

## **Critical Discourse Analysis of Hedges and Boosters in Iranian TV Election Debates of Presidential Candidates**

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### **Abstract**

To win the attention of the audience, presidential candidates rely on their own rhetorical methods. Hedges and boosters as metadiscourse markers have been the focus of many studies as the communicative strategies enabling speakers to soften the force of utterances or moderate their assertive force. TV news was used as the corpus of this study, whereas most of the previous studies have focused on examining newspaper presidential debates. The purpose of this study was to examine the role of hedges and boosters in TV election debates of the two presidential candidates - a principalist and a reformist. Three televised debates made by Hassan Ruhani and Bagher Ghalibaf were identified and classified based on the framework proposed by Jalilifar and Alavi-Nia (2012) and Alavi-Nia and Jalilifar (2013). Then, qualitative and quantitative methods were applied to identify the frequency and the function of the hedges and boosters. The results of the analyses and chi-square tests revealed that, in spite of some similarities, there were great differences in the use of hedges and boosters between the candidates. In other words, they had different tendencies toward using these techniques, and eventually Dr. Ruhani could win the battle due to using such metadiscourse devices.

**Keywords:** Boosters, Hedges, Qualitative, Quantitative, and TV presidential debates

### **ARTICLE INFO**

#### Article history:

Received: Thursday, November 9, 2017

Accepted: Friday, December 29, 2017

Published: Wednesday, February 28, 2018

Available Online: Wednesday, January 31, 2018

DOI: 10.22049/JALDA.2018.13684

## **Introduction**

Critical discourse analysis focuses on language as a form of social practice and also how social and practical domination are indicated by texts and talks semiotically. Looking at critical discourse analysis more precisely, it can be described as hyper-linguistic or supra-linguistic, that is, the larger discourse content that lies beyond the grammatical structure. In other words, to analyze the discourse, attention must not be paid to the grammar only, but to the semantics and pragmatics of the discourse as well. Moreover, carefully selecting words, help politicians defeat their opponents, persuade their viewers, disguise disagreements, evade a direct answer, and, all in all, manipulate reality. This is exactly what one will notice while listening to presidential candidates in televised debates. It can obviously be seen how each one of the candidates tries to exert power over the other one, in the hope of presenting a positive image of himself in order to attract the voters' attention.

Metadiscourse markers help candidates make coherent and listener-friendly talks, which is of considerable importance in academic speaking. Metadiscourse analysis is considered as a new concept in the fields of discourse analysis and language education. Metadiscourse stresses that as the candidates speak or write, they negotiate with others, making decisions about the kinds of effects they are having on their listeners or readers (Hyland, 2005). However, candidates try their best to show themselves worthy of attention during a debate. To this end, they might get help from metadiscourse markers among which hedges and boosters, may come to the fore.

Hedges and boosters are communicative strategies for increasing and reducing the force of statement. They indicate both the speakers' degree of confidence in the truth of proposition and an attitude to the audience. Boosters such as *clearly*, *obviously*, and *of course* let speakers express conviction and assert a proposition with great confidence. Hedges, like *possible*, *might*, and *perhaps*, on the other hand, represent a weakening of a claim. Through an explicit qualification of the writer's commitment, this may be to show doubt, or it may be to convey difference, humility, and respect for colleagues' views (Myers, 1989; Hyland, 1998).

One of the fields where communication, discourse, and metadiscourse overlap is the analysis of news. News is a discourse genre which gives us information about recent events happening not in view of the audience (Montgomery, 2007). When one talks about analysis of discourse, he/she is concerned with multimodal analysis that is the analysis of pictures and images in the news, whether still or moving. News and debates on TV with their specific format have always been at the center of attention (Montgomery, 2007). TV debates, contrary to the newspaper news and narratives are made more coherent and evanescent. TV represents a new type of interactive communication platform that connects people's ideas to one another and make them public. Electorates exchange their opinions, comments and feelings toward politicians or social issues with others through TV (Park, 2013).

Social scientists have done some research on the political use of social media and its implications in the context of information diffusion (Romero, Galuba,

Asur, & Huberman, 2011). However, few studies have been done regarding communication patterns of users on TV, which can provide a better understanding of information. There is little data regarding political communication through social networking. Recent studies show that viewers vigorously put their comments on programs aired and go through conversations with strangers for TV political debates (Shamma & Liu, 2009; Lotan, Graeff, Aananny, Gaffney & Pearce, 2011; Park, 2013).

Although several studies have been conducted on the use of metadiscourse markers in written articles, few studies only scantily have concentrated on the use of these markers in spoken language. Thus, in an attempt to contribute to existing studies on the use of metadiscourse markers in written texts like newspapers, this study focuses on the use of metadiscourse markers in the speeches of presidential candidates Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf and Hasan Ruhani on TV (2013).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the Iranian televised presidential debates by these two candidates (2013) to identify how these two candidates made use of hedges and boosters in their speech to attract the audience's attention to vote for them. The significance of this research rests on the analysis of a new genre in Iran, i.e. the presidential debates on TV. Hence the following questions are addressed in this study:

- 1- What are the similarities and differences between the frequencies of use of hedges and boosters in the two presidential candidates' speech in Iran 2013 elections to attract the audience's attention?
- 2- How did two presidential candidates in Iran 2013 elections make use of hedges and boosters in their speech to attract the audience's attention to vote for them?

## **Methodology**

### **Data Collection**

The data chosen in this study were three presidential debates made by Hasan Ruhani and Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf televised on 2013/May/31, 2013/June/5, and 2013/June/7, which were downloaded from the news websites and online resources. The main reason for selecting these debates was the fact that, first of all, the election was a competition between these two candidates, and, second, they had the greatest number of supporters in the final announcement of the election results as mentioned by press TV on 2013/June/7. Another possible justification for this comparison lies in the fact that these two candidates seemed to use the most comparable discursal strategies, each of which seemed to have been intended to attract a particular target population of voters.

### **Data Analysis Procedure**

Functional analysis of the data was a preliminary to show what kinds of hedging and boosting devices were used by the candidates. To this end, the three debates were

transcribed based on Jefferson's (1984) transcription notations. The members of the research team went through a preliminary pilot phase and a main phase of manual identification and analyses of hedging and boosting devices in the data. According to Fraser (2010a, b) hedges and boosters might include lexical items, syntactic structure, prosodic features, or an entire sentence. In this study, however, the focus of attention was mainly on lexical items and syntactic structure as the units of analysis in this study. Since in one context the same form can function as either a hedge or a booster, the same procedure was followed to trace these metadiscourse markers.

After transcribing the debates and analyzing the hedges and boosters, each was divided into two types depending on their functions. Hedges were divided into propositional ones (the ones used to create vagueness by covering up) and illocutionary forces hedges (those that have an undesirable effect on the hearer). The same division was done for boosters: propositional boosters (the ones which are used to make things less fuzzy) and illocutionary forces boosters (those that improve the force of a speech act). Hedges and boosters were counted with a great care and then the obtained value of square mean was evaluated against the sampling distribution of chi-square table.

It should be noted that the cases where a combination of a hedge and a booster was used (e.g. maybe definitely you already know the rules) were excluded from the results as the researchers think such combinations function differently from a single hedge or a booster, creating a kind of vagueness due to which the speaker's views are left ambivalent which is consistent with Hyland's views (2005). Another contributing factor that was reserved in deciding whether a form functions as a hedge or a booster was taking account of the tonal contour (or the intonational pattern) of the recorded statements as a determining factor for identification.

*Validity and Reliability of Analysis:* In order to guarantee the coder reliability of analysis of the corpus data, intra-rater (with an interval of three months) as well as inter-rater reliability was computed using Cronbach's alpha. To compute the interrater reliability, a portion of the intended corpus were separately analyzed. After calculating Cronbach's alpha (0.95) for the results, the differences, which were due to differences in interpretation, were negotiated and agreement was reached on the method of analysis between the two coders. The taxonomies of hedges and boosters described in this study made it possible to make a comparison of hedges/boosters employed by the winner of the Iranian presidential election (Ruhani) with those employed by his major competitor (Ghalibaf), in order for the researchers to trace the contributions that these candidates' hedging/boosting styles might have had to the ultimate results of the elections.

## **Results and Discussion**

The televised presidential debates analyzed in this study revealed that each candidate used hedges and boosters in order to influence his competitor's and also the electorates' minds. They did so by means of different linguistic forms such as lexical items, syntax, and discourse devices. The candidates shared the same language and

culture; however, the strategies they took in using hedges and boosters were different. Analysis of the debates showed that the two candidates behaved differently in using hedges and boosters. The results of the quantitative and qualitative analyses done by the research team are presented in the following two sections in this study.

### The Quantitative Results

The presidential candidates either reveal their powerful ideologies through the use of sharp and forceful words, or conceal their ideologies in veiled expressions of caution in order to depict themselves as reserved and honest. The televised presidential debates analyzed in this study showed that hedges and boosters are a part of the stock of strategies each candidate more or less draws upon. This is achieved by means of different linguistic forms, ranging from lexical items to prosodic features. Each speaker devises their own ways to express hedging and boosting in Persian.

Analysis of the debates revealed that both candidates under focus behaved similarly in using *Covering up . . .*, *Bounding attenuators*, *Expressing possible . . .*, *Limiting generalizability*, *Seeking solidarity*, and *Miscellaneous* hedges. However, as indicated in Table 1, Ruhani, the winner, exploited a significantly larger number of hedges. Ruhani heavily drew upon *Hesitation* and *Expressing* condition, and he made a significantly greater use of *Modulation*. On the other hand, Ghalibaf preferred *Agent avoiding* and *Evasion*. As is implied from the political atmosphere prevailing in Iran, Ruhani's being a Moderate presidential candidate entails setting up a starkly different mental model from that formed by Ghalibaf as a Principalist presidential candidate, with different needs, priorities, and expectations. Consequently, while Ruhani at times exploited the kinds of hedges which aided him to make an unfavorable impression of his rival and his party members in an evasive way (*Evasion*, *Agent-avoiding*, and *Source-tagging*), Ghalibaf did not employ these kinds of hedges as successfully.

**Table 1 .** Comparison of the Propositional and Illocutionary Force Hedges Used by Ruhani and Ghalibaf

	Ruhani		Ghalibaf		X <sup>2</sup>	p-value
	F	(%)	F	(%)		
1. Evasion	12	0.18	29	0.43	14.30	0.019*
2. Hesitation	8	0.13	89	0.82	21.08	0.000*
3. Expressing conditions	31	0.33	35	0.34	0.159	0.649
4. Expressing possible incompleteness	9	0.12	11	0.17	0.283	0.754
5. Agent avoiding	53	0.69	36	0.47	15.29	0.000*
6. Miscellaneous	3	0.06	11	0.22	09.23	0.035*

The results presented in Table 2 reveals the existing differences with respect to the two candidates' employment of boosters. Here again, Ruhani exploited an extensively larger number of boosters than Ghalibaf. The results of

Chi-square proved significant differences for most of the boosting strategies. In fact, Ruhani exceeded Ghalibaf in utilizing all boosters.

**Table 2.** Comparison of the propositional and Illocutionary force boosters used by Ruhani and Ghalibaf

	Ruhani		Ghalibaf		X <sup>2</sup>	p-value
	F	(%)	F	(%)		
1. Intensifying an element	197	0.93	36	0.18	27.120	0.000*
2. Personal involvement	2	0.03	14	0.21	06.563	0.011*
3. Expressing emphasis	82	0.67	38	0.31	12.728	0.000*
4. Bounding emphatics	9	0.15	22	0.36	07.343	0.043*
5. Seeking solidarity	13	0.27	11	0.24	0.263	0.831
6. Miscellaneous	4	0.08	1	0.02	03.211	0.027*

### The qualitative analysis

What follows are some examples that show these differences regarding the different categories of hedges and boosters. As is indicated in Tables 1 and 2, Ruhani made the best use of different types of hedges and boosters to win the competition and in fact he did. The following example is one among many others that show how the *bounding emphatic method* guided Ruhani in the competition.

**rɔ:ha:ni:ʔæsa:sæn** Fæza: Væghti: Na:ʔæmn jævæd Xæla:ghi:jæt kɔ:ʃtæ mi:ʃævæd .

Example 1: **Ruhani:** Basically, when the atmosphere is unsafe, creativity dies.

The next examples have to do with *agent-referring* method used by Ruhani many times as opposed to *agent-avoiding* method used by Ghalibaf.

**rɔ:ha:ni:** dær dɔ:reje ri:ja:sæte dʒɔ:mhu:ri: a:gha:je xa:tæmi: keʃvær ʔæz bɔ:hra:n nedʒa:t pejda: kærd.

Example 2: **Ruhani:** During the years that Mr. Khatami was taking the position of presidency in Iran, he saved the country from crisis.

**Gha:li:ba:f:** hærkæs hæ r tɔ:r du:st da:ræd ʔmæl mi:kɔ:næd.

Example 3: **Ghalibaf:** Everybody behaves as s/he wants to.

Both candidates needed to depict themselves as reliable future presidents able to deal with the problems; on the other hand, they had to be careful to avoid future attacks. To this end, Ghalibaf tried to color his debates with a limited spectrum of hedges such as *expressing conditions*.

**gha:li:ba:f:** ʔægær jek ru:z ʃæbæke tɔ:zi:ʔma:nra: mæxsu:sæn  
ka:rha:je ʔsa:si: dær ʔɔ:lævi:jæt bɔ:gza:ri:m .....

Example 4: **Ghalibaf:** If one day we prioritize our distribution network especially in basic tasks....

Another context is when the tone of the debate grows aggressive (Blas-Arroyo, 2003). Although the upset tone Ruhani adopted somewhere in the debate made him sound conflictive and face-threatening, this in turn helped him exert more power over his rival. This behavior was considered by some of the electorates as a sign of heroism.

**rɔ:ha:ni:** mæn næ ʔæsæba:ni:æm næ na:ra:hæt, mænba:jæd  
bɔ:lænd hærf bezænæm tʃu:n hærfha:ji: ke mi:zænænd  
tɔ:hi:na:mi:z ʔæst.

Example 5: **Ruhani:** I am neither angry nor upset, in fact I have to speak loud since what my rival said was insulting.

Solidarity markers help the candidates to invite the hearers to adopt their points of view. They can also be used in referring to the hearer's knowledge (Holmes, 1984).

**rɔ:ha:ni:** ʔmru:z ma: mi:bi:ni:m væghti: ʔi:nhæme bi:ka:r dær  
dʒa:meʔeje ma: vɔ:dʒu:d da:ræd ʔi:n ʃa:xesi: bæra:je bi:ʔeda:læti:  
ʔst.

Example 6: **Ruhani:** Today we see that the existence of so many unemployed people in the society is the sign of injustice.

**rɔ:ha:ni:** mærdɔ:m xɔ:deʃa:n bælədænd tʃegune ʔi:n færhæng ra:  
tæghvi:jæt kɔ:nænd.

Example 7: **Ruhani:** People themselves know how to enhance this culture.

In the openly conflictive context of televised presidential debates, self-protection was practiced by means of *self-evidence value judgment* method. That is, when the candidates used the expressions like: I think, I believe, etc. to present the program in the most moderate way possible. Ruhani used these expressions more in order to distinguish himself from any image that might be interpreted as authoritarian.

**rɔ:ha:ni:** fekr mi:kɔ:næm mæsʔæleje eʃtegha:l væ pa:ʔi:n  
a:værdæne nɛrxɛ bi:ka:ri: mɔ:hemtæri:n dæghdægheje mærdɔ:m  
ʔæst.

Example 8: **Ruhani:** I think the problem of employment and reducing the rate of unemployment are the people's most important concern.

**rɔ:ha:ni:** mæn fekr mi:kɔ:næm dær kena:re sa:jere ka:rha: ma:  
ba:jæd a:za:di:je bæja:n ra: hæm dær dʒa:meʔe da:ʃte ba:ʃi:m.

Example 9: **Ruhani:** I think, besides all the other things, we must have freedom of expression in the society.

In expressing the possible incompleteness of an action in the former government, both Ruhani and Ghalibaf referred to the same issue but from two completely different viewpoints.

**rɔ:ha:ni:** mæskæne mehr ba: mɔ:ʃkela:ti: mɔ:va:dʒeh bu:de zemne ʔi:nke ʔæslæf ka:re pæsændideʔi: bu:de leza: ba: ʃeta:bzædegi: ʔændʒa:m gereft. ʔebteda: ghæra:r bu:d devi:st heza:r va:hed sa:xe ʃævæd dær tu:le dæh sa:l ʔi:n tæbdi:l ʃɔ:d be jekɔ: ni:m mi:lju:n.

Example 10: **Ruhani:** Mehr dwelling is facing some problems, though basically it is an acceptable project, it is progressing too precipitately. At first they were supposed to build 200,000 units, over the last 10 years, however, this number has increased to one and a half million.

**Gha:li:ba:f:** mæskæne mehr ke ʔeghda:me xu:bi: bu:de dɔ: ta: ʔeʃka:l bæɾ ʔa:n va:red ʔæst. ʔi:n ka:r ba:jæd ba: hæmi:n ʃetab ʔeda:me pejda: kɔ:næd.

Example 11: **Ghalibaf:** Mehr dwelling, though it has two problems, has been a very good project and the process of building should continue with the same speed.

## Conclusion

In this study, both the qualitative and quantitative methods of analysis were used. Three televised debates were analyzed and the frequency of the hedges and boosters were obtained from the corpus. It is clear that there were considerable differences between Ruhani and Ghalibaf in the way they used hedges and boosters. The overabundance use of boosters by Ruhani is confident with the result of presidential election conducted on June 2013. For Ghalibaf, hedges and boosters were used to serve a different function, that is, he used them (mostly hedges) to exercise a degree of caution and self-protection (i. e. preferring *Agent avoiding* and *Evasion*). On the other hand, Ruhani, the winner, exploited a significantly larger number of hedges, extensively drawing upon *Hesitation* and *Expressing* condition, and making a significantly greater use of *Modulation*. The results imply that from the political atmosphere prevailing in Iran, Ruhani's being a Moderate presidential candidate entails setting up a frankly different model from the one formed by Ghalibaf as a Principalist presidential candidate, having different needs, priorities, and expectations.

The findings of this study are in line with a cross-linguistic study conducted by Jalilifar and Alavi-Nia (2012) in which hedges and boosters were examined as they were used by the two presidential candidates Obama and Ahmadinejad. The findings of this study are also consistent with the study done by (Hu & Cao, 2011) in



which hedges and boosters were examined in the abstracts of Applied Linguistic articles of English and Chinese-medium journals and the results showed that there was a significant difference between them. On the whole, the findings of this study can show that political debate is a specialized genre in which candidates rely profoundly upon different genre-specific linguistic items with an imprecise nature. The analysis of the linguistic behaviors of Iranian presidential candidates in their televised debates has also shed light on the similarities and differences between the more conventionalized and dominant linguistic behaviors in the flourishing Iranian debates which seem to be in their infancy compared with more institutionalized similar genres in western countries.

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