A Pragmatic and Rhetorical Analysis of Donald Trump's Presidential Campaign Discourse: Examining Linguistic Strategies from 2016 to 2024

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Abstract: This study analyzes Donald Trump's presidential campaign discourse (2016-2024) using pragmatic and rhetorical frameworks. It examines how his language constructs political identities, mobilizes voters, and negotiates power relations. Drawing on speech act theory and empirical research, the analysis of campaign speeches reveals Trump's reliance on a populist "us vs. them" binary, hyperbolic language, metaphoric framing, and strategic pragmatic devices (like presupposition) to frame issues as self-evident truths. These linguistic strategies consolidate his political identity and function as persuasive tools resonating with diverse audiences. The paper discusses implications for political discourse analysis and applied linguistics, suggesting future research on language and political ideology.

Keywords: Political discourse; Presidential campaign; Discourse analysis; Speech act theory; Narrative structure

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1. Introduction

Political discourse serves as both communication and a strategic power instrument. Recent scholarship increasingly analyzes how language shapes public opinion, mobilizes support, and constructs identities. Donald Trump stands out as a uniquely controversial and rhetorically innovative figure whose campaign speeches disrupted conventional political communication.

This study analyzes Trump's presidential campaign discourse (2016, 2024) using an integrated pragmatic and rhetorical framework. Pragmatics examines context-dependent meaning, revealing implicit assumptions and presuppositions in his language. Rhetorical analysis decodes persuasive elements like metaphor, repetition, hyperbole, and narrative framing. Together, they show how Trump's linguistic choices construct political realities.

Trump's rhetoric features directness, provocative metaphors, and emotionally charged "us vs. them" dichotomies, embodying a populist narrative framing politics as existential struggle. This research examines the linguistic devices underpinning his persuasive power.

Understanding such linguistic mechanisms is crucial in an era of polarization and digital media proliferation. This study contributes to political discourse analysis and applied linguistics, revealing the inextricable link between language and power in contemporary politics.

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2. Literature Review

This section reviews the theoretical and empirical literature relevant to the analysis of political discourse using pragmatic and rhetorical approaches. It is organized into three parts: the theoretical underpinnings of pragmatic analysis in political discourse, the role of rhetorical analysis in political communication, and recent empirical studies focusing on Donald Trump's campaign discourse.

(1) Theoretical foundations in pragmatic analysis

Pragmatics, as a branch of linguistics, investigates how context influences the interpretation of meaning. Early works by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969) established that language functions not merely as a vehicle for transmitting information but also as a performative tool that enacts social actions. In political discourse, speech acts—such as promises, declarations, and threats—serve not only to communicate information but also to shape political realities (Levinson, 1983).

Key pragmatic concepts such as presupposition, implicature, and deictic expressions are central to understanding how political messages are constructed and interpreted. Presuppositions are the background assumptions embedded in speech, which the speaker treats as given (Grice, 1975). In a political context, these can frame issues in ways that make certain viewpoints appear selfevident. Implicatures, on the other hand, involve meanings that are indirectly conveyed, relying on the listener's ability to infer unstated implications from the context (Grice, 1975). Deictic expressions—words whose interpretation depends on the situational context (e.g., "we," "here," "now")—further contribute to constructing a sense of immediacy and shared identity (Fillmore, 1977).

Recent research has applied these pragmatic concepts to political discourse. For example, Müller (2017) conducted a corpusbased study analyzing the presuppositions in political speeches, finding that such implicit assumptions can simplify complex political issues and mobilize ideological support. Similarly, Wodak (2015) argued that the strategic use of implicatures can enhance the persuasive impact of political messages. These studies underscore the significance of pragmatic analysis in understanding the subtleties of political communication.

(2) Rhetorical analysis in political communication

Rhetorical analysis examines how speakers use language to persuade audiences and construct compelling narratives. Rooted in classical rhetoric (Aristotle, trans. 1991; Burke, 1969), this approach emphasizes the importance of ethos, pathos, and logos in effective communication. Ethos refers to the credibility or character of the speaker; pathos appeals to the emotions of the audience; and logos involves logical reasoning and evidence. In modern political discourse, these classical appeals are reinterpreted within a context of mass media and digital communication.

One key aspect of rhetorical analysis is the examination of metaphors. Lakoff (2004) demonstrated that metaphors are not merely stylistic devices but foundational structures through which abstract political concepts are rendered understandable. Trump's speeches, for instance, often deploy metaphors drawn from warfare or sports to depict political struggles in vivid, emotionally resonant terms. Repetition and hyperbole further reinforce his message, creating memorable slogans and emotional intensity (CharterisBlack, 2005).

Another dimension of rhetorical analysis involves the study of narrative structures. Politicians often frame their speeches as coherent stories, drawing clear boundaries between "us" and "them" to mobilize support and delegitimize opposition (Moffitt, 2016). Recent studies have highlighted how such narrative framing not only simplifies complex political issues but also constructs a shared social identity among supporters. Researchers such as van Dijk (2011) have shown that the interplay of pragmatic and rhetorical devices creates a discourse that is both ideologically charged and highly persuasive.

(3) Empirical studies on trump's campaign discourse

Since his rise to prominence in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Donald Trump's political discourse has been the subject of extensive empirical research. Scholars have explored various aspects of his rhetoric, including his use of humor, hyperbolic statements, and moralistic language. Pasko (2017) investigated how Trump's language contributed to a "culture war" narrative by framing political conflict in stark moral terms. Other studies have examined the role of social media in amplifying his message, highlighting the rapid dissemination of his speeches and the consequent formation of a cohesive populist identity (Enli, 2017).

Empirical studies that employ pragmatic frameworks have focused on how Trump's speeches utilize presuppositions and implicatures. For instance, Müller's (2017) corpusbased analysis revealed that Trump's use of presuppositions often frames political issues as incontrovertible facts, thus marginalizing opposing viewpoints. Wodak (2015) further argued that such pragmatic strategies are integral to creating a discourse of certainty and inevitability, which in turn reinforces ideological divisions.

Rhetorical analyses of Trump's discourse have similarly emphasized the importance of metaphor and narrative. CharterisBlack (2005) and subsequent research have noted that Trump frequently employs metaphors and analogies to depict his political opponents as threats to national security and prosperity. These rhetorical strategies are often combined with repetition and hyperbole, resulting in a powerful, if polarizing, political narrative (Moffitt, 2016). Recent multimodal studies have also begun to explore how Trump's nonverbal communication—such as body language and visual imagery—complements his verbal rhetoric (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Machin & Mayr, 2012).

Despite the extensive body of research, several gaps remain. Most notably, while numerous studies have focused on Trump's discourse during the 2016 election and his presidency, comparatively little research has addressed his rhetoric during the 2024 campaign. Furthermore, few studies have integrated both pragmatic and rhetorical perspectives in a systematic manner. By bridging these gaps, the present study seeks to offer a comprehensive analysis that accounts for both the explicit persuasive elements and the underlying contextual assumptions in Trump's campaign speeches.

3. Research Questions

Based on the literature review and the identified gaps, this study is guided by the following research questions:

(1) How does Donald Trump employ pragmatic devices—such as presuppositions, implicatures, and deictic expressions—in his presidential campaign speeches (with a particular focus on the 2024 campaign) to frame political issues and mobilize voter sentiment?

(2) What rhetorical strategies (e.g., metaphor, repetition, hyperbole, and narrative framing) are most prevalent in Trump's campaign discourse, and how do they contribute to the construction of a populist political identity?

(3)How do the pragmatic and rhetorical features of Trump's speeches interact to produce a coherent discourse that both reflects and reinforces specific political ideologies?

(4) In what ways do changes in Trump's rhetorical strategies between earlier campaigns and the 2024 campaign reflect shifts in the political landscape and audience expectations?

4. Methodology

(1) Data collection

The data for this study consist of a corpus of publicly available speeches and campaign event transcripts

delivered by Donald Trump from the 2016 presidential campaign up to the 2024 campaign. Sources include official campaign websites, reputable news outlets, and verified video recordings. A diverse range of contexts—such as rallies, televised debates, and interviews—was included to capture the multifaceted nature of Trump's discourse. All speeches were transcribed verbatim to create a digital corpus for qualitative analysis.

(2) Analytical framework

The study adopts a twopronged analytical framework that integrates pragmatic and rhetorical approaches:

1) Pragmatic analysis

Presuppositions: Identification of assumptions embedded in the discourse that present political issues as selfevident truths.

Implicatures: Analysis of the indirect meanings and suggestions that rely on the audience's background knowledge.

Deictic Expressions: Examination of contextdependent terms (e.g., "we," "now") and their role in constructing group identity and immediacy.

2) Rhetorical analysis

Metaphor and Analogy: Evaluation of figurative language that simplifies complex political issues.

Repetition and Hyperbole: Investigation of how repetitive and exaggerated language reinforces key messages.

Narrative Structure and Framing: Analysis of how speeches are structured as coherent narratives that delineate "us versus them."

Multimodal Integration: When applicable, the study also examines nonverbal cues (e.g., body language, visual imagery) that complement verbal rhetoric (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006; Machin & Mayr, 2012).

(3) Data analysis procedures

The analysis proceeded through the following steps:

1) Transcription and preliminary coding

Each speech was transcribed, and an initial coding scheme was developed to capture recurrent pragmatic and rhetorical markers. Codes were refined iteratively to reflect both linguistic form and the sociopolitical context.

2)Thematic categorization

Codes were organized into themes corresponding to the research questions. Categories included different types of presuppositions (moral, cultural), rhetorical devices (metaphor, repetition, hyperbole), and narrative frames (populist vs. elitist).

3) Contextual analysis

Special attention was given to the context of each speech, including audience composition, media environment, and prevailing political issues. Supplementary materials (e.g., media reports, audience responses) were consulted to ensure an accurate interpretation of the pragmatic and rhetorical features.

4) Integration of multimodal elements

When video recordings were available, nonverbal aspects such as gestures, facial expressions, and visual cues were analyzed to complement the textual data. This multimodal approach enriched the understanding of Trump's persuasive delivery.

5) Validation of findings

To enhance reliability, the coding and analysis were crossvalidated by multiple researchers. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion, ensuring that the final analysis accurately reflected the data.

(4) Analysis & discussion

This section presents the results of the detailed qualitative analysis and discusses the findings in relation to the research questions and existing literature.

1) Pragmatic features in trump's campaign discourse

Presuppositions and Implicatures

A dominant feature in Trump's campaign speeches is the systematic use of presuppositions. For example, when Trump states, "We are the true defenders of our nation's values," the presupposition is that there exists an authentic national value system under threat by external forces. This type of presupposition, as noted by Grice (1975) and further explored by Müller (2017), implicitly assumes that any deviation from these values is inherently negative. The effect is to frame political issues as moral imperatives rather than debatable policy choices.

Similarly, implicatures are frequently used to convey messages that are not explicitly stated. In one rally, Trump remarked, "Some people just don't understand what's at stake," leaving it to the audience to infer that opposition voices are uninformed or even dangerous. This indirect approach to criticism minimizes the need for explicit confrontation while simultaneously delegitimizing the opposition (Wodak, 2015). By relying on the audience's shared cultural and political background, these implicatures serve as a powerful persuasive tool.

Deictic Expressions

Trump's extensive use of deictic expressions further illustrates how he constructs group identity and immediacy. Terms such as "we," "our country," "now," and "today" serve to create a sense of shared purpose and belonging among his supporters. According to Fillmore (1977), deictic words are inherently contextdependent and are crucial for establishing ingroup versus outgroup boundaries. In Trump's discourse, these expressions not only signal solidarity with the audience but also delineate a clear boundary between "us" (the true patriots) and "them" (the outsiders or corrupt elites).

2) Rhetorical strategies in trump's discourse

Metaphor and Analogy

Trump's reliance on metaphoric language is a key aspect of his rhetorical strategy. Drawing on Lakoff's (2004) theory, the use of metaphors such as "fighting an uphill battle" or "defending the home front" transforms abstract political conflicts into vivid, concrete images. These metaphors simplify complex political debates, making them accessible and emotionally charged. For instance, by comparing the political contest to a battle, Trump frames his campaign as not only a political struggle but as an existential fight for survival. This narrative of conflict reinforces a sense of urgency and righteousness among his supporters.

Repetition and Hyperbole

Repetition is another significant rhetorical device in Trump's speeches. Phrases such as "Make America Great Again" and "America First" are repeated frequently to embed these slogans into the collective memory of the audience. The effect of such repetition, as described in CharterisBlack (2005), is twofold: it reinforces key messages and creates an emotional resonance that is difficult to counter. Hyperbolic statements—exaggerations that amplify the stakes of political issues—further contribute to this effect. For example, Trump's claim that "nobody has ever seen a crisis like this" uses hyperbole to heighten perceptions of threat and crisis, thereby mobilizing support through fear and urgency.

Narrative Structure and Framing

The narrative structure of Trump's speeches is characterized by a clear delineation of "us" versus "them." This binary framing, as discussed by van Dijk (2011) and Moffitt (2016), is a common feature in populist rhetoric. Trump constructs his speeches as stories in which he, representing the true voice of the people, battles against corrupt elites and foreign adversaries. The narrative arc typically begins with a depiction of past greatness, transitions into a portrayal of decline or betrayal, and culminates in a call to action to restore national pride. This narrative structure not only simplifies the complexity of political issues but also mobilizes support by appealing to collective memory and national identity.

3) Multimodal elements

In addition to the verbal rhetoric, Trump's speeches are augmented by strong multimodal elements. Analysis of video recordings reveals that his nonverbal communication—such as assertive gestures, sustained eye contact, and a dynamic stage presence—reinforces his verbal message. Studies by Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) and Machin and Mayr (2012) have shown that body language and visual imagery can significantly enhance persuasive communication. In Trump's case, his confident stance and controlled facial expressions contribute to an overall impression of strength and determination, which in turn bolsters his rhetorical appeal.

Integration of Pragmatic and Rhetorical Features

A central finding of this study is the synergistic interaction between pragmatic and rhetorical devices in Trump's discourse. The presuppositions and implicatures that underpin his speech not only serve to embed ideological assumptions but also interact with his use of metaphoric and hyperbolic language to create a compelling political narrative. For instance, the presupposition that "our country is under threat" is reinforced by metaphors of battle and war, while the repeated use of deictic expressions strengthens the audience's sense of belonging and urgency. This interplay of linguistic features creates a cohesive discourse that both reflects and reinforces a populist political ideology.

(5) Case study

Case 1: The "America First" Rally Speech

Context:

During a 2018 rally in Houston, Trump repeatedly used the slogan "America First" as a rallying cry. In one segment of his speech, he stated:

> "We are putting America first, ensuring that our workers, our families, and our communities are protected from the global forces that have long taken advantage of us."<

Analysis:

Pragmatic Devices:

Presuppositions: The statement presupposes that America's workers and families have been exploited by "global forces." This assumption is presented as an accepted truth that requires no further justification, thereby marginalizing any counterarguments.

Deictic Expressions: The use of "we," "our," and "us" serves to create a strong sense of ingroup identity, inviting the audience to see themselves as part of a unified, beleaguered collective.

Rhetorical Techniques:

Repetition: The repeated use of "America First" reinforces the central theme and embeds it deeply in the audience's memory.

Narrative Framing: By framing global interactions as predatory, Trump constructs a narrative that positions his policies as a means to restore a lost sense of national pride and security.

Discussion:

This case demonstrates how Trump's use of presuppositions transforms a complex international issue into a matter of national survival. The implicit binary of "us versus them" not only simplifies the political landscape but also energizes his base by validating their sense of grievance. The repetition of the slogan solidifies group identity, which is essential for mobilizing a populist political movement.

Case 2: The Debate Performance

Context:

During a televised presidential debate in 2020, Trump engaged in direct verbal sparring with his opponent. In one notable exchange, he declared:

> "I am the best president ever, and no one can tell you otherwise. Our country's success is because of what I have done and what I will continue to do."<

Analysis:

Pragmatic Devices:

Implicatures: By stating "no one can tell you otherwise," Trump implicitly discredits alternative opinions without providing concrete evidence, relying on the audience's acceptance of his selfassessment.

SelfReferential Presuppositions: The claim presupposes that presidential success is measurable by personal achievements, which the audience is invited to accept as an unquestionable benchmark.

Rhetorical Techniques:

Hyperbole: The claim "the best president ever" is an extreme exaggeration intended to create a memorable, largerthanlife persona.

Ethos Construction: By asserting his unparalleled achievements, Trump seeks to reinforce his credibility and authority, appealing to the audience's desire for strong leadership.

Discussion:

In this case, the rhetorical strategy is markedly selfaggrandizing. The hyperbolic language not only seeks to elevate Trump's status but also implicitly establishes a dichotomy between his leadership and that of his competitors. The use of implicatures and selfreferential presuppositions further creates an aura of inevitability around his success, encouraging supporters to view his leadership as the only viable option. This performance, particularly in a debate setting, highlights how pragmatic devices can operate in highpressure environments to maintain a consistent political image.

Case 3: The Town Hall Interview on "Fake News"

Context:

In a 2021 town hall interview, Trump was questioned about media bias. He responded:

> "The fake news media is out to get us. They twist every story to make us look bad, and they ignore the truth that our country is winning like never before."<

Analysis:

Pragmatic Devices:

Presuppositions: The claim presupposes that there is an objective truth about national success and that any

reporting contradicting this narrative is inherently biased.

Implicatures: The term "fake news" implies that all opposing narratives lack credibility, delegitimizing alternative viewpoints without directly addressing them.

Rhetorical Techniques:

Repetition and Parallelism: Phrases such as "out to get us" and "ignore the truth" are repeated to hammer home the perceived injustice, reinforcing the narrative of victimization.

Contrast and Dichotomy: The juxtaposition of "fake news" versus "the truth" creates a stark binary that simplifies the media landscape into good versus evil.

Discussion:

This case illustrates how Trump's language strategically casts the media as a monolithic adversary. The presupposition of an undisputed "truth" not only simplifies the discourse but also mobilizes his audience against a common enemy. The rhetorical construction of a binary opposition—where anything not aligned with his narrative is labeled as "fake"—serves to unify supporters and delegitimize dissenting voices. This approach is particularly effective in an era of digital media, where rapid information dissemination can reinforce ingroup biases and further polarize public opinion.

These case studies highlight several recurring themes in Trump's political discourse. First, across various contexts—rallies, debates, and interviews—there is a consistent reliance on presuppositions that frame political realities in absolute terms. These presuppositions are not merely linguistic artifacts; they function as foundational assumptions that shape the audience's perception of what is "normal" or "acceptable." By embedding these assumptions in everyday language, Trump creates a discursive environment where his narrative is taken as selfevident.

Second, the use of deictic expressions (e.g., "we," "our," "us") across all cases underscores the importance of group identity in his rhetoric. Whether it is rallying his base around the slogan "America First" or constructing an "us versus them" dynamic in debates and interviews, these expressions serve to cultivate a strong sense of community and belonging. This, in turn, makes it easier for his audience to internalize the ideological divides he draws.

Third, the rhetorical strategies of metaphor, repetition, and hyperbole work in concert with pragmatic devices to create a potent persuasive force. Metaphors transform abstract political issues into tangible, emotionally charged scenarios (e.g., viewing global trade as a battle for national survival), while repetition ensures that these messages resonate long after the speech has ended. Hyperbole, although seemingly overblown, plays a crucial role in amplifying the emotional stakes of political discourse, often to the point of creating a sense of crisis or urgency that compels immediate action.

Finally, the integration of multimodal elements—such as body language and visual imagery—adds an additional layer of persuasive power. Even when the verbal message might appear straightforward, the accompanying nonverbal cues reinforce the intended narrative. This is particularly significant in a mediadriven political landscape, where visual impressions can be as influential as the spoken word.

In conclusion, these case studies provide compelling evidence that Trump's campaign discourse is a sophisticated blend of pragmatic and rhetorical strategies. Each case illustrates how specific linguistic devices work together to construct a political reality that is both internally coherent and highly persuasive. The synergy between implicit assumptions (presuppositions and implicatures) and explicit rhetorical techniques (metaphor, repetition, hyperbole, and narrative framing) not only shapes public perception but also reinforces the ideological divides at the heart of his political strategy. This integrated approach offers valuable insights for both discourse analysts and political communication scholars, highlighting the enduring power of language as a tool for political mobilization.

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