

PRAGMATIC

ASPECTS OF CHOICE IN AMERICAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

ASPECTOS PRAGMÁTICOS DE LA ELECCIÓN EN EL DISCURSO POLÍTICO ESTADOUNIDENSE

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Suggested citation (APA, seventh ed.)

Rzayeva, S. (2025). Pragmatic aspects of choice in American political discourse. *Universidad y Sociedad*, 17, e4912.

ABSTRACT

This article is devoted to the study of American political discourse. The relevance of the topic is explained by the importance of political linguistics as a modern linguistic field. During public speeches, political figures are faced with the choice of the necessary rhetorical techniques needed to accept winning the respect of their audience. Analyzing political speeches allows us to identify and determine the intentions and effective ways of influencing the audience. In this regard, we made an attempt to identify the features of speech behavior and choices based on their speeches. The analysis reveals various linguistic means used as techniques of persuasion, manipulation and achievement of the ultimate goal.

Keywords: Political discourse, Linguistic features, Persuasion, Manipulation, Structures.

RESUMEN

Este artículo está dedicado al estudio del discurso político estadounidense. La relevancia del tema se explica por la importancia de la lingüística política como campo lingüístico moderno. Durante los discursos públicos, las figuras políticas se enfrentan a la elección de las técnicas retóricas necesarias para aceptar y ganar el respeto de su audiencia. El análisis de los discursos políticos permite identificar y determinar las intenciones y las formas efectivas de influir en la audiencia. En este sentido, se intenta identificar las características del comportamiento del habla y las elecciones basadas en sus discursos. El análisis revela varios medios lingüísticos utilizados como técnicas de persuasión, manipulación y logro del objetivo final.

Palabras clave: Discurso político, Características lingüísticas, Persuasión, Manipulación, Estructuras.

INTRODUCTION

The second half of the twentieth century was marked by the emergence of the term “discourse,” which became an object of interdisciplinary study. Each discipline gives its own interpretation of this concept. In philosophy, it is the totality of everything said and spoken. In political science, it is the process of communication between politicians through which political opinions and political ideology are formed. For linguists, discourse is a text in conjunction with many factors (pragmatic, extra-linguistic, socio-cultural, psychological); it is speech with purposeful social impact; a text related to some event, “immersed in life” (Arutyunova, 1990, p. 137). That is, speech “immersed in life” expresses people’s opinions about something and characterizes the participants of communication (political, cultural, historical characteristics) (Akinina, 2019).

Linguists Harris Z., Foucault N., Kristeva Y., and Serio P. considered discourse in their works and concluded that it expresses individual linguistic traits of a person taking part in the communication process. The 1970s were characterized by the emergence of discourse analysis as an independent discipline. T. Van Dijk, W. Dresler, W. Labov, T. Givón, and J. Brown are the names of linguists who closely engaged with this problem. Despite the active study of this area of scientific knowledge, there is no unified understanding of the term “discourse” (Detinko, 2017, p. 17). According to T. Van Dijk, discourse studies the ways in which language is used to construct social and cultural meanings (Van Dijk, 2009, pp. 57–60). This approach to language analysis focuses on the influence of the context in which communication takes place on the interpretation of texts. Van Dijk’s discourse analysis helps to understand how linguistic elements shape perceptions, stereotypes, and power in society. Given the above, we can conclude that discourse is a text that has an author and is created for the realization of certain goals, reflecting the vision of the world inherent in a given society.

Political discourse is a type of discourse that covers the linguistic picture of the political world, a holistic set of images of reality that exists in individual or collective consciousness and is reflected in communicative activity (Chashchina, 2013, pp. 249–254). Political discourse defines politics in social and historical aspects, highlighting ideas, political activities, and political and social relations. Such speeches are delivered in public. An important aspect related to politics is ideology, which translates or conceals beliefs, traditions, and value systems. According to Chudinov, “a politician, through language, imposes their point of view and constructs their speech in such a way as to control the consciousness of their audience. A politician’s speech is organized and designed depending

on the participants, goals, social norms, and cultural traditions” (Chudinov, 2003, pp. 42–56). Political speech demonstrates the leadership qualities of a politician, their character, and the attitude of the audience. Thus, political discourse conditions the politician’s linguistic personality and helps them realize themselves as a professional linguistic personality.

Based on the preceding discussion, this paper seeks to examine American political discourse by exploring the distinctive features of speech behavior and linguistic choices observed in the speeches of American politicians. The study highlights a range of linguistic strategies employed as tools for persuasion, manipulation, and the attainment of intended objectives.

DEVELOPMENT

In political discourse, politicians use or can use their speech to their own advantage and therefore try to build their own strategy. In order to realize this strategy, they must deal first with language and linguistic means. Chilton and Schaffner suggest that “it is certainly true that politics cannot be carried out without language, and it is just as likely that the use of language in the formation of social groups leads to what we call ‘politics’ in a broad sense” (Van Dijk, 2011, p. 303). The use of language in political discourse involves the use of various linguistic devices (both literal and figurative).

E. Sheigal distinguished two dimensions of political discourse: virtual and real. The real dimension is understood as the immediacy of speech activity and its emotional coloring, as well as the texts resulting from this activity, taken in the interaction of linguistic factors. The virtual dimension is a semiotic space including verbal and non-verbal signs, the common denotation of which is the world of politics, a set of speech patterns and genres specific to communication in this sphere (Sheigal, 2004, p. 58). Thus, politicians try to exert speech influence on their audience. The distinctive features of political discourse include propaganda and manipulation, which are considered as the content and instrumental aspects of the political process (Altunyan, 2006, pp. 150–151).

Pragmatic strategies in political rhetorical choices

Pragmatics can be considered a type of discourse research direction because it analyzes discourse from the perspective of speech acts. The process of transition of discourse into speech acts is called pragmatic interpretation of utterances (Kaltashkina, 2012). Speech acts are divided into communicative or illocutionary, locutionary, and perlocutionary levels (Austin, 1962). While the illocutionary act is related to the speaker’s intentions, the

locutionary act is related to the actual content of the utterance, and the perlocutionary act affects the listener. The perlocutionary level is the most significant in political communication, as the main purpose of a political message is to influence the listener. In political discourse, pragmatic strategies are crucial for achieving effective communication. Nowadays, when political image plays an important role (Akopova, 2013, pp. 403–409), politicians address this task by incorporating various expressive means in their speeches and discourses, especially during election campaigns (Oblov, 2021, pp. 416–419).

Pragmatic strategies in political rhetorical choices refer to the ways in which politicians use language and rhetorical devices to influence their audience, shape their image, persuade voters, and achieve their goals in political communication. These strategies are aimed at manipulating public opinion, creating emotional connections with voters, and establishing a leadership image. As mentioned above, strategies are used to influence the listener. This influence can be direct, where information is transmitted in the course of speech, or remote, conveyed to the audience through the media. In both cases, however, the purpose of this influence is either to persuade or to manipulate the audience.

To shape and strengthen citizens' attitudes, politicians use various lexical and stylistic means of expression, giving their speeches vivid coloring. Politicians often use persuasion as a strategy, presenting arguments and facts to convince their audience of their views and positions. They may quote experts and make logical arguments to support their statements.

American politicians often employ repetition of words, phrases, and sentences, ellipsis, and changes in word order in their speeches and debates. One of the reasons for this is the specificity of the US political system, which requires politicians to view their political careers, packed with numerous speeches, face-to-face and group debates, as a war of words. In this regard, the most intriguing issue is the use of repetition, ellipsis, and word order reversal by politicians belonging not only to two camps but to two different communication styles (populist rhetoric and non-populist rhetoric).

The study of populist politicians and populist rhetoric has recently attracted particular interest. For example, based on a study of US presidential campaign speeches from 1915–2016, Dai and Kustov suggest that less popular politicians prefer to use populist rhetoric as a tool to achieve better election results (Dai & Kustov, 2022). Other researchers draw attention to the increasing trend of populism not only in American politics but also in European politics

(Austin, 1962). In populist rhetoric, politicians often use various pragmatically and cognitively effective syntactic and stylistic techniques, as well as elements of figurative language, such as metaphors and metonymies (Musolff, 2004).

Among these syntactic-stylistic devices, repetitions of words, phrases and sentences, various elliptical constructions, and changes in word order are of particular interest, as they are frequently found in the discourse of politicians using populist rhetoric. Donald Trump is one of the most prominent politicians who actively and extensively uses these syntactic-stylistic techniques in his political discourse. Indeed, some of these techniques, such as the repetition of the phrase "Make America Great Again," have become his political trademark (MAGA), widely used in the American media to refer to Donald Trump.

Persuasion is important in shaping attitudes towards key issues and values addressed by politicians and helps to mobilize support around specific ideas and policy interventions. Various lexical and rhetorical devices are used for effective communication. Such techniques make speech weighty and persuasive (Masalova, 2021).

As seen in the previous example, the president used a stylistic device, epiphora, to emphasize the perseverance and determination of the American people. The epiphora reinforces the emotional emphasis. The repetition of this phrase at the end of the statement emphasizes the importance of America's interests and the preservation of the nation. Here is another example of epiphora: "It is time for us to come together as one united people - it's time." In this example, the epiphora of the phrase "it's time" emphasizes the call to unite the American nation. The repetition of the phrase at the end reinforces the emphasis on the urgency and importance of this action. Epiphora in political speech increases the emotional impact on the audience and makes key ideas more memorable. Repetition of a phrase or word can emphasize persistence, persuasiveness, or the importance of the position being expressed. It also creates rhythm and structure, which makes the speech more persuasive. Epiphora makes the text more memorable and has an emotional impact on the audience, which is an important aspect of political communication.

Another common stylistic device in American political discourse is alliteration. Alliteration is used to enrich utterances and influence listeners. As is known, the essence of alliteration is the repetition of the same or similar sounds at the beginning of words. This technique creates musicality and memorability in statements. For example: "We will not waver, we will not tire; we will not falter, and we will not fail, we will not waver." In this example, alliteration in

the words “waver, will, we” creates rhythm and emphasizes the persistence and determination of the speaker. In another example, “We cannot be both the world’s leading champion of peace and the world’s leading supplier of the weapons of war,” alliteration of the ‘w’ sounds (“world’s, world’s, weapons, war”) creates a sound similarity and strengthens the contrast between the roles of world leader and weapons supplier. This helps to emphasize the contradiction and provokes reflection in listeners.

Another common stylistic device in American political discourse is antithesis. Antithesis is a structural opposition of two opposing ideas or concepts. It helps to emphasize contrast and increase emotional impact. For example: “Ask not what your country can do for you - ask what you can do for your country.” The antithetical structure in this example (“what your country can do for you” versus “what you can do for your country”) draws attention to the importance of selflessness and service to society. This emotional opposition serves as a way to actualize the content-evaluative elements of speech, which leads to strengthening the effect of psychological influence on the addressee.

In recent years, American politicians have increasingly resorted to using “plain language” to create an impression of accessibility and closeness to the electorate. This style excludes the use of complicated terms, professionalisms, and complex syntactic constructions that are difficult for a wide audience to understand. The language of the people, or plain language, is the concept of clear and concise English for official and business communication intended to make government, financial, and legal documents and publications understandable to ordinary people (Shchennikova, 2016). It is simple, accessible language that promotes more effective and understandable communication to a wide audience.

Using plain language has several advantages, such as attracting attention and enabling effective communication. Through simple language, politicians can communicate their ideas and values with greater effectiveness in persuading and inspiring their audience. Another advantage is its accessibility to a diverse audience. It removes barriers related to education or specialized knowledge, allowing politicians to reach a wider audience. The use of complex terms and formal language constructions can cause resentment and mistrust among citizens, who may feel they are dealing with obscure and hidden information. Simple language builds trust and emphasizes open communication.

For comparison, here is an example in complex language:

“Agencies that have created a performance-based, customer-driven, results-oriented culture have aligned their organizational processes to support this new culture and have used IT as an enabler.” Plain language: “Agencies with a performance-based, customer-driven, results-oriented culture have changed their organization by using IT to help them manage staff and their work” (Wright & Hallervorden, 2003). In this example, the first sentence uses complex words and long phrases, which can make it difficult for ordinary people to understand. The second sentence, written in plain language style, uses simple words and short phrases, making the information more accessible and understandable.

George Orwell, a prominent British writer and journalist known for his works on politics and language, addressed these issues in his essay “Politics and the English Language.” In this work, the author draws attention to the relationship between language and political discourse. He puts forward the thesis of using simple, precise, and clear language in political communication. This approach favors more honest and transparent political discourse. The author draws attention to aspects such as the use of metaphors and clichés. He believes that such phrases can lead to a blurring of meaning and difficulty in understanding. The writer also addresses the problem of inappropriate word choice. He believes that politicians often use complex language to give the impression of being scientific and authoritative. However, in the author’s opinion, this obscures and distorts the true state of affairs. Orwell also criticizes the excessive use of passive voice in political rhetoric. Such constructions, according to the author, make it difficult to identify those responsible and blur accountabilities.

Hence, it can be concluded that the choice of simple and clear language allows politicians to achieve honest and open discussion of political issues while avoiding manipulation and distortion.

Manipulation and manipulative aspects of choice

Political discourse is also prone to manipulative elements, where the selection of linguistic units can shape voters’ perceptions and opinions. In a political setting, manipulation may aim to influence public opinion, instill specific attitudes, or even alter voters’ decisions. These techniques often range from emotional appeals to the creation of imagery and symbols, or even the distortion of facts. While such methods can effectively sway public opinion, they can also serve to obscure true intentions. Politicians employ various lexical and stylistic strategies to mask the genuine meaning of their statements and manipulate the audience’s emotional responses.

One such lexical technique is synonymy, which plays a significant role in political correctness by influencing how messages are perceived. The ability to select appropriate synonyms helps convey ideas while respecting the audience's diversity and sensitivities. For example, in Barack Obama's speech, "We need to roll back the Bush tax cuts for the wealthy so that we can reform our tax code in a way that's fair and balanced," the terms "roll back" instead of the more direct "repeal" and "reform" instead of "increase" are employed. These choices soften the perception of the proposed tax changes.

Similarly, in a speech by Joe Biden addressing poverty, the statement "We must address economic inequality and ensure equitable opportunities for all Americans so that we can build a fairer and more just society" uses carefully chosen synonyms to articulate his intentions while emphasizing fairness and equity. However, the use of synonymy in politics is not always benign. Politicians frequently rely on synonyms to mask negative connotations and manipulate audience perceptions. For instance, terms like "flexible budget" as a substitute for "cuts in social programs" or "economic restructuring" for "mass layoffs" are designed to mitigate public backlash. Other examples include "enhanced interrogation techniques" for "torture," "strategic realignment" for "troop withdrawals," "revenue enhancement" for "tax increases," and "balancing the budget" for "cutting spending." These euphemisms often reduce negative reactions and foster a more favorable impression of contentious actions.

Thus, we can conclude that the manipulative nature of synonyms arises from several factors, including: 1) the covert transmission of information—synonyms obscure the true essence of a phenomenon by creating neutral or positive connotations through mechanisms like associativity and buffering; 2) the recipient of information often lacks the time to critically assess the synonym used, as the vast flow of information broadcast by media channels complicates the evaluation of linguistic material; and 3) understanding how manipulative influence is carried out is impossible without grasping the essence of the phenomenon itself (Yatsenko & Fedorov, 2018, pp. 35–36).

Another lexical device frequently employed by politicians to heighten emotional impact is homonymy. For example, in the statement "We will rid the world of evil-doers," George W. Bush uses the homonym "rid" to enhance emotional appeal. The phrase creates a strong association between deliverance and combating terrorism, evoking determination and support from the audience. Similarly, in Donald Trump's speech "We're going to take our country back," the word "back" is used to intensify emotional impact. It evokes a sense of regaining control and returning

to a former state, stirring feelings of patriotism and unity among listeners.

Further examples illustrate this point: the word "change," as in "It's time for real change in our country, and together we can make that change happen," uses its dual meaning to signify both a change in policy and broader transformations, fostering ambiguity. The word "right," as in "We must stand up for what's right, for the rights of every American citizen," plays on its dual meanings—justice and entitlement—creating a layered and persuasive effect. Similarly, "fair," as in "Our goal is to create a fair society where everyone has an equal chance to succeed," emphasizes fairness while also connoting success, reinforcing the intended message.

These examples demonstrate how homonyms can serve as tools in political speech to influence, create ambiguity, and subtly manipulate audience perceptions. Thus, it can be concluded that the manipulative aspects of word choice are often nuanced and difficult to detect, aiming to shape audience perception and behavior in a desired direction.

Choice of structures and speech patterns in political discourse

As discussed in the previous paragraphs, political discourse, a fundamental element of political communication, is instrumental in shaping public opinion and achieving politicians' objectives. One of the critical factors influencing the effectiveness of turn-taking in political speeches is the deliberate choice of structures and speech patterns. This section examines how politicians use various linguistic structures and rhetorical devices to enhance their impact on audiences and achieve their goals. Message structures are vital in organizing and conveying political information. Through the careful selection and sequencing of ideas, politicians can shape impressions and emphasize key aspects of their message. Two commonly employed strategies are triads and parallelism.

Triads, a linguistic technique where three elements or ideas are listed within a sentence or statement, hold significant persuasive power in political discourse. They enable politicians to highlight key components of their message, improve memorability, and amplify its impact. Triads enhance comprehension and lend a cohesive rhythm to speeches. For instance, "Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," from the U.S. Declaration of Independence, encapsulates core values, while "Security, prosperity, and freedom" outlines primary policy goals. The advantages of triads include their memorability (a rhythmic and structured format that is easily retained by listeners), heightened impact (emphasizing three pivotal points to increase

audience engagement), and evocation of emotional responses (enhancing the expression of ideas and values).

Empirical analysis demonstrates that triads effectively underscore essential aspects of ideas, values, and commitments, helping politicians achieve a deeper and more lasting connection with their audience. This strategy not only reinforces key messages but also ensures their enduring resonance.

Political speeches are also characterized by a large number of parallel constructions. This technique is often used in political discourse to strengthen the argumentation and create the effect of memorability and impact on the audience. Parallel constructions create a repetitive structure, which helps to emphasize key ideas and messages. The choice of parallel constructions is intentional, as due to their monotony they serve as a background for emphatic emphasis of the necessary segment of the statement: We are - the change we seek. We are the change we seek. This short phrase uttered by Obama uses a parallel construction to emphasize the idea that the change people seek begins with themselves. We are, followed by a repetition of the change we seek. This gives the impression of an internal connection between we and change, emphasizing the active role of society in changing and improving the situation. This parallel structure makes the utterance easy to remember and emphasizes the audience's emotional identification with the idea of change. The choice of structures and speech patterns in political discourse has a tremendous power in shaping perception.

CONCLUSIONS

Pragmatic aspects of choice in American political discourse are key to shape candidate images, manipulating public opinion, and achieving communicative goals. They represent a complex field of research that requires constant analyses, both linguistic and contextual. The analyzed pragmatic strategies serve as tools for manipulating language and rhetoric to achieve specific goals in political discourse. They allow politicians to actively influence the perceptions and reactions of their audience, forming an image, persuading and creating effective communication, and linguistic means are used to create certain effects on the audience.

There are many linguistic devices used by politicians to evoke empathy, and establish a sense of shared purpose (euphemisms, synonymy, homonymy, triads, and/or parallel constructions). It is important to notice that these are not just rhetorical embellishments but are, in fact, tools instrumental to creating certain effects in the audience, such as making it more memorable, emotionally

appealing, or softening the impact of controversial policies. Furthermore, these strategies are adaptable since politicians can frame their discourse in various ways to be appealing for different people respect of their cultural, ideological, and demographic sensibilities. That way, the pragmatic dimensions of political discourse draw attention to the intentional and calculated nature of language use as a tool of influence. They reflect the complex interaction of form, content, and context and show how politicians use linguistic choices to build narratives, frame debates, and, finally, attain communicative and strategic objectives.

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