

## Power in American Presidential Speeches: A Critical Discourse Analysis

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### ABSTRACT

Presidential debate is a crucial part of forming political genre to attract public attention towards the candidates. The candidates employ various linguistic techniques to persuade the audience to know their true personalities. This study is a critical discourse analysis of power in American presidential speeches. It is designed to explore four representative linguistic features of van Dijk employed by the two candidates (Donald Trump and Joe Biden) in the 2020 American Presidential Debate. These four linguistic features are: personal pronouns, three part-list, fillers, and interruptions. They are used to analyze the reproduction of six issues: Trump and Biden's record, The Coronavirus, The Economy, The Supreme Court, Race and Violence in American Cities, and Election Integrity.

This study presents an interdisciplinary qualitative and quantitative analysis of selected speeches of Donald Trump and Joe Biden. The qualitative analysis includes selecting some of Trump and Biden's speeches situated in the American presidential debate of the 2020. Whereas the quantitative analysis includes the frequency of occurrence of personal pronouns, fillers, interruption, etc. Van Dijk's model and other models of CDA are employed in the study.

It is hypothesized that:

1. Both candidates mock each other using sarcasm.
2. Trump makes lots of interruptions while Biden was expressing his opinion, so Biden rebuked him by saying "Will you shut up, man?"
3. Both candidates used repetition of sentences as a form of emphasis on their political views.
4. Trump and Biden used Personal Pronoun "I and we" as positive self-presentation and use "you and he" as negative other-presentation.

**Keywords:** Critical Discourse Analysis, Political Discourse, Presidential Debate

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## 1. Introduction

Much of the work in critical discourse analysis is attributed to the scholars such as Norman Fairclough, (1989,1995, 2000, 2003, 2006); Teun A. Van Dijk, (1989, 1993,1996a, 1996b, 2001,2008a ); and Ruth Wodak, (2001).Wooffitt (2005: 137) points out that the subject of critical discourse analysis is associated with some researchers such as Norman Fairclough, Ruth Wodak and Teun A. Van Dijk who present critical discourse analysis as it is concerned with analyzing how social and political inequalities are manifested and reproduced through discourse.

Fairclough (1995: 132-33) defines critical discourse analysis as:By 'critical' discourse analysis I mean discourse analysis which aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes; to investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power; and to explore how the opacity of these relationships between discourse and society is itself a factor securing power and hegemony.

In full agreement with Fairclough's conceptualization, Wodak (2001: 2) states that critical discourse analysis is fundamentally associated with the analysis of opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in

language. It aims at critically examining social inequality as it is expressed, signaled, constituted, legitimized by language use or in discourse. Critical linguists criticize the mainstream of formal linguistics for its lacking adequate social explanations, and obscuring ideological and political issues. The study of critical linguistics includes such topics as the social context of texts, grammar production, and language policy. The notion has also been extended to such areas as pragmatics and sociolinguistics, and specifically to the study of discourse.

Van Dijk (2001:352 , Alakrash & Bustan 2020) defines CDA as “a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context”. In this way, critical discourse analysts take explicit position, and thus want to understand, expose, and ultimately resist social inequality.

Crystal (1983: 123) defines critical discourse analysis as a branch of linguistics which aims at revealing hidden power relations and ideological processes at work in spoken or written texts.

Critical discourse analysis focuses on the relationship between text, social dimensions, and cultural practices. Text does not only affect sociocultural differences but also is affected by them and helps to formulate them. Fairclough (1989:26) introduces three levels of discourse to explain the actual nature of

discourse and text analysis. Firstly, the social conditions on which the production and interpretation of discourse is based. Secondly, the processes of production and interpretation which determine the way in which the text is produced and interpreted. The third level deals with the text as the product of the first two levels.

According to the above discussion, three questions are related:

1. What are the linguistic features used by both candidates, Donald Trump and Joe Biden?
2. What are the linguistic features used most in the American presidential debate?
3. What are the extra-linguistic features used by the candidates?

## 2. Power

The concept of power is crucial to CDA. It investigates the existence of social, political, and/or economic inequalities. Hence, critical discourse analysis tends to emphasize how power is discursively created and presented by the dominant groups, and how it is resisted by the dominated ones. For example, Fairclough (1995: 1), following Foucault (1986), defines power not only as unequal state or authority that exists among people who exercise its relations in the same discursive event, but also in terms of how they have different abilities to access and control power, and how discourses are produced, distributed and inspired.

Wardhaugh and Fuller (2015: 298) define the concept of social power as the ability of

a social group or institution to control the actions and the worldview of other groups. Such power can be understood in terms of military support, economic resources, or persuasiveness. Integral to this view of power is the concept of hegemony. Hegemony is a kind of power which refers to what is achieved through consent, that is, certain groups of people are granted social prestige because there is a consensus that they are somehow superior and inherently more valuable. We, for example, can talk about standard languages as being hegemonic and powerful as even speakers of nonstandard varieties have often internalized and naturalized the idea that the standard is superior. The access to and control over public discourse is a main focus of CDA.

Van Dijk (1996: 84) argues that the main characteristic of power is the relationship among social groups, institutions and organization. He focuses on social power just because it has a powerful effect on social actions and the recognition of dominating groups. Social power is the shared norms among the dominating group, that is, it is viewed as the central issue to understand the nature of social power. Power, however, deals with the dominating properties and characteristics of strength that mark a certain group of people.

Van Dijk (1993:21) states that to understand domination, inequality and racism, it is necessary for the critical discourse analyst to fully describe the notion of power. Claiming knowledge or

asking questions or making decisions in terms of authority is an indication of the existence of power. Social roles are constituted via language in which some kind of authority is invested to enable people to exercise power (Fowler, 1985). Thus, as suggested by Johnstone (2008: 130), power is more about agency than dominance. It is the individual's ability to shape an activity at hand whether positive or negative when communicating his stance. Some linguistic as well as extra-linguistic strategies are employed to express power illegitimately. This in turn is one way to control and access discourse to shape reality. Speakers, for examples, manipulate the knowledge of the interlocutors and abuse their power.

### 3. Political Discourse Analysis

In political speeches, specific messages and goals are intended to be conveyed to the audience. There is a tendency, therefore, by public speakers to employ language that match their needs and mirror their points of view. Political discourse is related to a classic discourse, entailing slogan, speech, and the given replies in press conferences. It is, as defined by Scott, et al. (2002: 49), "a standard speech used by a politician, typically a candidate who schedules many appearances prepares a short-standardized stump speech that is repeated verbatim to each audience, before opening to questions." Political speech establishes a kind of relationship with the audience to gain politicians' recognition and support. A critical review of political speeches

increases an individual's understanding of the role of proper use of language to communicate with audiences (Wodak, 2015). Therefore, the political speech is different from other kinds of speeches since it shows the speaker's stance and his views towards essential political and economic issues.

In a study by Chen (2018), political speeches are demonstrated to show how speakers convince their audiences to support and accept their views. The author suggests that the language used by politicians can convey the views, stance, and attitudes of that person revealing his/her intentions. Politicians often use metaphors that may be challenging for some people to comprehend or figure out their intended message. Hence, the review of political discourse analysis can help to understand the political objectives of the speaker.

### 4. Presidential Debate

Presidential debate is a sub-genre of political discourse because of its contextual and linguistic features. Chilton (2004:72-73) states that presidential debates may integrate political contextual references and past political history references which are identified by the audience. The purpose for which presidential debates are carried out is to show the citizens of a particular country and the goals and opinions of the candidates. Debates also have a particular setting and are governed by certain rules which must be obeyed by the participants. These certain rules affect the way in which political actors speak as they have to adjust

to a limited amount of time to express their concerns.

One interesting feature of presidential debates is the face-to-face interaction that occurs between interviewers and interviewees. The interviewer asks controversial questions to the candidates. The interviewees are the candidates who want to be elected as presidents of the elections. They are required to answer the questions in some minutes.



**US President Donald Trump and Democratic Presidential candidate and former US Vice President Joe Biden argue during the final presidential debate at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee, on October 22, 2020.**

### 5. Methodology and Framework

This study is a critical discourse analysis of American presidential debate of the 2020. It attempts to investigate the negative use of power and power abuse by

the American presidential candidates, Donald Trump and Joe Biden. The study presents an interdisciplinary qualitative and quantitative analysis of selected speeches of Donald Trump and Joe Biden. The qualitative analysis includes selecting some of Trump and Biden's speeches. The quantitative analysis includes the frequency of occurrence of personal pronouns, fillers, interruptions, etc.

A mixed approach is adopted in this study in order to identify the linguistic features in each presidential debate to quantify them later and provide an objective explanation. This study includes two sections: theoretical framework and practical analysis. The framework contains some mixed concepts in the study of political discourse. Then, the four linguistic features are accounted for, personal pronouns, three-part lists, fillers, and interruptions. The American presidential debate of 2020 is downloaded from the Internet as transcribed data.

#### 5.1 Theoretical Framework

Van Dijk proposes his sociocognitive approach to CDA. He combines three dimensions: *discourse*, *cognition* and *society*. Some people have the power to control other people because of their social position. Power, is needed to control society. However, those people take advantage of their social position to dominate others through language.

Similarly, Fairclough (2001) proposes a three-dimensional model taking into account the following dimensions: *text*, *interaction* and *context*. In fact, Fairclough

(ibid.: 21) distinguishes three stages of critical discourse analysis which involve the previous concepts:

1. Description is the stage which is associated with the formal properties of the text.
2. Interpretation is the second stage which considers the relationship between text and interaction, and seeing the text as a product of a process of production, and as a resource in the process of interpretation.
3. Explanation is the relationship between interaction and social context is taken for granted. Thus, the social factors basically determine the processes of production and interpretation of text.

In this model, the first stage is different from the other two stages, because the analysis is based on identifying the formal properties of a text in terms of a descriptive framework. However, the stages of interpretation and explanation are not based on applying a procedure to a text; rather interpretation deals with the cognitive process of participants, explanation which involves the relationship between interactions and social structures. Wodak (2001: 65) suggests a discourse-historical approach to critical discourse analysis. He examines “the ways in which particular genres of discourse are subject to diachronic change”. In other words, she investigates how particular discourse events are embedded within past and

current historical and political backgrounds.

CDA, to summarize, has no a specific theoretical framework or methodology. It involves different approaches to analyse general discourse from a critical point of view. The texts have been examined from different theoretical perspectives. The researcher applies a mixture of linguistic approaches springing from critical stylistic and critical discourse tools as inspired by the discourse historical approach through which selected texts are examined for contradictions, inconsistencies and manipulation which involves power abuse (van Dijk, 2006: 359). The model the researcher adopts is summarized in the following figure:

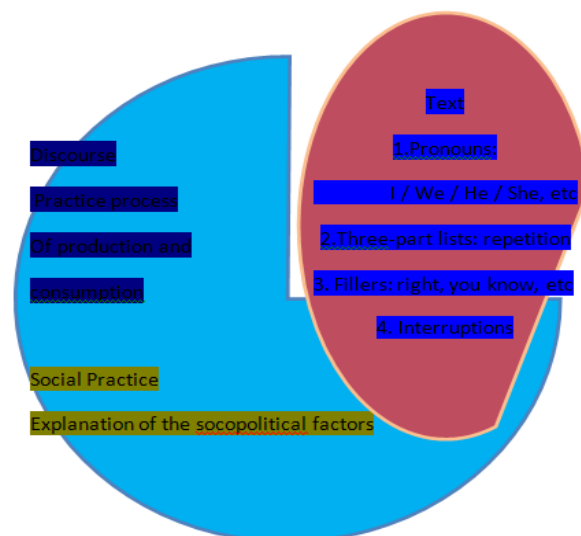


Figure: 1 The model of the analysis

## 5.2 Analysis

### 5.2.1. Personal pronouns

Personal pronouns have an important role in political speech analysis because they allow political candidates to construct a positive representation of *them* and a

negative representation of the *other*. Trask (1992: 53) states that, though important, personal pronouns constitute a closed set of lexical items with the principal function of distinguishing among individuals in terms of the deictic category of person but often expressing certain additional distinctions of number, sex or animacy.

Personal pronouns are of two kinds, subject personal pronouns (*I, you, he, she, it, we* and *they*) and object personal pronouns (*me, you, him, her, it, us* and *them*). Subject personal pronouns refer to the subject of a clause, and object personal pronouns refer to direct or indirect object of a verb, or an object of a preposition.

In traditional political discourse analysis, the emphasis is on the binary between *us* and *them* (Van Dijk, 2008; Wodak, 2009, Elaf & Hussien 2020) which is related to the subject personal pronouns *we* and *they* and the effects they have on the audience. They have been widely studied by critics in political speeches because these pronouns involve the speaker who utters the statement within a group. Fairclough (2001: 106) makes a distinction between inclusive and exclusive *we*. Whereas inclusive *we* involve not only the politician but also the audience, exclusive *we* include the politician but not the audience.

Critics also use the pronoun (*I*) to show themselves as individuals and talk from their subjective point of view. Beard (2000: 45) states that first person singular “shows a clear sense of personal involvement on the part of the speaker,

which is especially useful when good news is delivered”. The personal pronoun (*you*) is employed to directly attack the adversary or address the audience with a straightforward style.

Donald Trump:

*I* can tell you from personal experience, *I* was in the hospital. *I* had it and *I* got better. And *I* will tell you that *I* had something that they gave me, a therapeutic, *I* guess they would call it. Some people could say it was a cure, but *I* was in for a short period of time. And *I* got better very fast or *I* wouldn't be here tonight. And now they say *I*'m immune. Whether it's four months or a lifetime, nobody's been able to say that, but *I*'m immune. More and more people are getting better. We have a problem that's a worldwide problem. This is a worldwide problem, but *I*'ve been congratulated by the heads of many countries on what *we*'ve been able to do. If you take a look at what *we*'ve done in terms of goggles and masks and gowns and everything else, and in particular ventilators *we*'re now making ventilators all over the world, thousands and thousands a month distributing them all over the world. It will go away. And as *I* say, *we*'re rounding the turn. *We*'re rounding the corner. It's going away.

Trump begins his speech by talking about his experience with coronavirus crisis in hospital. He uses the personal pronoun (*I*) thirteen times. The text shows an excessive use of the pronoun (*I*), which is a good way to show oneself. Trump follows a

strategy by using, first, the personal pronoun ( *I* ), and second, the inclusive pronoun ( *We* ). By following the first strategy, Trump shows self-confidence, supporting himself by some verbs, such as ( *tell you, guess, got better, wouldn't*, etc.). Trump also uses the objective pronoun ( *me* ) to get himself involved in the problem of coronavirus. The second strategy that Trump employs is the inclusive ( *we* ), by which he involves the government and himself in coronavirus crisis.

The second sample is Joe Biden's speech: What *I* would do is make sure we have everyone encouraged to wear a mask all the time. *I* would make sure we move into the direction of rapid testing, investing in rapid testing. *I* would make sure that we set up national standards as to how to open up schools and open up businesses so they can be safe and give them the wherewithal, the financial resources to be able to do that. In the above text, Biden employs the personal pronoun ( *I* ) three times, using more formal style in addressing his audience, ( *I would make sure* ), to show his self-confidence. Biden uses the pronoun ( *we* ) to refer to himself and the American people to wear mask all the time against coronavirus.

### 5.2.2. Three-Part Lists

In order to give an air of unity and completeness to the discourse, three-part lists on the repetition of an item are included (Atkinson, 1984: 57). Repeating certain phrases, as stated by Jones and Peccei (1999: 39), contributes towards

making the ideas seem common sense. Jones and Peccei (1999: 51) suggest that this structural device is used by politicians not only when they have a statement to claim, but also when they want to reinforce it by repeating it.

There are three different structures three-part lists in political discourses.

1. Repetition of a single word at the beginning of a clause or sentence three times.
2. Repetition of a single word at the end of a clause or sentence three times.
3. Repetition of different words with similar general meaning three times.

Biden, for example, repeats the noun phrase '*millions of dollars*' to emphasize his purpose to attack Trump:

DONALD TRUMP: I paid *millions of dollars* in taxes, *millions of dollars* of income tax, and let me just tell you. There was a story in one of the papers

### 5.2.3. Fillers

Fillers are defined by Baalan (2001: 15, Bustan & Alakrash 2020) as "sounds or phrases that could appear anywhere in the sentence and that could be deleted from the sentence without a change in content" Strenström (1994:1) mentions two types of fillers: silent or filled pauses, such as ( /əʃm/ or /ə:m/) and verbal fillers, such as ( *well, I mean, you know* ). Fillers occur frequently in spoken language because these words fill the gaps of the discourse. However, the

analysis of verbal fillers in debates becomes interesting in presidential debates in order to investigate the way political candidates interact with the participants.

Verbal fillers are divided by Strensröm (1994: 63) into two groups according to their properties: interactional signals and discourse markers. Interactional signals contribute to the smooth of the interplay between speaker and listener by appealing (e.g., *right*) and giving a feedback (*I see*), responding (*Yes, that's right*) and involving the listener in the conversation (*You know*). Discourse markers, on the other hand, give a coordination to speech by helping to begin a conversation, introducing and marking the end of a topic, introducing a digression and resumption of an old topic and indicating the end of a conversation (ibid.). The following two samples show how fillers can be employed in the political debate:

Here are two samples, the first is by Trump, and the second is by Biden:

**Donald Trump:**

So *as you know*, 2.2 million people modeled out, were expected to die. We closed up the greatest economy in the world in order to fight this horrible disease that came from China. It's a worldwide pandemic. It's all over the world. *You see* the spikes in Europe and many other places right now. *If you notice*, the mortality rate is down 85%. The excess mortality rate is way down and much lower than almost any

other country. And we're fighting it and we're fighting it hard. There is a spike. There was a spike in Florida and it's now gone.

**Joe Biden:**

And to the best of my knowledge, I *don't think* the President has said anything to Putin about it. I *don't think* he's talking to them a lot. I *don't think* he's said a word. I *don't know* why he hasn't said a word to Putin about it, and I *don't know* what he has recently said, if anything, to the Iranians. *My guess* is he'd probably be more outspoken with regard to the Iranians.

In the above sample, Trump uses some fillers, such as *as you know*, *You see* and *If you notice*; whereas Biden uses different set of fillers, such as *I don't think*, *I don't know* and *My guess*. Fillers are used by both candidates to keep on the conversation while thinking.

**5.2.4. Interruptions**

Levinson (1983: 296, Alakrash .al.et 2021, Alakrash.al.et 2020) states that conversations are characterised by turn-taking: one participant, A, talks, stops; another, B, starts, talks, stops; obtaining an A-B-A-B-A-B ditribution of talk between two different participants. Bettie (1982: 95) mentions that turn-taking and interruptions are affected by social and personality variables. Moreover, Robinson and Reis (1989: 51) state that interruptions are related to negative personality.

Here is a piece of debate between Donald Trump and Joe Biden. In this sample, both interrupt each other, but the final results show that Biden interrupts more than Trump does. The space (-) indicates interruption.

JOE BIDEN: It does not. It's only for those people who are so poor they qualify for Medicaid. They can get that free in most states, expect governors who want to deny people who are poor Medicaid. Anyone who qualifies for Medicare would, excuse me, Medicaid, would automatically be enrolled in the public option. The vast majority of the American people would still not be in that option, number one.

DONALD TRUMP: Joe, you agreed –

JOE BIDEN: Number two –

DONALD TRUMP: – with Bernie Sanders

–

JOE BIDEN: Number, I, I didn't –

DONALD TRUMP: – who is far left on the manifesto, we call it.

JOE BIDEN: We knew – manifesto –

DONALD TRUMP: And that gives you socialized medicine.

JOE BIDEN: Look, hey. I'm not –

DONALD TRUMP: Are you saying you didn't agree?

JOE BIDEN: – going to listen to him. The fact of the matter is, I beat Bernie Sanders.

DONALD TRUMP: Not by much.

JOE BIDEN: I, I beat him a whole hell of a lot.

DONALD TRUMP: Not by much.

JOE BIDEN: I'm here, I'm here standing facing you, old buddy.

DONALD TRUMP: If Pocahontas would have left 2 days early –

JOE BIDEN: Well, I said –

DONALD TRUMP: – you would have lost every primary –

JOE BIDEN: All he knows how to do is –

DONALD TRUMP: – on Super Tuesday.

JOE BIDEN: Look.

DONALD TRUMP: You got very lucky.

JOE BIDEN: Here's the deal. I got very lucky. I'm going to get very lucky tonight as well. And tonight, I'm going to make sure –

DONALD TRUMP: With what?

JOE BIDEN: Because –

DONALD TRUMP: With what?

JOE BIDEN: Here's the deal. Here's the deal. The fact is that everything he's saying so far is simply a lie. I'm not here to call out his lies. Everybody knows he's a liar.

### 5.3. Results and Discussion

Table 1 The number of linguistic features occur in the presidential debate of 2020

	Donald Trump		Joe Biden		
		(%)		(%)	
Personal Pronouns & Proper Names	I	261	64.60	143	35.39
	You	245	74.92	82	25.07
	He	228	69.30	101	30.69
	She	8	57.14	6	42.85
	We	134	44.66	166	55.33
	They	118	38.94	185	61.05
	Trump	3	50	3	50
	Biden	3	50	3	50
	Joe	33	100	-	0
	Donald	-	0	-	0
Three- Part Lists	17	48.57	18	51.42	
Fillers	60	46.87	68	53.12	
Interruption	83	66.93	41	33.06	

Personal pronouns are considered to be one of the most common linguistic features used by Trump and Biden to attract their audience in the presidential debate. The candidates attempt to create their self-image to answer six important issues questioned during the debate. The first person singular pronoun *I* is the most frequent one employed by them with the aim of defending their own position. Trump uses this personal pronomen most, with (261) frequency, representing (64.60%) , whereas Biden uses it (143) frequency, representing (35.39%).

Meantime, Biden uses first personal plural pronoun *we* much more with percentage of (55.33%), whereas Trump uses it with the percentage of (44.66%). This indicate that Trump didn't have enough self-confidence. On the other hand, both candidates show negative representation of the other by using the pronouns *you, they, he, she* and the proper name *Trump and Biden*. Trump most often attacks his opponents using the pronoun *you*, whereas Joe Biden used *he* more often to mock Trump. Trump called his opponent with his nickname, which something unusual in official political event. Regarding the use of the pronouns (*he/ she*), both candidates show little difference. There is a significant difference in using the pronoun (*they*), with (61.05%) by Biden and (38.94%) by Trump.

To emphasize the meaning of the utterance, three-part lists are used by the candidates. This occurs when showing pride in oneself as well as mocking the other opponent. Both of them use balancing repetitions. Biden uses the three-part lists more than Trump does, with the percentages of (51.42%) and (48.57%), respectively.

Fillers, which are the most common linguistic feature in common interaction and political debates, are employed by the candidates. Biden uses more fillers than Biden does, with the percentage of (53.12%) by Biden and (46.87%) by Trump. Biden uses some set of fillers, such as *I don't think , I don't know* and *My guess*, whereas Trump employs different set of fillers such as *as you know, You see*

and *If you notice*. Fillers are used by both candidates to hold the control of the turn while thinking. Biden uses more fillers than Trump does. It may be because he is the opponent of the incumbent president. Finally, interruptions are also the essential feature used in political debates, because candidates show the dominance and power they have among other candidates. It's obvious that the candidate interrupts his the opponent in purpose to gain the floor and redirect the conversation to express his or her point of view about an issue. Trump interrupts more than Biden does. Trump's percentage of interruption is (66.93%), whereas Biden's is (33.06%). In the political history of the United States of America, there have been many interruptions, especially in the first round. So that finally the Commission on Presidential Debates, made a rule to mute the microphone while a candidate is speaking. They also mocked each other and used some sarcastic utterances.

## 6. Conclusion

The three-part lists are used by Trump and Biden with almost the same frequency. The presidential debate shows no big difference between the two candidates regarding the use of the three-part lists. This has proved to be useful for the candidates to use such a linguistic feature. It is used to convince the audience that they have the ability to show their positive identity and personality and show a negative image of their opponent.

The study also shows that Trump employs more personal pronouns with the

purpose to attack his opponent directly and promote his position. The most frequent pronoun is (*I*) which is used more than any other personal pronoun. The frequency of interruption during the presidential debate is also significant with the aim of mocking and sarcasm. Taking into account the way the candidates were talking, it was believed that Biden would win the presidency of United States according to his performance in presidential debates. Polling showed that Biden had significant and persistent lead. This is proven that Biden becomes the US President and defeats Trump.

It can be concluded that, in politics, persuasion is unattainable without language. Language allows political parties to manipulate the audience because they employ professional speech writers who are able to produce premediated speeches, which are just read by the candidates in a meeting. Although politicians are influenced by the linguistic features used by the candidates, they employ their particular ways of talking to convince the voters by producing positive self-image and negative image of the opponent.

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