Original Research Article

Hedging as a Crisis Communication Strategy: The Case of the Anglophone Crisis in Cameroon (2016-2020)

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Abstract: This paper examined the use of hedging in information subsidies about the Anglophone Crisis. More specifically, it sought to determine which hedging devices were used in government information subsidies about the crisis, establish the discourse and communication functions of these hedges, and determine the crisis response postures reflected through hedging. The paper adopted a documentation and records method to obtain 83 information subsidies (speeches, communiques, reports, policy statements, media statements or 'outings', press releases, press conference presentations, press kits, etc.) from twelve government institutions. These twelve institutions were purposively chosen because of their centrality to the government's crisis communications about the Anglophone Crisis between October 2016 and December 20. Nvivo was used for content analysis of information subsidies. Quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis, presentation and discussion were used. The study identified six categories of hedging devices which served varied discourse and communication functions. For example, approximators and rounders were used to distance the government from particularly controversial claims about key crisis issues; while contrastive conjunctions served to highlight support for government crisis management strategies, protect government credibility, and diminish the amount of crisis responsibility attributed to the government. Conditionals were used to express beliefs, claims and stances about Anglophone Crisis events in a way that restricts potentially controversial interpretations. Plausibility and attribution shields reduce the force of government crisis managers' claims by signalling uncertainty towards crisis messaging content and attributing particular crisis-related beliefs or commitments to other stakeholders. These findings show the role of hedging in crisis communication about the Anglophone Crisis. Given the divergence in crisis response postures reflected, this study recommends greater synchrony in the use of hedging devices.

Keywords: Hedging, Crisis Communication, Anglophone Crisis, Information subsidies.

1. INTRODUCTION

In October 2016, a crisis broke out in the North West and South West regions of Cameroon. Dubbed the Anglophone Crisis, it is the latest (and so far the most serious) phase of what has previously been described as the "Anglophone Question" and/or the "Anglophone Problem". From 1961, when British Northern Cameroons voted in a UN-organised plebiscite to join the Federal Republic of Nigeria and British Southern Cameroons voted to join already-independent Republique du Cameroun, the "warning signs" (Coombs, 2015) were already noticeable. These crisis signs developed along three major thrusts, including the Cameroonian constitution's troubled background, socio-economic and political factors, and the growth of Anglophone opposition and consciousness especially in the 1990s (Konings & Nyamnjoh, 2003). By 2017, the Anglophone Crisis had degenerated into an armed conflict, as armed separatist groups emerged to demand secession from La Republique du Cameroun.

This paper contends that the use of language has been consequential in debates about the Anglophone Crisis. As separatist groups push for secession and the government deploys its crisis management mechanism to keep the country

together, ensuing crisis events have had widespread physical, material and emotional effects. These effects are amplified by the sensitivity of spoken and written challenges to cultural, political, ideological and other values or affiliations of state and non-state actors. The crisis context has heightened the significance of spoken and written claims, as their insinuations may have material, psychological and even legal effects. Considering the potential implication of the content of press releases, speeches and interviews on stakeholders' crisis perceptions and expectations, there is a need to examine if and what hedging devices the government of Cameroon uses in these information subsidies to actualise its caution regarding what it says about crisis causes, stakeholders and events. This work thus examines the use of hedging devices in crisis communication by the government of Cameroon. It seeks to determine the implication of their use on crisis messaging themes. Furthermore, the paper attempts to identify crisis response postures reflected in hedging devices. In so doing, the paper seeks to answer the following questions: what hedging devices are used in government information subsidies about the Anglophone Crisis? What discourse and crisis communication functions do these hedges play? How is the overall crisis response by the government of Cameroon reflected in the use of hedging?

2. CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Crisis communication is a complex group of processes undertaken by an institution before, during and after an event or series of events that the institution and/or its associated stakeholders perceive as a crisis. Frandsen and Johansen (2010) state that it includes multiple discourses, contexts and actors. These discourses are actualised through specific, interrelated genres and texts. Press statements, speeches and other information supports constitute one of such genres. Faced with the Anglophone Crisis, the Cameroon government uses these tools to establish blame and assign guilt or innocence, justify, condemn or appeal to stakeholders, and characterise events and stakeholders. The collection, processing and dissemination processes which make up crisis communication include the "creation and dissemination of crisis messages to people outside of the team" before, during and after a crisis Coombs (2010, p. 20). The onset and progression of the Anglophone Crisis accentuated the need to deliver well-crafted messages through appropriate media to specific publics and stakeholders. Tensions over different levels of perceived importance given to the official languages, English and French, have equally brought the nature of language use under increased scrutiny. This tie with Nkwetisama (2021) who underscores that stakeholders in conflict matters often overlook the role of language in the resolution or settlement of conflict. These stakeholders tend to minimize the fact that the whole business of conflict resolution is a question of communication and that communication entails the use of language.

Mindful of the need for caution in language use during crises, Temnikova and Margova (2009) proposed using a controlled language in crisis management. Their proposal sought to significantly reduce the lexical, morphological and syntactic complexity of language used in crisis. This approach could enhance directness and clarity in information subsidies used during crises, and reduces the risk of misinterpretations or mistranslations of sensitive messages. Conversely, it is likely to reduce the ability to use deliberately fuzzy language, which could be a handy linguistic tool for crisis managers looking to distance themselves from the full implication of pronouncements they make during crises. No controlled language for crisis communication purposes has been developed in Cameroon, although official bulletins of recommended English and French cognates for government officials are periodically published by the presidency's bilingualism service (Ayafor, 2005).

Cheo and Ngwobela (2019) carried out a study on language use and social perceptions in Cameroon. The aim of their study was to examine how English as an official language was used in public media spaces and, mindful of a surge in Anglophone consciousness caused by the Anglophone Crisis, to identify and explain the link between language use and this consciousness. They used Geosemiotics, which identified meanings produced by code placement choices in public media spaces, and adopted the Social Construction of Consciousness theory and Osgoodian model of communication to show links between language use, Anglophone consciousness, and collective reflectivity as medial feedback in a broadly conceived public communication process. The findings revealed that bilingual public media spaces have become sites of linguistic struggle and that Anglophone Cameroonians' interpretations and evaluations of lower visibility for English in these spaces constitute an entry point for collectively reflexive processes. The study underlines the mutually influential link between language use and other aspects of the Anglophone crisis.

Nkwetisama (2021) on his part undertook a study on language, conflict and nation building in which he made an appraisal of the Linguistic Approach in government attempts at addressing the Anglophone Crisis. The study surveys how resources and devices of linguistics are used to reconstruct regulate and manipulate reality; and how political language is used in labelling and then categorising things, states, processes, people, events, phenomena and the goals of the state in order to frame them in a way appropriate to regulate and control the ideas and behaviour of the people. The work highlights the role of language in general and the semantic approach in conflict management.

3. HEDGING

Hedging is a broad pragmatic concept that covers almost any "expression of tentativeness or possibility or with a softening or downtoning function" (Johansen, 2020, p. 1). In both written and spoken discourse, pragmatically

competent communicators are able to capture nuances in their utterances, to anticipate the hearer's possible interpretations of these utterances, and to pivot towards intended meanings or understandings of their utterances. Such pragmatic competence is particularly significant in specific socio-cultural, economic and other settings like crises when the socio-political atmosphere is charged. Applied to the Anglophone Crisis, we notice that statements and claims are liable to different, possibly biased, controversial, divisive and/or uniting interpretations. Through hedging, speakers and writers distance themselves from the claims that they make. A hedge indicates a lack of commitment to the full semantic membership and force of a proposition. It presents an opinion or claim in an objective manner and softens the force of an utterance. This softening makes the content of the proposition more acceptable to the reader or listener, and suggests doubt, vagueness, contextuality and approximation in the making of claims (Hyland, 1994; Milanovic & Milanovic, 2010; Johansen, 2020). Structurally, hedges may be single words, phrases, clauses or syntactic structures, the context of which use determines their attenuation functions. A linguistic item is a hedge if it is possible to restate the proposition such that it is not changed but the authors' commitment to it is greater. This paper adopts the eclectic typology of hedging devices proposed by Milanovic and Milnanovic (2010).

4. METHODOLOGY

This paper adopted a documentation and records method to obtain 83 information subsidies (speeches, communiques, reports, policy statements, media statements or 'outings', press releases, press conference presentations, press kits, etc.) from twelve government institutions, including: the Presidency of the Republic of Cameroon; the Prime Ministry; the Ministries of Communication, Territorial Administration, Defence, External Relations, Justice, Posts and Telecommunications, Basic Education, Secondary Education, Higher Education, as well as Decentralization and Local Development. These twelve institutions were purposively chosen because of their centrality to the government's crisis communications about the Anglophone Crisis. The sampling procedure therefore took into consideration the degree to which these institutions were frameable as crisis managers – those individuals and institutions that plan, oversee, and/or execute the crisis management efforts of the institution in crisis, across the various stages of the crisis life cycle (Coombs, 2015). Only information subsidies in English which addressed the Anglophone Crisis and were released between October 2016 and December 2020 were considered. Nvivo was used for content analysis of information subsidies. Content analysis was chosen because it can be used as an interpretive approach that is observational and narrative in nature, and also as a technique for a quantitative description of communication content (Berelson, 1952). Quantitative and qualitative methods of data analysis, presentation and discussion were used.

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents and discusses the findings in relation to the research questions. The first question seeks to determine what hedging devices are used in government information supports about the Anglophone Crisis. In this regard, the content analysis revealed that variants of six groups of hedging devices occurred a total of 119 times in the corpus, as reflected in Table 1 below. Approximators, imprecision-markers and rounders featured most prominently, accounting for 24.4% of all occurrences of hedging in the corpus. Concessive adjuncts and conditionals each constituted 21% of government's use of hedging, whereas shields and impersonal constructions made up 9.2% and 6.7% of hedging strategies, respectively. The range of categories signals a significant level of complexity in government's deployment of hedging. Specific uses to which particular categories are put equally vary.

Table 1: Occurrence of Hedging Devices in Information Subsidies

Hedging device	Number of References	Percentage
Approximators, imprecision-markers and rounders	29	24.4
Concessive adjuncts	25	21
Conditionals	25	21
Comments on value-judgments and truth-judgments (Positive and negative dimensions)	21	17.6
Plausibility and attribution shields	11	9.2
Impersonal constructions	8	6.7
Total	119	100

Source: Authors' fieldwork 2022

In terms of what discourse and communication functions these hedges play, the six categories of hedging devices generally indicate a lack of commitment to the full semantic membership and force of different propositions. Some categories present crisis managers' opinions and/or claims as objective. Others soften the force of crisis messaging themes, making them potentially more acceptable to target stakeholders. Hedging strategies are also employed to suggest doubt and lend different degrees of vagueness to some aspects of crisis messaging. Their use provides contextuality and approximation to crisis managers' claims, declarations, promises, and threats.

5.1 Approximators, Imprecision-markers and Rounders

Crisis managers use verbs, adverbs, adverbials, modals, adjectival and adjunctive constructions to create vagueness, variability and deliberate imprecision in messaging about specific crisis issues. They appear to not know, want to, or need to provide exact information about crisis stakeholders and/or events. This category of hedges softens, weakens or makes less potent the full import of some crisis declarations and claims. In crisis messaging about particular controversial issues, crisis managers deploy these strategies, reducing the likelihood of being held to the semantic and pragmatic import of their utterances. Excerpts i) and ii) illustrate the use of these strategies.

i) *The Major National Dialogue afforded an opportunity to make recommendations, [some of] which are being implemented, with laws recently passed by Parliament.*

ii) *Thus, our two regions of the North-West and South-West have been granted, [within the framework of our Republic], a special status which [largely] meets the aspirations of our fellow citizens living there.*

In i), *some of* is critical to creating imprecision and limiting the implication of the claim that government is taking action based on recommendations from the Major National Dialogue (MND). Two major messages are communicated in ii); the granting of a special status as part of government crisis response and the suitability of this measure as a response to claims about political, social and economic marginalisation. The significance of these messages, respectively expressed in the main and relative clauses, is weakened through the inclusion of two specific constructions; a prepositional phrase (*within the framework of our Republic*) and an adverb of degree (*largely*). Although primarily semantic, this weakening carries legal, administrative and political implications within the crisis context. By using the prepositional phrase, crisis managers distance themselves from potential interpretations of the message as the granting of political, administrative and/or territorial autonomy demands made by some stakeholders. It confines these potential meanings/interpretations by projecting *our Republic* as the superordinate legal, political and administrative entity within which all crisis responses operate and will be implemented. The full force of the message is thus weakened to reflect government's distancing from any crisis response measure which includes a possible modification to the form of the state.

The relative clause is used to achieve a similar hedging effect. This subordinate clause expresses the impact and/or suitability of the measure contained in the main clause (granting of a special status). Distancing from the full force of this message (that the special status meets the aspirations of crisis stakeholders in the North West and South West regions) is achieved by signalling variability. The adverb *largely* suggests that the measure is reasonably suitable and goes significantly far. However, it equally indicates a gap between the fullness of these stakeholders' *aspirations* and the extent of the measure taken by government. The impact of this hedging strategy may be illuminated further by hypothetically considering the semantic, legal and administrative weight of the same crisis messaging, but without the hedges, as follows:

Our two regions of the North West and South West have been granted a special status which meets the aspirations of our fellow citizens living there.

Even if it is assumed that special status typically functions within a larger administrative unit, crisis managers' deliberate inclusion of these hedges is telling. Besides, this assumption could be outweighed in significance by the claim (in the main clause) that the measure meets the aspirations of stakeholders in the two regions. Within the Anglophone Crisis situation, some of these aspirations include a change to the form of the state. The adverb *largely* thus deliberately distances crisis managers from full commitment to the semantic and legal implications of the claim. The hedges used are thus both content-oriented and participant-oriented.

More broadly, the use of approximators and rounders indicates government's positioning on key crisis issues. It reveals a willingness to engage and take action, but equally unveils unwillingness to compromise on arguably the most consequential stakeholder expectations. Crisis managers deploy similar strategies to acknowledge some external stakeholders' genuine attempts to help resolve the crisis, suggest perceived malice behind other stakeholders' initiatives, and tout the success of the Major National Dialogue (MND). These hedges equally contribute to assertions about the professionalism of the Cameroonian army and claims about alignments between government policies and the aspirations of the Cameroonians. Some additional uses of this strategy, as they relate to different aspects of messaging content and different crisis stakeholders, are shown in iii), iv) and v).

iii) Also, the blunders that [some elements of] this Army [may] commit, [at times] and [according to circumstances], cannot in any way tarnish the image of our Defence and Security Forces, which have distinguished themselves in Cameroon, Africa and the world, through their professionalism, discipline and constant attachment to republican values and institutions.

iv) Its [reference to the Cameroonian military] vocation is to ensure the defence of the entire nation and all Cameroonians [who are respectful of institutions], without discrimination.

v) [The [vast] majority of] Cameroonians aspire to live together in peace.

5.2 Concessive Adjuncts

Contrastive conjunctions and other discourse markers are used in the corpus to show an alternative aspect of a crisis event, cause, or stakeholder. Their use highlights the opposite of a situation, raises questions about the value of previously provided information, and distances the government from possible interpretations of specific information. The ultimate intention is to express support for government policies and actions, protect government credibility, and reduce perceptions of government responsibility in crisis events. In vi) to viii), contrastive constructions distance the government from unpleasant crisis events and outcomes by providing another side of the event(s).

vi) [These efforts notwithstanding], there have been lingering difficulties, [especially owing to the emergence of political demands by extremist and separatist organizations].

vii) [Despite the efforts made by the Government], radical movements, mainly inspired from abroad, have exploited and distorted the corporate demands.

viii) [Despite this respect of commitments with regard to both their content, form and procedures by the Government], the other party refused to call off the strike, [contrary to what had been agreed upon], on the motive that the claims which were answered by the Government were not the major ones.

In viii) for example, the key message is contained in the independent clause *the other party refused to call off the strike*. This is an unpleasant crisis management outcome. It signals the continuation of strike action, with its attendant educational, social, legal and economic fallouts among stakeholder communities. It also suggests rising stakeholder power, understood as crisis stakeholders' ability to interrupt institutional continuity and make an institution do something it might otherwise not do. To distance the government from this unpleasant message and foreground other stakeholders as responsible for the unpleasant outcome, contrastive expressions are deployed. Hence, *despite this respect of commitments with regard to both their content, form and procedures* provides another side of the event, highlighting positive government efforts to meet the demands of striking education and judicial sector professionals. Further distancing is achieved by using another contrastive discourse marker to introduce another aspect of the crisis event. Thus, *contrary to what had been agreed upon*, used adjunctively, suggests that the government had reached an agreement by which the crisis event (strike) was to be solved. In this way, crisis managers shift the responsibility for the persistence of the crisis event to other stakeholders (*the other party* – a reference to the leadership of one of the striking teachers' trade unions).

Concessive adjuncts are also used to indicate institutional plans. In ix), contrastive discourse markers suggest the government's willingness to go the extra mile to understand and make public the reality of a crisis event. Thus, after providing a range of justifications about the behaviour of accused elements of the Cameroonian army, the crisis manager adds:

ix) [Nevertheless], and [despite the irrefutable nature of the evidence that I have just presented you], the Head of State has ordered the opening of an investigation as per usual practice.

The contrastives *nevertheless* and *despite the irrefutable nature of the evidence* suggest the existence of information enough to exonerate state security forces. Their use also frames future actions (such as opening an investigation) as demonstrations of the government's transparency, credibility and goodwill in managing sensitive crisis events. Other variants of this strategy are shown in x) and xi).

x) In the North-West and South-West Regions, socio- professional grievances, [which the Government nonetheless strove to address adequately], were exploited by extremists seeking to impose their secessionist plans through violence.

xi) The security operations conducted to that end have already yielded excellent results. They will continue unabated, [but without excesses].

As xii) shows, concessive adjuncts are equally used to distance the government from potentially incendiary or controversial positions on crisis events, claims and stakeholders.

xii) [However], we would like to point out that [never] in this unrest, were Barristers, Teachers or Students, involved in these irresponsible acts of violence.

Lastly, concessive adjuncts are used to contest claims about crisis causes and events, and to provide alternative information about government's crisis history. Several voices provide predominantly negative accounts of the Cameroonian government's crisis management history (Amin, 2020; Bone, 2021). Negative stakeholder perceptions of this history (should) determine the thrust of crisis messaging (Coombs, 2015). As xiii) below shows, faced with this negative contextual modifier, crisis managers opt for denial messaging.

xiii) [However], I would like to underscore that [as faithful as I have always been to the regional balance policy], I chose a Prime Minister who hails from the South-West Region. His predecessor who served in that key position [for nearly ten years] was from the North-West Region. In fact, since 9 April 1992, Prime

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Ministers, Heads of Government, have been appointed from among the people of those two regions. [Despite all this, some people will continue to talk of marginalization of the people of these regions].

Contrastive discourse markers frame alternative aspects of institutional history and distance the government from the full weight of other stakeholders' claims relating to the political, economic and social marginalisation of Anglophone Cameroonians. The contrastives *however* and *despite all this* help to frame alternative aspects of crisis history (faithfulness to institutional regional balance policy and appointment of Anglophones as Prime Minister) as negations of other stakeholders' claims. This contestation is strengthened by the prepositional phrase *for nearly ten years*, used to characterise an Anglophone Prime Minister's unusually long tenure. The approximator *nearly* suggests special government commitment to including Anglophones in institutional leadership. Overall, concessive adjuncts are used to defend institutional positions, contest other stakeholders' claims about institutional lapses, and question the actions of other stakeholders. These uses contribute to developing a crisis response posture of denial.

5.3 Conditionals

Information subsidy messaging features multiple claims, declarations, promises and commitments. Through them, crisis managers indicate institutional beliefs about crisis issues and stakeholders, and announce government policy. These beliefs, claims and stances are frequently articulated in a manner that limits their range of application and/or interpretation. To achieve this, crisis managers employ conditional constructions to predicate government claims and standpoints on hypothetical situations.

This hedging strategy limits the circumstances under which the government is willing to engage with other stakeholders and consider their demands. In the illustrative excerpts below, the overarching message relates to institutional willingness to dialogue and engage with professional, political and other stakeholder groups. The existence and institutional protection of multiple freedoms (of speech and association) in Cameroon are equally evoked. However, hedging reduces the government's commitment to the full scale of this message by predicating it on specific hypothetical situations.

xiv) Our country does enjoy political and trade union freedoms which are guaranteed and governed by our laws and regulations. Against this backdrop, every citizen can rightfully opine on any aspect of national life, including through [duly declared] [peaceful] strike action.

xv) I should make it very clear that, to my mind, dialogue has always been and will always remain the best means of resolving problems, [so long as it is strictly in line with republican legality].

The strategy equally predicates government legal, military and other actions on certain conditions. Regarding military action, specific applications of the strategy distance the government from full commitment to the propositional weight of crisis managers' threats. Crisis managers also utilise conditionals to boost government credibility. Thus, they signal administrative and judicial rigour in critical crisis issues, including investigations of crisis events, preparations for dialogue, etc. In this way, crisis messaging creates the impression that the government possesses immense military and judicial might, but is guided in its use of these latter by republican and humane principles. The excerpts below illustrate aspects of this strategy.

xvi) [If my appeal to warmongers to lay down their weapons remains unheeded], the Defence and Security Forces will be instructed to neutralize them

xvii) Nevertheless, investigations are underway and [in the event of proven misconduct], the Government will take some disciplinary and corrective measures [as appropriate].

xviii) Furthermore, I intend to continue the dialogue initiated [with people of good-will] to bring about lasting peace.

As xvii) shows, government extensions of goodwill are predicated on the perceived qualities of the stakeholders involved. Crisis managers signal their willingness to continue negotiations *with people of goodwill*. This hedged commitment is made after a review of the MND, thus eliminating potential ambiguity regarding whether *people of goodwill* refers to stakeholders with whom dialogue was broached or stakeholders with whom the government intends to proceed with dialogue efforts. While this hedge does not follow the lexico-syntactic formula used in other parts of the data, it plays a similar function – reducing the force of the commitment. Besides, the hypothetical quality of goodwill provides the government with even more wriggle room, as determinants of what constitutes proof of goodwill are unlikely to be unanimously agreed upon by opposing stakeholders. This strategy is equally used in crisis managers' framing of other stakeholders and their actions, as the excerpt below exemplifies.

xix) The trade unions had then taken the commitment to suspend the strike call [in the event where at least one of the 11 concerns raised in their strike notice of 6 November 2016 would have received a favorable reply from the Government no later than 30 November 2016].

In xix), the hedge is used to frame trade unions leaders' commitment to calling off strike action. It also sets the scene for further claims about the government's reliability and goodwill, as opposed to other stakeholders' perceived unreliability. This becomes evident in crisis managers' subsequent declarations about having kept their side of the bargain by meeting some of the demands made by trade unions, in contrast to some trade union leaders' refusal to call off the strike. Thus, while specific hedging strategies distance the government from the full import of specific utterances, they equally contribute to the overall complexity of the government crisis response posture. This specific illustration signals both ingratiation and scapegoating crisis response strategies. While the former suggests a bolstering posture, the latter points to a denial posture, thus creating complexity in the crisis response.

5.4 Plausibility and Attribution Shields
In some information subsidies, crisis managers signal uncertainty towards the content of their crisis messaging. They also attribute certain crisis related claims, beliefs and/or commitments to action to other stakeholders. This is achieved through the use of plausibility and attribution shields. Plausibility shields signal uncertainty; attribution shields share or shift the implicatory force of crisis messaging. Within the Anglophone Crisis rhetorical arena where crisis actors make reference to other (usually opposing) stakeholders' crisis messaging content to hold them to account, these shields deflect commitment to the full force of messaging regarding official government positions on crisis causes as well as specific crisis events, plans, policies, etc. Excerpt xx) below illustrates crisis managers' use of shields.

> xx) Another truth [that has not been denied by the Joint Commission of Inquiry] and that must be said is that the detachment of military and gendarmes dispatched to Ngarbuh was not intended to exterminate civilians or set houses on fire

The crisis manager seeks to clarify the purpose of military action during a specific crisis event. The excerpt reflects a consciousness of varied voices in the crisis arena which indict military action in the crisis event and attribute responsibility for the negative outcomes of the event to the government. The crisis manager therefore asserts that the negative outcomes (*exterminate civilians* and *set houses on fire*) were not the purpose of military action. Commitment to the force of the proposition is however lessened by attributing its validity to a different stakeholder. The choice of stakeholder and sub-strategies are equally notable.

Firstly, by referencing a stakeholder the entire existence of which is dedicated to understanding the specific crisis event in question, the crisis manager seeks to establish credibility for the object of his attribution. Secondly, a negative construction*, has not been denied*, creates an additional shield and lessens commitment to the import of the strategy itself. Thus, the crisis manager does not employ positive or definitive declaratives to assert that the Joint Commission of Inquiry into the Ngarbuh incident validated or accepted government claims about military action in Ngarbuh. He rather opts for a negative construction which pragmatically limits even the Joint Commission's commitment to the force of the utterance. This double shielding contributes to building a crisis posture of denial.

Variants of such shielding are used in the following excerpts.

> xxi) As for the situation in the North-West and South-West Regions, whose reconstruction programme the Head of State has just launched, [the Government, through my voice], urges the people of these two Regions to continue to support the local authorities, as well as our Defence and Security Forces, in their struggle to restore peace in this part of our country.
> xxii) [Pursuant to the Instructions of the PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC, His Excellency Paul BIYA], the Minister of State, Secretary General of the Presidency of the Republic, through a press release dated 21 April 2020, published the Report of the Joint Inquiry Commission set up on 17 February 2020, by the Minister Delegate at the Presidency of the Republic in charge of Defence, ordered by the Head of State, Commander-In-Chief of the Armed Forces, with the mission to shed light on the tragic events that occurred in the locality of Ngarbuh, on the night of 13 to 14 February 2020, and to establish the responsibilities of the different actors.
> xxiii) To this end, in Cameroon [as elsewhere], the information is collected from sources that enjoy the best presumption of reliability, and is then cross-checked before being made public, in order to limit as much as possible the margins of error likely to alter it.

Excerpt xxi) exemplifies the use of attribution shields to indicate the institutional (rather than personal) weight of crisis requests, declarations, policies, etc. While this institutional shielding occurs frequently in the data, an apparent reversal of it is even more recurrent, especially when institutional leadership is referenced. Excerpt xxii) exemplifies this attribution shielding (*Pursuant to the Instructions of the PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC, His Excellency Paul BIYA*). It is particularly notable for its use across most, and recurrence within particular, information subsidies. Such attributions of institutional action, plans, beliefs and positions to institutional leadership therefore constitute a general feature of government crisis messaging.

In xxiii), the crisis manager justifies government (in)action by suggesting the existence of procedural similarities between crisis management protocols used by the government of Cameroon and by other unnamed but supposedly more credible governments. This shield, like some others in the data, does not follow archetypal shielding formulae. Plausibility shields typically feature noncommittal mental processes (*I think, we believe*, etc.) while attribution shields are achieved using *X assured Y that Z* constructions (Johansen, 2020; Milanovic & Milanovic, 2010). Attributions to institutional leadership and to the government as an institution ('regular' attribution shields) occur in the data. However, crisis managers also use comparative phrases and negative constructions to create plausibility and attribution shields in government crisis messaging about the Anglophone Crisis.

5.5 Impersonal Constructions

With impersonal constructions, crisis managers fill subjective and objective clause positions with noncommittal or generic sentential elements, including the majestic *we*, its objective and possessive equivalents *us* and *our*, as well as indefinite pronouns. Agentless constructions are also used, especially with passives which facilitate the creation of impersonality in crisis messaging. In addition, generic descriptive categories are used to validate claims to which specific segments of the general category referenced might object or simply refuse to be associated with. Aspects of these sub-strategies are illustrated below:

xxiv) Decisions were taken subsequently to fast-track the decentralization process, with the creation of a new ministry devoted thereto.

xxv) On Wednesday, September 21, 2017, at 8:30 am, a bomb was activated against a police patrol, at the Hospital Round About, next to the Bamenda Regional Hospital.

Agentlessness enables the crisis manager present only the 'what' of crisis event. With information subsidies put out by institutional leadership, this prevents the grammatico-lexical monotony and rhetorical awkwardness of continuous self-referencing. Excerpt xxiv) above exemplifies this use of impersonality achieved through agentless constructions. Also, in the immediate aftermath of an event, the combination of scant institutional knowledge about the event and stakeholders' crisis information needs requires crisis managers to provide instructing and adjusting information. However, the same combination puts crisis managers at risk of committing themselves to utterances about participants in the crisis event (perpetrators, victims, witnesses, etc.). Of these, utterances about perpetrators and victims are most subject to scrutiny by both internal and external crisis stakeholders. Agentless constructions therefore enable limited commitment to the (perhaps unavailable or unverified) details of crisis event causes, perpetrators, blame, etc., as illustrated in xxv).

Indefinite pronouns are used nominatively and accusatively to suggest a high degree of obviousness in a claim. They distance crisis managers from the full consequence of their utterances through such suggestions of obviousness and clarity. As such, crisis manager's point to government's supposed goodwill, other stakeholders' supposed ulterior motives, etc., depending on the propositional content of the claim. Whatever thematic thrust is developed, the government's position is almost invariably defended and justified, even while commitment to the position is softened through hedging. In this regard, the xxvi) and xxvii) below are illustrative.

xxvi) [Everyone] can therefore appreciate, in the light of what I have just described in the conduct of the dialogue process initiated by the Government, the level of constructive commitment and citizenship duty of one another (sic) among the interlocutors of the Government.

xxvii) [Each of you] will therefore realize, in the light of a few selected excerpts from this indictment, that instead of an NGO for the defense of human rights, [we] are dealing with a real destabilization outfit, in the pay of secessionist movements and unacknowledged interests who dream only of installing chaos in our country.

In both excerpts, the subjectively used impersonal pronouns (in combination with previously provided information) suggest that the claim is accurate not because it is made by the crisis manager, but because the circumstances make it obviously so. Similarly, vagueness is created by using generic, noncommittal descriptives and possessives. These render the claims general enough to include stakeholders who might rather not be associated with the said claims. This lends an air of credibility to institutional stakeholders. Such generalisation is exemplified in xxviii) and xxix).

xxviii) It is [our] hope that this will restore calm that is indispensable for a return to normalcy and usual economic activity.

xxix) Credit for such accomplishments goes first and foremost to you, [the Cameroonian people]!

5.6 Comments on Value-judgements and Truth-judgements

This relates to the use of evaluative expressions to show institutional attitude towards propositional content. Structurally, they range from single descriptive adjectives, through noun and prepositional phrases, to entire adverbial, nominal and other clauses. Although these expressions relate primarily to propositional content, different evaluative slants are noticeable. Two aspects influence the nature of these slants; real world referents of propositional content

(particular crisis stakeholders, events, accusations, rumours, etc.) and (negative or positive) framing of stakeholders and their actions.

Propositional content may cast institutional stakeholders, their crisis actions, beliefs and claims positively or negatively. The same goes for non-government stakeholders. Evaluative expressions thus vary depending on which stakeholder is referenced (government or non-government, adversarial or friendly) and on whether propositional content skews towards a negative or positive framing/depiction of the stakeholder and their actions, beliefs, claims, etc. The evaluative slant in xxx) is mainly positive. Propositional content commented on relates mainly to government stakeholders (military personnel, top institutional leadership, government-created crisis-specific structures, etc.).

> xxx) Meanwhile, it [is inconceivable, not to say unthinkable], to believe for a moment that because of a political and cultural heritage which has certainly shaped our societal model, because of this cultural heritage [of which we are all proud of (sic)], the President of the Republic can exonerates (sic) himself from his [sovereign] mission entrusted to him by the people, that of protecting persons and goods on the national territory, ensure public order and guarantee fundamental freedoms of citizens as enshrined in the Constitution and laws of the Republic.

The excerpt acknowledges the political, cultural and linguistic legacy which distinguishes the North West and South West regions from the country's other eight regions (*a political and cultural heritage which has certainly shaped our societal model)*. By signaling pride in this legacy (*which we are all proud of)*, the crisis manager indirectly references the diversity element of the frequently-cited notion of unity in diversity. However, this positive nod to Anglophone Cameroonian heritage occurs and is referenced within non-essential syntactic elements. These two constructions and the positive evaluative expressions they contain are structurally and semantically outweighed by other sentential elements and evaluative expressions. Thus, the inconceivability and unthinkability of the President not fulfilling his *sovereign* mission are foregrounded, suggesting a supposed fundamental tension between Anglophone political and cultural heritage and the said mission. Institutional willingness to stick to the country's constitution and laws is therefore positively framed. Conversely, the grammatically and semantically positive comments on Anglophone political and cultural heritage are ultimately overshadowed by negative associations or involvements of this legacy in creating the need for the government to protect people's freedoms and goods.

The association of Anglophone heritage with crisis events and ideologies which created the need for government intervention is notable. It suggests a two-tiered value judgment, the first of which acknowledges its positive ideological and other assets as well as its historical contribution to shaping Cameroonian political and social life. The second tier negates this positive value judgment, framing it as a threat that needs to be contained. The same is not true of evaluative expressions that positively cast government stakeholders. The excerpts below exemplify these positive truth and value judgments.

> xxxi) Furthermore, the [most important] thing is [undoubtedly] the decision of the President of the Republic to give credence to the findings of the independent Inquiry that he ordered, to take note of them and to draw all the necessary consequences.
>
> xxxii) In the face of these intolerable acts, the Defence and Security Forces have taken [energetic] measures, often at the risk of their lives, to perform their duty of protecting citizens and their property.
>
> xxxiii) All what I have just said is [sufficient] to indicate that it was never the intention of the Government to distort the facts and attests to its [good] faith.

The second major aspect of truth and value judgment concerns evaluative expressions showing institutional attitudes towards propositional content that negatively casts some stakeholders and their actions. When propositional content negatively casts institutional stakeholders, crisis managers' evaluative expressions tend to question the truthfulness of the proposition. Adjectival, adverbial and nominal evaluative constructions are used to suggest that factual inaccuracies, malice and misleading circumstantial considerations account for negative depictions of the government and associated stakeholders, as illustrated in xxxiv), xxxv) and xxxvi) below:

> xxxiv) [Barely] had the main findings of the Inquiry ordered by the PRESIDENT of the REPUBLIC following those unfortunate events been made public that voices were raised here and there, through the media and social networks, to denounce [what they considered to be] lies previously uttered by the Government in connection with those events.
>
> xxxv) The [supposed] feeling of marginalization by the people of the North-West and South-West Regions has often been advanced to justify this crisis.
>
> xxxvi) That was, Distinguished Journalists, Ladies and Gentlemen, the truth, [the whole truth and nothing but the truth] about these events which [unfortunately], sometimes gave room for some [regrettable] allegations of carnage [purportedly] perpetrated by the Cameroonian Army on civilians.

There is a tendency to consistently question and defend against propositional content that negatively casts government stakeholders. Adjectives like *supposed* and *regrettable* suggest subjectivity and/or limited factuality, as well as general non-desirability. Thus they seem to undermine the truth value of these propositions (in this case, about the feeling of government marginalisation expressed by some Anglophone Cameroonian stakeholders and accusations of extrajudicial killings directed towards state security forces). Similarly, adverbial constructions are used to cast doubt on the intentions behind unflattering claims about the government, and to suggest partiality on the part of the accusatory voices in the crisis arena. Lastly, nominal constructions are used to reinforce the government's propositional questioning and institutional defence. Thus, alternative facts presented in defence of the government are evaluated to be the whole truth and nothing but the truth, whereas accusations of falsehood are *what they* [other, usually adversarial crisis stakeholders] *considered to be lies*.

This trend is reversed when propositional content negatively casts opposing stakeholders, rather than the government. As xxxvii) below indicates, evaluative expressions affirm negative portrayals of these opposing stakeholders and reinforce the truth value of the possible danger that they pose.

xxxvii) [Fortunately], this [other] terrorist act was perpetrated when the targeted children were praying outside the dormitory.

Crisis managers' use of evaluative expressions in crisis messaging to show institutional attitude towards propositional content therefore shows a consistent defence of the government and government crisis management efforts. This is complemented by affirmations of negative propositional content about other stakeholders. Even with positive propositional content about other stakeholders, crisis managers' evaluative expressions reveal an attitude of antagonism. The overall slant of these hedging strategies strongly reflects the crisis response strategies of attacking the accuser and excusing. These, in turn, help to develop a denial and diminishment crisis response posture, respectively.

5.6 Crisis Response Postures Reflected in Government's Use of Hedging

As regards the third research question which deals with what crisis response postures are reflected in the use of hedging, the hedging devices used mostly reflected strategies which develop a denial posture. Scapegoating and denial strategies in particular are central to government's shifting of crisis responsibility to non-government stakeholders. However, bolstering and rebuilding postures are signalled through the use of reminding and revision, respectively. The use of reminding aligns with scapegoating and denial in its deflection of crisis responsibility from government. On the other hand, the combination of revision and denial is contradictory and suggestive of a double crisis. Double crises occur when aspects of crisis response worsen or complicate the crisis situation (Frandsen and Johansen, 2010). Table 2 maps specific hedging devices to the predominant crisis response strategies and postures which they reflect.

Table 2: Reflection of Crisis Response Postures in Hedging Devices

Hedging devices	Number of Information Subsidies Referenced	Number of References	Predominant crisis response strategy(ies) reflected	Crisis response posture(s)
Approximators, imprecision-markers and rounders	19	29	Revision Reminding	Rebuilding Bolstering
Concessive adjuncts	15	25	Refutation Scapegoating Excusing Denial Reminding	Denial Diminishment Bolstering
Conditionals	14	25	Ingratiation Scapegoating Revision	Bolstering Denial Rebuilding
Comments on value-judgments and truth-judgments (Positive and negative dimensions)	13	21	Scapegoating Attacking the accuser Denial Reminding	Denial Bolstering
Plausibility and attribution shields	7	11	Denial Reminding	Denial Bolstering
Impersonal constructions	7	8	Revision Scapegoating	Rebuilding Denial

Source: Authors' fieldwork 2022

6. CONCLUSION

This paper examined the use of hedging in information subsidies about the Anglophone Crisis. The analysis and findings sought to determine which hedging devices were used in government information subsidies about the crisis, establish the discourse and communication functions of these hedges, and determine the crisis response postures reflected through hedging.

The analysis indicates that six categories of hedging devices were used in government information subsidies about the Anglophone Crisis. These devices were found to serve varied discourse and communication functions. Approximators and rounders were used to distance the government from particularly controversial claims about key crisis issues. Contrastive conjunctions served to highlight support for government crisis management strategies, protect government credibility, and diminish the amount of crisis responsibility attributed to the government. Through conditionals, the government expressed beliefs, claims and stances about Anglophone Crisis events in a way that restricts potentially controversial interpretations. Plausibility and attribution shields reduce the force of government crisis managers' claims by signalling uncertainty towards crisis messaging content and attributing particular crisis-related beliefs or commitments to other stakeholders. Impersonal constructions function to create vagueness in crisis communication and to provide an air of credibility to government stakeholders. Comments on value-judgements and truth-judgements signal variability in government's attitude towards propositional content.

With regard to how hedging reflects the overall crisis response adopted by the government of Cameroon, the study noted that strategies which develop different crisis response postures were reflected in the use of hedging devices. Strategies of denial and scapegoating were most predominantly reflected. The predominance of these crisis response strategies was found to contribute to strong reflections of a denial posture in crisis communications. To a lower extent, crisis response postures of diminishment, bolstering and rebuilding were also reflected in the use of hedging devices in crisis messaging. The reflection of a denial posture alongside diminishment and rebuilding postures signals a degree of contradiction in the government's overall crisis communication. These findings show the role of hedging in crisis communication about the Anglophone Crisis. Given the divergence in crisis response postures reflected, they also indicate the need for greater synchrony in the use of hedging devices.

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