1. Introduction

A look at the research literature on Political Linguistics reveals that there has been considerable research on vagueness, evasion, equivocation, and deception in the speech of politicians, but with the exception of Partington (2003), almost nothing on hedging.\footnote{A recent paper by Fetzer (forthcoming) is an example.} Given the nature of hedging and the image projected by President Bush, I was interested in the extent to which Bush would use hedging in response to challenging questions posed to him by reporters. I chose the 2007 Press Conferences as my source of data.

In Section 2 of this paper, I characterize hedging as it is thought of today, ignoring a detailed history of the topic, which will be found elsewhere (Fraser forthcoming). Then, in sections 3 and 4, I present the results of my analysis of the 2007 Press Conferences.\footnote{The material for this analysis are scripts of 30 press conferences held by G. W. Bush between January 1 and December 31, 2007.}

2. What is hedging?

*Hedging* is a rhetorical strategy. By including a particular term, choosing a particular structure, or imposing a specific prosodic form on the utterance, the speaker signals a lack of a full commitment either to the full category membership of a term or expression in the utterance (content mitigation), or to the intended illocutionary force of the utterance (force mitigation). Simply put, it is attenuation of the full value which the utterance would have, absent the hedging.
For example, in

The pool has sort of an L-shaped design.
Peter's house is almost 100 feet wide.

which are instances of content mitigation, there is an attenuation of the commitment
to the pool having a true L-shaped design and to Peter's house being 100 feet in width.
Analogously, in

I think that I must ask you to leave now.
It seems that no one wants to go.

which are instances of force mitigation, the speaker indicates that there is not a full com-
mitment to requesting the hearer to leave, both by virtue of the I think as well as the mo-
dal must. Similarly, the speaker of the second sentence signals less than full endorse-
to the declaration No one wants to go. Of course, this lack of commitment may truly re-
fect the extent of speaker's knowledge, for example, when a researcher states that

I find that the results more or less conform with those found by Johnson (1999)
where to make an explicit statement that the results conform is beyond what is
justified by the data.

To the extent to which a speaker does not 'misspeak,' either through mistake or
misadventure, hedging must be considered an intentional action in that the speaker
chooses a linguistic device over and above the propositional content of the message
which will affect the interpretation of the utterance, either by modifying the content of
the utterance or its force.3

Hedges are thus linguistic devices – lexical items, syntactic structures, prosodic
features – which are used to bring about hedging, though almost none of these are
used solely in this capacity. In the first example below, kind of is taken as a unit and
used as a hedge while in the second, it is used as a Noun-Preposition sequence.

He kind of missed the point.
I like that kind of ice cream.
According to John, there will be no class today.

In the second example, the expression according to John can be used to avoid respon-
sibility (hedging) or simply to indicate the source of the information.

3. In line with the initial writing on the topic when hedging was characterized as 'fuzziness'
(cf. Lakoff 1972), there are some who would argue that the concept of hedging also embraces an
emphasis in the membership category or force of an utterance, as in 'I emphatically state that she is here.'
I find several reasons to reject this position: first, that the use of the term today in all areas of hedg-
ing research deals almost exclusively with the lack of commitment; second, the term 'reinforcement'
has been adopted for this second use; and third, the sense of reinforcement does not imply more
than class membership or force values. Thus, I will use 'hedging' in only the attenuation sense.
Hedges do not form a grammatical category, since they do not fall within a single syntactic form. Nor do they constitute a Functional Category, as Clemen (1997) writes:

There is no limit to the linguistic expressions that can be considered as hedges... The difficulty with these functional definitions is that almost any linguistic item or expression can be interpreted as a hedge... no linguistic items are inherently hedges but can acquire this quality depending on the communicative context or the co-text. This also means that no clear-cut lists of hedging expressions are possible (Clemen 1997: 6).

In fact, a hedge can be an entire sentence, as in

- I must ask you this: why did you do such a foolish thing?
- I think I can guarantee that you will be awarded a full-tuition scholarship.

It seems best to treat them as an inventory of devices by which the speaker can qualify or attenuate commitment to either the meaning or the force which would be interpreted if the hedge were absent from the utterance.

Researchers have attempted to classify hedges into an array sub-categories, as the list below illustrates,

- adaptor, agent avoider, approximator, attenuator, attribution shield, bush, committer, compromiser, consultative device, deintensifier, diffuser, diminisher, downtoner, forewarner, hedge, indicator of degrees of reliability, minimizer, mitigator, plausibility shield, play-down, politeness marker, rounder, scope-stater, shield, understatement, understater, validity marker, vocal hesitator, weakener

some researchers choosing the same term but for different groups of the hedges. I find the distinction between content and force hedging to be more than sufficient and have found no basis for any finer distinction, either descriptive or theoretical.

The focus of a hedge varies. It may be a word, a phrase, the entire sentence, or the intended illocutionary force of the utterance, or its perlocutionary effect, as shown below,

- That is a kind of [bird.]
- He has a somewhat [elevated temperature.]
- As far as I can tell, [you don't have anything to fear from him.]
- I must request that you stop talk while the music is playing. [Request]
- I think that she is pretty much guilty. [Perlocutionary Effect on hearer]

but the focus of a hedge is never an inference, entailment or a presupposition.

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Propositional hedges include:

*about, actually, almost, approximately, as it were, basically, can be viewed as, crypto-*, especially, essentially, exceptionally, for the most part, generally, in a manner of speaking, in a real sense, in a sense, in a way, kind of, largely, literally, loosely speaking, more or less, mostly, often, occasionally, on the tall side, par excellence, particularly, pretty much, principally, pseudo-, quintessentially, rather, real, really, regular, relatively, roughly, so to say, somewhat, sort of, strictly speaking, technically, typically, very, virtually

though this list certainly does not exhaust the inventory. Illocutionary force hedges include:

**Impersonal pronouns**

*One* just doesn't do that.

**Concessive conjunctions (although, though, while, whereas, even though, even if, ...)*

*Even though* you dislike the beach, it’s worth going for the view.

**Hedged performative**

*I must* ask you to sit down.

**Indirect Speech Acts**

*Could you* speak a little louder.

**Introductory phrases – I believe, to our knowledge, it is our view that, we feel that.**

*I believe* that he is here.

**Modal adverbs** *perhaps, possibly, probably, practically, presumably, apparently.*

*I can possibly* do that

**Modal adjectives (possible, probable, un/likely...)**

*It is possible* that there is no water in the well.

**Modal noun (assumption, claim, possibility, estimate, suggestion...)**

*The assumption* is that you are going to go.

**Modal verbs (might, can, would, could...)**

*John might* leave now.

**Epistemic verbs (seem, appear, believe, assume, suggest, think...)**

*It seems* that no one wants to go.

**Negation**

*Didn't* Harry leave? [I think Harry left]

*I don't think* I’m going, vs. I’m *not* going. [Former hedges the meaning of latter]

**Reversal tag**

*He's coming, isn't he?*

**Parenthetic construction**

*The picnic is here, I guess.*

**If clause**

*If true, we're in deep trouble.*
Agentless Passive

Many of the troops were injured. (by Ø)

Conditional subordinators (as long as, so long as, assuming that, given that...) 

Unless the strike has been called off, there will be no trains tomorrow.

Progressive form

I am hoping you will come.

Tentative Inference

The mountains should be visible from here.

Conditional clause implying permission (if you don't mind my saying so, if I may say so)

If you don't mind me saying so, your slip is showing.

Conditional clause as a metalinguistic comment (if that's the right word...)

His style is florid, if that's the right word.

Conditional clause expressing uncertainty about the extralinguistic knowledge required for a correct interpretation of the utterance (if I'm correct, in case you don't remember)

Chomsky views cannot be reconciled with Piaget, if I understand him correctly.

Metalinguistic comment such as (strictly speaking, so to say, exactly, almost, just about, if you will)

He has an idea, a hypothesis, if you will, that you may find interesting.

In addition, Salager-Meyer (1995) indicates compound hedging devices which include

Modal with hedging verb

It would appear that...

Hedging verb with hedging adverb/adjective

It seems reasonable that...

Double hedges

It may suggest that this probably indicates...

Treble hedges

It seems reasonable to assume that...

Quadruple hedges

It would seem somewhat unlikely that it may appear somewhat speculative that...

Here, again, there is no reason to believe that the above list captures all hedging devices in English nor that a given device is always used for hedging.

Finally, there have been a variety of discourse uses which hedging serves, some of which overlap: to accomplish politeness, both positive and negative; to mitigate; to provide some degree of self-protection; to avoid confrontation; to avoid responsibility for a fact or an act; to appear modest; to conceal the truth, to be apologetic, and to seem less powerful. However, I find these can be reduced to the following two general purposes:
hedging is used (1) to mitigate an undesirable effect on the hearer, thereby rendering the message (more) polite; and (2) to avoid providing the information which is expected or required in the speaker’s contribution, thereby creating vagueness and/or evasion. It is the latter effect that will be relevant in the 2007 Bush Press Conferences.

3. **The framework of the Presidential press conference**

The Presidential press conference (Davis 1992; Kernell 1986; Smith 1990) is a gathering of reporters in the same room with the President and perhaps another head of state, where the President initially makes some remarks followed by questions to him and his guest. The questions are not scripted, although his aides alert him to the likely content and the hot-button issues. The atmosphere is relatively informal and at time quite humorous.

The framework of the Presidential press conference involves an aspect which is important to this analysis. It is the fact that a small number of the reporters present who, at the moment, are in Bush’s good graces, are typically permitted a single question and no follow up. This means that reporters typically try to make the question as broad and open ended as possible, and often link questions together – as evidenced below.

Q. ...he [Putin] said – well, at least the quote said that. And he also said, quote, he “sees no evidence to suggest Iran wants to build a nuclear bomb.” Were you disappointed with that message? And does that indicate possibly that international pressure is not as great as you once thought against Iran abandoning its nuclear program?

Q. Mr. President, you mentioned that you see national reconciliation as a crucial goal there for your policy. Why then haven’t you condemned the taunting that Saddam Hussein faced on the gallows from Shiite officials? And on a related subject, can you be more specific as to which day next week you’ll be unveiling your Iraq policy?

Reasonably, the longer and more inquisitive the question sequences, the larger the number of hedges in the President’s response.

In 2007 Bush held 30 press conferences: 20 with one or more guests, 10 where he was alone. In this paper, I am concerned only with his answers to questions posed by reporters and have not analyzed his prepared remarks at the start of the press conference. My initial hunches were that, there would be little opportunity to use hedging as a way of mitigating possible face threatening remarks, since Bush was answering questions and not debating with the reporters. The majority of Bush’s remarks would be explanatory statements, and I was interested in whether under these circumstances he would use hedging as a strategy to evade responsibility for both facts presented and actions taken.5

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5. Partington (2003: 237–243) suggests that hedging is only one of the strategies for evading, others being bald on-record refusal to answer, claims of ignorance, referring the question, refusal to speculate, stating the answer is well-known, and claiming that the question has been answered already.
Chapter 11. Hedging in political discourse

4. The findings

Contrary to the expectations of the use of hedging as a strategy to evade responsibility, I found, first of all, numerous cases of hedge-type expressions used in a non-hedging manner, as shown below.

1. I appreciate that kind of commitment, Mr. Prime Minister.
2. Newly elected President, Tony Blair came over, and he reached out; he was gracious – was able to converse in a way that – where our shared interests were the most important aspect of the relationship.

The terms for the most part, honestly, in a sense, largely, literally, loosely speaking, mostly, to my knowledge, principally, roughly, so to say, strictly speaking, technically, typically, virtually did not occur as hedges in Bush’s answers to questions, though they might have been expected in his answers, given their potential for discourse attenuation. In addition, there were no cases of hedged performatives, very few cases of hedged felicity conditions or hedged Gricean maxims, and no cases of I suggest that, I wonder if, or I suppose that, all of which might have been anticipated to work as, again, attenuators of the President’s commitment to the validity of the proposition following.

There were numerous cases of what I call neutral hedging, hedging which clearly had no impact on the issue being discussed. Specifically, in the context in which this hedging occurred, it was extremely difficult if not impossible to infer Bush’s intention to create vagueness or to evade a more focused and specific answer to the question. In the examples below, I have not provided the context in which the utterance occurred, both for space considerations and because it would not change the general thrust of this point if one were to disagree with some of the examples.6

3. We don’t believe freedom is just confined to our neighborhood; we believe freedom is universal in its application.
4. And as you know, we’ve been dealing with this issue ever since you’ve been covering me and pretty much ever since I’ve been the President.
5. The bill essentially says that before any other reforms take place, certain benchmarks will be met when it comes to securing the border.
6. …there is an underground industry that has sprung up that I think is essentially anti-humanitarian. It is an industry based upon coyotes – those are smugglers.
7. And that’s why I find it somewhat astounding that people in Congress would start calling for withdrawal even before all the troops have made it to Baghdad.
8. Since the tax cuts took full effect in 2003, our economy has added more than 8.3 million new jobs and almost 4 years of uninterrupted growth.

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6. There were 64 instances of kind of, 41 of actually, 240 of believe/not believe, 258 of think/don’t think, 55 of thought, 25 of we believe and one instance of we don’t believe.
What you’re asking is whether or not Congress ought to be basically determining how troops are positioned or troop strength. And I just – I don’t think that would be good for the country.

He kind of got beaten up by people in the Democratic Party and by Mitt Romney in your party. Romney comparing him to Dr. Strangelove.

I did have a good discussion with Prime Minister Maliki. It did nearly last for 2 hours.

There really wasn’t a serious debate until pretty much starting after the year 2000, if my memory serves me well.

And the truth of the matter is, they probably didn’t fully understand what they were signing up for.

As you probably are aware, I’ve really never felt like the United States needs to get United Nations approval to make decisions necessary for our security.

As you probably know, the public works committee is the largest committee – one of the largest committees in the House of Representatives.

I think it’s great to be able to say a good friend won reelection because...

I cannot look a mother and father of a troop in the eye and say, “I’m sending your kid into combat, but I don’t think we can achieve the objective.”

I believe we can succeed, and I believe we are making security progress that will enable the political tract to succeed as well.

Considered from the perspective of the general characteristics of President Bush’s public address style (Silberstein 2004), the hedge-type expressions in (3–18) should be deemed examples of ‘empty rhetoric’ (often involving appeals to undeniable truths, as in 3), rather than instances purposefully aimed at exerting rhetorical impact (having the force of mitigation, responsibility shift, etc.).

Interestingly, such a rhetorical stance was often picked up by reporters (as in 19–21), who would join in an exchange of hedged expressions with no apparent performative rationale. As a result, the precision and directness of the interaction would dwindle, though it is rather unclear whether one could call it an effect truly intended by the President:

Q. Mr. President, the Prime Minister has referred to terrorism as, quote, “a crime,” and he’s referred to it in part as a law enforcement issue. So for you, I’m wondering, does that underscore any sort of philosophical difference when your 2004 campaign took issue with somewhat similar descriptions from John Kerry?

Q. Mr. President Bush, Hugo Chavez of Venezuela has been using his country’s vast oil wealth to court a whole new generation of Latin Americans. You pretty much avoided using his name.

Q. I can’t help but read your body language this morning, Mr. President. You seem somehow dispirited – somewhat dispirited.

What I expected but did not find were examples of what I call self-serving hedging, hedging to evade answering the question in a straightforward and complete way. For
example, none of the following occurred: *I believe that there are WMD still in Iraq.*, *The plan to withdraw troops will possibly be revised.*, *The ultimate decision will be decided (by?) by next month.*, though there were a couple of responses using *I think* to hedge (as in 22 below), which could be construed as evasion, and an occasional use of hedging used for mitigation (as in 23):

(22) Q. Is it all their [the Democrats’] fault that these bills aren’t moving, that you’ve got these veto threats out?  
*The President.* *I think* it is their fault that bills aren’t moving, yes. As I said, I’m not a part of the legislative branch. All I can do is ask them to move bills. It’s up to the leaders to move the bills.

(23) Q. ...you weren’t this circumspect when you were talking to reporters yesterday about the economy.  
*The President.* I think I *pretty much* said the same thing yesterday, *in all due respect.*

Rather than using hedging for purposes of evasion, I found numerous cases of clear, deliberate evasion: a failure to responsibly answer the question put to him. In what follows I present various Question-Answer sequences which reflect this evasion in different guises. Interestingly, there is no apparent difference which depends on the subject, for example, the war in Iraq, the state of the economy, or the President’s ideological views.

In some cases, Bush seems to be at a loss for words (something attributed to him since he has been in office), as in (24):

(24) Q. Secretary Rice said that failure is not an option. You talked about substantial issues (sic.) need to be discussed. What is the minimum expectation from you that you will call this conference a success? And what you’re (sic.) offering the Arab nations to encourage them to participate?  
*The President.* Right. Well, that’s why Condi is making the trip she’s making, is to explain to people in private, as well as in public, that, one, we’re for comprehensive peace; two, that there is a – the meeting, the international meeting will be serious and substantive. In other words – as she said the other day, this isn’t going to be just a photo opportunity. This is going to be a serious and substantive meeting.

but generally his clear evasion was polished albeit frustrating for those who expected an answer that was responsive to the question. The following Question-Answers (25–27) illustrate this:

(25) Q. But, Mr. President, there have been seven investigations and the Pentagon has not gotten to the bottom of it. Can you also tell us when you, personally, found out that it was not enemy fire, that it was friendly fire?
The President. I can’t give you the precise moment. But obviously, the minute I heard that the facts that people believed were true were not true, that I expect there to be a full investigation and get to the bottom of it.

(26) Q. Thank you, sir. You have spoken passionately about the consequences of failure in Iraq. Your critics say you failed to send enough troops there at the start, failed to keep Al Qaeda from stepping into the void created by the collapse of Saddam’s army, failed to put enough pressure on Iraq’s Government to make the political reconciliation necessary to keep the sectarian violence the country is suffering from now from occurring. So why should the American people feel you have the vision for victory in Iraq, sir?

The President. Those are all legitimate questions that I’m sure historians will analyze. I mean, one of the questions is, should we have sent more in the beginning?...

(27) Q. Mr. President, thank you. Since General Pace made his comments that got a lot of attention about homosexuality, we haven’t heard from you on that issue. Do you, sir, believe that homosexuality is immoral?

The President. I will not be rendering judgment about individual orientation. I do believe the “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy is good policy.

The evasion strategies involve primarily outright refusals to answer (25, 27), but also a strategy to delegate the answer to another party (26), as well as self-reformulation and narrowing down the scope of the original question sequence (26), so that the answer detracts from the complexity of the issue at stake.

There were occasions where, rather than simply ignore the question, Bush would use the evasive ploy of stating that the question had been asked and answered, as in (28) and (29):

(28) Q. ...you weren’t this circumspect when you were talking to reporters yesterday about the economy.

The President. I think I pretty much said the same thing yesterday, in all due respect.

(29) Q. Was it on your order, sir?

The President. As I said, this program is a necessary program that was constantly reviewed...

When questioned about a general who had criticized the administration’s actions, Bush again totally ignored the question:

(30) Q. I wonder if you felt blindsided by the very blistering criticism recently from retired General Ricardo Sanchez, who was one of your top commanders in Iraq. [who voiced strong criticism of incompetent strategic leadership on Iraq]

The President. You know, look, I admire General Sanchez’s service to the country. I appreciate his service to the country. The situation on the ground has changed quite dramatically since he left Iraq. The security situation is changing dramatically. The reconciliation that’s taking place is changing. The
economy is getting better. And so I – I’m pleased with the progress we’re mak-
ing. And I admire the fact that he served. I appreciate his service.

A rare follow-up question by the same reporter who pursued the ‘blindsiding’ issue was met with a refusal to answer, another evasive technique, and another reporter was selected for a question, as in (31):

(31) Q. Should the American people feel disturbed that a former top general says that?

*The President.* Massimo. [Massimo Calabresi, *Time*]

Finally, Bush engages in downright lying, a form of evasion, although not hedging, as illustrated by the following (32), where his answer shows a marked disfluency, perhaps due to his dissembling:

(32) Q. And he [Putin] said – well, at least the quote said that. And he also said, quote, he “sees no evidence to suggest Iran wants to build a nuclear bomb.” Were you disappointed with that message? And does that indicate possibly that international pressure is not as great as you once thought against Iran abandoning its nuclear program?

*The President.* I – as I say, I look forward to – if those are, in fact, his com-
ments, I look forward to having him clarify those, because when I visited with
him, he understands that it’s in the world’s interest to make sure that Iran does
not have the capacity to make a nuclear weapon...I mean, if he wasn't concerned
about it, Bret, then why did we have such good progress at the United Nations
in round one and round two?

*The President.* [continuing] And so I will visit with him about it. *I have not
been briefed yet* by Condi or Bob Gates about, you know, their visit with
Vladimir Putin.

It is common knowledge that the President is briefed immediately upon return home by administration officials. Another instance of downright lying follows below (in 33). When questioned about a report on torturing Iraqi captives, he denied having seen it, implying he had not been briefed on it:

(33) Q. The New Yorker reports that the Red Cross has found the interrogation
program in the CIA detention facilities used interrogation techniques that
were tantamount to torture. I’m wondering if you have read that report, and
what your reaction to it is.

*The President.* *I haven't seen it.* We don't torture.

His rejection of waterboarding as a form of torture is as believable as Clinton's claim of “not having sex with that woman.”
5. Conclusion

As expected, I found numerous examples of neutral hedging, hedging where there was no indication that it was being used for evasion or politeness purposes but rather conveying a lack of precision. In addition, per my expectation, I did not find that hedging was used in the Press Conferences for mitigation purposes leading to polite effects. Lack of potential for adverse reaction would account for this.

Unexpectedly, I found only a few cases of hedging for purposes of evasion when the question was challenging, and Bush might be expected to avoid a direct, forthright answer on point. Rather I found that he moved directly to evading the issue, utilizing several of the techniques suggested by Partington (2003), including outright lying, often with sufficient dissonance that it made one wonder what question he was answering.

Press Conferences are one of the few venues where the President is confronted with challenging questions, and can be expected to answer them directly and completely. That Bush consistently does not conform to this expectation suggests that Press Conferences may be less of a forum for a President to explain views on tough policy issues and more of a change for the press to indirectly criticize an administration.

References


