

Investigating the Use of Hedging in Rishi Sunak's Prime Minister's Questions: A Pragmatic Approach to Political Discourse

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Abstract

This study examines the use of hedging devices in political discourse, focusing primarily on the context of spontaneous verbal interactions. It analyzes two of British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's weekly questions sessions. The study employs Salager-Meyer's (1997) framework to explore the use of hedging devices. The main objective is to analyze the hedging devices employed during Rishi Sunak's question sessions and to identify which device is the most prominent. The research methodology includes a theoretical survey of hedging to establish a general understanding, followed by qualitative and quantitative data analysis. The findings indicate that Rishi Sunak's use of hedging relies primarily on five specific hedging devices, which frequently co-occur in his question sessions. The findings reveal that modal auxiliary verbs were the most frequently used hedging devices.

Keywords: pragmatics, hedging, British Prime Ministers Questions, Rishi Sunak,

Introduction

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The pragmatic approach to hedging is the main emphasis of this work. The politeness theory will be discussed in this section, along with its importance in comprehending hedging and demonstrating the influence of the speakers' intentions.

It is believed that Lakoff (1972) was the first to coin the term "hedged" and use it to refer to words or phrases that serve to make certain linguistic formulations less ambiguous or fuzzy. According to Hyland (1994), hedges are utilized to convey hesitancy or potential.

According to Kasper (1993), pragmatics is the study of how people comprehend and use language in context. Additionally, Huang (2007) defines pragmatics as a subfield of linguistics with roots in the philosophy of language is pragmatics and its definition is the study of meaning derived from language use.

The words "hedge" and "hedging" imply concepts like boundaries, restrictions, and securities and directly relate to security or defensive strategies (Cabanes, 2007).

Literature Review

Pragmatics

According to Peccei (1999), pragmatics is one of the main areas of linguistics that focuses on the knowledge used by authors (Ss) to convey meaning as well as by readers (Hs) to extract meaning. In particular, pragmatics relies on understanding of the social and physical reality. According to Akmajian (2001), linguistics is a field that deals with interpersonal communication and natural language.

Furthermore, according to Allott (2010), pragmatics encompasses four convention-based ideas that are extremely relevant to communicative language users. Grice's work serves as the foundation for these ideas. These principles are as follows:

1. The addressee's determination of the intended message fulfills the complicated intention involved in communication.
2. The addressee must draw conclusions about what was said to him.
3. Different theories, including Gricean and neo-Gricean, as well as others, propose various laws or maxims that govern communication.
4. A speaker's aim is influenced by both direct and indirect communication, yet there is a distinction between the two.

According to the aforementioned definitions, pragmatics is the study of language meaning in communication and the relationship between the meaning of a sentence and the situation's context. Additionally, a variety of theories, such as implicature, deixis, presupposition, etiquette and conversation, speech act theory, and others, can be used to study pragmatics.

Hedging

Weinreich (1966) introduced the idea of hedging to the field of linguistics (Fraser, 2010). However, Lakoff (1972) to characterize how specific lexical units contribute to the ambiguity or lack thereof of propositions (Clemen, 1997) first used the word "hedge/hedging". He uses the classification of birds, for instance, to demonstrate this idea. Eagles, capercaillies, kingfishers, and albatrosses are all obviously classified as birds, but what about a chicken? "A chicken is a sort of bird," according to Lakoff, where "sort of" serves as a hedge (Skelton, 1988). Through a practical examination of queries aimed at the British Prime Minister, the researcher hopes to investigate the linguistic phenomena of hedging in this study.

Hedges "convey intentional vagueness, mitigation, tentativeness, politeness, indirectness, possibility, evasiveness, and lack of full commitment, while demonstrating deference to readers as opinions remain open to other interpretations," according to Hassan and Said (2020).

Hedging Motives

According to Salager-Meyer (1995), there are several reasons for using hedging:

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1. Salager-Meyer identifies that the most common and accepted reason for hedging is to reduce the risk of "face threat" associated with communicative acts.
2. Salager-Meyer states that "being too certain can often be unwise." This suggests that even highly knowledgeable scholars should hedge their opinions to allow their views to be subject to negotiation, even across generations. Therefore, hedging is essential in various fields, including academic settings, political interviews, and discussions, particularly when presenting personal viewpoints.
3. Salager-Meyer emphasizes that hedging is an effective politeness strategy. He notes that many politicians employ hedging to express diplomatic disagreement in a polite manner.
4. Additionally, Salager-Meyer points out that hedging can sometimes encompass all the previously mentioned reasons. Conversely, in many cases, it is used conventionally as a style of speaking or writing.

Taxonomy of Hedging

Salager-Meyer (1995) identifies a comprehensive set of hedging linguistic devices commonly used in English, which includes the following:

1. **Modal Auxiliary Verbs:** These verbs, such as may, might, could, can, would, etc., are used to express hedging.
2. **Modal Lexical Verbs:** Salager-Meyer refers to these as "speech act verbs," which are used for actions like doubting, evaluating, and criticizing rather than merely describing. Examples include assume, seem, believe, argue, think, and propose.
3. **Adjectival, Adverbial, and Nominal Modal Phrases:** These phrases indicate hedging, including probability adjectives like possible, potential, and thinkable. Nouns such as

estimate, suggestion, and claim also convey hedging. Additionally, adverbs like presumably, likely, perhaps, and practically serve this purpose.

4. Approximators: These express degree, quantity, frequency, and time, using terms like somehow, occasionally, a lot of, few, and somewhat.
5. Introductory Phrases: Phrases such as “to our knowledge,” “as I see it,” and “according to my information” function as hedging.
6. If Clauses: For example, “If I am not mistaken, you are the person I met last night at the party.”
7. Compound Hedging: This involves using more than one strategy to express hedging, as seen in the statement, “It seems likely that the president will announce his decision today.”

Salager-Meyer and Fran (1995) believe that hedging serves two main functions:

1. To protect authors from potential backlash regarding their propositions, and
2. To demonstrate humility and respect toward the audience.

Thus, hedging is a linguistic resource that reflects essential characteristics of scientific discourse: doubt and skepticism (Salager-Meyer & Fran, 1995). Being too definitive can be unwise; therefore, academics often prefer to remain vague in their statements, signaling to readers that they do not claim to provide the final word on the subject.

By focusing on pragmatics as a linguistic field and examining Boris Johnson's sessions as a source for linguistic exploration, we can address the research problem of conducting quantitative and qualitative analyses of hedging language in the British Prime Minister's question sessions.

Methodology

Research Approach

This study employs mixed methods, incorporating qualitative and quantitative approaches. A qualitative approach is applied to find answers to questions like how, why, and what.

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Additionally, a quantitative approach is used to support the qualitative one and to figure out the analysis results.

The introductory research tool in this study is the observation of the data because it is a descriptive qualitative study. It is vital to supply a concise interpretation of the data to be analyzed in the following section since an observer should be aware of the data under analysis. Creswell (1998) remarked that in qualitative research, the researcher is the central instrument in collecting and pinpointing the data that gathers words, analyses inductively, and obeys the utterances yielded by the speakers or writers. There are particular methods to accumulate the data, such as designing the research, choosing the data, classifying the data, analyzing the data, deciphering results, and totaling conclusions.

The selected data addresses several influential topics that help us comprehend contemporaneous matters. It features discussions among various members of parliament (MPs), with British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak provoking responses to their questions. Each extract corresponds to a specific question raised either by the leader of the opposition party or any member of parliament (MP) focusing on various political matters carefully chosen by the researcher for deeper analysis.

Participants

The data consists of five extracts taken from two sessions of the British Prime Minister Questions (PMQs) featuring Rishi Sunak. The extracts were carefully gathered precisely from the official UK Parliament Hansard archive in transcript form.

Moreover, Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs) is a weekly event in the UK House of Commons where the Prime Minister (PM) faces questions from other Members of Parliament (MPs). For collecting data, the British Prime Minister's Rishi Sunak's questions sessions are

collected and then read thoroughly many times to distinguish the aspects involved in the production of hedging.

Instruments

The researcher followed several steps to collect data for this study. First, the researcher looked at YouTube for videos of British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak questions sessions on the official channel of the UK Parliament. Next, the researcher explored the transcripts, which were then utilized to analyze the utterances. Then, the researcher watched the videos and understood the conversations between the participants. Finally, they focused on sessions that included hedging situations for further analysis. Notably, each extract is accompanied by instant online access for the respective session.

Procedures

To fulfill the aims and to prove or refute the hypotheses of the study, particular procedures are observed: Delivering a theoretical survey of the relevant literature on pragmatics and the politeness theory and examining the literature about hedging to show a general view about it. Analyzing the chosen data using a qualitative analysis, which is based on linguistic theories and quantitative analysis, which is based on percentages and frequencies. Therefore, drawing conclusions to test the validity of the hypotheses of the present study.

Results and Discussion

Excerpt 1

I congratulate my right hon. Friend on becoming Prime Minister. He is absolutely **Philip Davies:** the right person for the job and I wish him every success. He knows he has my full support. His two immediate predecessors made levelling up a key part of their agenda. Will he reaffirm his commitment to levelling up and start as he means to go on by approving the levelling-up fund bid for Bingley in my constituency?

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I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his warm remarks. I :**The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak)** can give him my cast-iron commitment to leveling up, particularly in Yorkshire, which he and I share. Obviously, he will know that I cannot comment on individual bids, but by the end of the year, an announcement is expected on the successful ones, and I wish him every luck with that.

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-10-26/debates/DA634E71-6A00-4C9C-8D40-CCE730776B42/Engagements>

The Analysis

In order to keep his words civil and soften them, Rishi Sunak uses hedging strategies in his communications. His usage of the modal auxiliary "can" is seen in his statement, "I cannot comment on individual bids." This indicates that he is reluctant to offer a conclusive response. Furthermore, the term "particularly" is used as an approximate, which further suggests hedging.

Additionally, Sunak uses the adverb "obviously" to disassociate himself from the veracity of his claims and lessen any possible danger to his audience. He may maintain his diplomatic demeanor while directing the audience's interpretation of his message thanks to this strategy. Sunak's use of hedging shows that he is aware of his addressee's negative face, which is simply their wish to avoid being forced. Sunak often uses hedging and indirect remarks to avoid coming out as extremely forceful.

Excerpt 2

Keir Starmer: Yesterday, the Prime Minister stood on the steps of Downing Street and promised "integrity, professionalism and accountability", but then, with his first act, he appointed a Home Secretary who was sacked by his predecessor a week ago for deliberately pinging around sensitive Home Office documents from her personal account. Far from soft on

crime, I ran the Crown Prosecution Service for five years. I worked with Home Secretaries to take on terrorists and serious organised crime, and I know at first hand how important it is that we have a Home Secretary whose integrity and professionalism are beyond question. Have officials raised concerns about his decision to appoint her?

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): I just addressed the issue of the Home Secretary. The right hon. and learned Gentleman talked about fighting crime. I would hope that, as we look forward, he would welcome the news today that there are over 15,000 new police officers on our streets. The Home Secretary will be supporting them to tackle burglaries, while the Opposition will be backing the lunatic protesting fringe that is stopping working people going about their lives.

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-10-26/debates/DA634E71-6A00-4C9C-8D40-CCE730776B42/Engagements>

The Analysis

The opening statement, "I just addressed the issue of the Home Secretary," frequently indicates the prime minister's attempt to convince MP Keir Starmer and the audience that the information he presents is adequate and required.

Furthermore, the use of the modal auxiliary verb "would" in the sentence "I would hope that" demonstrates hedging by enabling him to convey his viewpoint in a more oblique way. In other words, it does not mean that something will certainly happen; "would" expresses a desire to do something.

Excerpt 3

Simon Baynes: I, too, welcome the Prime Minister to his place. Farmers in my constituency are delighted that after 20 years they are once more able to sell Welsh lamb to the US market. Will

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the Prime Minister comment on the size and prospects of that market for our world-beating

Welsh lamb?

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): I congratulate my hon. Friend on that fantastic achievement. I can tell him that market is worth, I think, something like almost £40 million over the first few years—an enormous boost for our land farmers. I would just encourage the 300 million US consumers to give Yorkshire Swaledale lamb a look-in as well, but if my hon. Friend and I disagree on that, I know that we are united on the fact that we will unequivocally back

British farming and British farmers.

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2022-10-26/debates/DA634E71-6A00-4C9C-8D40-CCE730776B42/Engagements>

The Analysis

Rishi Sunak's use of hedging is demonstrated by the modal auxiliary verbs in the sentences "I can tell him that the market is worth" and "I would just encourage the 300 million US consumers to give Yorkshire Swaledale lamb...." "I think it's something like almost £40 million over the first few years—an enormous boost for our land farmers" is another statement that uses the verb "think" to bolster his argument. Additionally, the usage of quantity approximators like; "something," "almost," and "few" further indicates hedging to show lack of precision in the presentation of his ideas and thoughts.

4Excerpt

Keir Starmer: The question was how many people are paying more on their mortgages each month, and the answer that the Prime Minister avoided giving is 850,000. Nearly 1 million people are paying more on their mortgage each month because his party used their money as a casino chip. That is why George Osborne called them economic “vandals” who created a “self-

inflicted financial crisis”—not for the Prime Minister and his “non-dom thing”, not for the super-wealthy that the Conservatives gave tax cuts to, but for mortgage holders all across the country. Does the Prime Minister know how many more people will be joining them on higher mortgage rates by the end of this year?

The Prime Minister: Thanks to the actions we are taking, the Bank of England is showing that public expectations of inflation have now eased to a 15-month low. Consumer confidence is at the highest level since Russia invaded Ukraine and, because of our stewardship of the public finances, we can see a clear way to reduce debt and bring interest rates down. The right hon. and learned Gentleman keeps up his habit of quoting former Chancellors. We know that our plans will deliver lower inflation and lower interest rates, but we know that his plans just mean more debt, “year after year after year”. Those are not my words, but the assessment of the former Labour shadow Chancellor.

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2023-05-03/debates/2EBE6C5B-A35A-46E9-898B-1FE57F8768BF/OralAnswersToQuestions>

The Analysis

Hedging is practiced by Rishi Sunak when he says, "We can see a clear way to reduce debt and bring interest rates down." His use of the modal auxiliary word "can," which enables him to convey his viewpoint more subtly, exemplifies this hedging. "We can see" suggests a potential strategy for handling debt and interest rates. In the same phrase, Sunak also employs a positive politeness technique. By use the inclusive pronoun "we," he creates a spirit of cooperation by inviting the head of the Labour Party to work with him to cut debt and interest rates.

5Excerpt

Stephen Flynn: What we are talking about here is that nurses strike, doctors strike, firefighters strike—or protest—and of course republicans protest as well. They do so because it is a

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fundamental right within our democracy to be able to protest. So is the Prime Minister seriously saying that, moving forward, you can have your rights, but only on his term.

The Prime Minister (Rishi Sunak): It is also the right of the British public to be able to go about their ordinary day-to-day lives without undue serious disruption. That is why it is right that the police have extra powers. I respect that the hon. Gentleman disagrees with that, but we think it is right. Every day on TV, people see lives being disrupted, people not being able to get to school, to hospital appointments and to work. They should be able to do that, and the police should have powers to stop those who are preventing that.

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2023-05-03/debates/2EBE6C5B-A35A-46E9-898B-1FE57F8768BF/OralAnswersToQuestions>

The Analysis

By using the modal verb "think," Rishi Sunak employs hedging to make his point appear less clear. Rishi Sunak’s use of hedging to mitigate the face-threatening act (FTA) of his response to the question serves as an example of negative politeness.

Research results

The Quantitative Analyses

Table 5

Frequencies and Percentages of hedges in the British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak’s Questions

Sessions

Hedging device category	Frequency	Percentages
Modal Auxiliary Verbs	4	40%
Modal Lexical Verbs	2	20%
Adjectival, Adverbial, and	1	10%

Nominal Modal Phrases

Approximators	2	20%
Introductory Phrases	1	10%
If Clauses	0	0%
Compound Hedging	0	0%
Total	10	100%

The various ways that Rishi Sunak uses hedging in his language are shown in Table 5. The results showed that the majority of his hedging instances (40%) are modal auxiliary verbs, which make up the largest percentage. Approximators and modal lexical verbs account for 20% of the total. Additionally, adverbs and opening words are used equally by Rishi Sunak accounting for 10% of the total. However, Sunak does not use either compound hedging or if-clauses.

Conclusion

The present study examines how Rishi Sunak employs hedging during the British Prime Minister's Questions from a pragmatic perspective. Hedging is effectively used by illocutions sometimes to hide some negative ideas in the presence of another party without letting the latter suspect anything.

The current study emphasizes hedging as a language tactic commonly used by politicians to mask their actual objectives. According to this analysis, the prime minister Rishi Sunak frequently employs hedging strategies in political speech to express hesitancy about his views and to absolve himself of any future accountability for his remarks. These linguistic devices convey to the audience the speaker's level of commitment to the veracity and educational value of his statements.

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The findings indicate that modal auxiliary verbs make up the biggest amount of Rishi Sunak hedging instances. Overall, modal lexical verbs and approximators are employed equally.

Notably, Sunak makes no use of compound hedging or if-clauses.

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