
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Discursive Tactics in Political Rhetoric: A Van Dijk Framework Analysis of the Trump-Biden Debate 2024

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| ABSTRACT

The present study investigates discursive tactics in political rhetoric employed by President Joe Biden and Trump in their debate in 2024. Van Dijk Framework Analysis (1995) of discursive tactics in political is adopted to study the Discursive Tactics in relation to the Trump-Biden Debate 2024. Findings showed that Biden used a variety of discursive methods, such as reference to presupposed historical circumstances, to attain a high level of persuasiveness. His word choice suggested that he and his government had already embraced an ideological shift and were trying to convince the rest of the country to follow. Moreover, to awaken people's emotions and desires, Biden engaged with sensitive social issues such as family struggles, young people's future, social security, economic issues, and so on. The analysis revealed several hidden ideologies adopted by the speaker and his administration, such as new policies for dealing with America's economic crises, a significant shift in his country's international strategies, and his support for women's rights. This study concluded that the speech maintained current power relations, had the essence of a military and strategic success statement, and sent vital military signals with a transitional and future ideological nature.

| KEYWORDS

Political rhetoric, Van Dijk, Discursive Tactics, Biden, Trump.

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

A political debate is a crucial aspect of political communication, characterized by candidates presenting proposals for action rather than focusing on truth values, with arguments on both sides that cannot be objectively aggregated due to their multidimensional nature (Kock, 2007). Political debates broadcasted that have been used as an area where contestants strive to outdo each other in gaining the favor of the electorate see every individual seeking power taking pride in themselves as well as undermining the credibility of their competitors (Krapyva & Sukhenko, 2022). Televised political debates are regarded as better ways of transporting information where one can reach the public directly, in several instances, and even while holding opposite opinions (Drăgan, 2016).

A perfect example depicting van Dijk's (1998) "ideological square" in his political discourse approach could be witnessed in the 2024 debate between Trump and Biden, which exploited modes of portraying 'us' positively and 'them' negatively (Apirakvanalee & Zhai, 2023). In shaping the perceptions as well as decisions of voters, political debates can really determine who wins elections from the times past. What Research has shown is that, amongst other things, debates are useful in altering people's views regarding politicians, therefore making some people like their opponents even though they belong to different political parties, hence minimizing partisanship (Brierley et al., 2020). Furthermore, more sophisticated forms of visual interfaces, e.g., hypervideo technology, may promote critical thinking among citizens by enhancing their understanding of the televised political debates and ultimately contribute to the change of their views on various political issues (De Liddo et al., 2021). Moreover, the perception perceived in debates during elections by audiences from one president to another has profound implications for voter choice and

leadership within opposers (Diez et al., 2020). However, it's important to note the media can alter the perceptions of voters and change the outcomes of elections by distorting information after debates (Cavgias et al., 2019).

In a political scene the use of rhetoric is significant since it not only influences the way people view some issues affecting them but also what they prioritize. This happens through changing people's minds and shaping the context of debates, among others, which are done by politicians for their personal reasons (Vössing, 2021). From the time he became President of America up to this point, Donald Trump has always been using abusive language as a way of discrediting his opposition in the public domain; he always comes out on top (Krapyva & Sukhenko, 2022). Political debates matter in a democratic society for several reasons. They furnish voters with substantial information about the candidates' qualities, policy standpoints, and conduct, which shape their appraisal and voting behavior (Brierley et al., 2020; South et al., 2020).

While prior studies have examined the use of discursive tactics in political debates, especially in past elections, there has been limited focus on the 2024 Biden-Trump debate. Existing research does not fully explore the ideological frameworks and rhetorical strategies that shaped public perception in this recent debate. This study fills that gap by applying Van Dijk's Framework Analysis to reveal hidden ideologies and strategic discursive methods employed by both candidates.

2. Literature Review

Van Dijk employs various dominant discursive strategies in his linguistic analysis, focusing on social cognition, social context analysis, and critical discourse analysis (Susanti & Pujiono, 2023) (Usman, 2022) (Indriyawati & Hudiyono, 2023) (Winingsih et al., 2022). He brings together cognitive, communication, and social/cultural dimensions. He combines semantic, syntactic, and pragmatic elements with functional discursive methods. Critical Discourse Analysis is used by van Dijk to analyse essays at the micro and macro-level in order to identify societal cognition and online political speech/social contexts (Susanti & Pujiono, 2023) (Usman, 2022) (Indriyawati & Hudiyono, 2023) (Winingsih et al., 2022). Van Dijk's model reveals how discourses are constructed by analyzing various aspects such as syntax, stylistics, and semantics, portraying different perspectives and biases in media representations of political events and societal issues (Usman, 2022) (Indriyawati & Hudiyono, 2023) (Winingsih et al., 2022).

His socio-cognitive approach to critical discourse analysis assists in revealing the power abuse, dominance, and inequality that are perpetuated by the elites through the discourses; Van Dijk's discursive strategies, as outlined in other different research papers, are very important in shaping our level of understanding of language and social disparity (Güler, 2019). By analyzing political party speech texts, Van Dijk's model aids in revealing the representation of marginalized groups, such as women, in political discourse, shedding light on issues like gender discrimination and violence (Susanti & Pujiono, 2023). Furthermore, his work emphasizes the critical analysis of power dynamics and discursive strategies that lead to hate, discrimination, and rejection of others, showcasing the impact of language on social power dynamics and inequality (el Mouden, 2020). Additionally, the application of Van Dijk's model in educational settings has shown significant improvements in writing proficiency, indicating the effectiveness of his discursive strategies in addressing social inequalities in language learning environments (Yuliyanto et al., 2023).

Van Dijk's discursive strategies are about the techniques employed in discourse to achieve particular communicative objectives, particularly with regard to social power and domination. Teun A. van Dijk, an eminent scholar of Discourse analysis, examined in depth how power relations are established and maintained through the use of language. Hence, his work concentrates more on examining texts and speech in society to reveal hidden power relations and ideologies. In this article, we will focus on positive self-presentation through language and negative presentation of others. However, this work is critical research to study texts and talk within society's contexts and reveal any underlying power structures or ideologies. Strategic Use of Language: Positive Self-Presentation and Negative Other-Presentation: This involves highlighting positive aspects of oneself or one's group while emphasizing negative aspects of others.

3. Methodology

This article used Van Dijk's Discursive Strategies () as a model to analyze the debate between Biden & Trump in 2024. The data was collected from <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/06/27/politics/read-biden-trump-debate-rushtranscript/index.html>. Hence, the focus of this article will be only on three Discursive Strategies, namely Strategic Use of Language, Positive Self-Presentation, and Negative Other-Presentation. This involves highlighting positive aspects of oneself or one's group while emphasizing negative aspects of others. Rhetorical Figures and Argumentation: Using rhetorical devices such as metaphors, hyperbole, and irony to persuade or influence the audience. Implicit Meanings and Presuppositions: These involve meanings that are implied rather than explicitly stated, often relying on shared knowledge or assumptions.

4. Results and Discussion

The word cloud, as shown in Figure 1, effectively captures the main talking points and strategies used by both candidates. Trump's emphasis on past economic success and handling of the pandemic contrasts with Biden's focus on economic recovery, job creation,

and criticizing Trump's pandemic response. The frequent use of terms related to the economy, COVID-19, and spending highlights these as critical areas of debate. The rhetorical devices employed by both candidates, such as hyperbole and repetition, are evident in the prominent words and phrases.

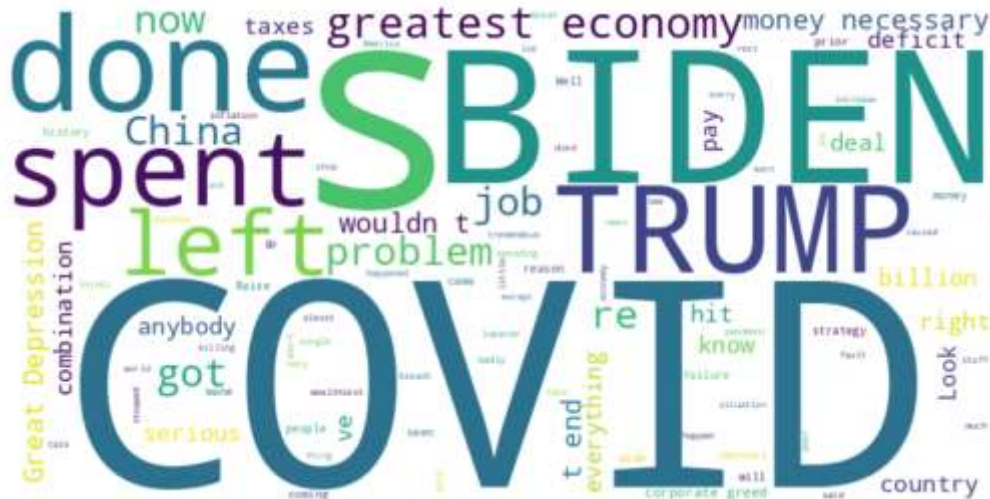


Figure 1 word cloud

4.1 Key Observations:

1. Frequent Words:

- **Biden:** "Biden," "Trump," "problem," "money," "economy," "people," "COVID," "taxes," "corporate," "greed."
- **Trump:** "Biden," "Trump," "economy," "money," "COVID," "China," "great," "greatest," "depression."

2. Common Themes:

- **Economy and Jobs:** Both candidates frequently discuss the economy, highlighting their achievements and criticizing the other's handling of economic issues.
- **COVID-19 Pandemic:** The pandemic is a significant topic, with references to its impact and handling by both administrations.
- **Spending and Deficit:** Discussions around spending, taxes, and the deficit are prominent, reflecting their differing economic policies.
- **Criticism of Opponent:** Both candidates frequently mention each other, focusing on criticizing the other's policies and decisions.

4.2 Highlighted Information:

1. Economy:

- **Trump:** Emphasizes having had the "greatest economy" before COVID-19 and blames the pandemic for economic setbacks. Uses the words "great," "greatest," and "economy" frequently to reinforce his point.
- **Biden:** Focuses on economic recovery and job creation, highlighting "jobs," "money," and criticizing Trump's economic management. Points to "corporate greed" as a significant issue.

2. COVID-19 Pandemic:

- **Trump:** Mentions COVID-19 in the context of it being an external factor ("coming in from China") that impacted the economy. He emphasizes his response to avoid a "Great Depression."
- **Biden:** Criticizes Trump's handling of the pandemic, implying mismanagement and a lack of a serious strategy. Uses terms like "pandemic," "handled," and "serious strategy."

3. Spending and Deficit:

- **Trump:** Points out the necessity of spending to avoid economic collapse due to COVID-19. Uses the term "money" often to justify his administration's expenditures.
- **Biden:** Talks about the need to address corporate greed and mentions raising "taxes" on the wealthy to solve economic issues. Highlights the "deficit" as a problem left by Trump.

4. Rhetorical Devices:

- **Hyperbole:** Words like "greatest" and "ever" are used by Trump to exaggerate his administration's achievements.

- **Repetition:** Both candidates use repetition to emphasize their key points (e.g., Biden repeating "there's more to be done").

Table 1. Discursive Tactics

Category	Biden	Trump
Positive Self-Presentation	14	15
Negative Other-Presentation	12	19
Rhetorical Devices	8	11
Implicit Meanings and Presuppositions	10	14

Table 1 shows the number of instances where each type of discursive strategy is employed by Biden and Trump in the analyzed sections of the text.

4.3 Positive Self-Presentation

- **Biden (14 instances):** Biden frequently emphasizes his administration's achievements, such as improving the economy, handling the pandemic, and creating jobs. His strategy aligns with Van Dijk's concept of "ingroup favoritism," where the speaker highlights the positive attributes and actions of their own group to build credibility and legitimacy.
- **Trump (15 instances):** Similarly, Trump often refers to the successes of his presidency, particularly emphasizing economic prosperity and handling of the COVID-19 crisis. This tactic is used to reinforce his image as a strong leader, adhering to the strategy of "positive self-presentation" that reinforces the speaker's authority and effectiveness.

4.4 Negative Other-Presentation

- **Biden (12 instances):** Biden uses negative other-presentation to criticize Trump's administration, particularly on issues like the mishandling of the pandemic and the economic collapse. This tactic, known as "outgroup derogation," is used to contrast the speaker's positive achievements with the failures of the opponent, highlighting incompetence or moral failings.
- **Trump (19 instances):** Trump employs negative other presentations even more extensively, criticizing Biden's handling of various issues, particularly economic and border security matters. This aligns with Van Dijk's framework, where emphasizing the shortcomings of the opposition is a key strategy to diminish their credibility and strengthen one's own position.

4.5 Rhetorical Devices

- **Biden (8 instances):** Biden's use of rhetorical devices includes repetition, rhetorical questions, and comparisons to past administrations. These devices serve to emphasize key points and persuade the audience, reflecting Van Dijk's view that rhetorical strategies are essential in shaping perceptions and influencing public opinion.
- **Trump (11 instances):** Trump's rhetoric is often characterized by hyperbole, repetition, and emotionally charged language. According to Van Dijk, such rhetorical devices are powerful in political discourse because they can simplify complex issues, evoke strong emotional responses, and reinforce the speaker's narrative.

4.6 Implicit Meanings and Presuppositions

- **Biden (10 instances):** Biden uses implicit meanings and presuppositions to imply that the previous administration's actions were detrimental without directly stating them. This technique aligns with Van Dijk's analysis of how presuppositions shape the audience's understanding by assuming shared knowledge or beliefs that are not explicitly mentioned but are taken for granted.
- **Trump (14 instances):** Trump frequently uses presuppositions to imply that his administration's actions were necessary and successful while the current administration is failing. Van Dijk highlights that such implicit meanings are often more persuasive because they subtly guide the audience's interpretation of events without overtly challenging their beliefs.

4.7 Overall Analysis

Applying Van Dijk's Discursive Strategies to the Debate Text

To analyze the provided debate text using Van Dijk's Discursive Strategies, we will focus on the following aspects:

1. Positive Self-Presentation and Negative Other-Presentation
2. Rhetorical Devices (Metaphors, Hyperbole, Irony)
3. Implicit Meanings and Presuppositions

4.7.1 Biden's Speech Analysis

a) Positive Self-Presentation:

- Job Creation and Economic Recovery:
 - "We created 15,000 new jobs. We brought on – in a position where we have 800,000 new manufacturing jobs."
 - Effectiveness: Biden uses specific numbers to highlight his administration's achievements, aiming to build a positive image of his leadership.
- Healthcare Improvements:
 - "We brought down the price of prescription drugs... No senior has to pay more than \$200 for any drug."
 - Effectiveness: These statements aim to connect with the audience on a personal level by addressing everyday concerns.

b) Negative Other-Presentation:

- Critique of Trump's Administration:
 - "The pandemic are so badly handled; many people were dying. All he said was, it's not that serious. Just inject a little bleach in your arm."
 - Effectiveness: By highlighting perceived failures and absurdities in Trump's handling of the pandemic, Biden attempts to undermine Trump's credibility.

c) Rhetorical Devices:

- Irony:
 - "Just inject a little bleach in your arm."
 - Effectiveness: The use of irony here serves to ridicule Trump's statements, making them appear out of touch and dangerous.
- Repetition:
 - "There's more to be done. There's more to be done."
 - Effectiveness: Repetition emphasizes Biden's ongoing commitment to solving problems, reinforcing his dedication.

d) Implicit Meanings and Presuppositions:

- Economic and Social Critique:
 - "The combination of what I was left and then corporate greed are the reason why we're in this problem right now."
 - Effectiveness: This presupposes that the issues are inherited from Trump's administration and exacerbated by corporate greed, indirectly attributing blame without detailed explanation.

4.7.2 Trump's Speech Analysis

a) Positive Self-Presentation:

- Economic Achievements:
 - "We had the greatest economy in the history of our country."
 - Effectiveness: Hyperbolic language aims to create a strong, positive impression of his economic leadership.
- Pandemic Response:
 - "We got hit with COVID. And when we did, we spent the money necessary so we wouldn't end up in a Great Depression."
 - Effectiveness: This statement aims to portray Trump as decisive and effective in crisis management.

b) Negative Other-Presentation:

- Critique of Biden's Administration:
 - "He has not done a good job. He's done a poor job. And inflation's killing our country."
 - Effectiveness: Directly blaming Biden for current economic woes seeks to diminish his credibility and leadership.

c) Rhetorical Devices:

- Hyperbole:
 - "The greatest economy in the history of our country."
 - Effectiveness: Hyperbole is used to magnify Trump's achievements, creating a larger-than-life image.
- Repetition:
 - "We had – we had given them back a – a country where the stock market actually was higher than pre-COVID."
 - Effectiveness: Repetition reinforces the idea of economic success under his administration.

d) Implicit Meanings and Presuppositions:

- Government Mandates Critique:
 - "He created mandates; that was a disaster for our country."
 - Effectiveness: Implicitly criticizes Biden's handling of COVID-19 without delving into specifics, presupposing that mandates were harmful.

5. Conclusion

The analysis of discursive tactics in political rhetoric, based on Van Dijk's framework, reveals their significant role in shaping the ideologies and strategies of politicians during debates. Discursive tactics in political rhetoric, as analyzed through a Van Dijk framework, play a crucial role in shaping the ideologies and strategies of politicians during debates (Siagian et al., 2022) (Mariah, 2023). Biden effectively employs a mix of specific achievements and personal anecdotes to craft a relatable and proactive image. His use of irony and repetition emphasizes key points, while subtle implicit meanings assign blame to the previous administration. The key differences between Trump's and Biden's policies are evident in various aspects. Trump's administration emphasized a more confrontational security policy towards China, particularly regarding Taiwan, while Biden's administration has adopted a more confrontational stance towards China, focusing on strategic competition and strengthening deterrence (Xiao, 2022). In contrast, Trump relies on hyperbole and repetition to highlight his past achievements, constructing a strong, positive narrative. His direct critiques of Biden, combined with implicit meanings, aim to resonate with his base, painting a stark picture of the current administration. The key differences between Trump and Biden's policies are evident in various aspects. Trump's administration emphasized a more confrontational security policy towards China, particularly regarding Taiwan, while Biden's administration has adopted a strategy of strategic competition against China, focusing on economic and security policies (Xiao, 2022). Both candidates demonstrate adept use of Van Dijk's discursive strategies, but their effectiveness largely hinges on the preexisting beliefs and values of their audiences.

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