



JURNAL LINGUISTIK Vol. 29 (2) November 2025 (120-136)

A Corpus-Based Critical Discourse Analysis of Approximators in Chinese and Malaysian Diplomatic Discourse

¹Xiaole Liu, ^{*2}Roslina Mamat & ³Salina Husain

¹gs65637@student.upm.edu.my, ^{*2}linamm@upm.edu.my & ³linahusain@upm.edu.my

Universiti Putra Malaysia, 43400 UPM Serdang

Tarikh terima : 28 September 2025

Received

Terima untuk diterbitkan : 27 Oktober 2025

Accepted

Tarikh terbit dalam talian : 30 November 2025

Published online

Abstract

This study examines the ideological differences, including cultural values and diplomatic philosophies, by comparatively analysing the similarities and differences in using approximators between Chinese and Malaysian diplomatic discourses. Based on two self-built corpora sourced from Chinese and Malaysian Foreign Ministry speeches and statements between 2023 and 2024, the data in this qualitative research are adopted to count and analyse the frequency and high-frequency words of the two sub-types of approximators through critical discourse analysis (CDA) under Fairclough's three-Dimensional Framework. The findings show that Chinese spokespersons prefer to use reduced-ambiguity adaptors, frequency-varying rounders and quantity-varying rounders to emphasise or exaggerate, thereby striving for more political influence as a responsible great power. In contrast, Malaysian spokespersons tend to choose restricted-proposition adaptors and quantity-varying rounders to demonstrate their commitment to international responsibilities, thereby winning more international recognition and support for Malaysia. This study provides linguistic and pragmatic references for the appropriate and effective use of approximators by Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokespersons and enables the public to learn how to interpret the diplomatic discourse critically.

Key Words: corpus-based, critical discourse analysis, approximators, diplomatic discourse,

Analisis Wacana Kritikal Berasaskan Korpus approximators dalam Wacana Diplomatik China dan Malaysia

Abstrak

Kajian ini mengkaji perbezaan ideologi, termasuk nilai budaya dan falsafah diplomatik, dengan menganalisis persamaan dan perbezaan antara wacana diplomatik China dan Malaysia menggunakan korpus approximator. Ia berdasarkan dua korpora binaan sendiri yang diperoleh daripada ucapan dan kenyataan Kementerian Luar China dan Malaysia antara 2023 dan 2024. Data penyelidikan kualitatif ini diterima pakai untuk mengira dan menganalisis perkataan dari segi kekerapan dan frekuensi tinggi bagi dua sub-jenis approximator melalui analisis wacana kritis (CDA) menggunakan kerangka Tiga Dimensi Fairclough. Dapatkan menunjukkan bahawa jurucakap China lebih suka menggunakan reduced-ambiguity adaptors, frequency-varying rounders dan quantity-varying rounders untuk menekan atau membesar-besarkan sesuatu perkara bagi mendapatkan lebih banyak pengaruh politik sebagai kuasa besar yang bertanggungjawab. Sebaliknya, jurucakap Malaysia cenderung memilih restricted-proposition adaptors dan quantity-varying rounders untuk menunjukkan komitmen terhadap tanggungjawab antarabangsa. Dengan itu, Malaysia memenangi lebih banyak pengiktirafan dan sokongan antarabangsa. Kajian ini menyediakan rujukan linguistik dan pragmatik untuk penggunaan

approximator yang sesuai dan berkesan oleh jurucakap Kementerian Luar Negeri bagi membolehkan orang ramai mempelajari cara mentafsir wacana diplomatik secara kritis.

Kata Kunci: berasaskan korpus, analisis wacana kritis, approximator, wacana diplomatik.

1. Introduction

Fuzziness is an essential property of natural language and has become a common phenomenon in language use, such as "particularly", "many", "often", and "usually". In 1973, G. R. Lakoff listed some words that can change the degree of ambiguity of other words and called these words "hedges". The term "hedge" was first introduced by Lakoff, referring to "words whose job is to make things fuzzier or less fuzzy "(Lakoff, 1973, p.471). Since then, more and more scholars have conducted in-depth research on hedges from the perspectives of semantics, pragmatics, translation, contrastive linguistics, cross-cultural communication, discourse analysis, etc. The selection of the research discourse is also getting wider and wider, specifically including doctor-patient communication discourse, academic discourse, advertisement discourse, news discourse, and courtroom trial discourse.

The speeches and statements of the Foreign Ministry are official political discourses representing a country's position, disseminating diplomatic and political ideas and shaping the country's international image. Hedges reflect speakers' linguistic strategies to convey and execute certain speech acts or realise specific communicative intentions. The appropriate use of hedges in the *diplomatic discourse* will be courteous and gain the discourse initiative to achieve the desired expressive effect.

Approximators limit the vagueness of concepts such as quantity, degree, frequency and time (Salager-Meyer, 1994). Prince et al. (1982) subdivided approximators into rounders and adaptors according to their pragmatic functions. Some adaptors are used to directly modify the fuzzy words or phrases in diplomatic discourse in order to supplement the degree of the magnitude of the word being modified, to make the expression closer to the actual situation, or to avoid arbitrariness, such as "更" (more), "非常"(very), "最"(most), "很"(quite), etc. in Chinese and "far", "very", "pretty", "extremely", etc. in English. Adaptors in diplomatic discourse can indirectly reflect a country's position and attitude when dealing with international disputes, such as "更" (more), "完全"(absolutely), etc. in Chinese and "especially", "particularly", etc. in English. However, previous contrastive analyses on approximators in Chinese and English discourse primarily focused on rounders and failed to consider adaptors. Therefore, it is essential to strengthen the systematic study of each category of approximators, especially adaptors that have been consistently overlooked.

The year 2023 marked the 10th anniversary of the comprehensive strategic partnership between China and Malaysia, and both sides shoulder the urgent task of building a China-Malaysia community. Conducting a critical discourse analysis on the similarities and differences in using approximators between Chinese and Malaysian diplomatic discourse provides linguistic and pragmatic references for spokespersons' appropriate and effective use of hedges. It enables the public to learn how to interpret the Ministry of Foreign Affairs discourse critically.

The following research questions are formulated for this study:

- (1) What are the similarities and differences in the frequency and the high-frequency words of approximators in Chinese and Malaysian political discourse?
- (2) What are the differences in ideology, including sociocultural values, and diplomatic philosophy hidden in using approximators within Chinese and Malaysian diplomatic discourse?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Critical Discourse Analysis on Political Discourse

Fairclough (1993) pointed out that critical discourse analysis aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events, and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony. In short, critical discourse analysis aims to make transparent the relationships between discursive practices, social practices, and social structures that are not obvious.

In recent years, more and more scholars tend to conduct corpus-driven critical discourse analysis of political discourse. Zhang Chenxia et al. (2023) investigated the linguistic aspects of Chinese and American diplomatic discourse combined with corpus linguistics and discovered that China's discourse is informationally dense and context-independent, while the U.S. discourse is emotive, interactional, and context-dependent. Li Tao et al. (2025) conducted a corpus-driven analysis of the discursive strategies adopted by the spokespersons of China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs during a public health crisis.

Xin Bin et al. (2021) employing the Citespace software to conduct statistical analysis of literature about critical discourse studies within journal databases from 1979 to 2018, discovered that Fairclough's research constituted the most significant proportion among the top ten scholars' publications. He proposed the fundamental principles and methods of critical discourse analysis from a macro perspective, elucidating the relationship between language, power and ideology (Fairclough, 1995a). He put forward the 'five-step' analytical framework for critical discourse analysis (Chouliarakis & Fairclough, 1999), then developed the method of discourse practice analysis (Fairclough, 2003) and dialectical-relational approach (Fairclough, 2010). This study adopted Fairclough's three-dimensional critical discourse analysis framework to systematically examine approximators within Chinese and Malaysian diplomatic political discourse across three dimensions: textual analysis, discourse practice, and social practice, integrating micro-level textual analysis with macro-level sociocultural analysis.

2.2 Comparative Studies between Chinese and English Approximators

The study of hedges in China started late and formally began around the 1980s. Until the beginning of the 21st century, Chinese-English contrastive studies on approximators began to emerge.

Yang Ping (2001) classified rounders appearing in English and Chinese, based on which he compared the use of English and Chinese rounders in terms of pragmatics and semantics, and pointed out their three characteristics: diversity, deliberation, and conformity. Based on Prince et al's (1982) classification, Yao Jun (2003) categorised rounders into four subtypes: degree-variable rounders, scope-variable rounders, frequency-variable rounders, and fuzzy-category markers. He discussed the linguistic manifestations of English-Chinese hedges and their semantic functions under these four classifications. Zhou Hong (2008) pointed out that although English and Chinese differ in semantics and syntactic structure, the pragmatic functions of English and Chinese approximators are the same: cancellation, ambiguity, face preservation, and selectivity. Huang Yi et al. (2009) analysed the four pragmatic constraint mechanisms of approximators in the framework of relevance theory, which are: cueing the approximation of the discourse information, cueing the discrepancy between the discourse propositional style and the idea it characterises, cueing the emergence of conversational meanings, and providing attentional orientation. Wu Guangting et al. (2021) categorised English and Chinese rounders into numerical and non-numerical types. They conducted a corpus-driven study on the differences and similarities between English and Chinese rounders.

Previous contrastive analysis on the pragmatic strategies of approximators in Chinese and English discourse has primarily focused on rounders, consistently ignoring the specific pragmatic functions of adaptors. This paper explores the diplomatic philosophies between China and Malaysia

through a systematic contrastive analysis of the pragmatic strategies embodied in using the two subcategories of approximators.

3. Methodology

The study adapted the qualitative method to conduct a comparative study between Chinese and Malaysian diplomatic discourses. Two self-built corpora were established for this study: (1) The Corpus of speeches and statements from the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs (“Chinese Corpus” for short): 55 speeches and statements from the two years of 2023 and 2024, covering about 73,732 words, source from <https://www.fmprc.gov.cn/> (see Figure 1); (2) The Corpus of speeches and statements from the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (“Malaysian Corpus” for short): 67 speeches and statements from the two years of 2023 and 2024, covering about 73,521 words, source from <https://www.kln.gov.my/web/guest/press-releases>. (see Figure 2).

Figure 1.
The interface of the Chinese Corpus

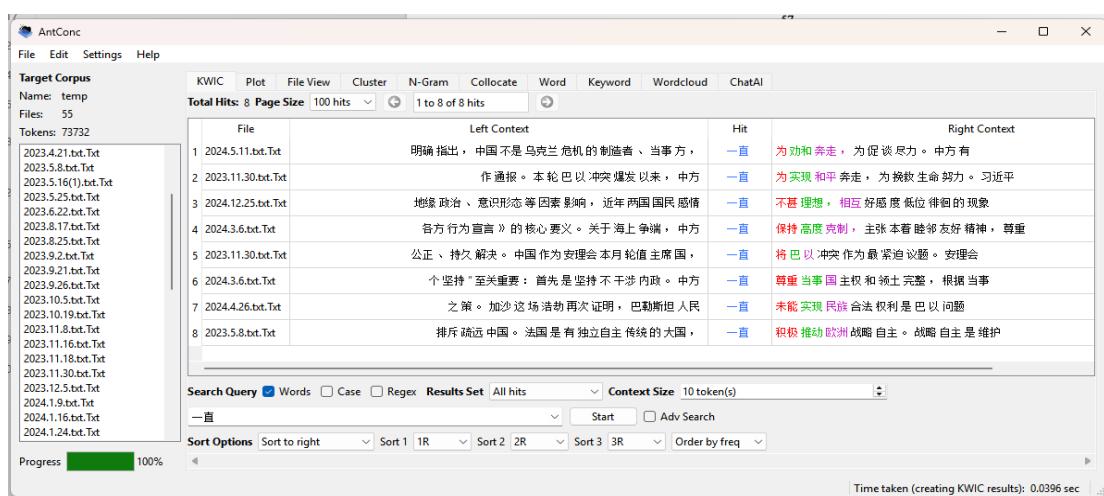
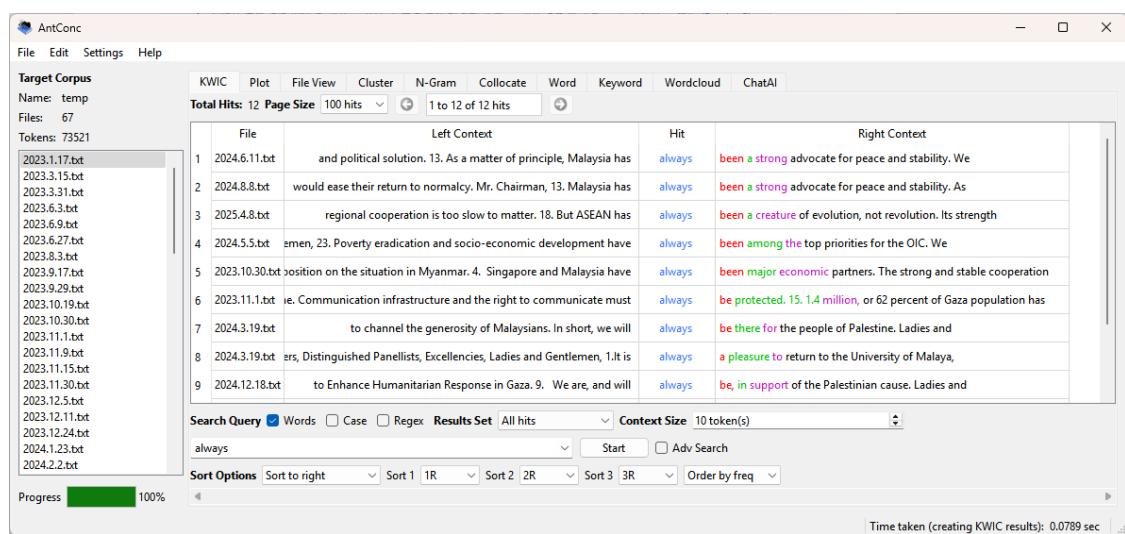


Figure 2
The interface of the Malaysian corpus



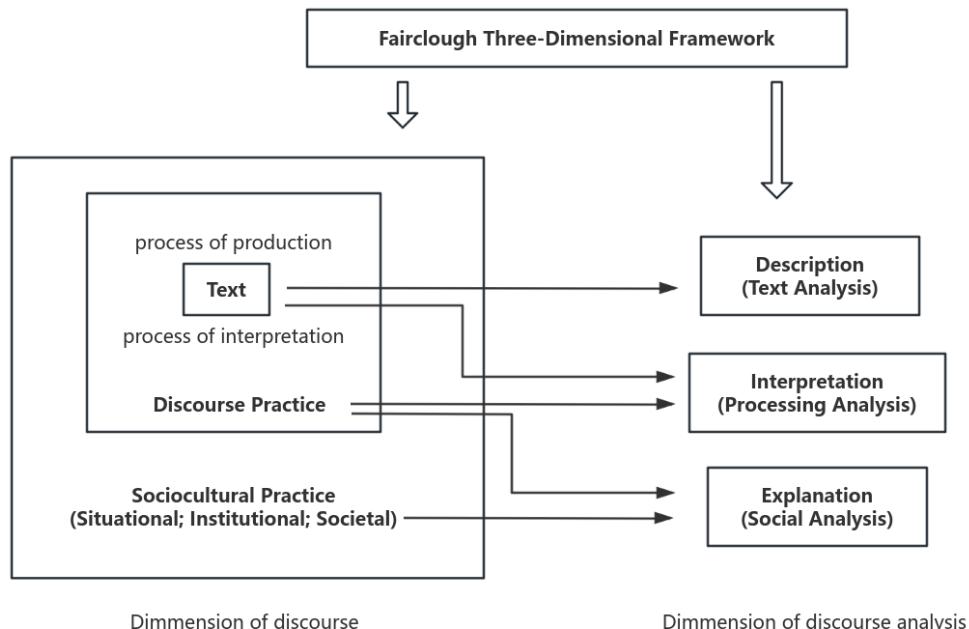
Under Fairclough's three-dimensional framework (Fairclough, 1995), this study examines the three dimensions of discourse analysis on political discourse: textual, processing, and social analysis.

The researcher employed Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to analyse approximators' frequency and high-frequency words in the two self-built corpora and explore the underlying meanings conveyed by the similarities and differences in using approximators in Malaysian and Chinese diplomatic discourse.

Fairclough (1989) proposed three levels of critical discourse analysis based on Systematic Functional Linguistics: description of the structural features of the text; interpretation of the relationship between the text and the discursive practice process; explanation of the relationship between the discursive practice process and its social context. In the description stage, the researcher initially identifies and counts the frequencies and high word frequencies of Chinese and Malaysian approximators through the corpus linguistic method to complete the textual analysis. In the interpretation stage, the similarities and differences in using approximators between Chinese and Malaysian diplomatic discourse are analysed based on the description stage above to conduct the processing analysis. In the explanation stage, the researcher explores the underlying reasons behind the differences and similarities of using approximators in the second stage above, then reveals the ideological differences and power relations behind using approximators in Chinese and Malaysian diplomatic discourse to conduct the social analysis. The theoretical framework is shown in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3

Fairclough Three-Dimensional Framework (Fairclough, 1995)



The Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) Qualitative Coder was chosen as a qualitative data annotator for this study. AntConc 4.3.1 was chosen as the retrieval software, and the Log-likelihood Ratio Calculator was used to test for significant differences. The study aims to identify the similarities and differences in using the two subtypes of approximators between two self-built corpora by counting the frequency and high-frequency words in each subtype.

4. Results and Discussion

Based on Systematic Functional Linguistics, this section will cover three levels of critical discourse analysis on the use of approximators in Chinese and Malaysian diplomatic discourse: description, interpretation and explanation. Two self-built corpora have been chosen as the data for conducting a comparative study through critical discourse analysis on the similarities and differences using two subtypes of approximators: adaptors and rounders. The procedure will be conducted through three stages as follows:

4.1 The Description Stage

In the first stage, the researcher will identify and count the frequencies of adaptors and rounders, and high-frequency words. According to corpus linguistics, the researcher must initially conduct “frequency normalisation” processing to facilitate comparison among corpora of different sizes. Based on the size of the corpus and the actual frequency, normalised frequency can be made per thousand words, per ten thousand words, and so on. The data of this study were calculated based on the raw frequency per ten thousand words. The raw frequency is divided by the total number of words in the corpus and then multiplied by ten thousand to obtain the normalised frequency per ten thousand words. That is:

$$\text{Normalized frequency of (per ten thousand words)} = \frac{\text{raw frequency}}{\text{the total number of words in the corpus}} \times 10\,000$$

4.1.1 Overall Results of Approximators

The researcher searched and counted approximators in the Chinese and Malaysian corpora. The Chinese corpus used approximators 1,643 times, with a normalised frequency of 223 times per 10,000 words; the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs speech corpus used approximators 436 times, with a normalised frequency of 59 times per 10,000 words.

Regarding the two subtypes of approximators, the Chinese corpus used adaptors 534 times with the normalised frequency 72 times per 10,000 words, while the Malaysian corpus used adaptors a total of 212 times with the normalised frequency 29 times per 10,000 words; In the Chinese corpus, the rounders are used 1109 times, and the normalised frequency is 150 times per 10,000 words; while in the Malaysian corpus, the rounders are used only 224 times, and the normalised frequency is 30 times per 10,000 words.

After the log-likelihood ratio calculator test (seen in Figure 4), the researcher concluded that the log-likelihood ratio of the raw frequencies of the approximators in Chinese and Malaysian corpora is about 743.18, the log-likelihood ratio of the raw frequencies of the adaptors is about 142.74, and the log-likelihood ratio of the raw frequencies of the rounders is about 638.32. All of the Significance values in the three data sets are less than zero, indicating they are all significantly different.

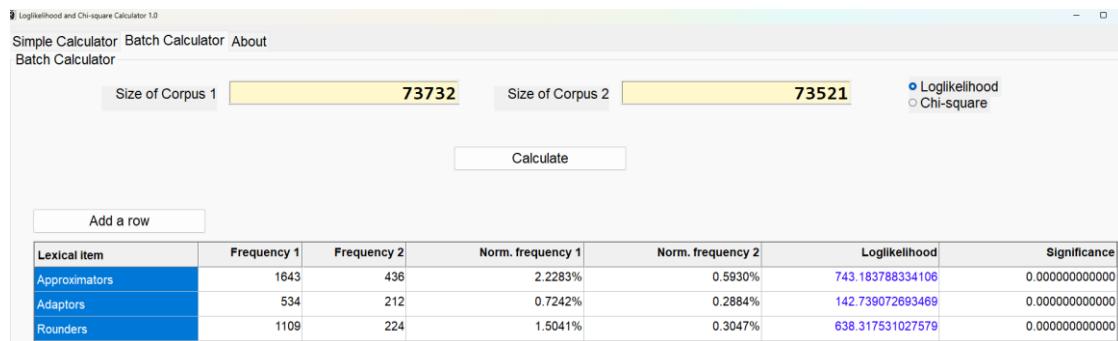
Table 1.

Comparison of the Frequency of Approximators in Chinese and Malaysian Corpora

two subtypes of approximators	Chinese Corpus	Malaysian Corpus
raw frequencies of approximators	1643	436
normalised frequency of approximators	223	59
raw frequencies of adaptors	534	212
normalised frequency of Adaptors	72	29
raw frequencies of Rounders	1109	224
normalised frequency of Rounders	150	30

Figure 4

Significant Differences of the Frequency of Approximators, Adaptors and Rounders in the Chinese and Malaysian Corpora

**Figure 5**

Comparison of the Frequency of Adaptors and Rounders in the Chinese and Malaysian Corpora

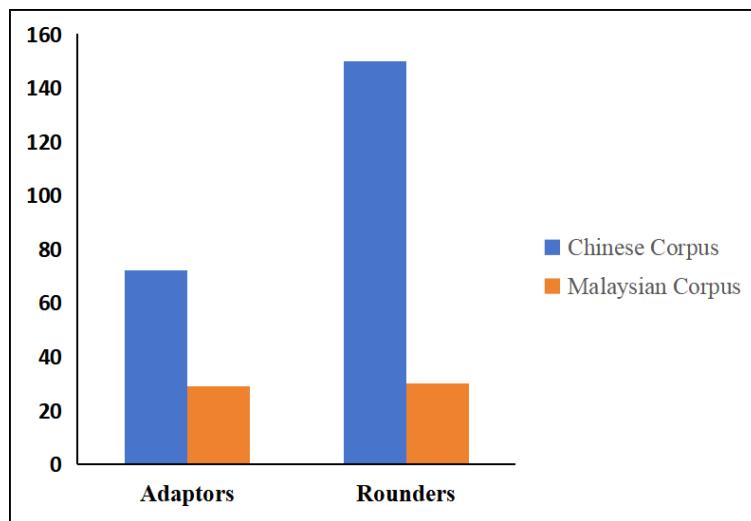


Figure 5 shows that adaptors and rounders are used more frequently in the Chinese Corpus than in the Malaysian corpus. The researcher also calculated the distribution of adaptors and rounders within the Chinese and Malaysian corpora. Figures 6 and 7 clearly show that the percentage of rounders in the Chinese Corpus is about twice as high as that of adaptors. The frequency distribution of adaptors and rounders in the Malaysian Corpus Corpus is almost equally divided.

Figure 6

The Distribution of Adaptors and Rounders in the Chinese Corpus

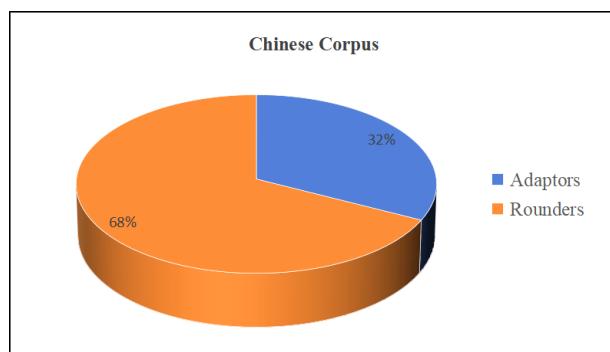
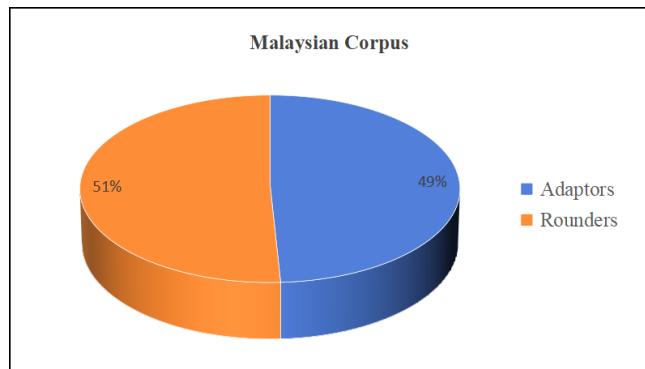


Figure 7*The Distribution of Adaptors and Rounders in the Malaysian Corpus*

4.2.2 Results of Adaptors

To analyse and compare the similarities and differences in using adaptors in the Chinese and Malaysian diplomatic discourse, the researcher searched for and counted all the adaptors and then listed the top 10 high-frequency ones in the Chinese and Malaysian corpora (as shown in Tables 2 and 3).

Table 2*Top 10 High-frequency Adaptors in the Chinese Corpus*

	Adaptors	Frequency
1	更	163
2	更加	143
3	最	90
4	越	45
5	在...基础上	21
6	从...出发	7
7	很	13
8	完全	11
9	更为	11
10	非常	8

Table 3*Top 10 High-frequency Adaptors in Malaysian Corpus*

	Adaptors	Frequency
1	particularly	36
2	in this regard	26
3	especially	25
4	very	15
5	most	14
6	much	14
7	even	14
8	too	9
9	highly	8
10	far	7

4.2.3 Results of Rounders

The researcher searched and counted all the rounders and then listed the top 10 high-frequency words in the Chinese and Malaysian corpora (as shown in Tables 4 and 5).

Table 4.

Top 10 High-frequency Rounders in the Chinese Corpus

	Rounders	Frequency
1	等	189
2	不断	125
3	近	120
4	多	120
5	更多	98
6	始终	88
7	持续	53
8	再次	46
9	广大	23
10	又	22

Table 5.

Top 10 High-frequency Rounders in Malaysian Corpus

	Rounders	Frequency
1	more than	28
2	many	24
3	over	20
4	some	18
5	always	12
6	often	10
7	never	9
8	again	9
9	consistently	9
10	several	8

4.2 The Interpretation Stage

In the interpretation stage, the analysis proceeds by examining the overall distribution of approximators. Based on the descriptive results presented in the previous section, this involves a comparative investigation of the frequency of adaptors and rounders in Chinese and Malaysian diplomatic discourse.

4.2.1 The overall use of approximators

The data reveal that the overall frequency of approximators in the Chinese Corpus is nearly three times higher than in the Malaysian Corpus. A similar pattern emerges when examining the two subtypes of approximators: both adaptors and rounders occur considerably more frequently in the Chinese diplomatic discourse than in their Malaysian counterparts.

Moreover, the relative proportions of adaptors and rounders differ substantially across the two corpora. In the Chinese corpus, rounders account for approximately 68% of all approximators. By contrast, in the Malaysian corpus, the distribution between adaptors and rounders is more balanced, with both subtypes appearing almost equal proportions.

4.2.2 Adaptors

In this study, the researcher divided adaptors into reduced-ambiguity and restricted-proposition adaptors according to their pragmatic functions. Reduced-ambiguity adaptors can directly modify ambiguous

words or phrases, complement the magnitude achieved by the ambiguous words, and reduce the degree of ambiguity of the modified words, making the expression closer to the actual situation or sometimes serving to avoid arbitrariness. For example, “相当”(quite), “格外”(extraordinary) and “非常”(very) in Chinese, and “very”, “pretty” and “slightly” in English. Restricted-proposition adaptors restrict the truth value of a proposition, indicating that the speaker limits the scope of knowledge of his or her discourse in terms of content, such as “基本上”(basically) and “事实上”(in fact) in Chinese, and “particularly” and “especially” in English.

In the Chinese corpus, the top 10 high-frequency adaptors appear 512 times. Among these, eight are reduced-ambiguity adaptors: “更(more)”(163), “更加(more)”(143), “最(most)”(90), “越(more)”(45), “很(pretty)”(13), “完全(completely)”(11), “更为(more)”(11), “非常(very)”(8). Two are restricted-proposition adaptors: “在...基础上(On the basis of...)(21) and “从...出发(based on...)(7). Reduced-ambiguity adaptors appear 484 times, accounting for approximately 95% of the total, while restricted-proposition adaptors appear 28 times, accounting for only 5%.

In the Malaysian Corpus, the top 10 high-frequency adaptors appear 168 times. Among them, seven are reduced-ambiguity adaptors: “very” (15), “most” (14), “much” (14), “even”(14), “too”(9), “highly”(8), and “far”(7). Three are Restricted-proposition Adaptors: “particularly”(36), “in this regard”(26), and “especially”(25). Reduced-ambiguity adaptors appear 81 times, accounting for 48% of the total, while restricted-proposition Adaptors appear 97 times, accounting for 52%.

It is evident that within the Chinese Corpus, reduced-ambiguity adaptors hold an absolute dominance, accounting for a substantial 95%, while restricted-proposition adaptors constitute a mere 5%. Chinese spokespersons exhibit a pronounced preference for adaptors such as “更 (more) , 更加 (more) , 最(most), 完全(completely)” to amplify positive national assessments and underscore authority, thereby constructing a highly definitive and distinct international stance. In the Malaysian Corpus, the proportions of the two subtypes of adaptors are relatively balanced, with restricted-proposition adaptors slightly outnumbering reduced-ambiguity adaptors. Malaysian spokespersons favoured restricted-proposition adaptors with limiting functions, such as 'particularly, in this regard, especially'. While hedges are emphatic, they did not dominate discourse absolutely. This suggests Malaysia's diplomatic stance relies more on 'discourse regulation and issue framing', aligning with its international positioning suited to multi-party coordination, compromise, and balance. This highlights the flexibility and specificity of its diplomatic stance.

4.2.3 Rounders

In this study, the researcher divided rounders into quantity-varying rounders, frequency-varying rounders and enumeration-varying rounders according to their pragmatic functions. In political discourse, the spokespersons use quantity-varying rounders to retain information by placing the description object within a variable range, such as “many” and “more than” in English, “大约(about)”, “近(nearly)” in Chinese. Frequency-varying rounders are used to make the frequency with which an action occurs vague. For example, “always” and “often” in English, “不断(continuously)” and “始终(always)” in Chinese. Enumeration-varying rounders are used in the case of incomplete enumeration. When some information is unimportant or too long, the speaker must use enumeration-varying rounders to omit it, such as “and so on” in English and “等(and so on)” in Chinese.

In the Chinese Corpus, the top 10 high-frequency words appear 884 times. Among these, 5 of them are frequency-varying rounders: 不断(continuously)(125), 始终(always)(88), 持续(consistently)(53), 再次(again)(46), 又(once more)(22); 4 of them are quantity-varying rounders: 近(nearly)(120), 多(more than)(120), 更多(more)(98), 广大(many)(23); only one of them is enumeration-varying rounder: 等(and so on)(189). Frequency-varying rounders appear a total of 334 times, accounting for approximately 38% of the total; quantity-varying rounders appear a total of 361 times, accounting for approximately 41% of the total; while enumeration-varying rounders appear a total of 189 times, accounting for approximately 21% of the total.

In the Malaysian Corpus, the top 10 high-frequency words appear 147 times. Among them, 5 of them are quantity-varying rounders: more than (28), many (24), over (20), some (18), several (8); the other 5 are frequency-varying rounders: always(12), often(10), never(9), again(9), consistently(9); none of them is enumeration-varying rounders. Quantity-varying rounders appear a total of 98 times, accounting for approximately 67% of the total; frequency-varying rounders appear a total of 49 times, accounting for approximately 33% of the total; while enumeration-varying rounders appear a total of 0 times, accounting for 0% of the total.

In the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs discourse, quantity-varying rounders predominate, accounting for as much as 68 per cent, followed by frequency-varying rounders, with enumeration-varying rounders absent. Conversely, within the discourse of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the three sub-types of rounders appear in balanced proportions: quantity-varying rounders hold a slightly higher proportion, frequency-varying rounders follow, while enumeration-varying rounders account for the lowest portion.

4.3 The Explanation Stage

This section will cover the social analysis under Fairclough's Three-Dimensional Framework (1995). Firstly, the researcher will examine the cultural value differences between China and Malaysia as reflected in the linguistic phenomenon of approximators within diplomatic discourse through case studies. Subsequently, the discussion will explore how the usage of approximators in Chinese and Malaysian diplomatic discourse mirrors diplomatic philosophies, followed by a critical analysis of specific cases. Approximators feature extensively in both Chinese and Malaysian foreign ministry statements. As political discourse, their pragmatic functions exhibit certain similarities, such as softening tone, avoiding absolutes, preserving face, and conveying politeness. However, significant differences exist between the two countries in the frequency of two approximator subtypes—rounders and adaptors—and their high-frequency words within political discourse. This section constitutes the interpretation stage, offering a critical analysis of the divergent usage of approximators in Chinese and Malaysian diplomatic discourse. It explores the sociocultural causes underpinning the differing approximator strategies and ideological orientations within the foreign ministries' rhetoric, examining cultural values and diplomatic philosophies.

4.3.1 Approximator Reflecting Cultural Values

China and Malaysia's divergent historical and cultural development patterns have determined significant differences in traditional cultural values. China's traditional culture is founded upon Confucianism, a philosophy with profound historical roots spanning several millennia that has exerted immense influence upon China's political, economic, and cultural spheres. In the essay *The Clash of Civilisations*, Samuel Huntington (1993) summarised key elements of China's Confucian traditional values as placing individual rights and interests in a secondary position, with state authority taking precedence over society, and society taking precedence over the individual. Malaysia is an exceptionally diverse nation, with numerous distinct ethnic groups, languages, and religions, each community typically preserving the cultural customs of their ancestors. Consequently, Malaysian society accommodates a rich tapestry of lifestyles, beliefs, and values. Nina Evasion (2016) summarised the core concepts of Malaysian culture as "gentleness, 'budi', respect, courtesy, modesty, face, filial piety and diversity". China is a high power distance society, valuing the constraints of authority, maintaining strict hierarchical structures, and emphasising obedience and reverence towards authority. Malaysia, conversely, is a low power distance society, prioritising individual democracy and freedom while respecting cultural diversity.

The divergent cultural values between China and Malaysia are also reflected in their diplomatic discourse through differing strategies for employing approximators: Firstly, in the Chinese Corpus, spokespersons utilise frequency-varying rounders and reduced-ambiguity adaptors at a significantly higher rate than their Malaysian counterparts when affirming China's stance and establishing governmental authority. Malaysian Foreign Ministry spokespersons, conversely,

predominantly employ quantity-varying rounders rhetorical devices that amplify emphasis through exaggeration or intensification in non-specific situations. These techniques moderate the directness and impact of language, reflecting Malaysia's cultural emphasis on harmony, respect, inclusivity, and politeness.

Figure 8.

Interface for searching “中国始终(China has always)” in the Chinese Corpus

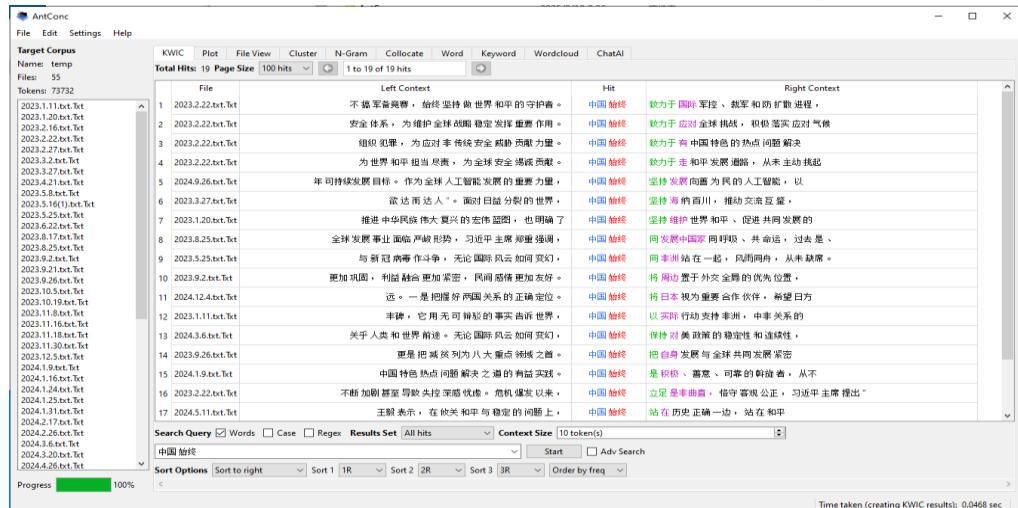
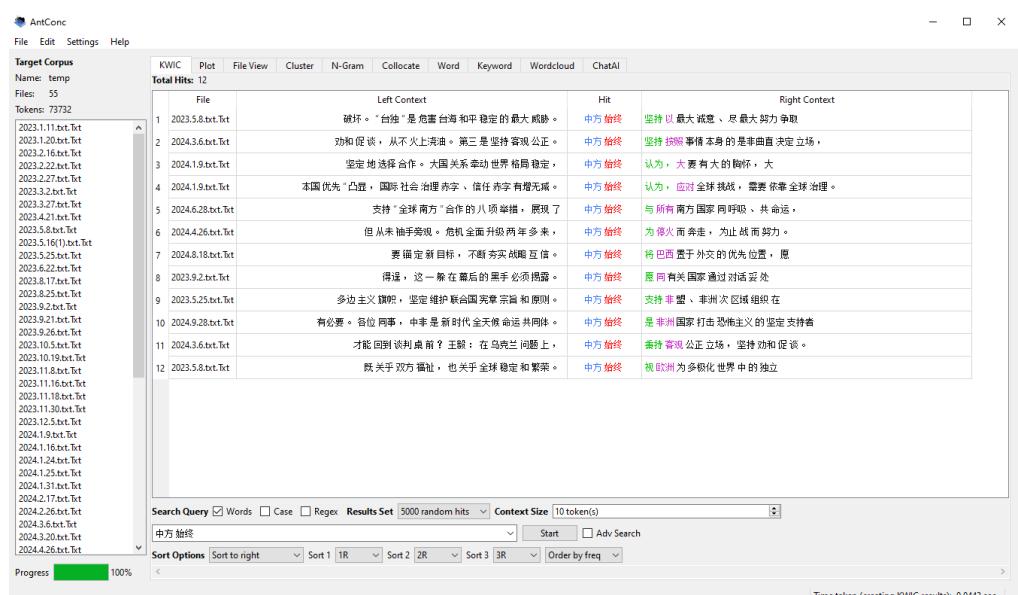


Figure 9.

Interface for searching “中方始终(the Chinese government has always)” in the Chinese Corpus



The term “always” carries connotations of continuity and consistency, emphasising an unchanging stance or behaviour. This corresponds with Confucian thought's emphasis on national political authority. Figures 8 and 9 illustrate that when Chinese spokespersons employ frequency-varying rounders in Chinese diplomatic discourse, the most frequently occurring subject types explicitly represent the state position, such as “China” and “the Chinese government”. The expressions “China has always” or “the Chinese government has always” in diplomatic discourse serve not merely to describe a stable policy stance, but to convey an authoritative attitude that is resolute and firm. This reflects the Chinese government's authority and absolute dominance in the diplomatic sphere, mirroring the core values of collectivism and state supremacy inherent in traditional Chinese culture.

Example 1: 一要做民心相通的引领者，为中外人文交流搭建更宽广桥梁。中外各友好团体和组织应当多沟通、常联络、勤走动，传承中外交往传统，弘扬民间友好精神，培养青年友好力量。中国将为中外人员往来开通更顺畅渠道，达成更方便安排，让外国友人“说来就来”更加便利，让中外人民交流互动更加深入。

二要做利益相融的推动者，为中外务实合作提供更强大助力。友好城市要发挥纽带作用，推动地方互利合作和发展战略对接，巩固经贸、文教、体育等传统领域合作，拓展科技、创新、绿色等新兴领域合作，为中外务实合作开拓更多路径、搭建更宽平台，不断做大共同利益的蛋糕。

三要做相互理解的促进者，为构建友好认知创造更广阔空间。全球化和互联网正在深刻改变人类的交往与认知方式，我们要与时俱进，主动发声，线上线下讲好中国故事、中外交往故事、人类命运共同体的故事，不断积聚友好与互信的正能量，建立理性和友善的相互认知。（Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, October 11th, 2024）

In Example 1, the Chinese spokesperson employs repeated use of reduced-ambiguity adaptors such as “更 (more)” and “最(most)” to emphasise the dynamic nature of “continuously enhancing” and “steadily strengthening”. This implies that in national development and international engagement, China seeks to maintain the current state and pursue ongoing optimisation and relentless progress. Simultaneously, the deployment of reduced-ambiguity adaptors like “更 (more)” and “更加 (more)” binds China to grand collective objectives such as “民心相通 (shared aspirations)”, “利益相融 (intertwined interests)” and “相互理解(mutual understanding)”. Individual interests and international exchanges are thus positioned within the framework of the nation's overarching political strategy, elevating national interests and civilisational progress to higher-order pursuits. This reflects the core value within Chinese cultural values, where state authority takes precedence over individual interests.

Example 2: We regret that it took about seven weeks before the “humanitarian pause” was agreed. It is outrageous that about 15,000 innocent civilians had to die, including about 6000 children, before the deal for a “humanitarian pause” was reached. It was agreed only after Gaza had become a “hell on earth” and a “graveyard for children”, after half of the homes and buildings in Gaza were reduced to rubble, and **more than** a million inhabitants were forcibly displaced. The “pause” was only agreed after **more than** 100 UN staff lost their lives, making Gaza the deadliest conflict ever for UN employees. (Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia, November 29, 2023)

Example 2 is taken from a statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia on the theme “The situation in the Middle East, including the Palestinian question”. In the clause “more than a million inhabitants forcibly displaced”, “more than” reinforces the large number of displaced people caused by the Gaza conflict. Similarly, in the clause “more than 100 UN staff lost their lives”, the speaker denounces the violence of the conflict through exaggeration by the use of ambiguity. By using “more than” twice to emphasise the excess of quantity, the spokesperson can avoid overly harsh or direct accusations, thereby adopting a more subtle and polite manner of speech, while at the same time conveying the condemnation of the conflict and a deep concern about the humanitarian crisis, emphasising that since the Gaza conflict, the delayed “humanitarian pause” has been a significant cause. The speaker delivered the unacceptability of the displacement of more than one million people and the deaths of more than one hundred UN staff members due to the delayed “humanitarian pause” agreement after the Gaza conflict, triggering emotional resonance among the audience, forming a common condemnation of the conflict and advocating for immediate action by the international community. The discursive strategy behind the quantity-varying rounders reflects the Malaysian government's adherence to humanitarian principles, advocating harmony and justice in international affairs.

4.3.2 Approximator Reflecting Diplomatic Philosophies

Diplomatic philosophy refers to the concepts and convictions that guide individuals in conducting diplomatic activities and formulating foreign policy. It is founded upon specific worldviews and value systems, falling within the realm of ideology. As the guiding principle of diplomatic strategy and foreign policy, it is the action guide for diplomatic practice. In the 2016 Government Work Report, Premier Li Keqiang stated that the core principles of China's diplomatic philosophy are peace, development, cooperation, and win-win. Among these, the “win-win” concept represents a new diplomatic philosophy introduced by the Chinese government after 2012. It emphasises cooperation, mutual benefit, and openness, opposes unilateralism and hegemony, and advocates for bringing more positive influence to global affairs through shared development and cooperation. Among the rounders used by Chinese spokespersons to convey attitudes, quantity-varying rounders appear most frequently, occurring 361 times. For example, whilst China's promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative involves numerous nations, diverse projects and extensive scale, the use of quantity-varying rounders, such as “近(nearly) one trillion dollars in investment” and “许多(many) nations benefiting”, avoids overemphasising absolute figures, preventing the impression of unilateral Chinese dominance, instead highlighting the multi-party participation and shared development inherent in the ‘win-win’ philosophy.

Example 3: 一个全体人民共同富裕的现代化，必将为各国共同发展开辟更广阔路径。富者愈富、穷者愈穷不是现代化，服务少数国家、少数人也不是现代化。全世界人民的共同富裕，需要各国的共同发展。共建“一带一路”和全球发展倡议是中国给国际社会提供的公共产品，也是实现共同发展、共同富裕的开放平台。共建“一带一路”倡议提出十年来，已形成3000多个合作项目，拉动近万亿美元投资规模，为沿线国家创造了42万个就业岗位，为许多国家人民实现了“铁路梦”“大桥梦”“脱贫梦”。（Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of China, April 21st, 2023）

In Example 3, the numerals “3000多 (more than 3000)” and “近万亿(nearly one trillion)” are deliberately non-specific expressions that transform precision into vagueness. From the perspective of Grice's Cooperative Principle, this linguistic choice adheres to the maxim of quantity: “Do not make your contribution more informative than is required” (Grice, 1975). The audience does not need to know the exact number of cooperation projects or the precise investment scale; the impression of magnitude and significance matters. By strategically employing vagueness, the discourse constructs China as an important player in the global economy and one of the world's largest partners. When viewed against China's diplomatic principles of peace, development, cooperation, and win-win (Li, 2016), these quantity-varying rounders perform important ideological work. The scale implied by “3000多 (more than 3000)”, “近万亿(nearly one trillion)” and “许多 (many)” underscores China's material contribution to global modernisation, presenting development as a shared process led by China but open to all. Vagueness here highlights not the exact figures but the overwhelming developmental impact. Thus, using approximators through non-specific numerals is not simply a matter of conversational economy but a deliberate rhetorical strategy that naturalises China's diplomatic identity. It frames China as a contributor to global public goods and a promoter of shared prosperity while legitimising its greater voice in global economic governance.

A consistent discursive feature of Malaysia's foreign policy is the projection of strategic flexibility, articulated through maintaining friendly relations with everyone.” Since independence, this stance has been framed as a defining tenet of Malaysian diplomacy, characterised by neutrality, non-alignment, and equidistance. (Jeshurun, 2007; Saravanamuttu, 2010). Across different administrations, Malaysian prime ministers have consistently emphasised that the country's foreign policy is both “principled and pragmatic” (Ministry of Foreign Affairs Malaysia, 2021). Also, Sharifah (2021) highlights Malaysia's aspiration to gain respect, to be “friendly with everyone,” and to project a “good” international image. This emphasis reflects a deeper motivation for the search for recognition among global elites. Within foreign policy analysis, such positioning is linked to the government's efforts at regime legitimisation and its intent to be perceived as just, confident, independent, and respectable

(Sharifah, 2021). In Malaysia's diplomatic discourse, spokespersons frequently employ restricted-proposition adaptors to flexibly adjust diplomatic positions by establishing thematic frameworks.

Example 4: Towards this end, BHEUU, JPM has published the National Baseline Assessment on Business and Human Rights (NBA) in August 2024, providing a comprehensive overview of the current state of human rights in Malaysia and outlining the necessary actions to address existing challenges. The NBA identifies gaps, challenges, and areas for improvement, assisting businesses in Malaysia in aligning with international human rights standards. It covers key areas such as the environment, labour, and governance, which align with global standards, particularly the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs). By adopting these principles, businesses can work towards practices that respect human dignity, equality, and fairness. The NBA marks an important first step toward building a sustainable framework for business and human rights, reflecting our recognition that the well-being of our people and the sustainability of our nation's growth are intertwined. (Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Malaysia, December 10, 2024)

In example 4, in a statement on the theme “Empowering Our Rights, Securing Our Future: Business Responsibility for People and Nation”, the Malaysian spokesperson used “particularly” to emphasise the authority of the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs). As part of the international standards, the UNGPs are the basis for establishing Malaysia’s National Baseline Assessment on Business and Human Rights (NBA). By using “particularly” to emphasise the determination to comply with international standards in formulating relevant policies, the spokesperson demonstrated the recognition and commitment to international responsibility, portraying Malaysia as playing an active role in global human rights affairs, striving to win more international recognition and support for Malaysia.

5. Conclusion

The researcher employed critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics to examine the comparative study of the approximators between Chinese and Malaysian political discourse. Under the guidance of Fairclough's three-dimensional framework, the present study investigates the similarities and differences of the frequency and high-frequency words of the two subtypes of approximators in the two self-built corpora sourced from Chinese and Malaysian Foreign Ministry speeches and statements between 2023 and 2024.

The study results show that the frequency of approximators, adaptors, and rounders in the Chinese Corpus is significantly higher than in the Malaysian Corpus. Chinese spokespersons prefer to use reduced-ambiguity adaptors to emphasise or exaggerate, thereby expressing the country's firm attitude and position when facing international disputes and constructing an image of China as an active participant and a responsible great power in international affairs. In contrast, Malaysian spokespersons tend to choose restricted-proposition adaptors to demonstrate their recognition of and commitment to international responsibilities, actively constructing the image of a responsible country to win more international recognition and support for Malaysia. Besides, Chinese and Malaysian spokespersons prefer to use quantity-varying rounders to express their strong condemnation of international conflicts and their continued concern for the suffering caused by political disputes between nations.

Though the study provides an innovative viewpoint to analyse the ideological differences between China and Malaysia, its critical analysis of approximators remains insufficiently thorough, with its interpretation of their role in discourse practices proving relatively weak. The corpus examined here originates from diplomatic political discourse; however, the critical discourse analysis process necessitates drawing upon theories and knowledge from related fields such as diplomatic studies, political science, communication studies, and journalism. This paper hopes to stimulate cross-disciplinary research further to reveal how hedge usage reflects the ideological differences from the perspective of CDA.

References

Chouliaraki, L., & Fairclough, N. (1999). *Discourse in late modernity: Rethinking critical discourse analysis*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Evasion, N. (2016). Malaysian culture. Cultural Atlas. <https://culturalatlas.sbs.com.au/malaysian-culture>

Fairclough, N. (1989). *Language and power* (2nd ed.). New York: Pearson.

Fairclough, N. (1993). Critical discourse analysis and the marketisation of public discourse: The universities. *Discourse & Society*, 4(2), 133–168. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0957926593004002002>

Fairclough, N. (1995). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. London/New York: Longman.

Fairclough, N. (2003). *Analysing discourse: Textual analysis for social research*. London/New York: Routledge.

Fairclough, N. (2003). “Political correctness”: The politics of culture and language. *Discourse & Society*, 14(1), 17–28. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42888547>

Fairclough, N. (2010). *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.

Huang, Y., Jiang, Y., & Bai, Y. (2009). Pragmatic constraints of approximators. *Journal of Xi'an International Studies University* (西安外国语大学学报), 17(02), 46–50.

Huntington, S. P. (1993). The clash of civilisations? *Foreign Affairs*, 72(3), 22–49. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20045621>

Jeshurun, C. (2007). *Malaysia: Fifty Years of Diplomacy 1957–2007*. Kuala Lumpur: The Other Press

Lakoff, G. (1973). Hedges and meaning criteria. In R. I. McDavid et al. (Eds.).

Li, T., & Pan, F. (2025). Constructing diplomatic discourse: A corpus-driven analysis of the discursive strategies by the spokespersons of China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs during a public health crisis. *Frontiers in Psychology*, (16), 1635767. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2025.1635767>

Prince, E. F., Frader, J., & Bosk, C. (1982). On hedging in physician–physician discourse. In R. J. Pietro (Ed.), *Linguistics and professions* (pp. 83–97). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.

Salager-Meyer, F. (1994). Hedges and textual communicative function in medical English written discourse. *English for Specific Purposes*, 13(2), 149–170. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0889-4906\(94\)90013-2](https://doi.org/10.1016/0889-4906(94)90013-2)

Saravanamuttu, J. 2010. *Malaysia’s Foreign Policy, the First Fifty Years*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.

Wu, G., & Yang, L. (2021). A corpus-based contrastive study of English and Chinese hedges: A case study of approximators. *Journal of PLA University of Foreign Languages*, 44(1), 45–52+160.

Xin, B., Ding, J. X., & Qian, Y. F. (2021). *Research on new developments in critical discourse analysis*. Beijing: Tsinghua University Press.

Yang, P. (2001). A comparative study of English and Chinese approximators. *Journal of PLA University of Foreign Languages* (解放军外国语学院学报), (06), 13–17.

Rahman, A., & Zainudin, I.S. (2023). Prosodi Semantik “Wanita” dalam Wacana Politik Malaysia: Satu Analisis Linguistik Korpus. *Jurnal Linguistik*, 27 (2), 103-118.

Sharifah. M.A. (2021). A Malaysian perspective on foreign policy and geopolitics: Rethinking West-centric international relations theory. *Global Studies Quarterly*, (1), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksab031>

Yang, X., Mamat, R., & Zin, Z. M. (2025). A multimodal critical discourse analysis of flawed women in *Castle in the Sky*. *Jurnal Linguistik*, 29(1), 99–113.

Yao, J. (2003). Hedges as category-variable terms: A comparative study of English and Chinese. *Journal of Jiaying University* (嘉应大学学报), (05), 80–85.

Zhang, C., Afzaal, M., Omar, A., & Altohami, W. M. A. (2023). A corpus-based analysis of the stylistic features of Chinese and American diplomatic discourse. *Frontiers in Psychology*, (14), 1122675. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1122675>

Zhou, H. (2008). Approximators in English and Chinese and their pragmatic functions. *Foreign Language Research* (外语研究), (02), 40–44.

Authors' biodata

Xiaole Liu is a Ph. D candidate at Universiti Putra Malaysia. Her major interest is in discourse analysis, especially in Chinese and Malaysian diplomatic discourse.

Roslina Mamat is an Associate Professor at Universiti Putra Malaysia, specializing in discourse analysis and Japanese animation studies. Her research focuses on Japanese comics and discourse studies.

Salina Husain is a Senior Lecturer in Spanish at the Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia. Her areas of expertise span the Spanish language and comparative Spanish-Malay linguistics. In addition, her research interests extend to the realm of Spanish-Malay English translation.