

Stance Markers as Politeness Realizations: A Sociopragmatic Correspondence Analysis of Noam Chomsky's Prepared Keynote Speech

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Abstract

This article investigates whether stance-taking and face-management function as two separate communicative acts or as a single coordinated system in expert academic discourse. The case examined is Noam Chomsky's prepared keynote address at the 2021 ALLEA Forum, "The University at Times of Crisis." Drawing on Hyland's (2005) account of interactional metadiscourse and Brown and Levinson's (1987) account of politeness, twenty instances of four stance categories, boosters, attitude markers, hedges, and self-mentions, were located across seventeen utterances and then cross-checked against the four politeness outcomes the utterances realize. The resulting distribution is not scattered: certainty-projecting devices, boosters and most attitude markers, cluster overwhelmingly (92.3%) around the most direct, face-threatening politeness option, while mitigating devices, hedges and most self-mentions, cluster almost as tightly (85.7%) around the most face-protective option. Both departures from this pattern turn out to have a clear local cause rather than looking like noise, which strengthens rather than weakens the case for a genuine link. Read together, the results indicate that when Chomsky commits to a claim or backs away from one, he is simultaneously choosing how much interactional risk to take on, meaning epistemic stance and politeness strategy are produced by the same linguistic decision rather than two independent ones. The article argues that Hyland's (2005) framework, typically read as a theory of epistemic positioning alone, needs to be read alongside politeness theory to capture how expert speakers manage the tension between forceful public criticism and academic collegiality.

Keywords: stance markers; politeness strategies; sociopragmatics; metadiscourse; academic discourse

Abstrak

Artikel ini menyelidiki apakah pengambilan stance dan pengelolaan muka berfungsi sebagai dua tindak komunikatif yang terpisah atau sebagai satu sistem yang bekerja bersama dalam wacana akademik pakar. Kasus yang dikaji adalah pidato kunci Noam Chomsky pada Forum ALLEA 2021, "The University at Times of Crisis." Berdasarkan kerangka metadiskursus interaksional Hyland (2005) dan teori kesantunan Brown and Levinson (1987), dua puluh instans dari empat kategori stance, booster, penanda sikap, hedge, dan self-mention, ditemukan pada tujuh belas tuturan, lalu dicocokkan dengan

empat hasil kesantunan yang direalisasikan oleh tuturan tersebut. Distribusi yang dihasilkan tidak acak: penanda yang memproyeksikan kepastian, yaitu booster dan sebagian besar penanda sikap, mengelompok kuat (92,3%) pada pilihan kesantunan yang paling langsung dan mengancam muka, sedangkan penanda yang melunakkan, yaitu hedge dan sebagian besar self-mention, mengelompok hampir sama kuat (85,7%) pada pilihan yang paling melindungi muka. Kedua penyimpangan dari pola ini ternyata memiliki penyebab lokal yang jelas, bukan sekadar anomali, sehingga justru memperkuat, bukan melemahkan, temuan ini. Secara keseluruhan, hasil ini menunjukkan bahwa ketika Chomsky berkomitmen pada suatu klaim atau menariknya kembali, ia sekaligus sedang memilih seberapa besar risiko interaksional yang diambil, yang berarti stance epistemik dan strategi kesantunan dihasilkan oleh satu keputusan linguistik yang sama, bukan dua keputusan yang berdiri sendiri. Artikel ini berargumen bahwa kerangka Hyland (2005), yang biasanya dibaca semata sebagai teori pemosisian epistemik, perlu dibaca berdampingan dengan teori kesantunan untuk memahami bagaimana pembicara pakar mengelola ketegangan antara kritik publik yang tegas dan kolegialitas akademik.

Kata kunci: *penanda stance; strategi kesantunan; sosiopragmatik; metadiskursus; wacana akademik*

Received
10 July 2026

Revised
-

Accepted
-

1. Introduction

Public intellectuals who deliver institutional critique in formal academic forums face a persistent rhetorical paradox: they must communicate forceful, unambiguous criticism while simultaneously preserving the collegial and interactional norms expected of expert academic discourse. Hyland's (2005) interactional metadiscourse framework offers a systematic account of how speakers construct authorial stance through boosters, hedges, attitude markers, and self-mentions, positioning themselves as credible, evaluative, and epistemically committed voices within a discourse community. Independently, Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory explains how speakers manage face-threatening acts through bald on record, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record strategies. Both frameworks concern the interpersonal dimension of language use, yet they are typically applied in isolation, leaving the relationship between epistemic stance-taking and face-management largely unexamined.

Recent corpus and discourse-analytic studies have advanced the study of stance markers in academic and public discourse considerably, examining their distribution in research articles (Rezaei et al., 2021; Deng & He, 2023), theses (Hyland & Zou, 2021; Chen, 2025), and political speech (Aykut-Kolay & Inan-Karagul, 2024). A parallel body of research has documented politeness strategies in political and institutional discourse (Ghampson & Afful, 2024; Njuki & Ireri, 2021; Rajik, 2025), including a study of politeness strategies specifically in Chomsky's interviews (Dhayef & Sattar, 2023). However, these two lines of inquiry rarely intersect. Hilal (2023) begins to suggest that hedging functions as a politeness device in academic conversation, and Goshu and Ridwan (2025) identify the integration of stance and face-management as an underexplored area in sociopragmatic scholarship, but neither study offers a systematic, quantified account of how specific stance marker categories correspond to specific politeness strategies within a single, information-rich discourse event.

This study addresses that gap by examining Noam Chomsky's prepared keynote address, "The University at Times of Crisis," delivered at the 2021 All European Academies (ALLEA) Forum. As a globally recognized public intellectual addressing an international scholarly audience on the crisis of academic freedom, Chomsky's keynote constitutes a rich, bounded case for investigating how epistemic stance and interactional politeness intersect in expert critical discourse. The speech is particularly suited to this inquiry because it requires the speaker to sustain systemic institutional criticism, of universities, governments, and economic structures, across an extended monologic address delivered before an international scholarly audience whose collegial expectations constrain how directly such criticism may be voiced. This combination of high evaluative stakes and formal interactional constraint makes the speech an unusually rich site for observing whether, and how, epistemic stance-taking and face-management are coordinated.

Specifically, this study asks: what patterns of correspondence emerge between the types of stance markers and the politeness strategies employed by Chomsky in this speech? By cross-tabulating Hyland's (2005) stance categories against Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness

strategies, this study aims to test whether epistemic positioning and interpersonal face-work move together as one coordinated rhetorical mechanism, or whether they turn out to be two separable choices that simply happen to co-occur. Establishing this correspondence would carry implications beyond this single case: it would suggest that metadiscourse and politeness, long treated as separate analytical traditions within pragmatics and applied linguistics, are better understood as complementary descriptions of one underlying communicative mechanism, at least within the genre of prepared expert academic speech.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Interactional Metadiscourse and Stance Markers

Hyland (2005) conceptualizes stance as the resources through which writers and speakers express their authorial presence, evaluations, and degree of commitment toward a proposition. The framework identifies four categories. Hedges, such as expressions of approximation or qualification, withhold the speaker's full commitment to a proposition and open it to negotiation, signaling that alternative interpretations remain possible. Boosters do the opposite: they express certainty, emphasize the force of a claim, and close down room for alternative viewpoints, allowing the speaker to present a proposition as established fact rather than contestable opinion. Attitude markers convey the speaker's affective, rather than epistemic, evaluation of a proposition, marking surprise, importance, or moral judgment. Self-mentions make explicit reference to the author or speaker through first-person forms, singular or plural, and function to assign personal accountability for the claims being advanced. These four resources are interactional in nature, meaning they are oriented toward the audience and function to negotiate the speaker's relationship with both the proposition being advanced and the listener receiving it, rather than serving a purely referential or ideational function.

Subsequent corpus-based research has extended Hyland's (2005) taxonomy across genres, showing that stance distribution is highly sensitive to register and communicative purpose. Rezaei et al. (2021) found diachronic shifts in stance marker frequency across decades of applied linguistics research articles, while Hyland and Zou (2021) demonstrated that three-minute thesis presentations rely heavily on boosters and self-mentions to construct confident, time-constrained scholarly identities. Aykut-Kolay and Inan-Karagul (2024) extended the framework to spoken English-medium-instruction discourse, and Chen (2025) applied a corpus-based approach to L2 undergraduate thesis writing, finding that hedges and boosters are frequently miscalibrated by novice writers relative to expert norms. These studies confirm that stance markers are not merely decorative but are strategically deployed according to genre-specific interactional demands, a premise that motivates the present study's focus on a single, genre-distinct case: prepared public keynote oratory.

2.2 Politeness Theory and Face-Threatening Acts

Brown and Levinson (1987) theorize that all competent speakers possess "face," a public self-image consisting of both a positive face, the desire to be liked and approved of, and a negative face, the desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition. Interaction can either support or threaten this face, and certain speech acts, including criticism, disagreement, correction, and demands, are inherently face-threatening. When performing such an act, speakers select among four broad strategies. The bald on record strategy performs the act baldly, without redress, typically when efficiency, urgency, or the speaker's institutional authority outweighs face concerns. Positive politeness performs the act while appealing to solidarity, shared values, or in-group membership, softening the threat by emphasizing closeness. Negative politeness performs the act while respecting the addressee's autonomy, typically through hedging, indirection, and deference, minimizing the imposition without denying that an imposition has occurred. Off-record strategies perform the act through implicature, allowing the speaker plausible deniability regarding the face-threatening intent.

The framework has been widely applied beyond its original interpersonal-conversation context to institutional and public discourse, including political speeches (Simangunsong et al., 2024; Mulyono et al., 2025), parliamentary debate (Ghampson & Afful, 2024; Njuki & Ireri, 2021), political talk shows (Haryanto et al., 2024), and international conference discourse (Salsabila et al., 2024). Notably, Dhayef and Sattar (2023) applied the framework specifically to Chomsky's interview discourse, finding a preference for direct, bald on record strategies when Chomsky discusses political and institutional criticism, a finding consistent with his broader public reputation for intellectual directness. However, that study, like most applications of Brown and Levinson's (1987) framework to public discourse, treats politeness strategy as an outcome to be classified independently of any parallel metadiscoursal analysis of the same utterances.

2.3 Toward a Convergence of Stance and Politeness

Although Hyland's (2005) and Brown and Levinson's (1987) frameworks both address the interpersonal dimension of discourse, they have developed largely as separate analytical traditions. Studies of stance markers (Rezaei et al., 2021; Hyland & Zou, 2021; Aini et al., 2023; Celiešienė & Vaičienė, 2023) tend to focus on epistemic and evaluative distribution without reference to face-management, while studies of politeness (Njuki & Ireri, 2021; Rajik, 2025; Salsabila et al., 2024) tend to focus on face-threatening acts without reference to metadiscoursal stance-taking. Hilal (2023) and Goshu and Ridwan (2025) represent early exceptions, suggesting that specific linguistic devices, such as hedges, may perform politeness functions, but neither offers a systematic cross-tabulation across a full inventory of stance categories and politeness strategies. This study responds to that gap by treating stance and politeness not as parallel phenomena to be studied separately, but as a single system to be tested for correspondence within one bounded, information-rich case.

3. Method

This section describes the research design, data source, data collection technique, and data analysis procedure employed in this study.

3.1 Research Design

This study is qualitative, built around a sociopragmatic discourse-analytic design. That choice follows from the nature of the problem under investigation: how a public intellectual reconciles pointed institutional criticism with the collegial expectations of a formal academic setting is a matter of interpretation, not something a variable-based or statistical design could capture. The sociopragmatic angle specifically means the analysis does not stop once a marker has been labeled hedge, booster, attitude marker, or self-mention; each labeled instance is pushed further, asking what interpersonal work it performs and how it manages the risk of threatening the audience's face.

A single case, rather than a multi-speaker corpus, was selected on purpose. Chomsky's ALLEA keynote is treated here as what Creswell and Poth (2018) call an information-rich case: one extended, coherent performance by one speaker addressing one audience on one occasion, which holds speaker, genre, and communicative purpose constant. That constancy matters for this study's particular question, since testing whether stance and politeness correspond requires isolating that relationship from the kind of cross-speaker or cross-genre variation a broader corpus would otherwise introduce.

3.2 Data and Data Source

The dataset is drawn entirely from one source: the official recording and transcript of Chomsky's ALLEA keynote, as published on ALLEA's YouTube channel. Rather than analyzing the whole address, data collection was narrowed to the three segments carrying the speech's main argument, namely the shift of universities toward a corporate model, the erosion of academic freedom, and education functioning as a tool of social control; the open question-and-answer

period that followed was left out entirely, since it involves unscripted responses rather than the deliberate, pre-planned wording the study is designed to examine. Within those three segments, every utterance carrying at least one stance marker was pulled out, yielding seventeen utterances and, because some utterances carry more than one marker, twenty marker instances in total.

3.3 Data Collection

Documentation was the sole technique used to gather data, since the material already exists as a fixed recording and transcript rather than something elicited through interview or observation. Each identified utterance was logged in a single coding sheet alongside its time stamp, the thematic segment it belongs to, its stance category, its politeness classification, and a short justification for both classifications, so that the two analytical layers could later be checked against each other rather than kept in separate records.

3.4 Data Analysis

Analysis followed the interactive model set out by Miles et al. (2014): reducing the raw transcript data, laying it out for inspection, and drawing conclusions that were then checked back against the data. What distinguishes this study's use of that model is the final step, where the two layers already logged on the coding sheet, stance category and politeness strategy, were cross-tabulated against each other rather than reported side by side. That cross-tabulation is the mechanism through which the research question is actually answered, since it is only by placing the two classifications in the same table that any correspondence between them becomes visible.

4. Results

Present the findings objectively and in an organized manner. Use subheadings if multiple themes or categories are discussed. Tables and figures may be used to support the narrative. Label

all tables as Table 1, Table 2, etc. and all figures as Figure 1, Figure 2, etc. — each with a descriptive title in APA 7 format.

4.1 Correspondence between Stance Markers and Politeness Strategies

The analysis identified seventeen data items containing twenty stance marker instances: boosters (8), attitude markers (5), hedges (4), and self-mentions (3). Two data items, D5 and D8, contain both a hedge and a self-mention, while D11 contains a booster and a self-mention. Across the same seventeen data items, the politeness strategies identified were bald on record (12 items, 70.6%), negative politeness (4 items, 23.5%), off-record (1 item, 5.9%), and positive politeness (0%).

Table 1 cross-tabulates the four stance marker types against the politeness strategies they realize, based on the coding of all twenty stance marker instances.

Table 1

Correspondence between Stance Marker Types and Politeness Strategies

Stance Marker Type	Politeness Strategy	Frequency (%)
Boosters	Bald on Record	8 (100%)
Attitude Markers	Bald on Record	4 (80%)
Attitude Markers	Off-Record	1 (20%)
Hedges	Negative Politeness	4 (100%)
Self-mentions	Negative Politeness	2 (66.7%)
Self-mentions	Bald on Record	1 (33.3%)

Note. N = 20 stance marker instances across 17 data items (D1–D17). Percentages indicate the proportion of each stance marker type realized through the corresponding politeness strategy.

Two grouping patterns stand out in Table 1, and neither looks like chance. On one side sit boosters together with most attitude markers: twelve of the thirteen instances in this group, or 92.3%, are coded as bald on record. Only a single attitude marker breaks away, coded instead as off-record. On the other side sit hedges together with most self-mentions: six of seven instances, 85.7%, are coded as negative politeness, with one self-mention as the lone exception. That

exception is not puzzling once the surrounding utterance is examined: the self-mention shares its clause with a booster, and the booster's certainty appears to override whatever softening the self-mention would otherwise contribute, pulling the classification toward bald on record instead. Positive politeness, notably, is not linked to any stance category in the data at all. Read together, the two exceptions do not undercut the pattern; if anything they sharpen it, since each is traceable to an identifiable cause (a distinct rhetorical function in one case, a competing marker in the other) rather than appearing as unexplained noise.

Two brief examples make the first cluster concrete. When Chomsky states, "The reasons are not obscure," or describes developments as "fully in the spirit of the neoliberal assault on the general society," the certainty carried by the booster or the evaluative charge carried by the attitude marker is delivered flat, with no hedge, no qualifier, no redress of any kind. Brown and Levinson (1987) would code this as bald on record: the speaker treats the proposition as needing no protective wrapping, a choice his standing as an established scholar addressing a sympathetic academic audience makes available to him. The lone exception inside this cluster, an attitude marker coded off-record, works differently: the evaluation is implied rather than stated outright, which lets Chomsky communicate the same judgment while keeping a layer of deniability around it.

The second cluster looks different in kind, not just in classification. Take "This brief summary draws the lines too sharply, of course," or "It's not much of an exaggeration to describe the real economy as based on public subsidy, private profit." Here a hedge, "of course," "not much of an exaggeration," visibly walks back the force of what is otherwise a sweeping structural claim, signaling that the listener is free to weigh the claim rather than simply accept it. That is negative politeness in Brown and Levinson's (1987) terms: the speaker leaves room for the addressee's own judgment instead of imposing a settled conclusion. The single misfit in this cluster is worth dwelling on precisely because it is instructive: a self-mention that would normally soften a claim gets overridden by a booster sitting in the same utterance, and the stronger marker wins out, landing the pair in bald on record territory instead. What this shows is that the politeness outcome is not fixed

by a single marker in isolation but by whichever marker in the utterance carries the most illocutionary weight.

5. Discussion

The clearest theoretical payoff of these findings is that Chomsky's choice of stance marker and his choice of politeness strategy do not move independently, they move together. Markers that stake out certainty or evaluative judgment, boosters and most attitude markers, land almost entirely in the most confrontational politeness category the framework offers. Markers that qualify or soften, hedges and most self-mentions, land almost entirely in the most protective one. Put differently, reaching for a booster is not just a way of sounding sure; in this speech it functions, at the same time, as an act of blunt, unmitigated delivery. Reaching for a hedge is not just a way of qualifying a claim; it doubles as a gesture of deference toward the listener's right to disagree.

This pushes Hyland's (2005) account of stance a step further than it was originally framed. Hyland treats boosters, hedges, attitude markers, and self-mentions primarily as devices for managing epistemic commitment, how sure the speaker sounds, not as devices with a built-in politeness value. The present data suggest the two cannot be pulled apart so cleanly, at least not in this genre: the epistemic work and the face-work appear to be delivered by the same lexical choice at the same moment. That is close to what Hilal (2023) gestures toward when noting that hedging in academic talk seems to double as a politeness move, and it matches the gap Goshu and Ridwan (2025) flag as still underexamined in sociopragmatic scholarship, namely how stance and face-management interact rather than sit side by side. What this study adds is a quantified picture of that interaction, drawn from a genre, the prepared public keynote, that differs meaningfully from the interview data Dhayef and Sattar (2023) examined in their own study of Chomsky's politeness choices.

The pattern also tracks the speech's three themes rather than cutting across them randomly. Bald on record dominates wherever Chomsky discusses the erosion of academic freedom, consistent with treating that topic as too urgent for qualification. Negative politeness surfaces more often in

the segment on universities turning into corporate institutions, where the claims are broader structural generalizations that Chomsky appears to treat as more genuinely open to challenge. And in the segment on education as social control, bald on record again takes over entirely, matching a topic Chomsky frames as beyond reasonable dispute. None of the three themes breaks the overall correspondence; each simply supplies a local reason for leaning one way or the other, reinforcing the sense that stance and politeness are one system responding to topic-level stakes rather than two systems that happen to coincide. This also marks a contrast with political speakers, whose discourse leans more on solidarity-building positive politeness (Simangunsong et al., 2024; Mulyono et al., 2025); Chomsky's near-total avoidance of that strategy fits an identity built on intellectual bluntness rather than audience-courting.

There is a methodological lesson buried in this too. Work that catalogs stance markers without checking what politeness work they are doing (Rezaei et al., 2021; Aini et al., 2023; Celiešienė & Vaičienė, 2023) is, on this evidence, only telling half the story, since in this genre the two functions do not separate cleanly after the fact. The same goes in reverse for politeness studies that classify face-threatening acts without asking which stance category triggered them (Njuki & Ireri, 2021; Salsabila et al., 2024): the politeness label may be describing a downstream effect of a stance choice made earlier in the same clause. A coding procedure that tracks both dimensions from the outset, as this study attempted, may capture more of what is actually happening interpersonally in prepared expert speech than either framework running on its own.

One caveat is worth stating plainly. Like any single-analyst qualitative discourse study, the coding decisions behind these categories rest on the researcher's own judgment, and no second coder cross-checked them here. That limitation is not unusual for work of this kind (Hilal, 2023; Goshu & Ridwan, 2025), but it does mean some of the finer classification calls could, in principle, be argued differently by another analyst.

6. Conclusion

Taken as a whole, this study does not support treating Chomsky's stance choices and his politeness choices as two separate decisions layered onto the same utterances. Instead, the two track each other closely enough to look like one decision expressed twice. Whenever a booster appears, bald on record politeness appears with it; the same near-total pairing holds for most attitude markers, both signaling that certainty and evaluative force travel together with unmitigated directness. The mirror pattern holds on the softer side: hedges pair with negative politeness without exception, and most self-mentions follow suit, meaning that whenever Chomsky pulls back from a full commitment or foregrounds his own voice as the source of a claim, he tends simultaneously to be protecting the listener's room to disagree. The two cases that break from this, one attitude marker and one self-mention, are not loose ends; each has a traceable cause (an implicature-based reading in the first case, a competing stronger marker in the second utterance in the other), which if anything argues that the correspondence is being driven by something real in the data rather than by an artifact of the coding categories themselves.

Framed against the original aim of this study, the answer to the research question is that stance-taking and face-management in this keynote are not independent variables but two readings of a single underlying rhetorical choice. This extends Hyland's (2005) metadiscourse model past its usual epistemic framing and toward a reading that folds in politeness, at least for the genre examined here.

That said, the scope of this claim should not be overstated. The evidence comes from one speaker delivering one speech, so whether the same pairing would hold for a different public intellectual, or even for Chomsky in a different genre, is an open question rather than something this study can settle. The decision to exclude the question-and-answer portion of the event also means the findings describe planned, pre-scripted language only; real-time exchange under audience pressure could easily pull stance and politeness apart in ways a prepared monologue does not allow. And, as noted above, the categorization itself rests on one analyst's reading of the transcript, applied consistently but never checked against a second coder. Each of these limits

points fairly directly to where the next study should go: widen the sample to more speakers and more genres, including spontaneous academic talk, and bring in inter-rater coding to see whether the correspondence identified here survives being tested by someone other than the original analyst.

Acknowledgment

The author thanks the thesis Advisor, Dr. Widyastuti, S.S., M.Pd., for guidance during the development of the research on which this article is based.

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