electoral period.

This reflexion not only contribute to the empirical literature on political discourse in political gendered linguistic studies, but also provides practical linguistic strategies for using hedges in politics. The hope is that this study may help to enlighten politician candidates and eventual learners about their use of linguistic strategies in political field as well as other domain where language is used to communicate.

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