
Hedging In press Briefing

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Abstract

This paper studies the phenomenon of hedging in press briefing . It begins with the introduction that introduces different definitions of the term for different writers and linguists in order to show its nature . The paper discusses also the types of hedging : hedging through negation , through disclaimer , hedged performatives and hedging through complex structure . Though the former sub headings seem rather varied and many , but it is an attempt to reflect the main ways of hedging that are used by politicians in general and press briefers in special . The study supports the above mentioned linguistic devices of hedging with suitable examples where necessary . The politeness principle as a style of indirectness in conversation has been also referred to . The relation between gender and hedged language with the main characteristics of women's speech in addition to the process of observing or violating Gricean maxims have been also mentioned throughout this study . The paper ends with the analysis of a press briefing sample with certain conclusions that have been arrived at.

1. Introduction

To hedge , for Mathews (2007 : 420) , is to use any linguistic device by which a speaker avoids being compromised by a statement that turns out to be wrong , request that is not acceptable and so on .

Some writers interpret Hedges as markers of politeness. House et al., (1981) cited in James (1983:197) argue that Hedges are modality markers as they contribute to the marking of degrees of politeness in interactive discourse .Hedging ,here, is used within the

politeness strategies. Crystal and Davy (1975) , cited in James (1983:197) also ,interpret Hedges as softening connectives which alter the stylistic force of sentence , so as to express the attitude of the speaker to his listener , or to express the assessment of conversation as informal . James (ibid:198) adds that hedges are compromisers which constitute voluntary markers of imprecision of propositional content on the one hand and modifiers of illocutionary force on the other. Dixon et al., (1995:90) say that Hedges refer to a class of devices that supposedly soften utterances by signaling imprecision and non-commitment . Holmes (1995:74) states that hedges reduce the strength strength or directness , mitigate face -threatening acts and avoid imposition on the addressee . Within discourse analysis and speech act theory , hedging is qualification and toning down of utterances or statements so common in speech and writing by the use of clauses ,adverbials etc...in order to reduce the riskiness of what one says . Thus , hedging may be a mitigating word or sound used to lessen the impact of an utterance .

1. There might just be a few insignificant problems we need to address. (adjective)
2. The party was somewhat spoiled by the return of the parents. (adverb)
3. I'm not an expert ,but you might want to try restarting your computer. (clauses)

In short mitigation of what may otherwise seem too forceful may be one reason ; politeness or respect to strangers and superiors is another reason for using hedging , (Wales, 1989:215-216).

2- Forms of Hedging

Before mentioning the main types of hedging , it seems suitable to refer to the politeness principle . Leech (1983 : 107 – 109) states that in order to increase the degree of politeness one should use a more and more indirect kind of illocution . Indirect illocutions tend to be more polite and the more indirect an illocution is , the more diminished and tentative its force tends to be . Thus , through hedging and indirectness the cost to hearer may be minimized and this is the essence of the politeness theory . yet , beside the element of politeness , the following points may reveal a kind of uncertainty hesitations or beating about the bushes .

2- 1 Hedging and Mitigation Through Negation

Leech(1983:101-102) states that there are some expressions to the generalizations that negative sentences are more marked than positive ones and carry implications of denial .The exceptions tend to be negative expressions of emotion or attitude : I do not like Kenneth; He doesn't believe in marriage ;We do not agree etc.... . The Negative is often preferred to the syntactically positive equivalent. Negation , here , for Leech (ibid) is apparently a hedging or mitigating device , the motivation for it may be politeness. So , since mitigation is closely related to politeness and politeness requires indirectness , negation is usually used to show such indirectness , (Leech , ibid:114).

2-2 Hedging Through Disclaimer

One of the devices that shows indirect polite expression is disclaimer . Disclaimer is an expression used by speakers to preface their main thought with the possibility that they may be incorrect in what follows . What follows is nearly always a declarative with the force of claim, judgment , diagnosis , criticism or a similar act which at least in the context conveys an unwelcome effect . The following examples adopted from Fraser's (1980 : 348) cited in Wales, (1989) , may reflect the above idea :

1. Unless I'm mistaken about the situation , the plan is total loss . (Estimate)
2. you may not even go there again . (forbidding)
3. It is time to come in . (Request)
4. you clearly are at fault . (Criticism)

Also , another type of sentential disclaimer involves phrases such as :

- * If you wouldn't mind
- * If it's not too much trouble
- * If it's not an inconvenience (ibid)

2.3 Hedged Performatives and Politeness

Leech(1983:140)states that hedged performatives are used as devices of politeness especially when the hearer is a person of a more authoritative status than the speaker: we cannot , for examples , automatically assume the right to engage someone in conversation just to achieve our personal goals. Even some polite illocutions such as

giving advice may be judged to be impositions which require a preface such as (could I suggest?)(might I give you just a word of advice?) etc . The reason for regarding advice as impolite is because it takes for granted that the speaker is superior in knowledge or experience to hearer.

The use of hedged performative ,Leech (ibid) ,may soften the inevitable illocution that follows:

I want to thank you.....

We are delighted to announce I must tell you how much I admire you ... and so on.

2.4 Hedging Through Complex Structure

a: Could you help me move tomorrow morning ?

b: Well. er , let me see , I have to take Cindy to nursery school and take my mother - in - law to the doctor couldn't we make it some other day?

Such responses as in (b) are different from the positive ones in a number of respects : structure , word count , hedges and hesitations (like .. er) . So , it is believed that one has to work harder , use more linguistic , resources to say "No" to a request than to say (yes). A (No), as in the example above, may have to be mixed with lots of background material in order to convey the impression of refusal . Circumstances , here , need to be specified , and this specification needs a greater effort, something which may surface as hesitation pauses , false starts hedging , repairs and so on , (Mey , 2001 : 15 I).

3. Hedged language and Gender

Brown et al., (2005:165-168) , state that for years people had believed that women use words like (immensely)(horribly),more than men and they have a tendency for hyperbole or exaggeration. Also , women were thought not to use taboo or off-color expressions. Yet , they (ibid) add that some researchers believe that hedging seems to be used by women to show politeness , reflect uncertainty and to avoid unfriendliness and direct assertion. Some people had even gone so far as to talk of separate languages for men and women and say that in some languages, men and women have different words for the same thing. Historically, women have been seen as both innovative (the first to use new words) and conservative (keeping alive the old words). Other , theories say that women are in fact ,more conservative

speakers than men . Brown et al., (ibid : 168-169) add that Hedges as (you know) are often used by women more than by men. Context here plays a role in deciding the real meaning of the hedging phrase. So a phrase as (you know) , for example , may be of (confident) type as in: all that baloney , you know , we have heard before , or (tentative) , i-e , with rising intonation : “I did not know what to say , you know” . Women are also thought to use (confident you know) more than men . In that men and women seem to use the same form to mean different things . Another study , Brown et al (ibid) resume , show that women in same sex group use Hedges when they are talking about sensitive topics . So they , for example , use (sort of) and (I mean) when criticizing a friend as a way to soften criticism , while men are found to avoid sensitive topics , i-e , they use fewer hedges .

Concerning other characteristics of women’s discourse Brown et al., (ibid) add they use hedges in conversation to respect the face needs of others and that tag and other questions are used to bring people into conversation.

4. Hedging as Metalinguistic Construction

Key (1983 : 129) cited in Horn et al , (2006 : 689-691) states that Some metalinguistic constructions involve the grammar and interpretation of elements of the type originally termed Hedges such as (strictly speaking loosely speaking , technically , kind of and sort of). A Hedged sentence here, often contains a comment on itself or on its utterance or on some part. For example when someone says : loosely speaking France is hexagonal , part of what is uttered is a certain kind of comment on the locution (France is hexagonal). In this sort of metalinguistic comment , the words that are subject of the comment occur both in their familiar role as part of the world the utterance about. Key (ibid) adds that using of words should comply with their intentions or senses, to objects in the world and the meaning of words are combined according to rules of the language . When the words fit the facts and the rules are followed , one speaks strictly and there is no need for hedging .

5. Hedging and Maxims Observing

Sometimes , hedges may help speakers and writers indicate more precisely how Gricean maxims (expectations of quality , quantity , manner and relevance) are observed in assessments . The above

maxims are not fixed rules but rather suggestions that are expected to be respected by the interactants in order that the intended meaning may be exchanged fully . It is a kind of cooperation between the people who are involved in conversation . The following examples may indicate some points of observing the above maxims:

1- **All I know** is smoking is harmful to your health . In (I) , it can be observed that information conveyed by the speaker is limited by adding (all I know) . By so saying , the speaker wants to inform that she is not only making an assertion but observing the maxim of quantity as well .

2- **They told me that** they are married .

If the speaker only says that " they are married " , and it is not known for sure if they are married , they may violate the maxim of quality since they say something that they don't know to be true or false . By adding " they told me that " the speaker wants to confirm that they are observing the conversational maxim of quality .

3- I am not sure if all of these are clear to you **but this is what I know**
The above example shows that hedges are good indications that the speakers are not only conscious of the maxim of manner , but they are also trying to observe it .

4- **By the way** , you like this car ?

By using " by the way " , what has been said by the speakers is not relevant to the moment in which the conversation take place . Such a hedge can be found in the middle of speakers` conversation as the speakers wants to switch to another topic that is different from the previous one .

Therefore terms as (by the way) function as hedging which indicates that the speaker wants to drift into another topic or to stop the previous topic , (Thomas,1995:71-72) .

6. Politicians And Maxims Violation

Hedging may result in the violation of the maxims of manner or quality as in the following interview with an unnamed official from the United States embassy in Port-au-Prince, Haiti :

Interviewer : Did the United State Government play any role in Duvalier`s departure ? Did they for example , actively encourage him to leave ?

Official : I would not try to steer you away from that conclusion .

The official could simply say "yes" here , but to avoid directness and lessen the effect of the act of intervening in the affairs of another country she/he did so , (Thomas , 1995: 71) .

From the above it seems that terms as : (you know) , (I think) and (well) are highly used hedging devices usually exploited by people in general , politicians and press briefers in special .

7. Models of Analysis

There are different models that can be consulted in the analysis of political and press discourses . The model which is going to be followed is an eclectic one that relates between Maggie's (2007) and Van Dijk's (2004b) and (2005) which are cited in Sherwani (2011:112 – 113) . Both linguists almost share same points of view concerning the treatment of the different rhetorical devices used by politicians as forms of hedging especially the (Disclaimer) process and rhetorical structures .

8. The Analysis

According to the elements and types of Hedging that have been mentioned earlier in this paper , the following press briefing by the US press secretary Josh Earnest on November , 18 , 2014 is going to be checked according to the above mentioned eclectic model .

The briefing covers the case of the hostages held in Syria and the question of paying ransom or not by the US government . It also talks about the US immigration system with the health care law and the dispute about them.

Concerning the use of complex structure of (well) , it has been used for (37) times . Here are some examples : (**well** , I'd refer you to the , **well** , I know that there`s been some talk about this , **well** , that possibility certainly does exist , **well** it`s certainly not unprecedented .

The above structure is usually used to reflect the speaker`s state of hesitancy or sometimes to convey the impression of refusal . So instead of the assertion with the direct "No" or "Yes" , diplomats or politicians in special tend to use this style .

As a type of metalinguistic constructions used to interpret and comment on what follows , the speaker uses (sort of) for (10) times : that given **sort of** the extraordinary , **sort of** the regular daily

.... , I don't want to get ahead of any **sort of** , who do seek to sort of fan the flames , and , again for any **sort of** tactical decisions,and so on .

While the construction **kind of** (same as **Sort of**)has been used for (3) times : I assume that those **kind of** decisions are made , We're very pleased with the **kind of** international cooperation , and of what **kind of** authority can be wielded

The other types of metalinguistic construction as (generally speaking , loosely speaking or technically speaking) are not traced throughout the brief responses . It seems that , as I believe , the speaker here does not want to comment or previously discuss what he is going to assert .Thus , he has left the location of his utterances as it is .

Elements of hedged performatives , such as : **I want to thank you** , or , **we are delighted to announce** , that are usually used when the hearer is a person of more authoritative status than the speaker (as we have noted earlier) are not shown throughout the speech and the reason for that , as it seems , is that the briefer himself is of a more authoritative position than his audience ,i.e, the reporters. Apparently , the speaker here is not in need to use such style or simply he doesn't prefer that , but we do not know the reason behind the very limited use of euphemism such as adjectives , adverbs or even clauses as forms of hedging . The speaker uses the above forms for (7) times : (2) as adjectives , (4) as adverbs and (1) as clause , e.g , (The president was obviously **pretty** busy) ,(I believe he had the opportunity to address this **senseless** act) and (**I'm not in a position to issue veto threats from here** , but as you know ... there are ...).

The most prevailing process throughout the briefing as a whole is the use of negation style . There is a heavy and extensive use of negated structures in Mr. Earnest's speech . Negated structures , as known , usually indicate indirectness which is often required to reflect politeness . Through out the responses given by Mr. Earnest , at least (47) negated structures can be checked . But the use of negation as a disclaimer hedging device , i.e. , structure like : **Unless I'm mistaken , If you wouldn't mind or if it is not convenience** and so on (which are usually used to avoid embarrassment , as has been mentioned previously ,) are simply not found throughout this briefing . I believe that since the speaker finds himself in a position of leading , directing

the conference and being almost the only source of introducing governmental information to his listeners , so the chances of being embarrassed or wronged seem quite little or limited . Really , in all his answers the speaker seems keen enough and able to liquidate any possible embarrassment .

Concerning the use of the hedging structure (you know) , we almost find no trace of it in this speech and the reason may be that the conversation is top formal while (you know) is usually realized within informal talks .

Finally the case of adhering to or violating Grice`s maxims especially the expectations of quantity and manner has been practiced many times throughout the above briefing. The result of all that is certainly a kind of hedging through the process of beating about the bushes . Notice that :

Reporter: Do you have a timeline for when this might be
Wrapped ?

Briefer: I don`t have a sense of when this would be
concluded . But when it has been , Im sure we will
let you know about it.

The above answer is a clear example of maxim violation by the briefer.

The following table may sum up type , number and percentage of the above detailed elements of hedging in the briefing :

<i>Type of the hedging</i>	<i>Number</i>	<i>percentage</i>
<i>Complex structure (well)</i>	<i>37 times</i>	<i>33.333%</i>
<i>Metalinguistic constructions :</i>	<i>10 times</i>	<i>9.009%</i>
<i>(Sort of)</i>	<i>3 times</i>	<i>2.702%</i>
<i>(kind of)</i>		
<i>Hedged performatives</i>	<i>x</i>	<i>0%</i>
<i>Euphemism</i>	<i>7 times</i>	<i>6.306%</i>
<i>(adjective)</i>	<i>2 times</i>	<i>1.801%</i>
<i>(adverbs)</i>	<i>4 times</i>	<i>3.603%</i>
<i>(clause)</i>	<i>1 time</i>	<i>0.900%</i>
<i>Disclaimer</i>	<i>X</i>	<i>0%</i>
<i>Negation :</i>	<i>47</i>	<i>42.342%</i>

Total: 111**Conclusions**

The above study may lead to the following conclusions :

- 1- Hedging is that device which is used to reduce the strength of directness and avoid imposition on the addressee through toning down and mitigating utterances that seem forceful , also it can lessen the direct impact of the speech in general .
- 2- Hedging seems as a style that is specially used by politicians , spokesmen , or press briefers in order to engage the listeners or press reporters with half of the truth through rounding about or beating about the bushes . Thus , it is Avoidance that is the most commonly occurring strategy that characterizes spoken political discourse .
- 3- Using Hedges may be a sign of politeness especially when there is a difference in social rank between the interactants .
- 4- Hedging , as it seems , can be considered as a powerless language at least in Western culture.
- 5- Grice`s conversational maxims are rarely adhered to in spoken political discourse in special .
- 6- Playing with words through the process of Hedging seems something professional and depends upon the status of the speaker , the addressee and context of the discourse .
- 7- It is true that to confine meaning to rules seems quite unrealistic Meaning is something flexible and depends on different factors.
- 8- Finally , man only and not even the most highly developed machines , can make use of language and direct it towards certain needed goals.

الملخص

م. حسن هادي حسن

الكلية التربوية المفتوحة / مركز ديالى

يدرس هذا البحث ظاهرة التخفيف والتلطيف عند المقابلات الصحفية . يبدأ البحث بمقدمة تستعرض التعريفات المختلفة لهذا المصطلح للإحاطة بطبيعته بصورة عامة. ثم يستعرض البحث انواع هذا الاسلوب اللغوي من استخدام النفي الى التراكيب المعقدة. ومع ان المواضيع الفرعية اعلاه تبدو متنوعة وعديدة نوعا ما الا ان هذه الدراسة تبقى محاولة لتبيان طرق التخفيف والتلطيف المستخدمة من قبل السياسيين بصورة عامة والمسؤولين عن الايجازات الصحفية بصورة خاصة تنتهي الدراسة بتحليل نموذج من الايجاز الصحفي والمرفق طي هذا البحث مع استعراض لاهم الاستنتاجات التي تم التوصل اليها.

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Appendices

Press Briefing by the Press Secretary, 11/18/2014

James S. Brady Press Briefing Room

1:00 P.M. EST

MR. EARNEST: Good afternoon, everybody. Nice to see you all. I don't see too many faces that toured Asia with me last week. (Laughter).

Q How's your jetlag

MR. EARNEST: We're still fighting it off, Steve, to be honest with you. It's nice to see you all. I don't have any announcements at the top, so we'll go straight to questions. So do you want to get us started?

Q Thanks, Josh. Can you talk a little bit about this review on hostages taken overseas?

MR. EARNEST: I can. This is something that the President ordered back over the summer, that given sort of the extraordinary nature of some of the hostage-takings that we've seen this year, the President

felt it was warranted to direct the relevant departments and agencies who have traditionally been involved in assisting families as they try to recover the safe return of their family members. So this is something that the Department of Defense, State, the FBI and the intelligence community have been reviewing.

The one thing that I do want to make clear, though, is this review does not include a reconsideration of a longstanding policy of the United States government that ransoms should not be paid to terrorist organizations that are holding hostages. But this is obviously an issue that the President takes very seriously. We have long said and we continue to take the view that significant resources have in the past been dedicated to trying to ensure the safe return of American citizens who are being held hostage overseas.

And there was an incident earlier this summer where the President did order a rather remarkable military effort, principally military effort, to recover some American citizens who were being held hostage in Syria. That was a mission that was successfully executed, but it did not successfully result in the safe return of the hostages.

But this is a review that's ongoing among the relevant agencies that are principally responsible for working on this issue.

Q So if it's a comprehensive review why would the paying of a ransom not be included in that? And even if you're not doing -- on the question of the U.S. policy on that, are you looking at the policy of how family members who might want to pay ransom are treated, whether they're possibly subject to prosecution?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I'd refer you to the Department of Justice for how the law is specifically applied in those matters. The reason that we're not reviewing the policy as it relates to not paying ransom is that our views on this are clear, and the President continues to believe, as previous Presidents have concluded, that it's not in the best interests of American citizens to pay ransoms to any organization, let alone a terrorist organization, that is holding an American hostage. And the reason for that is simple: We don't want to put other American citizens at even greater risk when they're around the globe, and that knowing that terrorist organizations can extract a ransom from the United States if they take a hostage only puts American citizens at greater risk.

Q And do you have a timeline for when this might be wrapped up?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have a sense of when this review would be concluded. But when it has been, I'm sure we'll let you know about it.

Q The other question I had was about immigration. Any sense of when the President would make his announcement? There's some talk on the Hill that it might be this week.

MR. EARNEST: There is a lot of speculation both on the Hill and across town about this. I don't have any additional updates as it relates to timing. I mentioned in a briefing that we conducted in Burma last week, of all places, that the President was nearing a final decision on the executive actions that he would take to fix our broken immigration system, but I don't have an update beyond that.

Q Thanks.

MR. EARNEST: Steve.

Q Josh, has he received the DHS recommendations on this?

MR. EARNEST: Steve, as I mentioned -- last week, we did talk about the fact that the President was nearing a final decision, and beyond that, I just don't have an update.

Q Any meetings today about this?

MR. EARNEST: I don't have any meetings to tell you about. The President was obviously pretty busy over the course of the Asia trip; did not have the opportunity to spend much, if any, time on this issue, but did plan to work on it when he got back. So I don't know if there are any meetings that are on the books, but I know that's something that -- this is something that's on his agenda this week.

Q And what about this Republican strategy we're hearing about that they would try to sort of cut off funding for various aspects of carrying out the order?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I know that there's been some talk about this, but I haven't seen any specific proposals. Obviously this is not something that we would view very favorably.

Q And are you hoping that by going ahead and acting that it will somehow spur the House into some legislative action in the near term? Or what's the strategy?

MR. EARNEST: Well, that possibility certainly does exist. I've said this before that there is a trump card that Republicans hold right now, and that is the President has indicated that if the House of Representatives does pass the Senate bill that already passed in bipartisan fashion more than a year ago that the President would not

actually follow through with his intent to use his executive authority to fix our broken immigration system. The reason for that is simply that the legislation that's already passed through the Senate would do more to fix the broken immigration system than the President is able to given the confines of the law.

So Republicans can certainly prevent the President from taking this executive action if they pass the Senate bill. And I will say that if the President does take action sooner than that and House Republicans decide before the end of the year, before this Congress adjourns, that they do want to take up the Senate bill, the President has indicated that he would happily throw away any executive actions that he did enact in favor of bipartisan legislation that would have significant benefits for our economy in terms of economic growth and job creation, would reduce the deficit, would strengthen border security.

There are a whole range of things that are included in this common-sense, bipartisan Senate bill that would be good for the economy and good for the country. I think that's why we had 14 Republicans join with almost every Democrat in the Senate to support this legislation. There's a lot of common sense in there. Unfortunately, we haven't seen the House Republicans be persuaded by that common sense to actually take it up.

Michelle.

Q Just to clarify what you said on -- Steve asked if he's received the recommendations. You're not saying whether this is in the review stage at this point, or whether he's still waiting for the full recommendations?

MR. EARNEST: That's right, I don't have any update beyond what I said last week, which is that the President is nearing a final decision on this.

Q Okay. So why don't you want to say whether he's received those recommendations or not? I'm just curious.

MR. EARNEST: Only because I don't want to be in a position of doing sort of the regular daily or even hourly play-by-play of all this. The President has indicated that he's going to act before the end of the year, and that timeline hasn't changed.

Q Okay. And meantime, this rhetoric has been building out there, with now threats of everything from impeachment, lawsuits, and now

shutting down the government. Does the White House have a response to that kind of pretty fierce rhetoric at times?

MR. EARNEST: Well, it's certainly not unprecedented rhetoric from Republicans, unfortunately, that even with a common-sense piece of legislation that has bipartisan support Republicans have been vociferously critical of that bill -- for reasons that I'm not entirely clear on.

The question that the President has before him is a pretty simple one, which is, given that Congress, and in this case House Republicans, have refused to act on legislation that would be good for the economy, good for the deficit, good for border security, and given that the Speaker of the House convened a news conference shortly after the elections in which he refused to commit to even take up this legislation again, the question before the President of the United States is, is he going to use his authority to actually do something good for the country, that would be helpful when it comes to our border security in terms of strengthening our border security. Is he going to take steps that would be good for the economy?

And the answer to that question is, yes, the President is determined to take the kinds of steps that are in the best interests of the country. He would prefer for Congress to actually fulfill their responsibilities in this regard. And that's why the President has indicated that if Congress does pass this legislation the President is happy to have common-sense, comprehensive bipartisan legislation that supersedes his executive action. But if they don't, the President is not going to use that as an excuse to not act himself.

Q The suspense is killing everyone. (Laughter.) But will the President veto the Keystone bill?

MR. EARNEST: Well, the President has been very clear about what our views are as it relates to the Keystone bill. Consistent with past practice, the State Department has a method of reviewing these kinds of projects that span our international borders, and that means that the State Department can conduct a review that includes a wide range of considerations, including, at the President's direction, the consideration about whether or not this particular project would substantially contribute to carbon pollution and the impacts of climate change.

So there is a process that's underway that is currently going through its regular course. This is complicated at least a little by ongoing court proceedings in the state of Nebraska as it relates to the route of the pipeline in Nebraska.

But there is a process underway, and the President is confident that that process will carefully evaluate the consequences of this specific proposal and that that's the proper way for a decision like this to be made.

Q So that's a yes?

MR. EARNEST: It is an answer to the President's view that the State Department is the proper venue for reaching this determination.

Justin.

Q I just wanted to go back to something you said first about the possibility that Republicans would attach something to a spending bill that would defund whatever the President's executive actions on immigration were. You said that's not something that you would view very favorably. Is that in the same way you'd not view the Keystone pipeline legislation favorably, on a scale of veto or not veto? (Laughter.) I'm just trying to understand what you mean by that.

MR. EARNEST: Well, it's hard to render a particularly definitive judgment on those kinds of proposals because they haven't been put forward yet. But I think as a general matter as it relates to the immigration reform decision that rests on the President's desk, that the President is confident that whatever action he will take will be within the confines of the law. So he'll be taking a lawful action that is not inconsistent with executive actions that previous Presidents, including Republican Presidents, have taken on this specific issue of immigration reform.

So I think that's why, in our view, we would consider it to be unwarranted for Republicans in Congress to try to undo that executive action using the budget process.

Q On the timing issue that's come up a few times, will you concede that part of your calculation is kind of the political consideration of if you bring this out before a spending bill is brought up it would give Republicans an opportunity, through the budget process that has to happen by December 11th?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I mean, I guess the question you're asking is, what about the legislative strategy, right, about whether the President should make this decision before Congress has acted on either a CR or an omnibus, with the thinking being that if the President waits until after they pass the CR or the omnibus that Republicans are less likely to attach some kind of rider that would defund any of the President's actions.

I think the fact is you could probably argue this both ways. Republicans, as they should be, are well aware of the President's intent to act before the end of the year. And my sense is that even if the President doesn't announce anything until late in December that will not prevent Republicans from preemptively trying to attach to the CR or an omnibus bill a proposal to make the implementation of that executive action harder.

So there are a variety of views on this topic, and while I guess I would concede, based on the long explanation I've given, that this is something that's been discussed at the White House, that I'm not sure - - that given you could argue it either way, I don't think that this strategic decision that you've raised here will determine the outcome at all.

Q Last one. Do you expect the Keystone bill to pass today?

MR. EARNEST: I'm not nearly as keen an observer of the legislative process as all of you. I know that some supporters of the proposal say that they have the votes necessary to pass the bill. But they'll put the bill on the floor tonight, and I guess we'll all find out.

Cheryl.

Q I'm going to try. (Laughter).

MR. EARNEST: There will be a lot of that today.

Q Senator McConnell has asked for a formal statement of administration policy to find out what the administration's position is, whether he'd veto the bill or not, heading into that vote. Do you plan on sending a statement of administration policy on the Keystone bill today?

MR. EARNEST: I have not heard any discussion of doing that. But if our decision on that changes, we'll make sure that all of you get it.

Laura.

Q What's the White House reaction regarding the attack in Israel today? And does the President plan to speak with Prime Minister Netanyahu?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Laura, I don't have any phone calls to preview for you here. You've seen that the White House has put out a written statement from the President, and I believe he had the opportunity to address this senseless act of violence at the beginning of a meeting that he convened earlier today.

So we obviously are deeply concerned about the -- specifically about this terrorist act. We're talking about attackers senselessly and brutally killing innocent worshipers at a synagogue. Those who were killed include three American citizens. The fact is there can be no justification for an attack like this against innocent civilians. And the thoughts and prayers of the American people are with the victims and families of those who were killed and injured in this horrific attack, and in other recent violence.

At this sensitive moment in Jerusalem, it is all the more important for Israeli and Palestinian leaders and ordinary citizens to work cooperatively together to lower tensions, reject violence, and seek a path forward toward peace.

Angela.

Q There's been a growing chorus of business leaders asking the White House to step in on the brewing West Coast port strike -- right now a slowdown, but threatening a strike out there right as the holiday season approaches and shipping volume is high. Is that something that the President is considering? Is it being discussed at various levels? Obviously President Bush did step in, in 2002, in a similar situation.

MR. EARNEST: Angela, to be honest with you, I don't know if there have been discussions about this at the White House. There are none that I'm aware of, but we can certainly look into that for you.

Q Is there a threshold at which the White House would intervene?

MR. EARNEST: Well, presumably, that's one of the things that would be discussed if discussions like that were ongoing. And I just don't know the answer to that. We'll have to look into that for you.

Jon.

Q Going back to the immigration executive order that's coming, does the President still stand by what he said last year when he said, "I

am not the emperor of the United States. My job is to execute laws that are passed.” Is that still operative?

MR. EARNEST: Absolutely.

Q Not a king, either.

MR. EARNEST: That's right.

Q Because he was asked very specifically about the idea of expanding the deferred action executive order for the DREAMers to their parents. And he said, September 17th of last year, to Telemundo, very clearly, “if we start broadening that, then essentially I would be ignoring the law in a way that would make it very difficult to defend legally, so that is not an option.” Is that still operative, when the President said specifically that expanding the DACA executive order is not an option because it would be ignoring the law. Does he still believe that?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jon, I don't want to get ahead of any sort of announcements that the President may make before the end of the year about executive actions that he may take to fix our broken immigration system. Since this interview aired, the President did direct the Attorney General and the Secretary of Homeland Security to conduct a review of the law to determine what, if any, authority he could use to try to fix some of the problems that House Republicans have refused to address.

So this is something that has been under consideration for some time by the Attorney General of the United States and by the Secretary of Homeland Security.

Q So just to be clear, so you're saying that this is no longer operative because we've had a review. So when the President said that expanding DACA to apply to the parents of the DREAMers, for instance, would be broadening and essentially ignoring the law in a way that would be difficult to defend legally, that it's not an option -- that that statement is no longer operative?

MR. EARNEST: What I'm saying is we'll have an opportunity to evaluate the actions that the President has chosen to take after he's announced them.

Q I'm not asking about the options. I'm just saying, does the President still stand by what he said in that interview in September of last year?

MR. EARNEST: Well, Jon, obviously there are some things--

Q Sounds like a no.

MR. EARNEST: Well, it's not. Obviously there have been some things that have changed, right? We have been in a situation where the President has ordered a broader, in-depth review of the existing law to determine what sort of executive authority does rest with the presidency to determine what kinds of steps he could take on his own. The other thing that we've seen is we've seen House Republicans refuse to act even on common-sense legislation that would fix so many of the problems of our broken immigration system in a way that would strengthen border security, reduce the deficit, and be good for the economy.

Q They had already refused to act at this point.

MR. EARNEST: Well, I guess it's fair to say they've been refusing to act for quite some time. At that point, it had only been a few months that they'd been refusing to act. Now it's been almost a year and a half.

Q But why are you not using -- to switch back to Keystone -- why are you not using the word "veto"? Why are you not saying -- previously when this issue had come up, you said -- you issued a statement of administration policy that the President's advisor would recommend a veto. It seems substantively what you're saying is it hasn't changed, but you're not saying it again. Is there a reason you're leaving options open to not veto it?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I guess -- I don't want to leave you that impression. It certainly is a piece of legislation that the President doesn't support because the President believes that this is something that should be determined through the State Department and the regular process that is in place to evaluate projects like this.

But again, I'm not in a position to issue veto threats from here, but as you rightly point out, there are similar pieces of legislation that have been introduced in this Congress where the President's senior advisors have recommended a veto.

Q Okay. And just one other subject. The videos of Jonathan Gruber have now become kind of -- almost a hit series -- I guess there's like seven of them out now. They're talking about the stupidity of the American voter, of the ways that -- the process of passing the health care law, the ways in which people were duped as to what was actually going on. I'm wondering what your reaction to this --

obviously he was a very important figure in the crafting of the health care law, so what is your view of what he's had to say?

MR. EARNEST: Well, I think the President, when he answered a question on this at the news conference in Brisbane over the weekend, was pretty clear about the fact that the sentiments that were expressed by Dr. Gruber are not sentiments that the President agrees with, and frankly, don't actually reflect what actually happened in the process of passing and implementing this law.

The fact of the matter is I do think that people are understandably pretty tired of relitigating all the political fights from 2009 and 2010 as it relates to the Affordable Care Act. And there are some Republicans, however, who do seek to sort of fan the flames of those old political arguments because they think it is politically advantageous for them to do so.

My suspicion is that they do so because it's easier to talk about six and eight-year-old videos than it is to talk about how smoothly the opening of the second open enrollment period has gone so far, or to talk about the millions of people that have gotten health care as a result of the Affordable Care Act, or to talk about how the growth in health care costs is the lowest in recorded history, again, in the aftermath of the passing of the Affordable Care Act.

The Affordable Care Act guarantees a bunch of patient protections, including that people can't be discriminated against because they have a preexisting condition. All that stuff is pretty inconvenient for people who oppose the law to talk about. So it's easier for them to talk about these kinds of videos. And they're certainly welcome to do that. I don't think that there's a particularly large audience of the American people that's eager to have this discussion.