Managing Crises: Hedging Strategies in Malaysian Diplomatic Press Releases

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ABSTRACT

Diplomatic press releases play a significant role in presenting a nation's position about global issues to the local and global communities. A nation's stance and decisions communicated via press releases need to be mitigated and expressed tactfully and cautiously to avoid distress leading to confrontations. As a mitigating device, hedging has been identified as an effective pragmatic strategy in reducing potentially damaging reactions, therefore encouraging effective diplomatic communication. This paper presents a content analysis of 27 press releases on world crises by the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs between May 2020 and May 2022. The identification and coding of hedging items were completed manually by considering context and co-text using a framework of Identification Criteria of Hedging Devices. The identified hedges were analysed pragmatically to determine their functions in diplomatic communication. The analysis reveals that hedges in diplomatic press releases by the Ministry of foreign affairs serve several functions which highlight the influence of culture on diplomatic stance-taking. It should be noted that the absence of hedges in some of the press releases confirms various writing guidelines that the genre values factual, direct, and accurate information. These findings are beneficial for successful intercultural diplomatic communication and accordingly global peace.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication; diplomatic communication; hedging; press releases

INTRODUCTION

The art of diplomacy which dates back to ancient times has since expanded with the establishment of international and regional organisations such as the United Nations (UN), Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which function to promote cooperation and resolve disputes and conflicts among global communities. These are usually achieved through negotiations and compromise, failure which may result in diplomatic and economic sanctions. Hence, diplomatic communication - spoken or written, involves the act of tactfully and cautiously stating a nation's position to avoid distress and open confrontations, both,

locally and globally. Hedging or cautious language is a diplomatic way of stance-taking to maintain harmonious relationships with other nations. Although there is a pressing need for every nation to express its stance vividly to portray its accountability and credibility, hedges are employed to ensure that positions are presented amiably. This paper aims to examine the types and functions of hedges used in the press releases by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia. It also discusses the influence of culture and genre in the use of hedges in the press releases.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

MALAYSIAN VALUES

Malaysia is a multiracial nation with multiple ethnic groups, religions, and languages which accounts for a kaleidoscope of culture. Malaysia is home to people from diverse backgrounds with Malays, Chinese, Indians, and other minorities including the indigenous people of Sabah and Sarawak, the orang Asli communities in Peninsular and other ethnic minorities like the Portuguese and Eurasians (Department of Statistics Malaysia Official Portal, 2022). Despite the diversity, Malaysia is rooted in the spirit of togetherness and Malaysians have been living in unity by upholding certain core values that promote peace and unity (Gill, Talib, & Jayum, 2012). Malaysian core values are an amalgamation of the Malays, Chinese and Indian values that reflect respect, peace loving, faith in God, humility, loyalty, indirectness, politeness, diligence, and orientation towards family (Awang, Maros, & Ibrahim, 2012). This also explains Malaysians' acceptance and tolerance to hierarchical order (Hofstede Insights, 2021). An established Malaysian value system is the concept of *Keluarga Malaysia* (a term coined to refer to Malaysians as one family unit despite the different cultural backgrounds) introduced to promote multilateralism and consolidate global cooperation by broadening the concept to that of a world family (Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, 2021). These are also the values that make up the underlying principles of Malaysian foreign policies.

Malaysia maintains a collectivist culture where loyalty is a core value which is envisioned in everyday relations (Hofstede Insights, 2021). Collectivist societies define themselves in terms of their relationship with others. Loyalty encapsulates the ethical system of the society; it influences how Malaysians value face. Saving face and avoiding shame are deeply ingrained aspects of the Malaysian interaction dynamics (Richardson et al., 2016). Particularly, this facesaving value governs how Malaysian society views the world which also dictates their approach to foreign relations. Face saving is undeniably crucial for diplomacy and maintaining networks. In essence, public disclosure of face-threatening information is not widely accepted in Malaysia. This is a precursor to maintaining peaceful relations in complex societies (Nair, 2019).

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Malaysia is deemed as a relatively flourishing, dignified and united nation situated in a geographical area that is crucial for peace and prosperity in Southeast Asia. The government's foreign policy is based on neutrality and forging friendly ties with members of the international community (Mitsuomi, 2015). Since the country's independence in 1957, its foreign policy vision has remained consistent: to protect Malaysia's national interests while at the same time contributing to a just and equitable community of nations. This is accomplished by defending the country's sovereignty and supporting global peace, as well as cultivating cordial relations with other nations

and safeguarding Malaysia's interests in the regional and international arena. Since independence, Malaysia's foreign policy has undergone several notable transitions. The dynamic regional and international environment as well as the established national traits and political leadership succession, have considerably shaped the policy.

As one of the founding members of ASEAN, Malaysia has advanced initiatives to enhance intraregional economic collaboration. Its role in the Southeast Asian region is crucial as the country has taken various governance initiatives to uphold peacekeeping, stability, and prosperity in the region (*National Security Policy,* 2019). This is affirmed by the former Minister of Communications and Multimedia, Datuk Seri Dr Salleh Said Keruak who stated that "We are united in ASEAN to solving regional issues such as overlapping territorial claims, the threat of terrorism, cross-border crimes and others" (Mahaseth, 2020, para. 5). In the early 1970s, Malaysia had initiated the concept of ZOPFAN (Zone of Peace, Freedom, and Neutrality) under the premiership of Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak (Tarling, 2009). The concept envisioned the neutralisation of Southeast Asia to fortify the nation's security from foreign powers particularly the United States, Soviet Union, and China.

Currently, Malaysia's engagement with international organisations such as the United Nations (UN), Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Commonwealth, G-15, and G-77 in addressing international strategic issues has led to being seen as a friendly nation and earned international trust. Through active involvement in the international bodies, Malaysia's interests and policies on numerous security issues have been emphasised and maintained *(National Security Policy,* 2019). Being one of the non-permanent members of the United Nations Security Council, and as chair of the OIC, NAM and G-77 associations, among others, has further ascertained Malaysia's role at the international level by the global community.

MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, MALAYSIA

Since its establishment more than 55 years ago, The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) has been entrusted with the task of legislating, overseeing, and managing foreign relations between Malaysia and other countries. Fundamentally, the MFA is commissioned to uphold and protect Malaysia's national interests, sovereignty, and its territorial integrity (Official Portal Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, 2022). Positioned to articulate the government's foreign policy, the MFA plays a key role in assisting other Malaysian ministries and agencies to establish bilateral and unilateral relations globally. In positioning the country in the international arena, the MFA has specific functions in scrutinising and evaluating regional and global developments to enable the government to foster strategic alliances. As a gatekeeper of international affairs, the MFA is also responsible for developing and advising the central government on matters ranging from foreign policy options and dispute settlements. In assisting Malaysians living abroad, the MFA is charged with providing consular services to support and serve them (Official Portal Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, 2022).

THE JOURNALISTIC GENRE: PRESS RELEASES

The press release has become a crucial "information subsidy" for all mainstream media and is one of the most important tools for disseminating information to society (Moody, 2011, p. 3). Press release genre "is characterised by a peculiar participant framework in which writers provide information to journalists in the hope that it will be passed on to the general public" (Pander Maat,

2007, p. 60). As indicated by Jacobs, press releases "do not compete for journalists' attention per se, but are meant to be retold by them as accurately as possible—preferably even verbatim—in their own news reporting" (Jacobs, 1999, p. 219). What makes a press release expressly special and an important genre for analysis is that it is considered "a mainstay of community journalism" (Minnis & Pratt, 1995, p. 18), however, due to absence of research in this area, its status has become contentious, with some scholars questioning its existence to some extent (Lassen, 2006).

Press releases have a huge impact as the media shapes the public's opinion about the outside world and sets the agenda for public debate (Gyasi, 2017). The way official government websites choose to present press releases also affect the public's view of government activities. Usually, press releases are posted on MFA websites to provide official statements about government activities. This is done with the aim of enlightening the public and presenting the government in a positive way locally and globally. Gyasi (2017, p. 43) adds that "Ministers and government officials have the advantage of controlling what is actually written in the releases. Without effective press releases, the government could easily lose credibility through misinformation". Hence, information should be accurately and concisely presented by considering the different audiences (local, global, affected, ignorant, etc.).

Being at the core of foreign relations, any form of press releases must reflect the foreign policies of a nation which is traversed by internal and external determinants (Bojang, 2018). According to Sheludiakova et al., (2021), foreign policies are a reflection of the local government's comprehension of domestic primacies which includes culture, national goals and inherited values. Within this context, it must be established that like the external determinants, the internal determinants of a nation which includes culture, traditions, values, and beliefs underpin the approaches it carves to manage foreign relations. The approach of a nation to its foreign policies are driven by traditionally inherited values which are entrenched in the way foreign relation policies are constructed (Bojang, 2018).

STANCE-TAKING AND HEDGING

Stance is a rather complex concept as it includes various linguistic and interactional aspects such as modality, subjectivity, and evaluation (Mohd Noor, 2014a). However, Du Bois' (2007) triangle representation of stance (Figure 1) is able to describe stance as a unified framework by showing the connection between evaluation, positioning, and alignment.
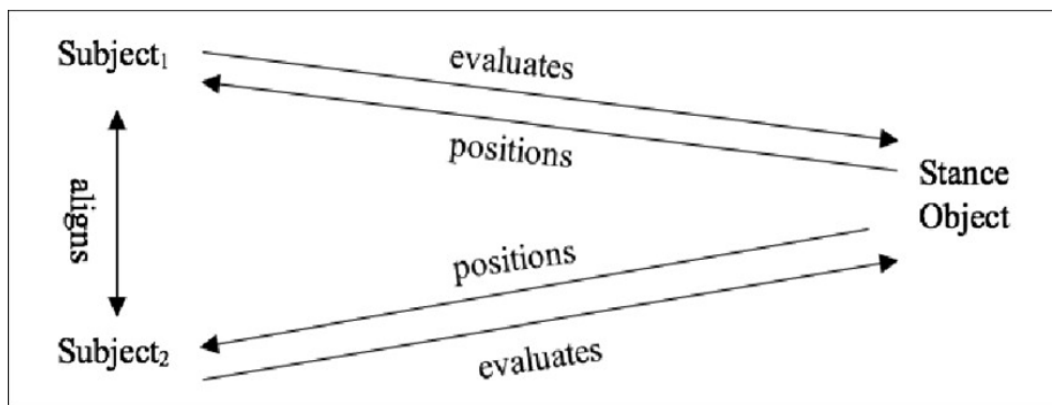

FIGURE 1. Du Bois' Stance Triangle (2007: 163)

As shown in Figure 1, an individual first evaluates a stance object prior to taking a position. A similar round of evaluation and positioning is also carried out by the second individual. Both the stance-takers will then need to align their positions which explains the "dialogic co-action" and "intersubjective connection" between the three entities (Du Bois, 2007, p. 170). In the case of intercultural diplomatic communication, the stance-takers are representatives from diverse nationalities and ethnicities. It specifically demands greater efforts to align their evaluations and positions in order to ensure their stance promotes strong continuous alliances.

Hedging is a concept that is strongly associated with stance. By mitigating a stance using vague language, a stance-taker will be able to protect him/herself from potentially critical or damaging reactions (Khalil, 2020). For this reason, hedging is crucial in any kind of negotiation, especially in diplomatic communication. By hedging, a more favourable global stance can be communicated. Table 1 lists some of the examples of hedging devices. A more detailed description of hedges is presented in the section on Frameworks of Hedges.

TABLE 1. Examples of Hedging Devices

No	Example	Explanation
1.	These data **indicate** that…	Using a nonhuman subject to distance from taking full responsibility of the stance.
2.	**Unless it is addressed immediately**, …	Using a conditional clause to hedge the uncertainty of an outcome
3.	The economic boycott **may** result in…	Using a modal verb to hedge the consequence
4.	The affected countries **apparently**…	Using an adverb to hedge the disposition
5.	**Approximately**, 345 people were…	Using approximators to hedge without the exact value

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Every diplomat strives to make collective judgments and decisions with fellow diplomatic members, while building and improving its own national reputation in the international sphere. Managing these is critical in diplomacy efforts and the development of foreign policies. Clearly, such intercultural communication endeavours across national borders demand great accommodation and negotiation from participating members.

Globalisation and technological advancements, however, have made these efforts more challenging, as issues that once were domestically debated are now publicly made available, discussed, and scrutinised as international agenda (Ashari, n.d.). Hence, all issues should be treated delicately by considering the local and international reactions. Both internal and external forces influence the goal of formulating a globally favourable diplomatic stance. Failure to communicate a diplomatic stance well may lead to rifts, and in worst-case scenarios, confrontations, economic war or even warfare.

To advance a favourable stance, diplomatic communication such as press releases need to mitigate its illocutionary force by hedging. However, linguistic studies into hedging in diplomatic communic--ation are limited, as researchers (among others include Abdualhussein & Chaqmaqchee (2021), Buddhima Karunarathna (2020), and Ustyantseva (2019) tend to lean towards examining hedging in academic discourse. Past attempts to examine hedging in political

discourse revolve around political editorials (Hassan & Said, 2020), political interviews (Habeeb, 2019), parliamentary debates (Ahmed & Majeed, 2019), political debates (Al-Rashady, 2012), political speeches (Rabab'ah & Abu Rumman, 2015) and press conferences (Fraser, 2010). McLaren-Hankin (2008) particularly examines hedging in press releases, however it is based on corporate press releases. Considering this gap, as well as the critical role of press releases as "a mainstay of community journalism" (Minnis & Pratt, 1995, p. 18), and hedging in managing diplomacy, it is pertinent to investigate the use of hedges in diplomatic press releases. Hence, this study aims to identify hedges and their functions in the press releases by the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs which address world crises from the cultural perspective. The results will contribute towards successful intercultural diplomatic communication and accordingly a more peaceful, just, and orderly world.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many linguists have attempted to outline the taxonomy of hedges (among others include Martin-Martin (2008), Hyland (1996), and Salager-Meyer (1994)). While some focus on linguistic categories, others frame them in terms of functions. Most importantly, hedging can be employed at lexical, phrasal, clausal, and sentential levels. It should also be noted that Lewin (1998) claims that even genre structures can be considered as hedges as certain moves protect stance-takers from possible opposition.

The most prevalent framework is Hyland's (1996, p. 438) Taxonomy of Hedges which divides scientific claims as factive and non-factive (hedged) statements. Hedged statements can be categorised as reader-oriented or content-oriented. According to Hyland (1996), reader-oriented hedges refer to writers' attempts to establish a relationship with their readers by mitigating the assertiveness of their claims. Content-oriented hedges, on the other hand, are related to propositions and they are further divided as accuracy-oriented hedges (formulation of propositions with greater precision) and writer-oriented hedges (commitment to the propositional content). Hyland's (1996) model is illustrated in Figure 2.
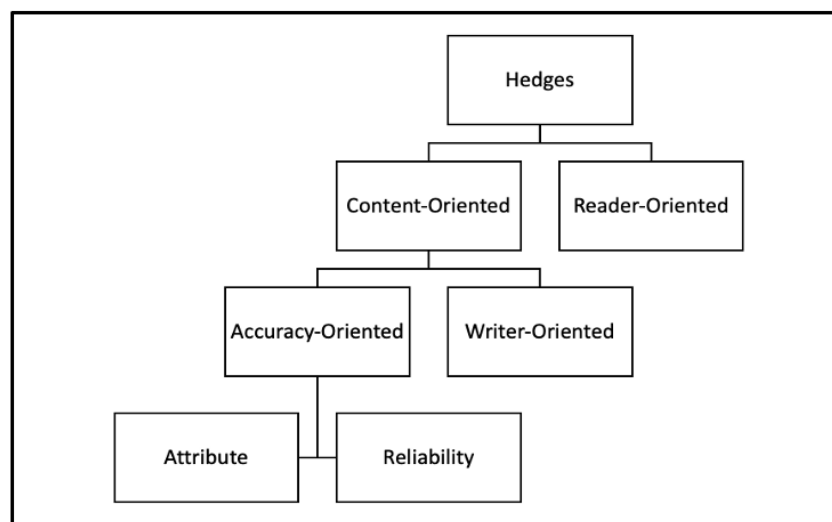

FIGURE 2. Hyland's (1996, p. 438) Taxonomy of Hedges

Salager-Meyer (1994), on the contrary, developed a framework which is based on strategic devices which are generally linguistic categories as summarised in Table 2. An important contribution of Salager-Meyer's (1994) work is her acknowledgement of compound hedges.

TABLE 2. Salager-Meyer's (1994) Taxonomy of Hedging Devices

Types	Functions	Strategies
Type 1	All modal verbs expressing possibility, semi auxiliaries, probability adverbs, epistemic verbs	Shields
Type 2	Quantity, degree, frequency, and time; approximately, roughly, about, often, occasionally	Approximators of degree, quantity, frequency, and time
Type 3	I believe, to our knowledge, it is our view that	Author's personal doubt and direct involvement
Type 4	Extremely difficult/interesting, of particular importance, unexpectedly, surprisingly	Emotionally-charged intensifiers
Type 5	Could be suggested, would seem likely, would seem somewhat	Compound hedges

Martin-Martin's (2008) framework is a considerably more recent attempt of categorising hedges based on the analysis of language use at both lexico-grammatical and syntactic levels by considering the socio-pragmatic context. Table 3 describes the taxonomy.

TABLE 3. Martin-Martin's (2008, p. 138) Taxonomy of Hedges

Strategy	Explanation	Example
Strategy of Indetermination	By giving a proposition a colouring of lesser semantic, qualitative and quantitative explicitness as well as of uncertainty, vagueness and fuzziness	a) Epistemic modality b) Approximators
Strategy of Subjectivisation	By signalling that the claim is personal or subjective opinion	a) First person pronouns + cognition / performative verb Quality-emphasising adjectival and adverbial expressions b)
Strategy of Depersonalisation	This refers to those cases in which the writers diminish their presence in the texts by using various impersonal, agentless and passive construction in order to relieve themselves of responsibility for the truth of the propositions expressed	a) Agentless passive and impersonal constructions Impersonal active constructions b)

A critical evaluation of the frameworks shows that most of the categories overlap with each other but often labelled differently resulting in items being embedded in a category which may have been placed into another broader or even narrower category such as modality, mitigation, and vagueness (Mohd Noor, 2014a). For example, Martin-Martin's (2008) 'Strategy of Indetermination' includes the use of epistemic modality which is instead labelled as 'Shields' by Salager-Meyer (1994). Hence, the fuzziness of the conceptualization of hedging as well as the

different analytic approaches from semantic to pragmatic have resulted in hedging not being treated as an independent concept. Any attempt to investigate hedges should be viewed as a pragmatic strategy that is dependent on the communicative context as well as co-text. This suggests that any linguistic feature has the potential to function as a hedge. Based on this reason, the identification of hedges must be done manually by considering the context, not by solely relying on previously identified hedges. The use of software programs that run predetermined lists of hedging items is incapable of accounting for the role played by context in stance-taking, and limits the possibility of discovering new hedging items (Mohd Noor, 2014b). For these reasons, an adapted set of coding schemes which was developed for manual identification of hedges in academic writing by Mohd Noor (2014a) was used for the study (refer to Table 4).

TABLE 4. Identification Criteria of Hedging Devices

Criteria	Examples
Expresses Likelihood and Prediction	(1) Hostilities and violence **will** be detrimental to the stability and peace in the region. (2) Malaysia also **believes** that the Commission of Inquiry, established by the HRC in March 2022, must be allowed time … conflict areas.
Approximates Value of Claims	(1) Malaysia strongly condemns Israel's recent decision to construct **more than** 3,000 new settlement units in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem. (2) Malaysia **categorically** rejects a statement reportedly by an Israeli official during a recent interview with Erem News claiming that Malaysia may join the Abraham Accords and normalize relations with Israel.
Disguises the Stance Taker's Presence	(1) The attacks were an act of aggression, and **those** responsible should be held accountable. (2) Malaysia is concerned over the prolonged conflict and urges the **concerned parties** to respect international human rights and international humanitarian laws.
Admits to a Lack of Knowledge	(1) The government is unable to reach a consensus **without complete evidence**. (2) **To our knowledge**, the victims have safely landed in KLIA.
Poses Questions	(1) **Do** we aim to play the role of the observers during this crisis? (2) **How** will the economic sanction affect Malaysians?

Although these five criteria/schemes were originally developed to examine hedging in published research articles, the research scope which was also on stance-taking act suggests that the framework is particularly relevant to the present study which examines hedging in diplomatic press releases - a genre which demands taking a stance on global issues.

There has been ample research addressing hedging in various academic and non-academic disciplines. As a mitigating device, hedging has been identified as an effective rhetorical strategy in reducing impacts of illocutionary force, hence encouraging effective communication. The concept of hedging was popularised by Lakoff (1972) and defined as 'words that make things fuzzier or less fuzzy' (p. 471). This concept has then evolved and today, hedging is characterised

by its multifaceted functions in indicating level of commitments (Fraser, 2010) as well as in managing potential threats in claims or utterances (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Myers, 1989).

Looking at the critical roles of hedging in attenuating claims as well as in communicating stance, it is relevant to assume its importance in managing crises and shaping public opinions in diplomatic communication through press releases. Available studies on political discourse also have highlighted extensive use of hedging in several spoken and written communication platforms. A study conducted by Hassan and Said (2020) on political editorials, for instance, highlight three pragmatic motivations for the use of hedges in political editorials which include to credibly propose with appropriate degree of accuracy, to avoid complete commitment to protect against possible criticisms, as well as, to humbly present a claim to provide space for possible negotiation.

In several other studies, it has been noted that hedging devices are also prominently used in spoken political discourse (Al-Rashady, 2012; Ahmed & Majeed; 2019, Habeeb, 2019). Other than highlighting significant gender differences on the use of hedging (Habeeb, 2019), findings from these studies emphasise its functions in delivering appropriate tone (Al-Rashady, 2012) and showing cautiousness in making claims and propositions. As a face-saving strategy, hedging could effectively modify the strength of illocutionary force therefore, making a speaker's propositional content less offensive (Habeeb, 2019). Furthermore, results from a study conducted by Ahmed and Majeed (2019) indicate that the use of certain hedging devices in parliamentary debates help speakers to observe cooperative principles by appearing true and relevant, as well as giving adequate information when answering questions. These indicate the vital roles of hedging in conveying stance diplomatically and effectively in political discourse.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts the qualitative approach and employs the content analysis method. The decision to work on press releases is centrally due to the focus of the study which aims to examine diplomatic communication. Press releases on world crises by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Malaysia between May 2020 and May 2022 were used as the data for analysis. The selection process started with the most current month at the point of data collection stage and worked backwards in order to identify the latest press releases. A total of 27 press releases (9 from 2021 and 18 from 2022) were downloaded from the official website. Only those press releases in the English language which address world crises were downloaded. Press releases announcing official visits, for instance, were ignored. This is crucial to ensure that the press releases involve the act of taking a stance. The selected press releases were each then labelled and saved for analysis.

Although expedient, using electronic research tools limits the potential of discovering new hedging items. Hence, the coding work was completed manually by the researchers to ensure that the identification and coding of hedging items were done by considering the context as well as co-text. The identified hedges were then further analysed pragmatically to determine their functions in diplomatic communication. The entire text of each press release was used including headline and heading, except for boilerplate, date, quotation, contact information and logo. The data were analysed using the framework by Mohd Noor (2014a) as described in Table 4 and justified in Section 4.1. The instrument which was developed based on the framework was statistically tested to be reliable using the Cohen's Kappa test. However, to match the genre of this investigation (press release), the criterion 'to disguise the writer's presence' is changed to 'to disguise the authority's presence'.

It should be noted that an application for ethics application exemption was approved considering that the data are readily available in the public domain and do not involve confidentiality issues.

FINDINGS

The analysis discovered only three of the five hedging categories from the sample. The identified items are presented based on the coding schemes with examples and explanations in context. Discussion and justification for the findings and absence of the two categories are discussed in Section 7.

EXPRESSIONS OF LIKELIHOOD AND PREDICTION

Example 1 is an excerpt from PR22(12) which was released to explain Malaysia's abstention vote on Russia's Human Rights Council (HRC) membership suspension at the United Nations General Assembly (GA).

1. As the HRC is a subsidiary organ of the GA, under the established Rules of Procedure of the GA, the latter **may** suspend the membership of a HRC member that commits gross and systematic violations of human rights, with a two-thirds majority of Member States present and voting.

(Code: PR22(12))

Malaysia predicts the suspension of Russia's HRC membership as the organisation is a subsidiary of the United Nations. The modal verb 'may' is used to explain the high probability as it is a logical prediction which has yet to happen at the point of release.

In the same press release – PR22(12), the MFA justified its decision to register for an abstention vote as shown in Example 2. During the voting, Malaysia was one of the 58 countries which chose to abstain, 93 others voted in favour, 24 voted against, while the remaining 18 did not vote on the resolution.

2. In its statement delivered after the vote, Malaysia stressed that a critical decision such as the suspension of a HRC member **should not** be made in haste and must be accorded its due processes.

(Code: PR22(12))

As shown in Example 2, Malaysia emphasises the need to further assess the issue prior to making any hasty decision on the suspension of Russia from the United Nations. Malaysia's stance was clear that the best decision is only possible once investigations to verify all allegations made against Russia are completed. Note the negative form of the modal verb 'should' cautiously used to hedge the stance, instead of claiming that the decision was made injudiciously.

PR22(7) was released prior to the voting to suspend Russia from HRC. It was published to inform the results of the voting on 'Aggression against Ukraine'.

3. While Malaysia **may not** have agreed to every single word in the resolution, Malaysia supported and voted in favour of it in line with the country's longstanding position on the need to consistently uphold the principles of sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of States – principles which are sacrosanct to Malaysia.

(Code: PR22(7))

As shown in Example 3, although Malaysia later chooses to abstain from voting to suspend Russia's membership with the United Nations (PR22(12)), Malaysia acknowledges Russia's hostility towards Ukrainians. Its stance is cautiously worded by using the modal verb 'may not' to justify that despite voting in favour of it, Malaysia does not completely agree with the resolution. Examples 1, 2, and 3, when analysed together reflect Malaysia's predicament as it wishes to sustain its relationship with both - Ukraine and Russia. This is established in PR22(7) when Malaysia underlines its "strong and close relations with both Ukraine and Russia" and believes that the best solution for the crisis is through peaceful dialogues.

APPROXIMATION OF THE VALUE OF THE CLAIM

Malaysia denied the claim that it would join Abraham Accords by releasing PR21(5). Abraham Accords refers to an agreement between the United States, United Arab Emirates, the State of Israel, Bahrain, and several other countries to strengthen peace and promote multilateral cooperation in the Middle East (Abraham Accords Peace Institute, n.d.).

4. Malaysia will continue to pursue actively the Palestinian agenda bilaterally, as well as in **various** regional and international fora towards realizing the Palestinian peoples' aspiration for freedom and their independent State of Palestine.

(Code: PR21(5))

In Example 4 of PR21(5), Malaysia hedges using the determiner 'various' to generalise its claim by avoiding specific details as to the precise regional and international assemblies for it to show its support to the Palestinians. It allows for the MFA to remain uncommitted to specific details in its promise or commitment to the Palestinian struggle.

Malaysia released PR22(17) to express its disapproval of the terrorist attack on a water lifting facility in Sinai, Arab Republic of Egypt as well as condolences and sympathies to the government.

5. Malaysia strongly condemns the terrorist attack on a water lifting facility in Sinai, Arab Republic of Egypt on 7 May 2022 which resulted in **at least** 11 fatalities.

(Code: PR22(17))

Malaysia outwardly condemns the terrorist attack which led to fatalities and injuries. Unfortunately, without the latest figure on the number of deaths, the MFA hedges by using 'at least ' to report the last number made known to the ministry. By placing the adverb 'at least', it can avoid making an inaccurate declarative statement.

PR22(7) explains Malaysia's stance on the resolution entitled 'Aggression against Ukraine' at the United Nations General Assembly.

6. **While Malaysia <u>may not</u> have agreed to every single word in the resolution**, Malaysia supported and voted in favour of it in line with the country's longstanding position on the need to consistently uphold the principles of sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of States – principles which are sacrosanct to Malaysia

(Code: PR22(7))

The fronted adverbial clause 'while' is used in Example 6 to mitigate the MFA's decision to support the resolution. It gives the ministry an opportunity to specify the terms or provisions of their commitment to the resolution to the mass. The use of while- clause is seen as more persuasive for others to agree to its justification to sign the resolution. Note that the modal verb 'may not' in

the clause is also a hedging item. The employment of two hedging devices makes the overall stance more convincing.

DISGUISE OF THE STANCE TAKER'S PRESENCE/ANONYMITY

PR22(12), as explained earlier, was released to provide justification for Malaysia's decision to abstain from voting for the resolution to suspend Russia's membership in United Nations HRC.

> 7. **Malaysia also <u>believes</u>** that the Commission of Inquiry, established by the HRC in March 2022, must be allowed time to carry out investigations and present its findings first, as to verify allegation of any gross and systemic violations of human rights and breach of humanitarian law happening in conflict areas.
>
> (Code: PR22(12))

As illustrated in Example 7, Malaysia – a country, is given an animate ability to 'believe'. Instead of placing the responsibility to a specific individual, the government, or the MFA itself, the use of 'Malaysia … believes' is seen as a hedge. This suggests that the commitment to the stance is a collective decision which can be translated to be a persuasive strategy for everyone to read it from the same perspective. Note that 'believe' is also considered a hedging item to express prediction.

PR22(16) was released to condemn Israeli's ongoing aggression towards Palestinian civilians and worshippers. It was following an extraordinary meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

> 8. **The document among others, reiterates** the centrality of the cause of Palestine for the entire Islamic Ummah; calls for effective measures and intensified coordination by the international community to address the conflict; and calls on OIC Member States and the Islamic Groups to work at the international forums in providing international protection for the Palestinian people.
>
> (Code: PR22(16))

At the meeting, OIC adopted a final communique. As shown in Example 8, similar to Example 7, the document (an inanimate subject) is given an animate capability of reiterating. However, in this instance, the subject of the stance is the document agreed upon by OIC representatives - not solely Malaysia, the government, or the MFA. This collective stance is also seen as a hedging strategy.

PR22(14) explains Malaysia's positive reaction to the establishment of the Presidential Leadership Council in the Republic of Yemen.

> 9. Malaysia is concerned over the prolonged conflict and urges the **concerned parties** to respect international human rights and international humanitarian laws.
>
> (Code: PR22(14))

Example 9 disguises the responsible parties involved in the civil war in Yemen by using the word 'concerned'. Although the parties involved in the conflict are widely known, no reference is made to any specific parties to avoid confrontations. Malaysia is nonpartisan and intends to remain friendly to gain international trust. Thus, despite showing its support to the recent development in Yemen, Malaysia is committed to demonstrate an image of confidence, trust, and deference globally. This finding is crucial to our understanding of the concept of anonymity in hedging as Example 11 shows that anonymity is not used to disguise the agent (Malaysia or its affiliations), but instead on the objects of discussion (parties involved in the conflict).

DISCUSSION

The analysis reveals that hedges in diplomatic press releases by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs serve various functions. Firstly, hedges are used to cautiously state a stance, especially when articulating probabilities and logical predictions, by considering the local, regional, and international reactions. By being general and avoiding specific details, the MFA can avoid making erroneous declarative statements. This is aligned to the claim by Hassan and Said (2020) in their analysis of political editorials that editorialists must present political propositions credibly with appropriate degree of accuracy, and Ahmed and Majeed's (2019) analysis of parliamentary debates that hedging devices help members of parliaments to be true and relevant. As a result, Malaysia's stance is interpreted as more plausible to the international audience.

Secondly, hedges are also used as a persuasive strategy. Hedges in the press releases help to moderate the tone of the stance taken by the government to sound more amiable to the international audience. This conforms to Al-Rashady's (2012) finding that hedges are employed to deliver the appropriate tone in political debates and Hassan and Said's (2020) finding that humbly presented claims provide rooms for the audience to negotiate the unresolved crisis. The cordial approach helps to avoid unnecessary confrontations particularly when handling a contentious issue and making a strong controversial stance. It is crucial for Malaysia to remain friendly to gain international trust. Another important function of hedges is to express collective decisions. The employment of this strategy serves as a testament to Malaysia's commitment to support the stance of its affiliations. This is expressed by using hedges to convey mutual opinions and decisions with affiliated members. It highlights the significance of group membership and the spirit of togetherness to Malaysia in managing diplomacy. In addition, in the local context, the audience would interpret it as a consensus by fellow Malaysians and accordingly perceived as a dynamic and empowering community by the international audience. These emit the image of confidence, trust, and deference globally.

The genre of press releases specifically in diplomatic communication clearly shapes the way a stance is modulated. Primarily, every stance formulated must acknowledge the different audiences that it is addressing - the local and international audiences. They may involve parties which do not support Malaysia's aspirations and refuse to play active roles as agents of positive and constructive change. Hence, Malaysia must delicately manage its relationship with them to pursue its foreign policy which is founded on the values of peace, humanity, justice, and equality.

In advancing global peace, security and prosperity, the MFA's press releases must be worded cautiously to be accurate at the point of release. This demands expressing claims with an appropriate amount of caution to protect them from being dismissed. By hedging a stance, it reads less absolute and accordingly more agreeable or appropriate. This is aligned to Habeeb's (2019) claim that hedging makes a speaker's propositional content less offensive. Apart from accuracy, the tone set in the press releases must appear 'professional yet friendly' and 'direct yet courteous'. Subtle changes in the choice of words and structure can ensure that the stance is better received and consequently stand a greater chance of being positively interpreted by the audience. Clearly, communicating diplomatically is a complex endeavour but by hedging a stance can appear more justifiable and rational.

The analysis also highlights the influence of culture on stance-taking in the press releases. Hedges, particularly, are used to downplay power, save face, convey solidarity, highlight loyalty, and express politeness to gain international trust - all of which are the essence of the Malaysian values. Although the genre of press releases is identified by certain characteristics such as concise,

direct, and accurate, our analysis reveals that hedges are employed to accomplish different rhetorical purposes. Firstly, hedges are used to minimise the authoritative tone of a stance in order to signal respect for all parties. It is described as a face-saving strategy to protect the face of the relevant parties and general audience. This is confirmed by Habeeb (2019) who claims that hedging could effectively modify the strength of the illocutionary force of a stance and make its propositional content less offensive. Hence, by downplaying its authority in its stance, Malaysia appears modest and amiable.

A related concept to face is politeness - a core Malaysian value (Awang, Maros, & Ibrahim, 2012) which clearly facilitates efforts towards developing and maintaining positive relationships. As Malaysia strives for harmonious international relationships, it needs to remain polite by using diplomatic language in its diplomatic communication to protect the national face and the addresses' face. It should be noted however that politeness should not be viewed negatively as according to Ashari (n.d), it portrays a powerful national identity. She explains that politeness, in fact, helps to project a stronger national reputation than military force or even economic power. This accordingly promotes tolerance and peaceful co-existence that are valued by the local and global communities.

Belonging to a collectivistic culture, Malaysia values its relationship with others, and looks forward to developing new ones and maintaining them (Hofstede Insights, 2021). Locally, Malaysians are generally attentive to making sure that opinions are conveyed respectfully and favourably to ensure unity and peace in a multicultural country. Malaysia extends its unifying value beyond the national border, notably in diplomatic communication, by hedging its stance with those within (affiliations) as well as outside of its circle. As shown in the press releases from Malaysia, successful diplomatic intercultural communication initiatives necessitate tremendous flexibility, accommodation, and negotiation from participating members. It explains the 'aligning stage' (Du Bois, 2007) when Malaysia needs to communicate its stance once an evaluation of an issue (stance object) is completed, and a stance (position) is formulated. Thus, the employment of hedges in Malaysia's press releases underlines Malaysia's continuous efforts at aligning itself to the agenda of its affiliations while avoiding direct conflicts with the resistants. Additionally, Malaysians are accustomed to the top-down, vertical hierarchical structure of organisations (Hofstede Insights, 2021), making it more amenable to accommodate differences and better equipped to express disputes or disapproval amiably.

The analysis of the findings also reveal that two of the five coding criteria are absent from the data. They are Question-Posing and Admission to a Lack of Knowledge. A further analysis explains their absence from the data as the MFA is a respectable entity which represents the country and thus should not project an image of uncertainty, or ignorance. In the case of uncertainty, the MFA opts for Approximation of the Value of Claims to modify precision rather than leaving others to question its credibility. Question-Posing, on the other hand, is absent from the data as press release is a genre that posts declarative statements and stances rather than imposing ideas through posing questions. Rhetorical questions, although can be forceful, has a literary effect which is incongruent to the genre of press releases. Diplomatic press releases do not aim to compete for journalists' attention by being dramatic or catchy in its presentation, instead it is guided by veracity (Jacobs 1999, p. 219).

Despite the identified hedges in the MFA's press releases, it should be noted that some of them are without hedges. This demonstrates that the genre values factual, direct, and accurate information. However, often, especially when dealing with a delicate matter, a stance needs to be

hedged to soften the impact. It opens doors to further peaceful negotiations. These, we believe, are the reasons for the inclusion and exclusion of hedges in diplomatic press releases.

CONCLUSION

This paper discovers that hedges are employed in diplomatic press releases, despite the genre being one that promotes accountability, accuracy, and credibility. It should be reiterated that hedges in diplomatic press releases should be viewed positively as they are tactful initiatives towards peace, unity, and harmony. Apart from that, they are also employed to avoid making inaccurate declarative statements, especially when the details are absent. Hedges are also used to express collective decisions, highlighting a nation's commitment to align itself to its affiliations. In addition, they make the formulation of stances more justifiable, rational, and believable.

Culture-wise, hedges are used to downplay power, save face (both, the country, and the global communities), convey solidarity and highlight loyalty to its affiliations, as well as express politeness to gain national reputation and international trust - all of which are the essence of the Malaysian values. As a developing country, Malaysia understands its limited strength and influence as compared to the developed nations. Hedging in diplomatic communication explains Malaysia's continuous attempt to be cognizant of its affiliations.

To conclude, diplomatic reporting, particularly press releases, is the lifeblood of foreign relations as it mirrors the internal and external chemistry of diplomatic affairs that a nation recognises. It explains that the foreign policy of every nation is premised on vital concepts that culture embodies including traditions, beliefs, and values.

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