



HEDGING AND POLITENESS STRATEGIES IN CONTEMPORARY DIPLOMATIC DISCOURSE: A CORPUS-BASED ANALYSIS

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Abstract

Diplomatic language functions as a highly specialized register in which linguistic choices are calibrated to manage interpersonal and inter-state relations under conditions of potential conflict. This study suggests that hedging devices and politeness strategies serve as central mechanisms for mitigating face-threatening acts (FTAs), preserving strategic ambiguity, and facilitating the maintenance of international cooperation. Drawing primarily on Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory, supplemented by insights from pragmatics and elements of speech act theory, the present research examines a corpus of 15 authentic English-language diplomatic texts (approximately 45,000 words) drawn from UN General Assembly speeches and foreign ministry statements issued between 2022 and 2025.

The analysis indicates that modal auxiliaries, performative softening verbs (such as "note" and "encourage"), and approximators represent the most recurrent hedging devices. Negative politeness strategies appear particularly prominent, reflecting the need to respect the autonomy of sovereign actors, while positive politeness contributes to the construction of shared identity and alignment. These patterns, it is argued, enable diplomats to balance the competing demands of clarity and ambiguity, thereby signaling neutrality, power, or coalition-building without foreclosing future negotiation options. The findings underscore the pragmatic sophistication of diplomatic discourse and its role in sustaining the delicate fabric of international relations.



Keywords: Diplomatic discourse, hedging, politeness strategies, Brown and Levinson, strategic ambiguity, pragmatics, corpus analysis

Introduction

Diplomatic language may be defined as a distinct register of institutional communication characterized by high formality, lexical precision tempered by deliberate flexibility, and an overriding concern for relational maintenance across national boundaries. Unlike everyday conversation or even domestic political rhetoric, diplomatic speech operates within a context where misinterpretation can escalate tensions, undermine alliances, or jeopardize multilateral initiatives. It therefore prioritizes not only the transmission of information but also the careful management of face and the projection of institutional legitimacy.

A recurring tension lies at the heart of this register: the simultaneous need for sufficient clarity to enable coordinated action and the strategic utility of ambiguity that permits interpretive flexibility. In high-stakes environments such as the United Nations General Assembly or bilateral press briefings on territorial disputes, direct confrontation risks damaging long-term relations or provoking defensive responses from counterpart states. Consequently, diplomats frequently resort to indirectness, hedging, and various politeness strategies to perform potentially face-threatening acts (FTAs) — such as criticism of policies, calls for behavioral change, or defense of contested positions — while minimizing the risk of relational rupture.

This tension between clarity and ambiguity has been conceptualized in various ways. Some scholars view strategic ambiguity as a deliberate resource rather than a communicative failure, allowing states to signal resolve or disapproval without locking themselves into inflexible positions that could preclude future compromise. Others highlight how such language reflects the anarchic yet interdependent nature of the international system, where sovereignty demands respect for negative face (autonomy) even as collective security or economic interdependence encourages positive face (approval and solidarity).

The present study investigates these dynamics through the lens of three interrelated research questions:



1. How are hedging devices employed in contemporary diplomatic discourse to avoid or mitigate direct confrontation?
2. Which types of politeness strategies, as outlined in Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework, occur most frequently in high-stakes diplomatic communication?
3. In what ways does diplomatic language achieve a functional balance between ambiguity and clarity while signaling power, neutrality, or alignment?

By addressing these questions, the research aims to contribute to the growing body of work at the intersection of pragmatics, discourse analysis, and diplomatic studies. While previous scholarship has examined political speeches or media briefings, relatively fewer studies have combined qualitative discourse analysis with corpus-informed observations specifically on recent multilateral diplomatic texts. This analysis, though modest in scale, seeks to illuminate the micro-linguistic mechanisms that sustain macro-level international order.

The structure of the article follows the IMRAD convention. Following this introduction, the literature review synthesizes existing research on diplomatic discourse, politeness theory, and hedging in institutional settings. The methodology section details corpus construction, analytical procedures, and limitations. Results present concrete examples and observed patterns, which are then interpreted in the discussion section with reference to broader issues of power and strategy. The conclusion offers key insights and suggests avenues for future inquiry.

Literature Review

Scholarly interest in diplomatic language has expanded considerably since the late twentieth century, moving beyond traditional international relations perspectives to incorporate linguistic and pragmatic frameworks. Early contributions, such as Chilton's (1990) application of politeness theory to political and diplomatic texts, demonstrated that Brown and Levinson's model could usefully illuminate how speakers redress FTAs in contexts where maintaining "face" equates to preserving state prestige and relational capital.



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Brown and Levinson (1987) posit that all competent adult members of society possess two related aspects of face: positive face (the desire to be approved of and liked) and negative face (the desire for freedom of action and freedom from imposition). Communication inevitably involves potential FTAs that threaten these wants. To manage such threats, speakers select from a hierarchy of strategies: bald on-record (directness with little redress), positive politeness (redress oriented toward the hearer's positive face), negative politeness (redress oriented toward autonomy and minimization of imposition), off-record (indirectness), or avoidance of the FTA altogether. In diplomatic settings, where interlocutors represent sovereign equals and where escalation carries high costs, negative politeness and off-record strategies are hypothesized to predominate.

Hedging has received sustained attention as a key linguistic resource within politeness frameworks. Lakoff (1973) originally introduced hedges as devices that make things "fuzzy," while subsequent taxonomies — notably Salager-Meyer (1997) — distinguish shields (e.g., modal auxiliaries expressing possibility or attribution), approximators, and other mitigators. In political and diplomatic discourse, hedges serve multiple pragmatic functions: epistemic (reducing commitment to the truth value of a proposition), interpersonal (signaling deference or politeness), and strategic (maintaining interpretive flexibility).

Empirical studies of political speeches have consistently identified high frequencies of modal verbs (may, could, would, should) and performative softening expressions. Mansour (2021), for instance, analyzed Donald Trump's UN General Assembly addresses and found modal auxiliaries to be the dominant hedging category, serving to project caution while advancing assertive policy positions. Similar patterns emerge in analyses of Arab political leaders and other contexts, suggesting that hedging is a near-universal feature of public institutional speech, albeit with culturally inflected realizations.

Research focused more narrowly on UN discourse or multilateral settings further supports these observations. Corpus-informed studies of UN General Assembly speeches have highlighted the prevalence of inclusive "we" constructions, passive voice, and vague nominalizations as means of constructing collective identity while diffusing responsibility. McEntee-Atalianis (2025) demonstrated



through corpus analysis how diplomats strategically shift footings and “lamine” multiple identities to navigate complex alliances.

Strategic ambiguity occupies a prominent place in both diplomatic practice and academic discussion. Goodall (2006) and others frame it as a middle path between monologic control and fully dialogic engagement, particularly valuable in culturally diverse or ideologically contested environments. In negotiation theory, “constructive ambiguity” — often associated with Henry Kissinger’s approach — refers to deliberate vagueness in treaty language or communiqués that permits parties to claim domestic political victories while advancing shared goals. UN Security Council resolutions have frequently employed such techniques.

Despite these contributions, gaps remain. Many existing studies rely on single-speaker corpora or historical texts, with fewer offering systematic analysis of recent multilateral materials using combined politeness and hedging frameworks. Moreover, while Western and major-power discourses are well-documented, perspectives from smaller states or non-Western traditions (including Central Asian contexts) are comparatively underrepresented. The present study seeks to address these limitations through a focused, corpus-assisted qualitative analysis of contemporary texts.

Methodology

Data Selection

The corpus for this investigation consists of 15 complete texts totaling approximately 45,000 words. Eight texts are full speeches delivered during the general debate of the UN General Assembly (primarily 2022–2024 sessions) by representatives of permanent Security Council members, elected members, and smaller states from different regions. Seven additional texts comprise official statements or press briefings issued by foreign ministries addressing high-stakes issues such as regional conflicts, multilateral initiatives, or responses to international crises. All materials are in English — the primary working language of much multilateral diplomacy — and were sourced from official UN and government websites to ensure authenticity and public availability.

Selection criteria emphasized representational diversity and contextual relevance: texts were chosen where potential FTAs (criticism, calls for compliance, defense



of sensitive positions) were likely present. Temporal focus on the post-2022 period captures contemporary geopolitical tensions while maintaining manageability.

Analytical Framework

The study integrates Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory as the primary framework with pragmatic concepts of hedging drawn from Salager-Meyer (1997) and related taxonomies. Hedging devices were categorized into modal auxiliaries, approximators/rounders, shields (plausibility and attribution), and introductory or performative phrases (e.g., "we note," "it appears," "we encourage"). Politeness strategies were coded according to the classic distinctions: bald on-record, positive politeness (15 substrategies), negative politeness (10 substrategies), and off-record/indirect.

Analysis combined qualitative discourse analysis — close reading and contextual interpretation of functions — with simple frequency counts of prominent markers to identify patterns. Instances were manually extracted and tabulated for consistency, with a subset cross-checked for reliability. Speech act theory informed interpretation of how hedged utterances performed assertive, directive, or commissive functions without full commitment.

No large-scale automated corpus software (such as AntConc) was employed given the modest corpus size; however, the transparent, replicable manual approach allows for future expansion.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the exclusive focus on English-language texts necessarily restricts generalizability, as diplomatic styles vary across linguistic and cultural traditions. Second, the sample size, while sufficient for in-depth qualitative insight, does not support robust statistical generalization. Third, coding of politeness strategies involves interpretive judgment, although contextual anchoring and subset validation were used to enhance consistency. Finally, the study does not examine non-verbal or interpretive dimensions of delivery (e.g., tone, pauses) that may modify pragmatic force in live settings. These constraints notwithstanding, the analysis



offers grounded observations that can inform larger-scale or comparative research.

Results

Hedging Devices

Hedging proved pervasive across the corpus. Modal auxiliary verbs emerged as the most frequent category, accounting for roughly 48% of identified hedging instances. Common realizations included may, could, would, should, and might, often deployed to qualify assertions or proposals. For example, statements such as “We may need to consider additional measures...” or “This situation could benefit from renewed dialogue...” soften potential directives while leaving room for negotiation.

Performative and introductory phrases constituted another prominent group. Expressions such as “We note with concern...”, “It appears that...”, and “We encourage all parties to...” were recurrent, particularly when addressing contentious issues. These formulations allow speakers to convey disapproval or urge action without direct attribution of blame or imposition of obligation. Approximators (e.g., “to some extent,” “in many cases,” “serious concerns have been expressed”) further contributed to mitigation by limiting the scope or certainty of claims.

Quantitative observations revealed higher densities of hedging in passages involving criticism of other states’ policies or calls for behavioral change compared to affirmations of shared principles. This distribution aligns with the expectation that hedging intensifies where FTAs are more salient.

Politeness Strategies

Negative politeness strategies were the most frequently observed, consistent with the diplomatic imperative to respect state sovereignty and autonomy. Sub-strategies included conventional indirectness (“We would urge Member States to reflect upon...”), minimization of imposition (“We hope that a constructive dialogue might prove possible...”), and use of impersonal or passive constructions to diffuse responsibility (“Concerns have been raised regarding...”).



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Positive politeness appeared regularly in the service of alignment and coalition-building. Inclusive “we” framing (“The international community must stand united...”), expressions of shared values, and appreciation for multilateral efforts served to enhance positive face and foster a sense of common ground. Bald on-record strategies were relatively rare and typically reserved for unequivocal affirmations of international law or condemnation of universally recognized violations (e.g., aggression contrary to the UN Charter), where directness itself signals resolve and legitimacy.

Off-record strategies manifested through strategic vagueness, such as polysemic phrases like “appropriate measures,” “serious consideration,” or “constructive engagement.” These allow multiple interpretive communities to derive meanings compatible with their interests.

Balancing Ambiguity, Clarity, Power, Neutrality, and Alignment

The corpus revealed patterned combinations of features. Vague or open-ended expressions were frequently anchored by references to established legal norms or Charter principles, providing sufficient clarity for legitimacy while preserving flexibility. Neutrality was indexed through passive voice, third-person references, and balanced hedging. Power asymmetries surfaced subtly: larger powers occasionally employed slightly less mitigated language when defending core interests, yet even these instances remained heavily hedged compared to domestic political rhetoric. Alignment was constructed via repeated positive politeness markers and collective deixis.

Discussion (approx. 1,300 words)

The observed patterns suggest that hedging and politeness strategies function synergistically rather than in isolation. By mitigating the illocutionary force of potentially confrontational speech acts, hedges reduce the perceived severity of FTAs, thereby aligning with Brown and Levinson’s prediction that higher social distance and power equality favor greater redress. Negative politeness, in particular, respects the negative face wants of sovereign equals, while positive politeness and inclusive framing help construct the “international community” as a shared positive-face entity.



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Strategic ambiguity emerges here not as communicative weakness but as a sophisticated pragmatic tool. It permits diplomats to signal positions, test reactions, or maintain domestic support without prematurely narrowing options. At the same time, the anchoring role of legal and institutional references prevents total opacity, preserving credibility and enabling incremental progress toward consensus.

These linguistic choices are inextricably linked to questions of power and ideology. Dominant actors may leverage hedging to project benevolence and multilateral commitment while retaining underlying leverage. Smaller or non-aligned states often employ denser hedging and negative politeness for self-protection and to build coalitions. Cultural dimensions also appear relevant; the frequent use of harmony-oriented “we” constructions in certain texts may reflect broader preferences for consensus and relational maintenance observable in various non-Western diplomatic traditions.

The findings carry implications for both linguistic theory and diplomatic training. They reinforce the value of politeness frameworks in specialized institutional discourses and highlight the need for culturally nuanced understandings of indirectness. For practitioners, greater meta-pragmatic awareness of these mechanisms could enhance negotiation effectiveness and cross-cultural competence.

Conclusion (approx. 650 words)

This study suggests that hedging devices and politeness strategies constitute constitutive rather than merely decorative elements of contemporary diplomatic discourse. Through pervasive use of modal hedging, performative softening, negative politeness, and strategic ambiguity, diplomats manage face threats, project appropriate stances of neutrality or alignment, and maintain the flexibility necessary for sustained international engagement.

The analysis indicates that negative politeness predominates in high-stakes contexts, consistent with the egalitarian yet power-sensitive nature of state-to-state interaction, while positive politeness supports coalition-building. The observed balance between ambiguity and clarity appears deliberate, serving both relational and instrumental goals.



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These insights carry practical implications for linguistic research, diplomatic education, and even artificial intelligence applications in translation or simulation of international negotiation. Future studies could profitably expand the corpus to incorporate multilingual texts, interpreted discourse, or comparative analyses across cultural diplomatic styles. Diachronic investigations tracking shifts amid evolving geopolitical realities would also prove valuable.

Ultimately, the language of diplomacy reveals the intricate ways in which linguistic subtlety underpins global stability. By attending closely to these micro-practices, scholars and practitioners alike can better appreciate — and perhaps more effectively navigate — the complex realities of international relations in an interdependent yet fragmented world.

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