

LEXICAL VERB(S) OF HEDGING USED BY THE WHITE HOUSE SECRETARY’S RESPONSES IN PRESS BRIEFING

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ABSTRACT

The study aims to investigate the lexical verbs of hedging used by two White House secretaries in press briefings, namely Jen Psaki (JP) and Karine Jean Pierre (KJP). The research focuses on the secretary's response in answering the question made by journalists. The corpus consisting of 22 press briefing meetings published from November 2021 to August 2022. The study identifies the most used lexical verbs by the two secretaries through quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis to describe their functions. As a result, the use of hedging verbs is more widely used by secretary Jen Psaki than secretary Karine Jean Pierre. Nevertheless, both used many verbs in the form of think in their responses. The findings reveal the uncertainty and reduce the secretary's commitment. Besides, the function of hedging is to protect secretaries from forward-looking statements and seek protection against overstatement.

KEYWORDS Hedging verb; responses; press briefing



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INTRODUCTION

The responses made by the White House secretary to answer the question seem to have their style in every spoken speech. The word *seems, think, probably, would, could, might* are often uttered in spoken language, especially in the press briefing. These devices are used for specific purposes such as ‘vague,’ ‘evade,’ ‘fuzzy,’ and ‘uncertainty’. The words whose meaning shows fuzziness are first created by Lakoff (1973). Following Lakoff (1973), it is known as ‘hedging’ forms in Linguistics. Biber et al. (1999) have argued that hedging demonstrates linguistic expression that decreases the consequence of intentional statements expressing possibilities, uncertainty, and inaccuracy. It is usually used to indicate tentative and

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uncertain an assertion that can be interpreted differently depending on the conversation's content and who employs the hedges.

Moreover, hedging belongs an essential strategy used in communication. It follows Hyland (1998) that hedging is used to soften statements' accuracy, claim the precision, and show doubts. In academic writing, hedging is used by the author to reduce the strength of what has been written (Rabab'ah & Abu Rumman, 2015). According to Biber et al. (1999), hedging is displayed in linguistic expression expressing uncertainty, possibilities, and inaccuracy, showing the consequent reduction of intentional statements. According to Hyland (1998), Hedging is weakening statements' accuracy, claiming accuracy, and expressions of doubt. Itani (1998) claimed that the word *probably* and *suppose* is considered hedging devices.

Hedging is an essential strategy employed in political Press Briefing (Schubert, 2014; Hassan, 2016; Fu & Wang, 2022; Yang & Li, 2022). Such as, the White House secretary gave transparent responses to answer various journalists' questions about government information. Addai & Gurji (2021) revealed that there had been relevant research on equivocation, vagueness, and uncertainty, especially in politicians' speeches. According to McLaren-Hankin (2008), press releases aim to communicate with the public to inform them about their work. It is related to the past and present and the case for the future involving the community. Press briefings involve prediction, which frequently reveals a forward-looking statement. What the secretary conveyed in the press briefing is employing the hedging displayed in the responses. The secretary should employ hedging in her utterances primarily due to the occupational responsibility to be alert to the trouble of her speech in a press briefing (Resche, 2004). That is the importance of using hedging against the consequences that can occur. According to Dornbusch et al. (1988), public reactions depend mainly on their interpretation of policy decisions. Therefore, the secretary is fully aware that she has many opportunities for public appearance when conveying inaccurate information will take a loss of credibility. Brown & Levinson (1987) stated that hedging is "a particle, word or phrase that modify the degree of membership of a predicate or a noun phrase in a set; it says of that membership that it is partial or true only in certain respects, or that it is more true and complete than perhaps might be expected".

Tang (2013) pointed out that the classification of hedging usage is due to the perspective of the study. It also forms with an even smaller scope as in words and phrases. According to Liu (2020), Many words fulfill the standard of hedging usage that can be classified as adverbs, modal verbs, adjectives, and impersonal phrases. Hedging can appear in various linguistic forms, for instance, lexical, grammatical, and syntactical (Hardjanto, 2016).

Many researchers have conducted hedges. Some researchers analyzed the hedges such as in the article (Hardjanto, 2016; Mur-Dueñas, 2021; Hu & Cao, 2011; Budiarti, 2019; Triyoko, 2021), written text (Salager-Meyer, 1994), text message (Walker et al., 2011), conversation (Anindyawati, 2004; Wang, 2010; Engström, 2018), gender (Namaziandost & Shafiee, 2018; Mohajer & Jan 2015; Li & Li, 2020), book reviews (Itakura, 2013), broadcast (Yang & Yap, 2015), and discourse (Pisanski Peterlin & Zlatnar Moe, 2016; Plappert, 2019).

Although the word hedging tool has been widely used in many previous kinds of research, both written and spoken, the word hedging may appear in various forms and variations. It is considering [Brown & Levinson \(1987\)](#) that the potential for hedging disclosure is not semantically limited in its number of forms. It can be found in any situation, and hedging devices are widely used in many cases with different words, phrases, or clauses. The present study will investigate the use of the lexical verb(s) in the secretary's response in obtaining information related to public policy, and what the government is doing will be conveyed transparently and also identify the function of using hedging. Moreover, the study aims to investigate the lexical verbs of hedging used by two White House secretaries in press briefings, namely Jen Psaki (JP) and Karine Jean Pierre (KJP).

Epistemic modality

According to [Perkins \(1983\)](#), Epistemic means a lack of knowledge. [Coates \(1983\)](#) defined epistemic as “*the speaker’s assumptions, or assessment of possibilities, and, in most cases, it indicates the speaker’s confidence or lack of confidence in the truth of the proposition expressed*”. [Vold \(2006\)](#) defined epistemic modality as a linguistic expression that expresses possibility, for example, *perhaps*. Epistemic modality is characterized by how people rely on the truth of a proposition. [Depraetere & Reed \(2008\)](#) argued that the use of epistemic modality does not show factual information or indicate the possible truth of a proposition.

On the other hand, [Le Querler \(1996\)](#) claimed that epistemic modality is the way the total uncertainty toward absolute certainty. It can be concluded that epistemic modality is a speaker's strategy to express doubts about some information based on specific knowledge and considerations or propositions that can be judged both true or false. [Palmer \(2001\)](#) formulated the examples of the epistemic sentence using three modal verbs:

- (1) *John may be in his office.*
- (2) *John must be in his office.*
- (3) *John will be in his office.*

The three sentences above have different propositional judgments. Sentence (1) describes the speaker’s uncertainty about John’s presence in the office. The second sentence shows that the speaker makes a judgment based on the evidence (e.g., that the office light is on or hearing John’s voice from outside), and the third sentence means the speaker generally knows about John (from a habit that John often does). Therefore, from those explanations, it can be concluded that the proposition presented is a possibility based on specific considerations.

Hedging’s Classification

Some categories of hedging highlighted the concept of [Hyland \(1998\)](#), [Namasaraev \(1997\)](#), and [Varttala \(1999\)](#) can be formulated as follows:

Table 1. Categories of Hedging

Hedging forms	Types	Parts	Examples
Lexical	Verb	Modal	<i>Can, may, must, shall, will</i>
		Lexical	<i>Claim, think, suggest, assert</i>
	Adverb	Frequency	<i>Commonly, frequently, often, typically</i>
		Degree	<i>Highly, strongly, significantly.</i>
		Probability	<i>Possibly, presumably, seemingly.</i>
		Approximative	<i>About, almost, around, some, approximately.</i>
		Adjective	Frequency
	Degree		<i>Central, large, significant</i>
	Probability		<i>Likely, perhaps, possible.</i>
	Approximative		<i>Approximate, close</i>
Noun	Tentative cognitive	<i>Estimate, assessment, perception</i>	
	Nonfactive assertive	<i>Argument, prediction, indication</i>	
	Tentative likelihood	<i>Opportunity, possibility, potential</i>	
Grammatical	Impersonal construction	It- clause	<i>It is likely..., it was possible that...it is suggested that...</i>
		Personification	<i>The results indicate that... The data show...</i>
	Interrogative construction	Question	
	Conditional construction	Real	
		Unreal	If clause

Based on the table above, the verb hedging consists of a modal auxiliary and lexical verb. The word *may, will, shall, and must* belong to modal auxiliary verbs, while *be, have, and do* are non-modal auxiliary verbs. Besides, the word *claim, think, and suggest* include a lexical verb, while non-modal lexical verbs are *drink, come, and eat* (Budiarti, 2019). The primary device in these verb categories, often identified as hedging, is modal verbs related to the present and the past condition (Huddleston & Pullum, 2005). Besides, lexical verbs are also indicated as hedging devices which will be the focus of study in this research. By so doing, this study used the concept of Palmer (2001), which divided the lexical verb of hedging into four categories.

Table 2. Lexical Verbs Categories

Categories	Examples	Explanation
Speculative	<i>Think, argue, believe, suggest</i>	State a claim based on his own subjective opinion
Deductive	<i>Assume, conclude, interpret, presume</i>	State a conclusion based on the statements he/ she made earlier
Quotative	<i>"Peter, the President believes in the rule of law. The President said that he believes in the independence of the Department of Justice".</i>	Quote someone's statement.
Sensorial	<i>Feel, see, look, appear</i>	Involve the use of the senses.

Press briefing

The press briefing is a press conference held by the President's secretary. The President's secretary holds the press conference, and the journalists attend. The event is a question-and-answer interaction held by journalists with the secretary of the white house about the topic related to issues that existed in society. A government organization presents press briefings to convey the information to the public through the media. The press is led by a secretary to choose the reporters to ask questions related to the topic. It is essential to know because a press briefing represents the President's policy and daily issues in the nation, even related to the world. The secretary conveys the brief information as a president's representative to provide the information transparently, give the responses and present the information that is still a question for the public to be delivered through the press briefing. It became an extensive information and referral source to journalists in publishing an issue to become public consumption. Hedging can be an essential communication strategy the secretary employs in giving a response. The use of hedging will likely differ based on the speaker's wishes. The speakers can choose what language they want to convey. This study is interested in identifying the use of hedging by the White House secretaries, namely Jen Psaki and Karine Jean-Pierre. Even though they both served as secretaries of the White House, the use of hedging may seem different. The researcher investigates the hedges used by the secretary in conveying crucial information related to the news within the government. The previous research was used as a reference to investigate the hedges in the secretary's responses.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study analyzes the responses given by the white house secretary. The responses aim to answer the questions asked by journalists attending the press briefing. The data is in the form of sentences containing the dispreferred responses, giving information, and straightening the argument. The response will be obtained from the secretary who once served as secretary of the White House, namely Jen Psaki, who served as secretary from January 2021 to May 2022 and then continued by Karine Jean Pierre until now. Purposive sampling will use in the research. It suggests that the data will be applied from November 2021 to December 2022. Besides, the data merely 16 focussed on the responses of the secretaries. The data is acquired from the official website of the White House, which can be seen and downloaded at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/>.

The video of the press briefing by the White House Press Secretary also can be seen and downloaded on the official White House YouTube account. The research employs a quantitative method to find the frequency and distribution of hedging forms. At the same time, to find the function of the hedging, use a descriptive qualitative method. The data collection steps to analyze the hedges in press briefing are formulated as follows: Collecting the conversation data in press briefing transcription of the Press Briefing, separating the conversation into two parts (questions and responses), Thoroughly reading the responses, and classifying the data into hedging (Classify the data precisely in words, sentences, or clauses).

After downloading the responses, the document format from the transcript, which initially had the extension "word," was converted to plaintext. This conversion is done considering the software used in this study is AntConc 3.5.9 (Anthony, 2020), which can only process the files with that extension.

Furthermore, the data is processed through a keyword search method in the Corpus by entering one by one word that is classified as hedging. At this stage, keywords that have appeared will be filtered because not necessarily all of them appear to include hedging. After acquiring the data, the researcher identifies and analyzes the hedging verbs found in a press briefing by White House Press Secretary: Jen Psaki and Karine Jean Pierre based on the theory of Palmer (2001) In the end, the researcher contributes conclusions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

In this section, the authors present an analysis concerning hedging used by secretaries in their responses. First, it displays the frequency of forms of hedging used according to Palmer (2001), as well as a comparison both of the frequencies of the two white house secretaries, Jen Psaki (JP) and Karine Jean Pierre (KJP). In addition to modal auxiliary verbs, lexical verbs also play an essential position in expressing hedging. The hedging verb in this study will be limited to several lexical verbs often found in press briefings, such as *think, guess, seem(s), argue, believe, conclude, feel, suggest, predict, imply, expect, and suppose*. Below is two White House secretaries in their responses: the frequency of using hedging.

Table 3. Frequency of Hedging Verbs by Two White House Secretaries

Secretary	Number of Words	Frequency	Percentage
JP	112.407	503	59%
KJP	113.354	356	41%
Total	225.761	859	100%

Referring to the table above is generally the use of hedging in the form of lexical verbs by two press briefing secretaries at the white house. The table above shows that the use of hedging in the form of lexical verbs is more widely used in the response of secretary Jen Psaki (59%) than in secretary Karine Jean Pierre (41%). While, Surprisingly, the number of words that appear in the response tends to be more than the number in Secretary Jean Pierre's response. Besides, in this case, there is a level of awareness of the two secretaries as spokespersons for the government of the importance of using hedging, especially in the form of lexical verbs in discussing political issues and government policies in conveying them to the public. In order to be more detailed, the following will show one by one the use of hedging in the form of lexical verbs used by the two press secretaries.

Table 4. The Form and Frequency of the use of Lexical Verbs Used by Secretary Jen Psaki

Verb of hedging	JP	
	Frequency	Percentage
Think	296	0.59
Expect	74	0.15
Believe	45	0.09
Feel	37	0.07
Guess	14	0.03
Predict	13	0.03
Suggest	8	0.02
Seem(s)	7	0.01
Conclude	4	0.01
Argue	3	0.01
Imply	1	0.0
Suppose	1	0.0
Total	503	1.00

Table (4) demonstrates that the word "*think*" is the most frequently used by Jean Psaki in her responses, with a frequency of 0.59. The word "*think*" is often used in spoken language, especially in a press briefing (Fu & Wang, 2022). While the word "*expect*" is the second most common word after the word "*think*" in Secretary Jen Psaki's response (0.15). There are significant differences in the use of *think* and *expect*. Then, the third order of the most used lexical verbs is "*believe*," with a frequency of 0.09 and followed by the word *feel* (0.07), *guess* and *predict* with the same frequency (0.03), the use of word *suggest* (0.02), *seem*, *conclude* and *argue* (0.01). The minor lexical verb used in Secretary Jen Psaki's response is the word *imply* and *suppose* with frequency (0,0).

Table 5. The form and frequency of the use of lexical verbs used by secretary Karine Jean Pierre

Verb of hedging	KJP	
	Frequency	Percentage
Think	224	0.63
Believe	81	0.23
Feel	19	0.05
Expect	15	0.04
Argue	12	0.03
Conclude	2	0.01
Predict	1	0.00
Guess	1	0.00
Seem(s)	1	0.00
Suggest	0	0.00
Imply	0	0.00
Suppose	0	0.00
Total	356	1.00

In table (5), the word *think* is the most frequently used in secretary Karine Jean Pierre's response, with a frequency of 0.63. It is not much different from the secretary Jen Psaki where the most widely used word is "*think*". It indicates that the use of *think* in press secretary is evenly used. Unlike Jen Psaki, the second most

used lexical verb by secretary Karine Jean Pierre is the word *believe* with a frequency (of 0.23). The word *feel* is much different from the word *believe*, which ranks third with a frequency of 0.05. Then, followed by the use of the word *expect* (0.04), *argue* (0.03), and *conclude* (0.01). Surprisingly, if in the response of secretary Jen Psaki there is the use of the words *imply*, *suggest*, and *suppose*, then there is a difference in the response of secretary Karine Jean Pierre who does not use these words in the press response at all. It can be concluded that the use of hedging for the two secretaries has a significant difference. It can be seen that Karine Jean Pierre's secretary tends to use less hedging in her response than Jen Psaki's secretary.

Speculative lexical verbs

Basically, speculative lexical verbs are used in the form of performative verbs (*argue*, *propose*, *suggest*). Besides that, it can also be realized in the form of cognitive verbs such as *believe* and *think*. Speculative lexical verbs are general clauses that use personal pronouns (*i*) and (*we*) as subjects. As follows:

I think, in President Biden's heart, he is a local elected official still, and he gets into the weeds of what they're experiencing. (JP02)

I think he mentioned this in his - in his statement yesterday, he has spoken to Senator Schumer. (KJP17)

I believe it's a commission at the Department of Defense. It's certainly an initiative the President of the United States supports, but I would send you to the Department of Defense for more specifics about the timeline and membership. (JP12)

And so, again, the President se- - believes that it is his job to level with the American people about threats he sees to our nation and our values. And that's what you heard from him last night. And we **believe** it did - it indeed resonated. (KJP05)

The use and choice of the *think* verb in a secretary's response like the examples above are generally included an opinion based on knowledge of the matter concerned. This can be said to be a subjective or tentative interpretation and still conveys the truth of the proposition. The use of the lexical verbs listed above is considered a hedging device since there is a subjective cognitive notion of press secretaries. In another sense, the proposition submitted cannot be ascertained by the secretary but is suspected to be true because it is not the result of objective calculations (Varttala, 2001). It is also claimed by Hyland (1998) that the use of cognitive lexical verbs is a presumption meaning of the previous proposition.

Deductive lexical verbs

Deductive lexical verbs are preceded by subject (*i*) and (*we*), as well as speculative lexical verbs. Explicitly, this proposition is the result of the speaker's conclusions.

I suppose - about the meeting this weekend kind of got out there, and obviously Brian confirmed it. There are a lot of meetings happening at one time with a lot of different officials. (JP03)

The deductive verbs above show inferential reasoning on previous opinions or knowledge (Budiarti, 2019). Vass (2017) argued that deductive verbs are used on a set of known facts in making conclusions.

Quotative lexical verbs

Suppose some speculative lexical verbs are marked with personal pronouns (*i*) and (*we*). In that case, the quotative lexical verbs generally have a third-person subject which is realized by quoting a particular name or object. Like the two types of lexical verbs above, the verbs used most often in the responses of the two white house press secretaries are the verbs *think* and *believe*, especially using personal pronouns *I* and *we*. Here are the examples below:

*Well, **the President believes** that the Senate has the constitutional duty to proceed as they see fit on holding the former President accountable. He spent 36 years in the Senate; he's no longer there.* (JP05)

*But, you know, **the President thinks** that there is an extremist threat to our democracy.* (KJP07)

In the press response of the white house secretary, many forms of quoted lexical verbs are found in the form of *believe* and *think*. It is due to his authority over work as a government spokesperson or President. The secretary conveys what the President does and responds to a particular policy. In this way, they directly provide propositions based on people who are very influential to the public and make the public believe in certain information.

Sensorial lexical verbs

The use of lexical verbs in this type generally involves using the senses. The quotative lexical verbs included include the words *see*, *feel* and *look*. The verb *feel* is most used in the responses of the two white house secretaries.

*So, don't want to - you know, we **feel** like it's inappropriate to talk about hypotheticals here.* (JP02)

*We **feel** that we have the time - some time to make that happen. And so, that is - in order to continue our progress and build on our progress, we're going to continue to fight for that funding.* (KJP05)

In this case, quotative lexical verbs reveal the secretary's attitude, inviting the public to agree with what he is saying. Based on the overall presentation of the data above, the use of lexical verbs by the two secretary's responses is the preference of each secretary in selecting lexical verbs to use according to the function they want to use according to the context. In short, the use of lexical verbs by the two secretaries is not much different in their usage pattern. The difference appears in the comparison of the number of uses of lexical verbs.

As previously mentioned, one of the hedging functions is to reduce the speaker's commitment. This case supports McLaren-Hankin's (2008) research that hedging functions to protect secretaries from forward-looking statements. It is what Hyland (1998) has stated that forward-looking statements involve uncertainty. Hyland (*ibid*) has argued that hedging has a sign of uncertainty in making assertions and seeking protection against overstatement. The secretaries can never be 100

percent sure of their arguments. To overcome this, secretaries often involve the President in their statements. It can be seen in the example below:

*The President put an increase in the minimum wage in the initial package because **he thinks** it's important for American men and women, who are - have a full-time job, working hard, to have a decent wage, and **he thinks** it's long past time to raise the minimum wage. But we'll let the process see itself through, and I'm not going to negotiate what he'd be open to and not from the podium. (JP18)*

Indeed, as well as showing caution in making statements to avoid uncertain knowledge, the use of hedging in this case also involves predictions, expectations, and beliefs. It is a positive attitude in conducting press briefings to outline performance in the future, the policies to be taken, and expectations regarding the development of something going forward. Besides, In addition, the secretary's moral attitude in giving arguments with several sentences that use the pronoun (*we*) as a form of expression for the spokesperson not to express his point of view directly (Zhou, 2020). Furthermore, in a press conference, as shown in this study, the spokesperson does not have to raise his voice or be agitated and openly confront journalists. However, they have a strategy to evade that by preventing journalists from continuing with their unpleasant questions. It is generally because the secretary wants to have a positive image of government performance and strengthen government authority.

CONCLUSION

This study examines hedging, specifically in the lexical verbs used by two white house secretaries in a press briefing, by identifying the most used lexical verbs by the two secretaries through quantitative analysis and qualitative analysis to describe the accompanying functions. The findings reveal that the use of personal opinion (*think*) is primarily used by the two secretaries than other lexical verbs. In addition, it is common to involve the President in expressing arguments in press briefings. It is done to form a positive image and gain public belief. Finally, this study opens broader insights into evaluating the response given by the white house secretary. However, this study has a limitation, namely due to the limited research on lexical verbs. This research still needs to determine hedging at different levels for a broader comparison.

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