



The Topos of “*Precaution*” in the German Discourse on Assistance to Ukraine: Iconic Reproduction through Linguistics and Pragmatics

O topos da “precaução” no discurso alemão sobre a assistência à Ucrânia: reprodução icônica por meio da linguística e da pragmática

Nataliia Kravchenko

National University of Life and Environmental Sciences of Ukraine (NULES),
Kyiv, Ukraine

nkravchenko@outlook.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4190-0924>

Oleksandr Yudenko

National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture (NAFAA), Kyiv, Ukraine

yudenko29@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0309-1548>

Olena Zhykharieva

National Academy of Fine Arts and Architecture (NAFAA), Kyiv, Ukraine

eaap@ukr.net

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1054-3725>

Iryna Kryknitska

Kyiv National Linguistic University (KNLU), Kyiv, Ukraine

iryna.kryknitska@knl.u.edu.ua

<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3143-8956>

Abstract: The study of mitigation in political discourse deserves the closest attention since it concerns the manipulative dimension of politics in the modeling of public consciousness. This research is aimed at identifying linguistic and pragmatic mitigators associated with the topos of *Precaution* and its manifesting strategies in the discourse

of assistance to Ukraine. It reached the main finding about the correlation of mitigators with the implementation of discursive strategies mediated by the influence of bushes, hedges, and shields on the illocution of speech acts. Since the illocution is influenced not only by hedges distinguished by this criterion, but also by other types of mitigators, we have introduced, in addition to the propositional, illocutionary, and deictic coordinates of the utterance, an additional criterion for the distribution of mitigators – their correlation with discursive strategies. Bushes implement the strategy of reducing the speaker’s responsibility for the asserted facts, promises – indirect commissives and recommendations – implicit directives by triggering conventional implicatures that imply the conditions for these acts feasibility. Shields transfer, generalize or depersonalize the speaker’s responsibility for assertive facts, implicit promises and indirect recommendations, “blurring” the deixis to a denotative situation. Hedges in assertives transfer responsibility to the sphere of subjective epistemic modality with increasing probability instead of the certainty about what is being asserted. In directives, hedges generalize / depersonalize the speaker’s responsibility thereby intersecting with the functional scope of shields. Polyfunctional mitigators implement several discursive strategies. The article specifies each group of mitigators in terms of its constituent linguistic devices.

Keywords: bushes; hedges; shields; speech acts; discursive strategies; political discourse.

Resumo: O estudo da mitigação no discurso político merece a maior atenção, pois diz respeito à dimensão manipuladora da política na modelagem da consciência pública. A pesquisa visa identificar mitigadores linguísticos e pragmáticos associados ao topos da *Precaução* e suas estratégias de manifestação no discurso da assistência à Ucrânia. O estudo chegou à principal conclusão sobre a correlação dos mitigadores com a implementação de estratégias discursivas mediadas pela influência de arbustos, sebes e escudos na ilocução dos atos de fala. Como a ilocução é influenciada não apenas pelo critério de *cerca* (hedges), mas também por outros tipos de mitigadores, introduzimos, além das coordenadas proposicionais, ilocucionárias e dêiticas do enunciado, um critério adicional para a distribuição dos mitigadores – sua correlação com as estratégias discursivas. Os arbustos implementam a estratégia de reduzir a responsabilidade do locutor pelos fatos afirmados, promessas – comissivas indiretas e recomendações – diretivas implícitas, acionando implicaturas convencionais que implicam as condições para a viabilidade desses atos. Os escudos transferem, generalizam ou despersonalizam a responsabilidade do locutor por fatos assertivos, promessas implícitas e recomendações indiretas, “embaçando” a dêixis para uma situação denotativa. *Cerca* (hedges) em assertivas transferem a responsabilidade para a esfera da modalidade epistêmica subjetiva com probabilidade crescente em vez da certeza sobre o que está sendo afirmado. Nas diretivas, os *cerca* (hedges) generalizam/despersonalizam a responsabilidade do locutor, cruzando-se com o escopo funcional dos shields. Os mitigadores polifuncionais

implementam várias estratégias discursivas. O artigo especifica cada grupo de mitigadores em termos de seus dispositivos linguísticos constituintes.

Palavras-chave: arbustos; cerca; escudos; atos de fala; estratégias discursivas; discurso político.

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1 Introduction

The latest pan-European public opinion poll conducted by the European Council on Foreign Relations in ten countries (Krastev; Mark, 2022) shows a steady increase in votes for an early end to the Russian-Ukrainian war, even at the cost of concessions from Ukraine. This article attempts to explain this trend within a discursive-analytical framework, primarily through an analysis of the verbal and pragmatic features of the texts of European politicians. A landmark interview with the German chancellor was selected for analysis, as Germany leads the peace-against-justice camp (49% and 19% respectively), according to the poll.

An additional argument in favor of the research material is the need to confirm or refute the survey-based conclusion about “a growing gap between the stated positions of many European governments and the public mood in their countries” (op. cit.). In the case of Germany, it seems possible to talk about the absence of such a gap, or rather, that public opinion is to a certain extent modeled by politicians and is based on the discursive topos of *Precaution*. In this vein, the article is considered relevant and politically significant. Despite Berlin’s historical tradition of staying out of military conflicts, it unequivocally supports Ukraine’s fight against Russian aggression, as demonstrated by statements from officials and the overall volume of weapons supplied. However, support for Ukraine remains cautious. Observers attribute this to simplified stereotypes in the German historical memory, a sense of collective guilt towards Russians for Germany’s actions during World War II, the threat of the Kremlin to plunge the world into a nuclear war (Kurenkova, 2023), fears that the war would escalate into a direct conflict between NATO

and Russia (Kinkartz, 2023) and fundamentally different assessments by Germany and the United States of the strategic and tactical situation (Witwicki, 2023).

The concept of “Precaution” is key in discussing Germany’s assistance policy and is explicitly articulated in both Ukrainian and European media as well as by Chancellor Scholz himself: “Germany acts cautiously because it does not want to become directly involved in the military conflict” (Scholz, 2023; Sukharevich, 2023). This explains the choice of the topos of *Caution* and its implementing means as the focus of the research. Examining the topos of *Precaution* at the level of its manifesting discursive strategies, relying on mitigating measures, is motivated by the fact that the activation of this argument is linked to a balancing act between unpopular measures and the speakers’ desire to preserve their face through evasive formulations when discussing problematic issues. The semantic component of “preventing problems” is part of the meaning of the term “caution”, which is defined as “something that is done in advance in order to prevent problems” (Oxford). In the case of political discourse, it involves the problem of threat to the speaker’s image, which implies the use of self-serving mitigation strategies (Fraser, 1980, p. 345).

The preliminary analysis shows that the topos of *Precaution* is involved not only and not so much at the explicit level of the analyzed discourse, but at the level of implicatures and connotations since implicatures are used to implicitly convey information related to unpopular measures or other delicate issues when explicitly explaining ideas that may pose a threat to the speaker’s image. This determines the focus of this study on pragmatic and related semantic devices.

The hypothesis of the research is that the *Precaution* topos is iconically reproduced with the help of multi-level means of mitigation, which include structural-semantic, pragmatic, speech-act and deictic devices that underlie the discourse-forming strategies of the discourse of aid to Ukraine.

2 Literature review and Theoretical Background

The theoretical basis of the article covers three vectors of discourse research that contributed to the choice of the presented research approach and methods of analysis and include (a) critical discourse

analysis, (b) the concept of mitigation, and (c) pragmatic theories related to explaining the manipulative mechanisms of mitigation.

From the perspective of critical discourse analysis, the article is based on the concept of *topos*, which is developed within the framework of the discursive-historical approach of CDA (Hart; Cap, 2014; Reisigl, 2017; Reisigl; Wodak, 2008). *Topos* is understood as a component of argumentative models that justifies the transition from argument to conclusion (Kienpointner, 1992, p. 194). Any *topos* can be reduced to a certain inference rule like “if X, then Y”. For example, if precaution can prevent negative consequences (and imprudence can, on the contrary, lead to them), then precautions should be taken, and careless actions should be avoided. In some critical-discursive studies, *topoi* are understood as generalized key ideas that can be used to build individual statements and arguments (Richardson, 2004, p. 230). Such *topoi* are close to the Aristotelian understanding of *topoi* as *locus communis* or specific *topoi* “as premises of a very general kind” (Perelman; Olbrechts-Titeka, 1969, p. 84), on which most preferences and choices are based.

Among the most common *topoi* in political discourse, discourse analysis singles out the following ones: *Burdening, Reality, Numbers, History, Authority, Threat, Definition, Justice, Urgency, Challenge, Belonging, Constructing a hero*, etc. (Wodak, 2009, p. 40-44). At the same time, the *topos of Precaution* has not yet been singled out by discursive analysts, although it is this *topos* that, in our opinion, determines the style and pragmatics of mitigation, which is often a constitutive feature of political discourse.

It would be reasonable to expect that at the verbal level, the *topos Caution* is mainly based on the means of mitigation, which is understood in the work as “an all-embracing category employed in pragmatics” and covers a wide range of strategies by which interlocutors soften the interactional parameters of their speech, thereby reducing possible communication risks (Caffi, 2006, p. 171; Caffi, 2007). Researchers define mitigation as a cognitive, social, and linguistic phenomenon (Gratch; Marsella; Martinovski, 2005) aimed at reducing the interlocutors’ “vulnerability”.

In this regard, the article uses one of the most successful, in our opinion, classifications of mitigating agents proposed by Caffi (1999) who suggests three types of mitigation devices, namely bushes, hedges and shields. The advantage of Caffi’s classification lies in its comprehensive and detailed analysis of a wide range of linguistic devices and strategies

used for mitigation. Compared to other classifications (Fraser, 1980; Hinkel, 2005; Prince; Frader; Bosk, 1982), Caffi's approach is distinguished by (a) inclusiveness since it encompasses a broad spectrum of mitigating agents, including both lexical and syntactic resources, as well as non-verbal cues, (b) systematic organization providing a framework for categorizing mitigating agents based on their linguistic properties and functions with clear distinctions of the types of devices, (c) analytical depth as it goes beyond surface-level descriptions of mitigating agents by delving into their pragmatic functions and effects – considering the social, cognitive, and interactional aspects of mitigation, providing a deeper understanding of the reasons behind their usage and the impact they have on communication. Bushes are so called because they are used to hide the true meaning of an utterance, thus affecting its propositional scope. Hedges are devices that stand between the speaker and the proposition, and thereby indicate the speaker's lack of commitment to the truth of the sentence. Such group of devices relate to the illocutionary scope of the utterance. The group of shields defocuses the speaker and his/her intentions using deictic markers of time, place, or agent coordinates of the utterance (Caffi, 1999, p. 883), thus correlating with its deictic scope.

At the same time, the article proposes some modifications of this classification, since when projecting verbal mitigators onto discursive pragmatics – illocutionary acts, implicatures and face-protecting strategies, the line between members of the classification is partially erased. Presumably that, markers from different groups affect the weakening of the illocutionary force of speech acts and the disregard of cooperative maxims, triggering discursive implicatures. Accordingly, one of the objectives of the article is to specify the members of the classification of mitigators, considering their pragmatic functions.

Accounting for the mitigation-illocution relationship and the discursive function of the illocutionary acts in constructing contexts of social interaction (Searle, 1983, 1995), the article also relies on studies of the influence of mitigators on speech acts, in particular, on reducing their “anticipated negative effect” (Holmes, 1984, p. 346; Fraser, 1980, p. 342), especially in directive and (Haverkate, 2010, p. 510) and commissive (Kravchenko; Chaika; Kryknitska; Letunovska; Yudenko, 2022b) speech acts.

The function of mitigating factors in modifying illocutionary force has been identified in several pragmatic studies (Kravchenko; Pasternak; Korotka, 2021; Kravchenko; Prokopchuk; Pozhar; Rozhkov; Kozyarevych-Zozulya, 2022a; Sbisa, 2001; Thaler, 2012), including in terms of their influence on felicity conditions. V. Thaler describes mitigating processes “as operations on components of illocutionary force, namely on the preparatory conditions, the sincerity conditions and the degree of strength of one of the act’s sincerity conditions” (Thaler, 2012, p. 907). Equally important to this article is the face-oriented account of mitigation, based on the motivation of the speaker, with a differentiation between altruistic and self-serving mitigation (Fraser, 1980, p. 345). If the motivation is to mitigate the impact of the speech act on the hearer and is aimed at reducing his negative feelings that he may experience after receiving the information reported by the speaker, then this type of mitigation is called altruistic. The opposite type of mitigating is applied when the speaker is trying to protect his own face (Fraser, 1980, p. 345).

Both types of mitigation are associated with the concept of *Precaution*. However, given the political and local textual (journalist’s questions) context of the politician’s discourse, one should expect the absolute predominance of self-serving markers when the speaker tries to reduce his responsibility by distancing himself from his own discourse. It can be assumed that altruistic softening also implements the topos of caution, being used in deictic references to the parties to a military conflict in order to avoid direct characterological nominations.

3 Methods

The underlying in the paper is the method of speech acts analysis with elements of critical discourse analysis, with a focus on mitigation devices in their impact on the pragmatic and ideational levels of the discourse of assistance to Ukraine, which is based on the key topos *Precaution*. In this vein our method of analysis correlates with three CDA research scopes, introduced by N. Fairclough (1995), including description (text analysis), interpretation (processing analysis) and explanation (social analysis).

The first stage of the study includes a description of the structural, semantic, and grammatical mitigators that underlie the other two levels of analysis. This research vector includes an explanatory tool of theories

of language mitigation, using existing classification criteria for mitigators (Caffi, 1999, 2006; Fraser, 1980) to clarify their types identified in the discourse under consideration. Caffi's classification has been somewhat specified with the involvement of an additional classification criterion of the mitigators' correlation with discursive strategies.

The second stage of the analysis, which deals with the dimension of discourse as *discursive practice*, identifies pragmatic devices, including speech acts, conversational and conventional implicatures, which are affected by mitigators and which, in turn, influence discourse-forming strategies. In this regard, the article uses the classical analysis of speech acts (Searle, 1969), modified by the method of identifying direct / indirect speech acts and their classification depending on the degree of illocutionary force based on mitigating devices (Kravchenko; Prokopchuk; Pozhar; Rozhkov; Kozyarevych-Zozulya, 2022a). The research also made use of the Searle's felicity conditions as conventional rules that are constitutive of a particular kind of act (Searle, 1969, p. 36-37).

Along with the method of speech acts, the article partially employs the Grice's inferential pragmatics (Grice, 1975; Bach, 2012; Braun, 2011) since mitigators that hide meanings behind the ambiguity and indirectness of speech, ignore some cooperative maxims. Disregard of maxims triggers discursive implicatures, which, along with explicit means, actualize the topos *Precaution*.

To a certain extent, the study also uses the technique of identifying conventional implicatures (Potts, 2005, 2014; Skovgaard-Olsen; Kellen; Krahl; Klauer, 2017; Spector; Sudo, 2017), which are lexicalized by adverbial modifiers and other mitigating means that expand the propositional content of speech acts with additional meanings associated with the conditions of their feasibility. Of some importance for our methodology is a study that reveals the "patterns of correlation" between the illocutionary force and the conventional implicature (Kravchenko, 2017), which sets the conditions for the feasibility of a particular speech act, thereby contributing to the modification of its illocution. Even though the author of the article analyzes direct speech acts and implicature triggers that are not associated with mitigation, the proposed approach seems promising for our study.

At the final stage of the analysis, the topos *Precaution* is explicated as a configuration of discursive strategies based on linguistic and pragmatic means of mitigation. In this vein, the concept of Fairclough's

three levels of analysis is slightly modified by the article in that the level of explanation / social analysis is presented in a simplified form – by explaining linguistic and pragmatic means of softening with the help of the Precaution topos, as a concept-idea integrating the semantic space text.

The material under consideration is based on a landmark interview of German chancellor Olaf Scholz with *Der Spiegel*, April 22, 2022, under the heading *There Cannot Be a Nuclear War*. The choice of the text of the interview as an object of analysis is due to its abundance in mitigators and indirect speech acts revealing face-protecting discursive strategies. The purpose of this study is to identify linguistic and pragmatic mitigators associated with the topos of *Precaution* and its manifesting discursive strategies that construct the discourse of assistance to Ukraine.

4 Results and Discussion

At the stage of linguistic analysis, the article carries out a phased identification of mitigation tools: first, it determines the means of indirection and hedging, which are presented in Table 1 and are based on the general mitigation classifications presented in particular in (Demir, 2018; Fraser, 1980). Then mitigators are subdivided according to Caffi's criteria into bushes, hedges, and shields. At both stages, linguistic mitigators are interpreted in terms of pragmatic mitigation, namely as a means of weakening illocutionary force or markers of flouting the maxims of cooperation with the actualization of discursive implicatures.

Table 1 – Linguistic mitigators in Discourse of assistance to Ukraine

Number	Linguistic mitigator	Samples
1	Epistemological modal verbs, combination of deontic and epistemological modals	<p><i>We can see</i> this in the military successes of the Ukrainian army.</p> <p>You <i>can</i> only deliver what you have and <i>can</i> give away.</p> <p>The <i>need to be able</i> to defend alliance territory at all times.</p> <p>We <i>must be able</i> to hold out for 12 days with our ammunition and equipment.</p> <p>You <i>can see</i> how tense the situation is.</p>
2	Epistemological verbs and their substitutes	<p>I <i>do not think</i> it is justifiable.</p> <p>But I <i>do not see</i> an instinctive pacifism.</p>

3	Adverbs of time, manner, indefinite pronouns, determiners with indefinite semantics, blurring the denotative scope of things or quantity, quantifier words, adverb – justification enhancer (<i>even</i>). indicates the conditions under which the propositional part of the sentence is feasible	<p>But we will certainly deliver <i>whatever is still</i> available.</p> <p>Without <i>even</i> knowing the exact facts of the matter.</p> <p>We can <i>successively</i> fill the gaps created by these deliveries by our partners.</p> <p>It is a difficult balancing act that we <i>constantly</i> have to conduct together.</p> <p>The U.S. military has <i>considerably</i> larger inventories.</p>
4	Parenthetical constructions, rephrasing	<p><i>In other words, as before, (...)</i></p> <p><i>As far as dependence on Russian gas, oil and coal is concerned,</i> we should have made sure early on that we could also be served by other suppliers.</p>
5	Quantitative nouns of indefinite semantics	<p><i>Many who</i> categorically rejected this step in the past.</p> <p>There are, <i>of course, many</i> who have a different opinion than mine.</p> <p><i>Many of our allies</i> are doing so as well.</p>
6	Metonymic generalization	<p>That is why, in discussion with <i>German industry</i>.</p> <p>In the medium term, we will help Ukraine develop its defensive capability, also with <i>Western weapons</i>.</p>
7	Passive voice	<p>The military equipment <i>must be deployable</i>.</p> <p>We have drawn up a list of military equipment that <i>can be delivered</i> quickly.</p> <p>The quickest way to do this is with weapons from the former Soviet stocks, <i>with which the Ukrainians are well acquainted</i>.</p> <p><i>I could not have done</i> that as a pacifist.</p>

8	Evidential constructions based either on the speaker's own observations or on someone else's opinion / experience, with reference to information about the described event "from the outside", which serve as deictic markers that expand the circle of subjects of responsibility and / or distance the speaker from the referent situation	<i>When I look around the world, I see that all partners are operating within the framework of our agreements, just as we are.</i>
9	Modal verb <i>would</i> (often in combination with passive voice and other mitigators)	I <i>would like</i> to once again state that fact. Imposing a no-fly zone, <i>as has been called for</i> ; <i>would</i> have made NATO a party to the war. The consequences of a mistake <i>would be</i> dramatic. That <i>would be</i> inappropriate.
11	Impersonal forms	In the world we live in, <i>it is necessary</i> to ensure our own security with a sufficient defensive capability.

Source: Author's Survey.

As a rule, one statement contains an accumulation of mitigators, as, for example, in (1)

- (1) The right response *would* have been to become *more* independent of Russian imports, or *at least* to have created the technical conditions *to be able to* do so at any time.

The mitigating operators in (1) include (a) the modal verb *would*, which serves here as a deictic operator that refers an event to the realm of possibility instead of reality, (b) two adverbs-quantifiers, including *more* that de-concretizes the subsequent attributive characteristic, and *at least*, which is a modifier-de-intensifier of the part of the sentence following the adverb, limiting the scope of the prospective action, (c) *to be able to* expresses ability and possibility instead of "feasibility", reducing the speaker's degree of confidence in what is being reported.

All identified mitigators actualize the semes “ability”, “possibility”, “approximation”, “uncertainty in time”, thereby connoting the meaning of “uncertainty” (compared to the definition of the word in the Cambridge Dictionary: the failure to do something immediately or quickly because you are [...] not certain). The concept of uncertainty, in its turn, is in a causal relationship with the topos *Precaution*. In particular, such a relationship is postulated by scientists in a broad epistemological, political, philosophical and other frameworks (Funtowicz; Ravetz, 1990; Kaiser, 2004; Kinzig *et al.*, 2003).

Despite the fact that the speaker describes actions in the past tense, his statement is contextualized with the present – in view of the continuing relevance of the propositional content. Accordingly, from a pragmatic point of view, the mitigators in (1) influence the illocutionary force of a two-intentional speech act that combines assertive and weak commissive illocutions. Modal and adverbial de-intensifiers of action weaken the conditions for the successful implementation of both assertives and commissives – the speaker’s confidence in what is being reported and the level of responsibility for non-implemented and, accordingly, “must-be-implemented”, actions.

In terms of discursive strategies, the speaker, by means of mitigators, realizes self-protective strategy of defocusing the responsibility for unfulfilled actions by partially distancing himself from his discourse. Transformation of the statement with the omission of mitigators would result in a phrase that significantly increases the risks associated with a threat to the speaker’s face – especially when it is contextualized with the interviewer’s initiating question, implying responsibility for unfulfilled actions: We had to become independent of Russian imports and create technical conditions for this.

Such interpretation is supported by analytical reviews in the media regarding Germany’s dependency on Russian gas being considered one of the factors explaining Germany’s hesitancy in providing assistance to Ukraine in the 2022 war. As Klaus-Dieter Bahmann points out, the excessive dependency of Germany on Russia comes at a high cost to the citizens of the most economically powerful state in the European Union (Bachmann, 2023).

The systematization of the identified means of mitigation is based the classification of K. Caffi (1999), who singles out bushes, hedges, and shields, associated respectively with the propositional, illocutionary, and

deictic levels of mitigation of utterances. The first group of mitigators, called “bushes”, is focused on propositional softening of the statement, which is based on vague formulations. With this type of mitigation, the illocutionary function of speech acts is preserved, while the precision of the propositional content is reduced (Caffi, 1999, p. 890). This is achieved by epistemological modals and such approximators as nouns of indefinite semantics, adverbs, adjectives, pronouns, particles, and other devices that blur the specificity of the propositional content (see items 1 and 3 in Table 1). Accumulation of bushes are exemplified in (2).

- (2) In the current threat situation, *particularly*, I will *do my utmost not to forget* this commitment.

In addition to lexical operators, a mitigating device in this example is a grammatical category of negation as it “transforms a statement to an understatement” (Giora; Fein; Ganzi; Levi; Sabah, 2005, p. 84). The affirmative sense of the negated concept dilutes the negativity of the negation marker, resulting in a more positive or less negative account of an undesirable situation” (Giora; Fein; Ganzi; Levi; Sabah, 2005, p. 85).

Bushes in combination with negation connote the same *ability* (to perform an action), which implies *obstacle factors*, transferring the commissive act from the realm of reality to the realm of possibility and actualizing the meaning of the speaker’s uncertainty about the realizability of actions. Such a transfer is argumentized by the topos *Precaution*, which is triggered by the lexeme *threat*. As the analysis of the entire text of the interview shows, the same *threat*, which motivates the topos *Precaution*, is a key component of the semantic coherence of the entire text (the threat from “a highly armed superpower like Russia, a nuclear power” is too great to act decisively and requires special precautions).

In speech acts facet, the above utterance is an indirect commissive, the illocutionary force of which is significantly reduced by bushes since they stipulate the conditions under which the promised action is feasible. Such conditions are implied by the presuppositional meaning of *to do my utmost*, which in its inference pattern contains the same *capability* (if to compare with the idiom definition in dictionary: do one’s utmost – to do all one can, MW). Correspondingly, the conventional implicature about the condition for the act feasibility complements the scope of its propositional content in the following way: the realizability

of promises depends not only on the desire of the speaker, who “will act if he can, depending on the circumstances”. Since the possibility of fulfillment is not equal to the fulfillment itself, the bush *do my utmost* in combination with negation affects such basic condition for the successful implementation of the commissive act as its feasibility.

In the political realm, the use of the analyzed mitigators can be commented upon in such a way that the chancellor cannot pursue a policy that does not align with the expectations of the German citizens, as the population of Germany approves of well-balanced, justified, and carefully crafted decisions from the federal government (Kinkartz, 2023). A representative survey conducted by Kantar Public, a public opinion research institute, revealed that 80% of Germans are concerned about the escalation of war with Ukraine affecting neighboring NATO countries, 69% fear a Russian nuclear strike, and 72% say they feel threatened by Russia (Hemicker, 2022).

The second group of mitigators are hedges, which operate at the level of illocution, influencing the illocutionary force of speech acts and mitigating face-damaging acts such as disagreement, warning, advice, and recommendation. According to Caffi, hedges are devices that “stand” between the speaker and the proposition, and thus indicate the speaker’s lack of commitment to the truth of the proposition (Caffi, 1999, p. 883) as shown by (3), (4), (5) and (6).

- (3) *I am sorry*, but we will not get anywhere with simplifications of this kind!
- (4) First, *I do not see* at all that a gas embargo would end the war.
- (5) *I do not think* it is justifiable.
- (6) *I would like* to once again state that fact.

Analysis of speech showed that hedging is primarily aimed at weakening the illocutionary force of assertives (as in 3-6) and directives. According to J. Searle the illocutionary point of an assertive is to commit the speaker, in varying degrees, to the truth of the stated proposition (Searle, 1976, p. 10). Correspondingly, hedges affect such a felicity condition for this type of speech acts as the speaker’s confidence in what is being reported, his conviction in the truth of the statement being

expressed (considering such a direction of fit, constituting a constative illocution, as “words must necessarily correspond to the world”). To reduce the potentially undesirable effects of the information provided, the speaker deliberately avoids factitive verbs: know, be aware, regret, realize, etc., which imply that their object / complement is true (Heim, 1992) replacing them with non-factitive verbs, often in a negative form, which, as mentioned above, is a means of additional mitigation.

The mitigating effect is achieved through the connotations of uncertainty and doubt in the propositional content of speech acts, which at the connotative level trigger the topos *Precaution*, and in the pragmatic scope reduce the assertive illocutionary force of confidence in what is being reported: *I do not see* at all that a gas embargo would end the war (instead of “I believe that the gas embargo will not end the war”); *I do not think* it is justifiable (instead of “I know it’s unjustified”). In addition to non-factitive verbs, the article also distributes into the hedge group those subordinate clauses that serve as explanatory and justifying comments on unpopular measures to protect the speaker’s face as is exemplified by (7).

- (7) *When I look around the world, I see that all partners are operating within the framework of our agreements, just as we are.*

In (7) the speaker’s confidence in what he is saying is called into question by a reference to his own observations combined with an allusion to the opinion/practice of others as evidential markers that “stand” between the speaker and the proposition. Thus, the hedge indicates the speaker’s uncertainty about the audience’s approval of actions, reflected by the propositional content of the utterance.

Summing up the function of hedges in assertives, it should be noted that the combination of verbs of knowledge with negation in (5) and (4) (*I don’t see* is also used in the meaning of *do not think*) expresses not only authorization and de-officialization, reflecting direct speaker’s involvement, but also his doubt about the content of the statement. This transfers the statement into the framework of the subjective-epistemic modality. A similar function is performed by the hedge in (3) and the evidential marker in (6) given that a number of linguists consider evidentiality to be a subtype of epistemic modality (see the definition of Epistemic modality in Glossary of linguistic terms: <https://glossary.sil.org/term/epistemic-modality>).

In addition to assertives, hedges also affect the illocutionary force of directives, which results in their transformation either into direct weak directives as in (8), or into the acts characterized by multiple illocutionary force, combining assertive and implicit-directive illocution, which, moreover, varies in its intensity, as in (9), (10), (11) and (12). For example, utterance (8) conveys the directive illocutionary force marked by such an illocutionary force indicating device as *have to*, indicating advice or appeal.

- (8) *You have to* take a close look at how operational which materiel really is – and when.

However, the act does not comply with the canonical performative directives, since it lacks a deictic marker indicating the addresser of the directive act thereby corresponding to the formula: “Addresser (implied) + illocutionary verb / illocutionary force indicating device + addressee-destinator of directive act + propositional (informative) part” (Kravchenko; Pasternak; Korotka, 2021, p. 174). For comparison, the formula for a strong directive would be: “I / we + illocutionary verb / illocutionary force indicating device + addressee-destinator of directive act + propositional (informative) part” (op. cit., p. 173). According to this formula, the above act would have to take the following form: I advise / urge you *to take a close look at how operational which materiel really is – and when*.

Based on the taxonomy of directives, depending on the degree of their illocutionary force, the indicated hedged directive can be divided into a group of direct weak directives, “incorporating personal pronouns or indefinite pronouns in combination with modal verbs of obligation or their substitutes must, have to, be to” (op. cit., p. 176), which are hedged by the omission of the performative part of the act *I advise / urge / order / recommend, etc.*

Another group of hedged directives highlighted in the speech belongs to the category of “non-conventional indirect directives” (op. cit., p. 178), whose illocutionary function is implied under the structural form of assertives and which, in our opinion, implement the discursive strategy of “not imposing” rules, referring rather to public consciousness as in (9) and (10).

- (9) *There has to be* a cease-fire.

- (10) *There must be* a peace agreement that allows Ukraine to defend itself in the future.

Indirect directives are arranged by impersonal structures containing modal verbs of obligation *has to* and *must be* as the illocutionary force indicating devices. However, such acts have only a propositional content, while they lack a performative part, and have no deictic reference either to the addresser or to the addressee of the act. This results in a shift of responsibility from the speaker to an impersonal source of the urge for action.

Another group of indirect directives is represented by utterances in which the directive illocution is implied by nouns with the semes “need” or “requirement”, suggesting a call to action to solve the problem formulated by the propositional part as in (11) and (12).

- (11) In the world we live in, *it is necessary* to ensure our own security with a *sufficient* defensive capability.

- (12) *The need to be able to* defend alliance territory *at all times*.

In (11) and (12) the degree of directive illocutionary force is even more weakened compared to direct weak directives and indirect directives, due to a nominal or impersonal constructions devoid of modal verbs of obligation. Additional mitigation of the implicit-directive illocution is provided by bushes *sufficient* and *to be able* as well as means of an indefinite, diffuse space-time deixis *in the world we live in, at all times*. Through these additional mitigators, combined with the impersonal syntactic form, the action falls into the class of hedged indirect acts. Like bushes and hedges softening assertive illocution, hedge mitigators of directive illocutionary force also connote the semes of *evasiveness* and *indirectness* associated with the meaning “uncertainty” as a structural component of the topos *Precaution*.

The analysis showed the lack of an evident demarcation line between hedges and bushes since both groups of devices influence the illocutionary force of speech acts. Even though the illocutionary aspect of the statement is associated by researchers with hedges (Caffi, 1999), bushes also influence the decrease in the degree of illocutionary force – introducing additional conditions regarding its successful execution (Haverkate, 2010, 507) as, for example, in (13).

- (13) We can *successively* fill the gaps created by these deliveries by our partners.

In (13) an adverb-bush *successively* indicates the conditions under which the propositional part of the sentence is feasible, thus softening the compound assertive-commissive illocutionary force. An additional meaning of the conditionality of the action is possible due to the presuppositional meaning of the adverb, which in its inference pattern contains senses *in stages, and not all at once*. Extending the sentence with a conditional implicature indexed by the adverb *successively*, we get the statement that does not meet the basic felicity conditions for assertives, that is, the speaker's confidence in what he is saying: We can fill the gaps created by these deliveries of our partners, *but only on condition that this is done sequentially, in stages, and not all at once*. The conditionality of the action is also implied by the presuppositional meaning of the idiom *to do my utmost*, which inference pattern presupposes the conventional implicature *not everything depends on me* about additional conditions of the act implementation.

The third group of mitigators is constituted by shields that, according to Caffi (1999, p. 883) “covers” the figure of the speaker using deictic shifts of various kinds (e.g. when time, place or agent of the utterance are put out of focus of the hearer). Identifying shields, the article was guided by the classification of three types of deixis – personal, spatial, and temporal, introduced by Fillmore (1975). We also used the division of personal deixis means into those related to the producer of the speech act, called the locutionary source, and to its addressee, called the locutionary goal.

Among the shields, the article singles out the following groups of deictic markers. The first group includes passive and impersonal constructions, which remove the agent of action from the position of the phrasal subject and iconically distance the speaker from his own discourse as in (14), (15), (16).

- (14) The military equipment *must be deployable*.

- (15) We *are* therefore *heavily engaged* with units in Slovakia and Lithuania, among other countries.

- (16) *a list of military equipment that can be delivered quickly*.

The second group of deictic markers involves metonymic objectification replacing personal deixis with reference to institutional structure as in (17) and first person plural pronouns, which are marked by vagueness and generalization and reduce the speaker's responsibility for actions nominated in the propositional part, by moving them into the sphere of joint responsibility as suggested by (18) and (19). The use of inclusive pronouns as shields, blurring personal deixis and the associated responsibility of the speaker, in a political context aligns with one of the principles of German politics articulated by Chancellor Scholz, namely: avoiding unilateral actions by any single supporting country and making decisions only "in close consultation and coordination with our friends and allies" (Kinkartz, 2023).

- (17) *The Bundeswehr's options* for supplying further weapons from its arsenal are largely exhausted.
- (18) *We* will consider everything carefully, constantly re-evaluating and consulting with *our* closest allies.
- (19) It is a difficult balancing act that *we* constantly have to conduct together with *our* partners.

In (17), the deictic reference to the speaker is vague and based on a distancing metonymic objectification by referring to the institutional structure, the German armed forces, as the subject of responsibility for delays in the supply of weapons. Thus, the speaker avoids taking personal responsibility for a certain action, since, due to shield – metonymic objectification, he acts only as a representative of a certain institutional structure.

The third group of deictic markers includes means of removing other agents of action from discourse, aimed at protecting their faces as in (20) and (21), the means of non-specificity and generalization that expand the referential sphere of deixis to a generalized addressee as in (22), (23) and (24) as well as a generalized deixis to actors described by the speaker's utterances as in (25), (26) and (27) including deixis metonymy as in (28).

- (20) Imposing a no-fly zone, as *has been called for*, *would* have made NATO a party to the war (instead of "Ukraine called for").

- (21) The string of military defeats can no longer be glossed over by *any government propaganda* (instead of “Russian propaganda”).
- (22) *Any person* who does not consider it possible to judge their own actions with hindsight differently than they do in the middle of events cannot act responsibly.
- (23) There are, *of course, many* who have a different opinion than mine.
- (24) *is anyone* actually thinking about the global consequences?
- (25) *Many who* categorically rejected this step in the past.
- (26) *Many of our allies* are doing so as well.
- (27) *Others* have also issued this serious warning to him.
- (28) *That is why*, in discussion with *German industry*.

The fourth group of deictic markers encompasses means of temporary deixis – the use of lexical and grammatical markers of an indefinite future tense, which results in the vagueness of the speaker’s obligations as in (29); the use of the modal verb *would*, referring to the realm of possibility instead of reality as in (30) and (31).

- (29) *In the medium term*, we *will* help Ukraine develop its defensive capability, also with Western weapons.
- (30) The consequences of a mistake *would be* dramatic.
- (31) That *would be* inappropriate.

The conclusion made in the article about the absence of a demarcation line between bushes and hedges – considering their impact on the illocutionary force of speech acts, is also true for hedges and shields, especially for those that are associated with deixis to the utterance agent, since both hedges and shields aim to mitigate or avoid personal factors, thereby reducing the speaker’s responsibility for his words. Thus, parenthetical hedges *I do not see, I do not think. I am sorry* in (3-5),

softening the illocutionary force of assertives, simultaneously serve as deictic markers of the speaker, while functioning as shields.

The functional intersection of shields and hedges becomes even more evident when they implement the “not-I” strategy of the speaker’s withdrawal from the role of the subject-agent of actions along with the removal of the addressee or other agents of the utterance out of its communicative focus. This strategy is implemented both at the semantic and grammatical levels where the means of deictic de-focusing function both as shields, providing deictic generalization of the subject as in (17-19), or its removal from the communicative focus as in (14-16), and as hedges, reducing illocutionary force of assertives, implicit directives and indirect commissives. As in the case of bushes and hedges, the topos *Precaution* serves as a conceptual-argumentative framework for the use of shields that implement the “not-I” strategy of the speaker’s withdrawal from the communicative focus of statements with defocusing of his personal responsibility.

Despite the absence of a clear line of demarcation between bushes, hedges and shields due to the impact of all three groups of mitigators on the illocutionary force of an utterance, it is still possible to differentiate mitigators according to the criteria for their implementation of various discursive strategies as is shown in Table 2.

Table 2 – Types of Mitigators in the Implementation of Discursive Strategies in the Discourse of Assistance to Ukraine

Topos Precautions	
BUSHES	Reduction of responsibility through the conditionality of the implementation of actions by circumstances
HEDGES	Transferring responsibility to the sphere of subjective epistemic modality with increasing probability instead of the certainty of what is being reported
SHIELDS	Replacement, impersonalization or generalization of personal responsibility or its distancing / non-specification in time

Source: Author’s Survey

Bushes in “folded form” contain additional conditions of the implementation of the action stated by the propositional content of the utterances. Conditioning the implementation of actions by circumstances, they implement a discursive strategy of reduction of the

speaker's responsibility for reported facts (assertives), implicit promises (commissives) and recommendations / warnings (implicit directives).

Shields "blur" the deixis to different components of the denotative situation represented by the utterance, implementing the discursive strategy of transfer, generalization or impersonalization of the speaker's responsibility for reported facts, implicit promises, and recommendations / warnings. In addition, shields transfer the actions / events from the realm of reality to the realm of possibility or ability. Based on it, the article includes in this group of mitigators not only deictic temporal markers, but also modal verbs with the same *possibility* and *condition*. Hedges implement the discursive strategies of authorization and de-officialization in assertive speech acts. However, when implementing such strategies, they simultaneously become triggers for implicatures about the speaker's uncertainty about the stated state of affairs or the feasibility of actions, since the transfer of responsibility to the sphere of subjective epistemological modality increases the probability instead of the reliability of what is being reported. In indirect directives, hedge-passive constructions and hedge-impersonal structures that weaken the illocutionary force of such acts are difficult to distinguish from that group of shields that blur personal deixis, removing the agent of action from the position of the phrasal subject and iconically distancing him from his own discourse.

The distribution of mitigators into groups based on discursive strategies – with the allocation of both "pure" or monofunctional means, and polyfunctional mitigators, is presented in Table 3.

Table 3 – Bushes, hedges, shields and multifunctional mitigators in their verbalizers

Bushes	Hedges	Shields	Polyfunctional mitigators
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - adverbs of time and manner - pronouns-determiners, - nouns, - justification enhancers, blurring the denotative scope of the utterance and implicating the conditions under which its propositional content is true / feasible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - epistemological non-factive verbs, often in negative form, in combination with first person singular pronoun - subordinate clauses that serve as explanatory and justifying comments on unpopular measures to protect the speaker's face, thereby mitigating the assertive felicity condition of the speaker's confidence in what is being said 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - metonymic objectification replacing personal deixis with reference to institutional structure - 1st person plural pronouns instead of 1st person singular pronouns - means of passivation and generalization to withdraw actors of actions from discourse, aimed at protecting their faces - non-specific and generalized deixis to the addressee or actors described by the speaker's utterances - metonymic generalization of the subject and actors of utterances - means of temporary deixis, which results in the vagueness of the speaker's obligations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - impersonal, passive, or nominal forms (a) as hedges to decrease the directive illocutionary force and (b) as shields to blur the personal deixis - the modal verb "can" and the phrase "to be able to", which indicate the possibility instead of feasibility thereby reducing the responsibility of the speaker for his words and serving as (a) hedges to reduce the illocution of assertives and commissives, and (b) as shields transferring promises or statements from the plane of reality to the plane of possibility

Source: Author's Survey

5 Conclusion

The study has shown that the topos *Precaution*, analyzed in the discourse on assistance to Ukraine, is a component of argumentative models that justify the principles of German politics regarding the inadmissibility of escalating the conflict into a direct confrontation between NATO and Russia, preventing a nuclear war, avoiding unilateral actions, and making decisions in coordination with alliance allies, sensitivity to the moods and expectations of the German citizens, etc. This topos is based on discourse-shaping strategies and the speech acts that manifest them, whose illocutionary force is weakened by mitigators in order to balance between cautious statements and expected decisive actions, with the aim of the speaker preserving his face by employing self-serving mitigation strategies and their underlying tools. The article reached three main results.

1. The weakening of the illocutionary force of acts is influenced not only by hedges, which are traditionally distinguished based on this criterion, but also by other groups of mitigators – bushes and shields. This explains the use by the article of such an additional classification criterion as the connection of the type of mitigators with the implementation of a certain discursive strategy.

2. Bushes implement the discursive strategy of reducing the speaker's responsibility for reported facts (assertives), implicit promises (commissives) and recommendations / warnings (implicit directives) by actualizing conventional implicatures about additional conditions of the action implementation. Shields provide a discursive strategy for transferring, generalizing, or depersonalizing the speaker's responsibility for the assertives-based facts, implicit promises, and indirect recommendations / warnings by “blurring” the deixis to different components of the denotative situation and transferring the action / event from the realm of reality into the realm of the possibility of action or ability of the speaker.

Hedges implement two discursive strategies based respectively on softening assertive and directive illocutionary forces. In assertives they transfer responsibility to the sphere of subjective epistemic modality with increasing probability instead of the certainty of what is being reported. In implicit directive acts, hedges implement a strategy of generalizing

or depersonalizing the responsibility of the speaker in recommending or warning, and thus intersect with the functional scope of shields.

3. The group of bushes includes adverbs of time and mode of action, pronouns-determinants, nouns, and justification enhancers, which in their lexical presuppositions contain semes that blur the denotative sphere of the utterance. In the group of hedges the article singles out the epistemological non-factual verbs, often in negative form, combined with a first-person singular pronoun as well as subordinate clauses – an explanatory and justifying comments on unpopular measures to protect the speaker’s face, which doubt the assertive felicity condition of the speaker’s confidence in what is being said. The group of shields involves metonymic objectification replacing personal deixis with a reference to the institutional structure, 1st person plural pronouns instead of 1st person singular pronouns, means of passivation and generalization for removing actors from discourse aimed at protecting their faces, non-specific and generalized deixis to the addressee or actors described by statements, a metonymic generalization of the subject and actors, as well as means of temporary deixis that ensure the obscurity of the speaker’s obligations. The article also identified polyfunctional mitigators that are involved in the implementation of several discursive strategies simultaneously – impersonal, passive, or nominal forms, as well as the modal verb “may” and the phrase “to be able”, which are distributed into groups of both hedges and shields.

The perspective of the research is a comparative analysis of the topoi *Precaution* vs. Justice in their manifestation in discursive and pragmatic strategies of the political discourse of assistance.

Authors contribution

Kravchenko Nataliia: made substantial contributions to the idea; analysed the data; took the lead in writing the paper; reviewed the content of the paper; approved the final version to be submitted and published; came to an agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the paper.

Yudenko Oleksandr: developed the idea of the research; contributed to the interpretation of the results and analysis; made the collection, analysis of data for the research; approved of the final version to be submitted and published; came to an agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the paper.

Zhykharieva Olena: developed the idea of the research; made contributions to the method of the research and data; took the lead in writing the paper; approved of the final version to be submitted and published; came to an agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the paper.

Kryknitska Iryna: provided interpretation of data for the research; contributed to the interpretation of the results and analysis; designed the tables; approved of the final version to be submitted and published; came to an agreement to be accountable for all aspects of the paper.

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