

Deciphering Speculative Discourse in MH370 News Coverage: A Corpus-based Critical Discourse Study of Selected Local and Foreign News Outlets



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ABSTRACT: This research explores how selected local and foreign news outlets depict speculative discourse in their coverage of the MH370 tragedy through corpus-based critical discourse analysis. It begins by contextualising the prevalence of speculative language in modern journalism and its potential impact on journalistic principles, drawing on previous research to highlight the rise of interpretive journalism and its association with speculative reporting. The MH370 incident serves as a case study, revealing how imbalanced news coverage has led to the emergence of rumours, speculation, and conspiracy theories, particularly in the shifting narrative surrounding the Malaysian government's response. The study focuses on linguistic patterns of speculative discourse, employing Wiebe et al.'s (2001) framework for classifying speculative language to analyse news headlines and reports from selected local and foreign news outlets. By examining the presence and utilisation of speculative language, the study sheds light on how journalists convey uncertainty and speculation in their reporting, influencing public perception and understanding of the MH370 tragedy. The findings confirm the widespread presence of speculative discourse in both local and foreign news coverage of the MH370 tragedy, with journalists from both spheres employing subjective interpretation in their reporting. The analysis highlighted a significant usage of hedging strategies such as modal verbs expressing probability, particularly in foreign headlines, which exhibited less certainty than local ones. Both local and foreign headlines commonly featured hypothetical questions and unnecessary quotation marks, amplifying uncertainty in reporting on MH370. Notably, 64% of MH370 news headlines were identified as speculative, emphasising the prevalence of speculative language in influencing public perception and encouraging contemplation of multiple assumptions and uncertainties surrounding the tragedy. Overall, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of how speculative discourse shapes news coverage and public discourse surrounding major events like the MH370 tragedy.

KEYWORDS: Speculative discourse, news coverage, corpus-based analysis, critical discourse analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

Currently, the news serves as a primary means of information dissemination, as modern societies are heavily engaged with daily news updates. Poor quality journalism can at times enable the propagation of disinformation and misinformation within the legitimate news framework (Ireton & Poletti, 2018). The use of speculative language in news content, being a form of subjectivity, may undermine the journalistic principles of objectivity (Hudock, 2005). In addition, the rise of interpretive journalism, marked by four intertwined traits—critical expertise, speculation, advocacy, and meta-journalism—is also associated with the growing prevalence of speculative elements in news reporting (Salgado & Strobeck, 2012). Journalists often resort to speculating about uncertainty instead of focusing on reporting current factual events as a means to sustain ongoing suspense in the news stream and to continually generate fresh stories, particularly in situations where there is a lack of new information available (Blom, Rønlev, Reinecke Hansen, & Ljungdalh, 2021).

Given the MH370 tragedy, extensive news coverage of the incident has been observed globally. Imbalanced news reports have led to the emergence of rumours and speculations, which have in turn directed blame toward the parties involved. News coverage of the MH370 flight incident and the Malaysian government's response has shifted from sympathy to assigning blame, giving rise to conspiracy theories. This has sparked a contentious battle between local and foreign media outlets, with some

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even linking the tragedy to the economic downturn of the home state, leading to political tensions among concerned Malaysians.

The unprecedented level of attention that Malaysia received following the MH370 incident made it a prime target for certain foreign media outlets. Malaysia's lack of experience in handling press scrutiny became immediately apparent. According to Minter (2015), the Malaysian government's failure to provide transparent updates on the event led to suspicions that they were concealing information. Many foreign news agencies seized upon this perceived incompetence to criticise the Malaysian government, resulting in unfavourable portrayals that not only fuelled anger and frustration among many Malaysians toward their government but also resonated globally.

Furthermore, speculation began to mount on various aspects of the event due to limited available resources. Consequently, media interpretations began to focus on how the incident was handled, leading to unwarranted speculations by various press outlets due to a lack of concrete information about the fate of the missing plane.

Thus, the objective of this study is to investigate the application of speculative discourse in selected MH370 news headlines and reports.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Newspapers in the early nineteenth century were anticipated to adopt a subjective perspective. To comprehend the factors contributing to the evolution of news reporting styles, transitioning from objective to subjective reporting, it is imperative to delve into the realm of journalistic ethics and media responsibility in news dissemination. Therefore, this research endeavour undertakes an examination of the extant literature on Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm's Social Responsibility Theory, formulated in 1956. This theoretical framework was initially conceived under the auspices of the American Commission on Freedom of the Press (1947), with the aim of ensuring press freedom devoid of censorship and instilling a sense of "social responsibility" within the media to furnish the public with reliable and pertinent news and information. The foundational principle was to grant absolute media freedom under external oversight. According to this paradigm, the content of news reports should be vetted and endorsed by public boards, and media entities should recognise their obligation to both public oversight and professional self-regulation. However, the landscape of media responsibility has evolved over time. Rather than simply presenting facts truthfully, there has been a shift towards providing interpretative analyses of facts, accompanied by clear explanations (McChesney & Scott, 2004). This transition underscores a move from primarily "objective" reporting focused on factual dissemination to "interpretative" reporting, characterised by investigative depth. Consequently, in fostering professionalism within the media landscape by upholding higher standards of accuracy, truthfulness, and informational integrity, additional parameters of social responsibility have been incorporated. These encompass the establishment of a press code of conduct, enhancement of journalistic standards, safeguarding the welfare of journalists and journalism, and establishment of mechanisms for critiquing and penalising those who contravene the code of conduct (Fink & Schudson, 2013). Through this lens, it becomes evident that mass media wield significant influence in shaping the issues that dominate the public consciousness and actively exercise this influence (Kuypers, 2002).

The researcher employs Wiebe et al.'s (2001) investigation into subjective speech as the primary theoretical framework. Wiebe et al. (2001) delineated speculative speech as "aspects of language utilised to convey opinions and assessments." Their study categorised evaluation and speculation as the two primary forms of subjective speech. According to Wiebe et al. (2001), evaluative speech comprises affective language that reflects both positive and negative appraisals, as well as expectations, opinions, and assessments. Examples of speculative expressions include those employing modal verbs of probability such as could, would, might, and should (Wiebe et al., 2001). In essence, speculative language denotes the expression of uncertainty in statements, which also encompasses the use of hedging. Hyland (1998, cited in Conway, Collier, & Doan, 2009) defines hedges as "the means by which writers can present a proposition as an opinion rather than a fact." As a form of subjective language, speculative speech often goes unnoticed by readers as it anticipates the outcomes of events to sustain ongoing news coverage. The corpus-based analysis conducted by Wiebe et al. (2001) serves as a reference point for this study, aiming to provide a comprehensive understanding of whether the newspaper reports disseminated to the public contain factual or speculative information.

The content and textual analysis help to investigate the presence of speculative language and its utilisation in the news discourse surrounding MH370, specifically focusing on the lexical choices within news content that speculate potential outcomes of the tragedy. This study adopts Wiebe et al.'s (2001) framework for classifying speculative language, which involves categorising words into syntactic units and distinguishing between those based on concrete events (or factual sources) and

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those expressing assumptions and conjecture. This classification system aids in identifying non-speculative and speculative language groups. The researcher selects Wiebe et al.'s (2001) classification due to its comprehensive categorisation of subjective cues in reported speech analysis, guiding the analysis of linguistic coding for subjectivity. Additionally, headlines are included in the analysis because they serve as a representation of reported news and are pivotal in conveying the primary information of a news event, thereby piquing the reader's interest in reading further. Hudock (2005) asserts that headlines shape readers' perceptions of a news story.

III. THE CORPUS

The study focuses on ten chosen news outlets that have covered stories about the missing flight MH370. Five news releases from each of these ten news agencies are collected within the timeframe of March 8, 2014, to November 5, 2014, resulting in a total of fifty news articles. The researcher has limited the selection of news releases related to the MH370 event to an eight-month duration, as it is commonly observed that extensive news coverage typically occurs within the first year after the event takes place (Andersen, 2012). This study primarily investigates the elements of news discourse that lead to speculative inferences regarding the MH370 event. A content and textual analysis are conducted on the news headlines and reports from ten chosen news releases to assess the extent of speculation in MH370 news reporting. By utilising Wiebe et al.'s (2001) coding of speculative speech, the content and textual analysis aid in identifying instances of speculative language in the selected news reports.

IV. METHODS

This study examines fifty MH370 news reports, obtained from ten local and foreign news outlets. Specifically, the sample includes five reports from local Malaysian English-language news sources and five from foreign news organisations:

<i>Local Press</i>	<i>Foreign Press</i>
The Star	Daily Mail (UK)
New Straits Times	The Guardian (UK)
Sun Daily (the Sun)	Washington Post
Malaysian Insider	New York Times
Malaysiakini (Malaysia Today)	USA Today

The chosen news reports on the MH370 incident encompass coverage from the initial days following the event, starting from March 8, 2014, and spanning over a period of eight months until November 5, 2014. The news press outlets were chosen based on their circulation figures, representing the average number of copies distributed daily.

According to Van Dijk (2012), headlines play a critical role in news discourse by conveying the main information or plot of an event. Often, news structures prioritise placing the most important information in headlines to provide a summary of the story. Using the coding scheme for subjectivity outlined by Wiebe et al. (2001), the researcher categorised headlines into those containing speculative language and those without. Wiebe et al.'s methodology for annotating subjective elements was applied, analysing words and clauses within sentences thematically. The resulting data was then presented through descriptive statistics, showing frequency distributions. Subsequently, a textual analysis was conducted on the news content using the same framework to explore how reporters utilised speculative discourse in their coverage of the MH370 tragedy.

The study employs Wiebe et al.'s (2001) speculative coding scheme framework, which serves as a roadmap for categorising words into the objective and subjective (speculative) language. Within this framework, an Information Extraction (IE) system is implemented to differentiate between factual and non-factual information, labelled as "uncertain." Consequently, this framework enables the researcher to identify clauses containing opinions and assess the strength of these opinions (Wiebe et al., 2001).

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<i>Speculative language</i>	<i>Examples of speculative choices</i>	<i>of Examples of speculative phrases (Speculative elements are in parenthesis)</i>	<i>Examples of speculative headlines</i>
Anything that removes the presupposition of events occurring or states holding	Maybe / could / should / might / potentially / speculated / theorized / assumed / believed /	(If) she were here, we (wouldn't) be in this fix. Tom suggested that this his friends (should) stay overnight.	Storm could leave thousands without power. Election Day may go away.
Anything that expresses uncertainty	if / wish / may / were / will to	She recommended that he (should) go and see his doctor.	Plan will improve classroom standards.
Theorising on any subject		(If) I (were) you, I'd learn how to drive.	Columbia to free rebels
Reasoning from assumed premises			
Conjecture		I (wish) it (were) Friday.	

Figure 1: Speculative Annotation Scheme (Wiebe et al., 2001)

To ensure coder reliability, the researcher incorporates an inter-coder analysis of the headlines. Two coders are tasked with analysing the headlines based on the Wiebe et al.'s Speculative Annotation guidelines. Once the data is collected, a comparison is made between speculative and non-speculative discourse in the headlines. Subsequently, the various forms of speculative speech are identified and described. The researcher aims to illustrate the occurrence of speculative word choices, phrases, clauses, and/or sentences in the selected news headlines. Thus, the theoretical framework of this study is depicted in the following figure:

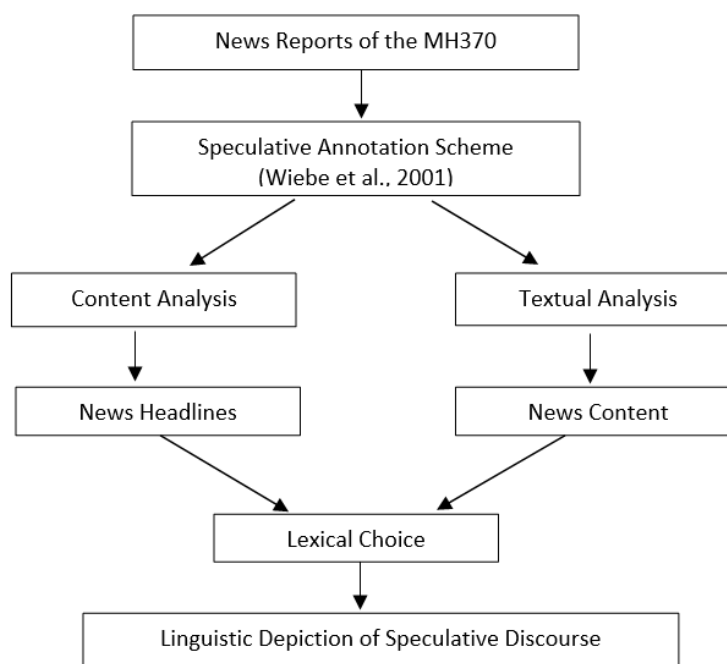


Figure 2: Theoretical Framework

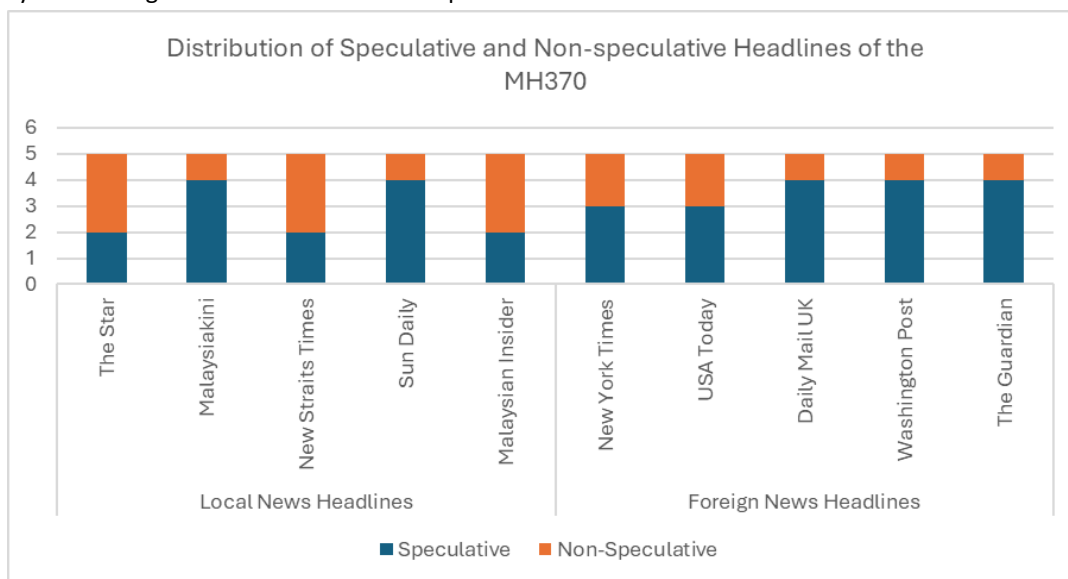
V. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Occurrence of Speculative Markers in MH370 News Headlines

Headlines serve the purpose of not just convincing but also maximising the importance of stories for readers (Dor, 2003), and they are crafted to capture the attention and pique the interest of potential readers (Ecker, Lewandowsky, Chang, & Pillai, 2014). They blend contextual impact and processing effort to help readers construct the most favourable perspective or context

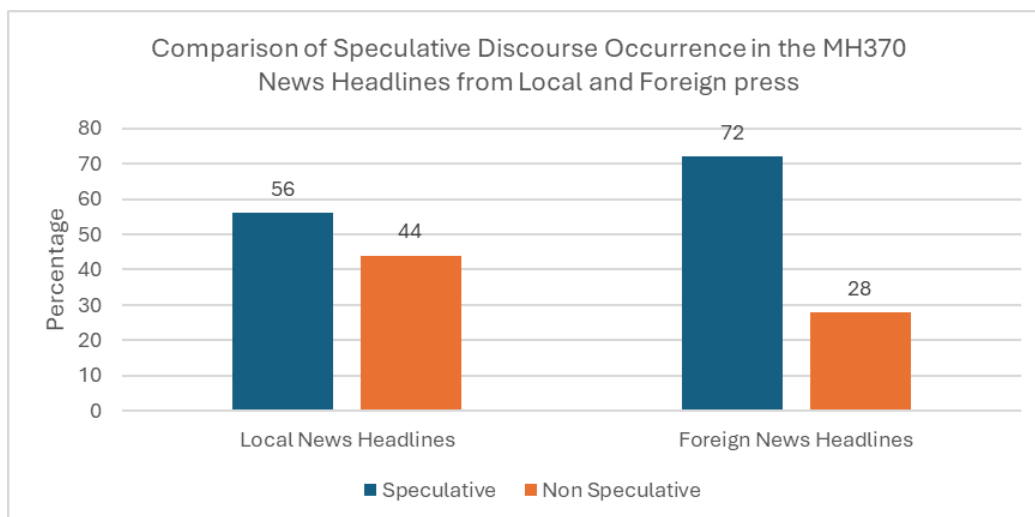
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for interpretation. Therefore, it is crucial to analyse the headlines of the MH370 news reports as they are designed not only to emphasize the significance of the news content but also to attract readers' interest in reading the full report (Hudock, 2005). The analysis indicates that the headlines published by the local news press revealed less speculative than those published by the foreign news-press. Figure 3 presented below illustrates the findings derived from the encoded data. A total of fifty headlines have been analysed utilising Wiebe et al.'s criteria for speculative cues:



The graph illustrates the distribution of speculative and non-speculative headlines across both local and foreign news sources. Overall, a total of 32 speculative headlines were detected across all chosen sources, with Malaysiakini, Sun Daily, Daily Mail UK, Washington Post, and The Guardian each having 4 out of 5 selected headlines containing speculative cues. On the other hand, there were 18 headlines that were non-speculative, primarily originating from The Star, New Straits Times, and Malaysian Insider. This analysis suggests a prevalence of speculative discourse in the headlines, particularly in foreign news sources, indicating a tendency towards speculative reporting in the coverage of the MH370 event.

Figure 4 below illustrates the relative percentage distribution of speculative discourse occurrence in MH370 news headlines from both local and foreign press.

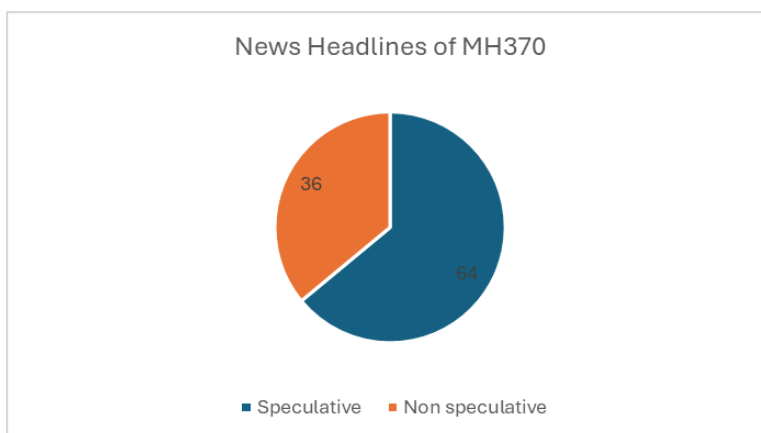


Generally, the graph illustrates a noticeable contrast, with 72% of the news headlines from foreign press identified as speculative, while only 28% are devoid of speculative elements. In contrast, local news press exhibits a lower percentage of speculative discourse in their headlines, totalling 56%.

Next, Figure 5 below shows the analysis that reveals a notable prevalence of speculative discourse in both local and foreign press headlines. Out of the total 50 headlines examined, 32 were identified as speculative, while the remaining 18 were

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considered non-speculative. This indicates a higher percentage (64%) of speculative speech across headlines from both local and foreign sources. Conversely, only 34% of the MH370 headlines were found to be non-speculative, adhering more closely to factual reporting. In essence, this analysis suggests a 64% likelihood that out of every 100 headlines published, 62 will contain speculative elements.



5.1.1 Speculative Label

A speculative label refers to language or expressions that convey uncertainty, conjecture, or opinions rather than objective facts. These speculative elements often involve assumptions, guesses, or interpretations about events, situations, or outcomes, rather than concrete evidence or confirmed information (Swedberg, 2021). The analysis reveals that, in reporting the MH370 incident, there is an excessive utilisation of speculative labels which prompts the meaning of uncertainty of the occurrence as well as signifies the construction of propositions, suggestions, and assumptions, to name a few. The speculative labels deny, suggest, blame, possible, claim, clue, and leave are found to be significantly used in the MH370 headlines:

Local Press:	Foreign Press:
Experts: MH370 likely crashed further south. (<i>Malaysiakini</i> , 30.9.14)	Radar Suggests Jet Shifted Path More Than Once (<i>New York Times</i> , 14.3.14)
MH370: Sailor claims she saw MH370 in fiery plunge. (<i>Sun Daily</i> , 4.6.14)	U.S. reviews possible terror links in missing Malaysian jet. (<i>USA Today</i> , 9.3.14)
Missing MH370: Police deny modifying pictures of imposters. (<i>The Star</i> , 12.3.14)	Flight MH370 co-pilot tried to make mid-flight phone call, report claims . (<i>The Guardian</i> , 12.4.14)
MISSING MH370: EXCLUSIVE: Flying as low as 80 feet " possible " (<i>New Straits Times</i> , 19.3.14)	Vanished Malaysia Airlines flight leaves relatives with anger and phantom phone calls (<i>Washington Post</i> , 10.3.14)
Police deny British tabloid's report that MH370 pilot received phone call before take-off. (<i>Malaysian Insider</i> , 17.3.14)	Terror attack clue as 239 die in jet plunge: Two passengers on flight had used "stolen passports" (<i>Daily Mail UK</i> , 8.3.14)

5.1.2 Modals of Probability

In reporting on the MH370 incident, the selected news media extensively utilised modal verbs of probability, also known as modals of speculation, to conjecture various aspects of the MH370 event. These modal verbs, including "could," "may," and "might," along with speculative tactics, were employed in MH370 news headlines to evoke notions of possibility, prediction, speculation, assumption, and uncertainty among readers. Below are examples of news headlines that exemplify speculative discourse through the utilisation of these speculative modal verbs:

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<i>Local Press:</i>	<i>Foreign Press:</i>
More ships should be used for MH370 search, say aviation experts (<i>Sun Daily</i> , 17.3.14)	'Tell us the truth': Chinese families hurl water bottles at Malaysian Airline staff as clueless officials admit the plane could be ANYWHERE within 27,000 square nautical mile area (<i>Daily Mail</i> , 12.3.14)
MH370 may have turned south 'earlier' than thought (<i>Sun Daily</i> , 28.8.14)	Flight MH370: Indian Ocean objects might have drifted hundreds of miles (<i>The Guardian</i> , 21.3.14)
	Flight MH370: 'Hunt for black box may be in the wrong area' (<i>The Guardian</i> , 5.4.14)

5.1.3 Hypothetical Question

In addition, another indicative strategy employed to signify the presence of speculative discourse in headlines is the use of speculative questions. According to Clark, Huebert, and Petri (2014), a "speculative question" is a query that lacks a definitive answer at the time it is posed by the speaker. Speculative questions are often considered philosophical or hypothetical due to the broad scope of the inquiry (Estes, 2012). They represent a type of reflective inquiry seeking responses that rely more on imagination than concrete interpretation. Speculative questions combine traditional questioning techniques, such as conceptual and semantic relations, with verb tense annotations to identify future tense implications in the question (Clark, Huebert, & Petri, 2014). Estes (2012) elaborates on a more explicit structure of speculative questions, emphasising the inclusion of broad and generic nouns or unquantifiable adjectives that possess a strong speculative quality, prompting listeners to contemplate and select a response even in the absence of evidence. Another indicator of a speculative question is the use of "why," which reflects a metaphysical inclination (Estes, 2012). Below are examples of excerpts of speculative questions extracted from the selected news headlines:

<i>Local Press:</i>	<i>Foreign Press:</i>
' Nothing to hide? Then tell us who's responsible' (<i>Malaysiakini</i> , 3.5.14)	Could the search for the missing Malaysia Airlines plane have gone much faster? (<i>Washington Post</i> , 23.3.14)
Conspiracy in hiding MH370's cargo manifest? (<i>Malaysiakini</i> , 23.10.14)	Did pilot commit SUICIDE? (<i>Daily Mail UK</i> , 10.3.14)
Why first 240 mins of MH370 still secret? (<i>Malaysiakini</i> , 25.10.14)	

5.1.4 Apologetic Quotation Mark

The analysis further demonstrates that journalists employed apologetic forms of quotation marks when conveying information about the MH370 incident. Every (2015) suggests that the use of unnecessary quotation marks in news reports by journalists serves to introduce speculation. Journalists adopted this approach as a means of avoiding accountability for the accuracy of the information presented. Consequently, statements presented in this unconventional quoting style lack definitive reliability. By enclosing statements within quotation marks, readers are prompted to scrutinise the implied meaning of the quoted phrases. This, in turn, indicates the presence of speculation, as readers' individual interpretations are required to grasp the underlying significance of the information. Below are instances of non-standard quotation marks observed in the news headlines.

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Local Press:	Foreign Press:
Missing MH370: Imposters “not Asian-looking,” says DCA chief. (<i>The Star</i> , 10.3.14)	Missing jet's pilot was opposition “political activist” (<i>USA Today</i> , 16.3.14)
MISSING MH370: EXCLUSIVE: Flying as low as 80 feet “possible” (<i>New Straits Times</i> , 19.3.14)	No survivors: Malaysia Flight 370 “ended” in India. (<i>USA Today</i> , 24.3.14)
	MH370: Chinese planes spot “white objects” in search area. (<i>The Guardian</i> , 24.3.14)
	“Tell us the truth” : Chinese families hurl water bottles at Malaysian airline staff as clueless officials admit the plane could be ANYWHERE within 27,000 square nautical mile area. (<i>Daily Mail UK</i> , 12.3.14)
	Officials “convinced” two communications systems on missing jet were deliberately shut off 14-minutes apart as it emerges aircraft DID keep “pinging” for hours after vanishing at 35,000 ft. (<i>Daily Mail UK</i> , 13.3.14)

5.2 Representation of Speculative Diction in MH370 News Contents

In this study, the objective of the textual analysis is to elucidate the correlation between social occurrences and their social contexts, and how these factors influence the portrayal of the MH370 tragedy in news disseminated to the public. The analysis of language choices and other linguistic techniques employed in reporting on the MH370 event seeks to delve into the journalists' expressive styles in conveying the news. The study reveals the extensive use of various hedging strategies by journalists in interpreting the unfolding event. Hedging, as defined by Boncea (2013), is a tactic used by communicators to convey either certainty or doubt regarding a statement, with the aim of indicating a certain level of confidence in the claims they make. These hedging devices serve as cues for readers to assess the credibility of the assertions (Boncea, 2013). Every (2015) describes hedging as the use of cautious language to make noncommittal or ambiguous statements, thereby avoiding the risk of commitment. In the case of MH370, journalists allow this ambiguity in their reporting for several reasons: to amplify or diminish search efforts and engagement from both the home country and international volunteers, to acknowledge the limitations of their investigation, and to shield themselves from the risk of disseminating false information.

One of the hedging strategies identified in the MH370 news reports is the employment of modal verbs of probability. A significant number of modal verbs of probability were observed in journalists' coverage of the MH370 event, prompting readers to contemplate the likelihood of various outcomes for the missing flight. The use of these modal verbs of probability also appears to influence readers' future expectations and actions. In narrating news text surrounding the MH370 aircraft tragedy, both local and foreign news outlets appear to transcend mere reporting by interpreting the event through the construction of numerous attributions. Through the use of modal verbs of probability, the researcher finds that journalists analyse the missing MH370 aircraft incident by making inferences about two main conditions: the dispositions of social actors and the event setting. Below is a list of modal verbs of speculation identified in the selected news reports of both local and foreign press:

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	<i>The Star</i>	<i>Malaysiakini</i>	<i>New Straits Times</i>	<i>Sun Daily</i>	<i>Malaysian Insider</i>
Local Press	...might have been involved.../...might hamper.../...would be expanded.../ ...would be conducted...	...would not affect.../...would be kept.../...will continue.../...should be searching.../ ...could not have flown.../...would shed light.../ ...would definitely be.../...would call.../ ...would be recorded...	...could help narrow down.../ ...would be given.../ ...would be "virtually impossible" .../ ...could possibly help.../...could be.../...may not want.../ ...could be conveyed. /...would correspond.../ ...would have been invisible.../...would have exerted.../ ...would have created.../...would have really needed to have done.../ ...would be fulfilled.../...would be meeting.../ ...would be dividing.../ ...would see.../...must have had.../ ...might have been applying...	...may have seen.../ ...could dive much deeper. /...would report.../...would be engaged.../...should be improved.../ ...should be deployed.../...would be quit.../...would be involved.../...should be developed.../ ...could not map.../ ...might be overlooked. / ...should not be confined.../...should also look.../...will focus on.../...may have turned.../ ...could not have followed...	...would conduct... /...would take.../ ...could be down to.../...could have caused.../ ...would have provided...
	<i>New York Times</i>	<i>USA Today</i>	<i>Washington Post</i>	<i>Daily Mail UK</i>	<i>The Guardian</i>
Foreign Press	...would most likely have taken longer than.../...could still provide.../...may have departed.../...could have a variety of explanations.../...might have prevented.../ ...might not be able to transmit .../...might have been made.../ ...might have happened.../...where it might be now.../...may have been.../...would be.../...should have popped up.../...could potentially.../...might try to persuade...	...would mean.../ ...will want photographic proof...will be coming shortly. / ...will cover.../ ...should have checked in.../...will enter.../...will be a "prolonged process".../...will close assistance centers.../...would make "advanced compensation payments".../...could not possibly have been any survivors. / ...could've landed nearby.../...would have run out of fuel. /...must inform.../ ...could be connected to.../	...could address.../ ...might be thrown.../ ...must conform.../ ...might be.../...couldn't find.../...should not issue.../...could not only.../...could use.../ ...could not have been.../...could have been.../...may be.../ ...will likely be scrutinized.../...wouldn't properly shape.../ ...might have ended up.../...could have clinging.../...could start to focus on...	...would have disappeared... /...would have been.../...could have been.../ ...would have had.../...would continue.../...could offer.../...could simply have switched off.../ ...could have in theory ended up.../ ...might have tried to turn back.../ ...may have done a U-turn. /...could have led to the apparent crash.../ ...could have been a deliberate act.../ ...might help...	...could have drifted.../...could be related .../...could have moved.../ ...would be drifting.../...may have been buffeted.../...will change.../...will make a difference .../...will move. /...would make any search difficult.../...could interpret this as.../ ...might be on the road.../...will make the job ...more difficult. /...may be looking.../...will become significantly more challenging.../ ...could be

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	<p>...could have reached.../...will have to accept it. / ...may have had a role.../...would never ever have hijacked the plane. /...would likely take some time.../...may have boarded.../ ...may have changed course.../...would not confirm the identity.</p>			<p>scouring.../...would have attempted to.../...might have put.../...would be smaller and much harder to see.../ ...will continue to try to identify.../ ...could lead.../ ...must be dragged.../...would be brilliant if they heard the pinger... /...would take forever...</p>
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Furthermore, hedging in news content is also evident through the use of speech act verbs. These verbs imply the performance of specific actions rather than simply describing them, as noted by Boncea (2013). Speech act verbs that function as hedges when used epistemically include terms like seem, appear, believe, assume, suggest, estimate, tend, think, argue, indicate, propose, speculate, and suppose (Boncea, 2013). These verbs often reflect the writer's strong opinions and judgments. Below are examples of such speech act verbs found in the selected MH370 news contents from both local and foreign press, presuming what might have happened to the missing aircraft:

Local Press:	Foreign Press:
<p>He is believed to have been headed to Frankfurt, Germany and is not likely to have any terrorist link. (<i>The Star</i>, 12.3.14)</p> <p>The union also said it was highly possible that the women, who were originally from South Africa but who now live in Australia, had been paid to talk about the incident for news reports that could serve as "a form of cheap publicity," (<i>The Star</i>, 12.3.14)</p> <p>We believe that Malaysia has done its level best in its response to this unprecedented predicament given the sheer scale of the search and rescue (SAR) operation, the biggest and most complex we've ever seen... (<i>New Straits Times</i>, 4.4.14)</p> <p>It also suggested that the plane's controller might have been applying "terrain masking" during most of the eight hours it was missing from the radar coverage. (<i>New Straits Times</i>, 4.4.14)</p> <p>Australia said Thursday the hunt for missing Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 will focus on the southern part of the existing search zone after new information suggested it "may have turned south" earlier than thought. (<i>Sun Daily</i>, 28.8.14)</p>	<p>The airline says the pilots did not send any distress signals, suggesting a sudden and possibly catastrophic incident. (<i>Daily Mail UK</i>, 12.3.14)</p> <p>It released satellite images late Wednesday that showed debris off the coast of Vietnam in the South China Sea, suggesting that it might be the plane wreckage. (<i>Washington Post</i>, 13.3. 14)</p> <p>Other facts appear to have simply been left out. (<i>Washington Post</i>, 13.3.14)</p> <p>"(w)e have to assume beyond any reasonable doubt that MH370 has been Lost and that none of those on board survived." (<i>USA Today</i>, 24.3.14)</p> <p>We don't know where to look, we think we know and we're doing our best, but we may be wrong. (<i>The Guardian</i>, 5.4.14)</p>

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<p>The Sydney Morning Herald in its report today said crash investigators believe the disappearance of the plane and the decision to disable the communications system appear to have been deliberate. (<i>Malaysian Insider</i>, 30.3.14)</p> <p>We argue that the aircraft could not have flown far beyond the seventh arc before crashing into the ocean, if it went beyond that arc at all," (<i>MalaysiaKini</i>, 30.9.14)</p>	
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Additionally, there is evidence of unnecessary quotation marks being employed by journalists from both local and foreign press in reporting on MH370, which serves as another form of hedging. These quotation marks are predominantly utilised to highlight the writer's expressions within the MH370 coverage. Referred to as "apologetic" quotation marks, this usage is noted for its unusual nature (Every, 2015). According to Every (2015), "the author hedges by incorporating quotation marks to enable readers to form their own interpretations or to acknowledge the irony or unique usage." Below are several examples identified in the analysis:

Local Press:	Foreign Press:
<p>Investigators studying CCTV footage of the two impostors who boarded flight MH370 with stolen passports have said they were not "Asian-looking." (<i>The Star</i>, 10.3.14)</p> <p>.... had been paid to talk about the incident for news reports that could serve as "a form of cheap publicity." (<i>The Star</i>, 12.3.14)</p> <p>However, its military was quoted in foreign reports admitting that there were a "few gaps" in the country's civil and military radar networks but added that it would be "virtually impossible" for MH370 to have crossed into Indian airspace undetected. (<i>New Straits Times</i>, 19.3.14)</p> <p>But after confirming her yacht's position using GPS data in recent days, she said she knew she was in the "right place at the right time" and told authorities. (<i>Sun Daily</i>, 4.6.14)</p> <p>Scientists and aviation experts are relying on a series of satellite "handshakes" to try to pinpoint the plane's final resting place estimated to be in a 1.1 million sq km area of the southern Indian Ocean. (<i>Sun Daily</i>, 17.3.14)</p> <p>An expert group has reviewed all the existing information and Australian Deputy Prime Minister Warren Truss said it was now "highly, highly likely that the aircraft was on autopilot" when it went down. (<i>Sun Daily</i>, 26.6.14)</p> <p>Rogers said US investigators would conduct a detailed</p>	<p>"Tell us the truth": Chinese families hurl water bottles at Malaysian airline staff as clueless officials admit the plane could be ANYWHERE within 27,000 square nautical mile area. (<i>Daily Mail UK</i>, 12.3.14)</p> <p>Officials "convinced" two communications systems on missing jet were deliberately shut off 14-minutes apart as it emerges aircraft DID keep "pinging" for hours after vanishing at 35,000 ft (<i>Daily Mail UK</i>, 13.3.14)</p> <p>According to investigators this indicated that the switched-off could have been a deliberate act and officials told ABC News that the two communications devices were "systematically shut down." (<i>Daily Mail UK</i>, 13.3.14)</p> <p>China loses patience with Malaysia over hunt for missing flight MH370 and warns it must "immediately" step up the operation (<i>Daily Mail UK</i>, 17.3.14)</p>

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<p>forensic analysis of the computer equipment, even as they continue to investigate the crew and passengers of the plane, but he warned it would take “a tremendous amount of time.” (<i>Malaysian Insider</i>, 30.3.14)</p> <p>In a statement yesterday, the airline says the document released alongside MH370’s cargo manifest is actually a “master airway bill” comprised of five separate “house airway bills (AWB).” (<i>MalaysiaKini</i>, 3.5.14)</p>	
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VI. CONCLUSIONS

The findings of the study validate the presence of speculative discourse concerning the MH370 tragedy in both selected local and foreign news headlines and content. Notably, both local and foreign journalists seemed to employ subjective interpretation in their coverage of the MH370 incident. The analysis reveals that headlines from local news press exhibited less bias compared to those from foreign counterparts in their use of speculative reporting. This difference may stem from the fact that Malaysian news press adhere not only to the Code of Journalism Ethics established by the Malaysian Media Council but are also subject to regulation under the Printing Presses and Publication Act 1984 (Act 301). Section 3 of this Act grants the Malaysian Internal Security Minister decisive authority in granting or denying publication licenses and in revoking licenses for content deemed prejudicial to public order, morality, security, international relations, or public interest. Moreover, the Act vests the government with total discretion in issuing publication permits and retracting permits for offenses categorised as publishing false news. Furthermore, action can be taken against any press outlet deemed to have failed to take "reasonable measures" to verify the accuracy of their reporting. Additionally, the Act extends its regulatory scope to foreign publications (Section 9/1).

The findings also indicate that foreign press coverage of the MH370 tragedy, predominantly exhibits conservative criticism and media bias towards the Malaysian government and Malaysian Airlines, reflecting the personal viewpoints of reporters or media owners with specific interests. This research finding is consistent with Kuypers' (2002) study, which suggests that media often frames controversial issues. The MH370 tragedy is perceived as an opportunity for foreign media to provide analysis, judgments, and criticisms of the target social actors, in this case, the Malaysian government and Malaysian Airlines.

Several key aspects of linguistic representation of speculative discourse were found to be extensively utilised by journalists from both local and foreign news presses. Both content and textual analyses uncovered a significant prevalence of modal verbs of probability in both the news headlines and contents related to the MH370 crisis, a classification identified by Wiebe et al. (2001) as part of speculative diction. The analysis also reveals that foreign headlines often utilise speculative language with a lesser degree of certainty, employing phrases such as "may be," "might," and "could be" when speculating about future developments related to the MH370 event, events that are deemed less likely to occur. In contrast, local headlines tend to use speculative modals indicating a higher probability of occurrence, such as "should."

Moreover, both local and foreign headlines appear to employ hypothetical questions to initiate speculative discourse. Specifically, three local headlines, all sourced from the *Malaysian Insider*, and two foreign headlines, one each from the *Daily Mail UK* and the *Washington Post*, are characterised by their hypothetical nature. The study also reveals that both local and foreign press outlets utilise unnecessary quotation marks in their news headlines and content when reporting on MH370. The hedge phrases applied in journalists' reporting of the MH370 occurrence serve to heighten the uncertainty surrounding the event.

In total, 64% of the analysed MH370 news headlines are categorised as speculative. This solidifies the evidence of speculative language being prevalent in the discourse surrounding the MH370 incident. Consequently, the extensive presence of speculative codes in MH370 reporting prompts readers to consider various possibilities, predictions, speculations, assumptions, and uncertainties. Nyamnjoh (2000) emphasises that "the urgency of the message should not lead to a lack of precision in form or to anger." In the context of MH370, speculative discourse is apparently employed to suggest certain assumptions about the events surrounding the missing flight and to propose conclusions regarding the actions of the Malaysian government and Malaysia Airlines.

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