Research Paper

The Mechanism of Verbal Warfare & Polarization: Exploring Communicative Strategies in American Political Discourse

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Abstract

This study examines communicative strategies in American political discourse, focusing on verbal confrontation and polarization. Analyzing a corpus of 250 texts from 2016-2023 political debates, speeches, and interviews, the research employs a functional-linguistic approach combining qualitative and quantitative methods to identify key strategies and tactics used in adversarial situations. The study reveals 3 primary strategies: discrediting, control over conflict situations, and coercion/persuasion, with discrediting emerging as the most prevalent. Expressiveness, utilizing techniques like hyperbole and metaphor, is recognized as a universal tactic enhancing all strategies. Frequency analysis quantifies the prevalence of these strategies, highlighting the confrontational nature of contemporary American political discourse. This research contributes to understanding the dynamics of political communication, having practical value for politicians, strategists, and educators while underscoring the need for enhanced media literacy to help citizens critically analyze political discourse in an increasingly polarized environment.

Keywords: Communicative Strategy; Communicative Tactic; American Political Discourse; Functional Linguistics; Pragmatics.

1. Introduction

Language and politics are inseparable, as the words we use shape and reflect our beliefs, values, and identities. As Orwell famously wrote, "political language … is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind" (1946, p. 8).

For American political discourse, this statement seems more relevant than ever, as the country faces unprecedented levels of polarization, division, and conflict. The use of language as a tool for persuasion, manipulation, and pragmatic impact has been a significant area of research in functional linguistics and pragmatics. Planning the functional perspective of speech acts, deliberate choice of language means to achieve communicative strategies and the deployment of certain tactics, particularly in the larger context of verbal warfare and polarization, shapes the sociopolitical narratives and defines the discourse surrounding political campaigns and debates (Lakoff, 2014; Wodak & Meyer, 2015).

The notions of "verbal warfare" and "polarization" have become pivotal for current research on communicative and strategic aspects of speech interaction in the political sphere. Verbal warfare in this study refers to the strategic use of language in political discourse to dominate, undermine, or manipulate opponents as well as influence public opinion (Gieroń-Czepczor, 2013; Smits, 2022). It encompasses various linguistic tactics, including insults, accusations, and persuasive rhetoric, aimed at gaining a competitive edge in political communication. Polarization, on the other hand, denotes the increasing ideological divide in a society, where political opinions become more extreme and oppositional, leading to reduced consensus and heightened conflict (Otieno, 2024; Pew Research Center, 2014).

Although the interconnection between strategic language use and successful politics amidst heightened discord and conflict is a global phenomenon, this study specifically focuses on American political discourse due to its heightened levels of polarization and the prominent execution of adversarial communication strategies in recent years. The United

States has experienced significant political events, such as the 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, which have intensified verbal confrontations and deepened societal divisions (Khlopotunov, 2020). This study undertakes a comprehensive exploration into the mechanisms of American political communication as it seeks to single out the most important strategies behind the adversarial verbal behavior of discourse participants and analyze the tactical means that contribute to both verbal warfare and the deepening polarization in discourse.

As political actors engage in debates, rallies, and media interactions, their use of language extends beyond mere expression and conveying information. It becomes a strategic endeavor aimed at gaining control, asserting dominance, and change public perceptions (Lakoff, 2014; van Dijk, 2006). The polarized nature of contemporary American politics further amplifies the significance of communicative strategies, turning political discourse into a battleground where words are wielded as weapons (Bail et al., 2018; Iyengar et al., 2019). The functional-pragmatic evolution of political communication has undergone a shift towards significantly more confrontational rhetoric, with candidates and leaders resorting to more nonstandard and previously disapproved linguistic patterns (Khlopotunov, 2019). Understanding these strategies is essential for comprehending the subtleties of contemporary political discourse, where words possess significant power in the pursuit of political objectives.

The current research is guided by four key questions: (1) What are the primary communicative strategies used by American politicians in moments of conflict? (2) What are the most important tactical means of achieving communicative goals in adversarial political communication? (3) How do American political figures establish and exert control over communicative situations in antagonistic settings? (4) What role does expressiveness play in enhancing the persuasive impact of political communication?

2. Literature Review

The concept of *communicative strategy* is central to discourse studies, yet its definition varies across different research fields. Terms like *speech strategy* and *discourse strategy* are often used interchangeably, leading to ambiguity. A comprehensive literature review is thus necessary to clarify the existing perspectives underpinning this important concept.

In foreign language learning, communicative strategies are typical maneuvers which learners employ to overcome linguistic limitations and achieve communicative objectives in a nonnative language (Alhourani, 2018; Mirsane & Khabiri, 2016; Rashidi & Mirsalari, 2017). Examples include asking for clarification, paraphrasing, or using gestures. Littlemore (2003, p. 331) defines these strategies as "steps taken by language learners to enhance the effectiveness of their communication." However, this definition is limited to the specifics of studying and does not include the broader strategic use of language in political or professional environments. The applicability of these strategies outside the classroom remains underexplored, highlighting a gap that this study aims to address.

Whereas communicative strategies in language acquisition focus on overcoming linguistic limitations, functional linguistics takes a broader approach, emphasizing the deliberate planning in the execution of a speech act. According to this viewpoint, speakers select and use various linguistic strategies and tools to fine-tune their speech behavior according to their communicative goals and the situational context. For instance, speakers may use communicative strategies such as hedging, politeness, or irony to express their attitude, establish rapport, or challenge their interlocutors (Gazizova et al., 2020; Holmes, 2012; Kuzhevskaya, 2019; Schmidt, 2020). In prepared discourse, such as speeches or presentations, speakers can plan their communicative behavior in advance, while in spontaneous discourse, such as conversations or interviews, speakers rely on the preacquired cognitive frames and scenarios to guide their communication (Ardianto, 2016; Yoshida-Morise, 1998).

Different areas of language studies employ various types of strategies, such as 'pedagogical strategies' (also called 'learning strategies'; Björkman, 2001), 'textual strategies' (or 'writing strategies'; De Pew, 2011), and 'discourse strategies' (and their synonyms 'cognitive processing technique' and 'comprehension strategies'; van Dijk & Kintsch, 1983).

The difference in terminology and conceptualization between these frameworks reflects the complexity and diversity of communicative strategies, in particular, and the strategic approaches to speech acts and discourse, in general. In this article, we opt for the term *communicative strategy* as it more precisely captures the essence of this study's research

focus which is the system of English language means that embody the strategic orientations and specific goals of communication participants.

Building on the broader approach of functional linguistics, van Dijk (2006) introduces a socially oriented perspective, particularly relevant in political discourse. According to his study, a communicative strategy is a sophisticated amalgamation of speech actions strategically aligned to achieve communicative objectives. In other words, a communicative strategy is a deliberate and planned way of using language to influence and modify the intellectual, volitional, and emotional spheres of the audience. Nevertheless, although van Dijk offers a comprehensive approach to understanding discourse manipulation, his approach tends to focus on macrolevel social structures, sometimes neglecting the microlevel linguistic elements that occur in individual speeches and debates.

Political communication, in particular, showcases a unique application of strategies, which can vary depending on the context, the purpose, the medium, and the situation of communication. For example, politicians may use different communicative strategies in speeches, debates, interviews, or social media posts. Some of the common communicative strategies used in political discourse are framing, agenda-setting, mockery, priming, spin, rhetoric, and propaganda, among others. These strategies aim to form public opinion, to persuade the voters, to manipulate the facts, or to challenge the opponents (Khlopotunov, 2020).

Different linguists offer varied views on the concept and functions of communicative strategies. For instance, Carlo (2015) regards them as tools for conveying information and disseminating knowledge, while Fairclough (2010) contends that they can also serve as instruments of information suppression and knowledge distortion. At the same time, their analyses are predominantly qualitative, lacking the quantitative rigor needed to validate the prevalence of these strategies systematically.

Mannan (2013) proposes a communicative strategy framework that includes identification of speech goals, choosing semantic elements, assessing information scope, adjusting to interlocutors' mental abilities and background knowledge, tactically arranging language means, and adapting verbal interaction forms to fit different modes, styles, and genres.

Malyuga and Tomalin (2017) distinguish between communicative strategies (general plans outlining purpose, meaning components, information scope, and dialogue dynamics) and communicative tactics (specific speech actions modifying interaction parameters, evaluations, and speech situation). Yet, they do not specifically address the unique functional space of political adversarial communication. This study, thus, plans to extend existing theories by providing both qualitative and quantitative analyses tailored to the communicative sphere of American political discourse.

Speech acts and communicative strategies are crucial concepts in studying human interaction in politics. To clarify this relationship, a speech act performs a function (Austin, 1962; Hashemian, 2021), whereas a communicative strategy guides the selection and combination of speech acts to achieve a communicative goal and influence the interlocutor (Issers, 2008; Tsoumou, 2020). Moreover, communicative strategies are determined by cognitive and pragmatic factors, such as the communicative situation, goal, context, and available verbal and nonverbal tactics (Biletska et al., 2023). Thus, a tactic is a specific move that a speaker makes during the conversation to implement or modify a communicative strategy (Klyuev, 1998).

Expanding on this framework, communicative strategies encompass three main dimensions: planning, execution, and outcomes (Issers, 2008). Planning involves envisioning the interaction and deciding on tactics, influenced by factors like interaction type, prior knowledge, and situation (Putnam & Wilson, 2012; Radyuk, 2019). Once planning is established, execution involves the process of performing the interaction and adapting to feedback, using specific verbal and nonverbal means (Radyuk & Khramchenko, 2014). This dynamic process allows speakers to adjust tactics based on outcomes and needs (Chesnokova et al., 2020).

To analyze strategies in political communication, one must examine discourse means of persuasion, pragmatic impact, communication settings, interlocutors' aims, verbal/nonverbal actions, interaction type, perlocutionary effect, and communicative norms (Issers, 2008). Ultimately, a communicative strategy has a complex and variable structure that depends on both the speaker's goals and various nonlinguistic factors.

Collectively, the literature underscores the multidimensional character of communicative strategies. However, there is a distinct lack of focused research on how these strategies operate in the adversarial and polarized sphere of American politics. This study aims to fill this gap by systematically identifying and analyzing the communicative strategies and tactics that underpin verbal warfare and polarization in contemporary US political discourse.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

The dataset for this study comprised 250 texts. They were extracted from a wide range of oral and written American political discourse, including debates, campaign speeches, official statements, and interviews, spanning the time period of 2016-2023. The selection aimed to capture a comprehensive representation of contemporary political communication in the US, encompassing various politicians, parties, and communicative situations. The texts were sourced from reputable news archives, official campaign transcripts, mass media, official government Websites, and debate records. As we regard discourse as a text considered in conjunction with all extralinguistic factors accompanying its generation and perception (Ponomarenko, 2016), these factors were summarized and taken into account for the functional-linguistic analysis of each text.

To mitigate selection bias and enhance the representativeness of the corpus, the study included an extensive array of political figures beyond major party leaders, for example, primaries candidates, third-party candidates, local officials, and emerging political voices. Additionally, the inclusion of different communicative situations—ranging from high-profile national debates to more localized town hall meetings—ensures that the analysis captures both sensational confrontations and more casual political communication.

3.2. Inclusion Criteria

The texts included in the analysis met the following criteria:

- Source authenticity, that is, the texts originated from prominent American political figures, that is, individuals holding or seeking significant political office (e.g., presidential candidates, senior senators, governors, etc.), and were sourced from reputable news archives, official campaign transcripts, mass media, official government Websites, validated social media accounts, and debate records).

- Presence of confrontational/polarizing elements, including debates and direct exchanges (see the criteria for the identification of confrontational/polarizing elements below).

- Temporal range, that is, the corpus spanned American political discourse from three recent election cycles, covering 2016-2023 and ensuring relevance to contemporary political communication. This period encompasses significant political events, including the 2016, 2020, and 2022 elections, as well as critical legislative debates (e.g., the discussions surrounding the Affordable Care Act, 2017), the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (2017), and the impeachment trials of President Donald Trump (2019, 2021)). Additionally, major debates around voting rights (e.g., H.R.1 - For the People Act of 2021) and immigration reform (e.g., DACA and border wall funding) took center stage. During this time, national crises also significantly defined political discourse, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic (2020-2023), which led to debates over public health measures, economic relief packages like the CARES Act (2020), and vaccine distribution policies. The period also saw heightened discourse following the Black Lives Matter protests (2020), the Capitol insurrection on January 6, 2021, and the Supreme Court's overturning of Roe v. Wade (2022). All together, these events reflect the polarized quality of political communication in the US during this timeframe.

- Political diversity, as the corpus includes texts from a spectrum of political ideologies, ensuring balanced representation from both major political parties (Democrats and Republicans), as well as third-party candidates and independent voices. This diversity was achieved by selecting texts from a variety of political figures with differing policy positions and rhetorical styles.

The corpus texts were selected based on key political events and topics that are known to elicit confrontational discourse, such as elections, policy debates (e.g., healthcare, immigration), social movements, and personal attacks during debates.

The criteria for the identification of confrontational/polarizing elements were as follows:

- Lexical markers (the analysis focused on identifying lexical markers indicative of confrontation and polarization, including but not limited to adversarial language (words or phrases that position the speaker in direct opposition to their target, e.g.: phrases like "*my opponent is completely wrong*" or "*this policy is a disaster*" establish conflict and draw a clear line between opposing sides), strong assertions (characterized by definitive language that presents a claim or position as indisputable, e.g.: phrases such as "*There is no doubt that ...,*" "*It is absolutely clear that ...,*" or "*This is the only solution ...*"), and emotionally charged expressions, that is, phrases designed to evoke a strong emotional response from the audience, such as "*betrayal,*" "*crisis,*" or "*outrageous,*" tapping into feelings of fear, anger, distrust, anxiety, or urgency, thus magnifying the polarization of discourse).

- Tone and intensity (the texts were evaluated for the tone and intensity of language used, with special attention to instances where rhetoric heightened emotional responses or created divisions among audiences. For example, in political speeches, tone often shifts from calm, reasoned discourse to impassioned, intense verbal exchange, especially when addressing sensitive issues. Such shifts often signal a move toward a more confrontational and divisive mode of communication).

- Topic sensitivity (identification of topics that commonly evoke confrontational discourse, e.g., sociopolitical problems, policy debates, personal attacks. Special emphasis was placed on instances where divergent opinions led to heightened tension).

- Rhetorical devices (the study considered the use of rhetorical techniques known to escalate confrontation, including direct challenges, provocative questions, dismissive statements aimed at opponents).

- Audience reaction (the considered instances where the text elicited strong reactions from the audience, as observed through media coverage, public discourse, or documented audience responses during live political events. For example, live political events (e.g., rallies or televised debates) often provide real-time audience feedback in the form of applause, booing, or cheering. These responses were analyzed to understand immediate audience reactions to confrontational or polarizing rhetoric. Standing ovations following strong assertions or sharp criticisms of opponents were considered indicators of alignment and support, while visible tension or walkouts might reflect heightened divisions).

A stratified sampling approach was employed to ensure that the corpus accurately reflected the diversity of texts and political situations of the chosen timeframe. The texts were grouped based on key political issues, ensuring representation from all major policy areas that contribute to polarization (e.g., immigration, economic inequality, racial justice). Content from various mediums (print, digital, broadcast, social media) was sampled to reflect the different ways political messages are communicated and received. Texts from both leading political figures (e.g., presidents, presidential candidates) and other significant actors (e.g., senators, governors) were included, ensuring a mix of elite and grassroots discourse. Then, random sampling was applied to obtain a corpus of 250 texts.

3.3. Methodological Framework

The study employed a combination of methods:

- qualitative content analysis (for an in-depth exploration of language features and their implications. This involved coding the texts for specific themes, patterns, and linguistic markers related to confrontation and polarization);

- comparative method (to analyze different texts in various political situations, e.g., speeches, debates, social media posts. This enabled the identification of common strategies);

- rhetorical analysis (to evaluate how authors employed specific rhetorical devices to achieve their communicative goals).

- quantitative analysis (to support the qualitative findings).

The analysis in this study was grounded in the principles of systemic functional linguistics (Bloor & Bloor, 2017; Eggins, 2004; Schleppegrell & Oteíza, 2023). This theoretical approach allowed for a comprehensive examination of language use in American political discourse, considering both the functional and formal aspects of linguistic elements. Language units of the selected corpus were analyzed in terms of their functional load in discourse—specifically, the purpose for which they might be used in speech, how their choice by the author contributes to the realization of the communicative intent, and the determination of the author's intentions through the analysis of the semantic and pragmatic components of the discourse. The specific words and phrases used in the texts were examined for their connotations and implications. This analysis focused on identifying lexical markers of confrontation and polarization. The use of rhetorical techniques, including metaphors, analogies, and rhetorical questions, was analyzed to understand how they contribute to the persuasive pragmatic effect and emotional resonance of political discourse. An examination of the types of speech acts performed in the texts (e.g., assertions, questions, directives) was conducted. This involved categorizing these acts based on their intended functions in the communication process. The analysis considered the broader contextual extralinguistic factors surrounding the selected texts, for example, historical events, sociopolitical climate, and audience demographics. This context was essential in interpreting the significance of the linguistic choices made by the speakers.

The text analysis was conducted using NVivo, which facilitated the systematic coding and categorization of linguistic features. This tool enabled efficient handling of the large corpus and ensured consistency in coding across different texts.

3.4. Annotation and Coding

Each text in the corpus underwent thorough annotation and coding, with a particular focus on linguistic expressions that signify conflict, control, persuasion, and expressiveness. Annotated features included but were not limited to interruptions, rhetorical devices, hyperbole, repetition, irony, humor, and metaphor.

The coding scheme was developed based on the theoretical framework of functional linguistics and existing literature on communicative strategies in political discourse. The scheme included categories for identifying specific linguistic features, rhetorical devices, and prominent communicative tactics.

The coding process involved several stages:

1. Initial coding, when the author of this article conducted a first pass of the entire corpus, identifying and labeling relevant linguistic features and communicative tactics. We defined our unit of analysis as individual utterances within the corpus. An utterance was operationalized as a continuous speech segment by a single speaker, bounded by either the end of the speaker's turn or a significant pause or topic shift.

2. Code refinement, that is, the coding scheme was reviewed and refined to address any ambiguities or overlaps in categories.

3. Recoding using the refined scheme to ensure consistency across all the texts.

4. Intercoder reliability check, when a second coder, also trained in linguistics and discourse analysis, independently coded a random sample of 25% of the corpus (62 texts) to enhance the reliability of the coding. This step was crucial to mitigate potential biases and ensure the consistency of code application.

5. Reliability calculation, when intercoder reliability was calculated using Cohen's kappa coefficient. The initial intercoder agreement was $\kappa = 0.78$, indicating substantial agreement.

6. Disagreement resolution, when cases of disagreement between coders were discussed and resolved through consensus, leading to further refinement of the coding scheme. Typical disagreements concerned lexical markers (e.g., one coder might view a phrase as a strong assertion indicating confrontation, when the other might categorize it as a general negative expression) and rhetorical devices (e.g., when evaluating the use of a rhetorical question like "*Are we really going to allow this?*" one coder might categorize it as a challenge to the audience's values, although the other might see it merely as a rhetorical flourish with no confrontational intent).

Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz

7. Final coding, that is, following the resolution of disagreements, the author conducted a final coding pass of the entire corpus using the finalized coding scheme.

The final intercoder reliability achieved was $\kappa = 0.86$, suggesting strong agreement and enhancing the validity of the coding process.

It is important to note that while these measures significantly enhanced the reliability of our analysis, some degree of subjectivity is always inherent in qualitative discourse analysis.

3.5. Qualitative Analysis and Data Interpretation

The final phase involved synthesizing the findings from the functional-linguistic analysis. Interpretations were grounded in functional linguistics and aimed at providing an understanding of the communicative intentions, patterns, and pragmatic impact connected with communicative strategies in American adversarial political discourse. The qualitative analysis involved a close examination of specific linguistic instances, allowing for a deeper comprehension of the context and subtleties in the analyzed fragments of discourse. This comprehensive approach to empirical materials and methods ensured a robust and systematic exploration of communicative strategies in American political discourse, drawing on the data acquired from the functional-linguistic analysis of the text corpus.

3.6. Quantitative Analysis

For each strategy and tactic, the followings were calculated:

a) Absolute frequency, that is, the total number of occurrences in the corpus. It was, then, normalized by 1,000 words.

b) Relative frequency, that is, the percentage of utterances that employed each strategy or tactic.

This quantitative approach complements the qualitative analysis by providing a systematic measure of the prevalence and distribution of communicative strategies and tactics in American political discourse. The resulting data allow for statistical comparisons and the identification of patterns that might not be apparent from the qualitative analysis alone.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly adhered to in both the collection and analysis of empirical material. All the texts were sourced from publicly available platforms. Efforts were made to present the findings in a manner that respects the dignity and integrity of the involved politicians.

3.8. Limitations

While this research endeavors to provide a comprehensive analysis of American polarized adversarial political discourse, it is crucial to acknowledge certain inherent limitations that may impact the interpretation and generalizability of the findings. The corpus selection, though versatile, may not fully represent the entirety of American political discourse. The inclusion of texts primarily from major political figures and widely covered events might introduce a bias towards sensational or high-profile confrontations.

The study's temporal scope, spanning 2016-2023, may not capture long-term trends or shifts in confrontational discourse. Political communication constantly evolves, and the analysis might not fully encapsulate emerging patterns or changes that occur beyond the selected timeframe.

The identification of communicative intentions, specific strategies, tactics, confrontational and polarizing elements involves a degree of subjectivity, as interpretations may vary.

Despite these limitations, this study serves as a foundation for further research into the processes of strategic planning in political discourse. Future research work could employ a more extensive dataset, incorporate multimodal analysis, and dig deeper into the contextual peculiarities that define adversarial communication in the political sphere.

4. Results and Discussion

Effective verbal interaction hinges on two fundamental principles: cooperation and confrontation (or noncooperation). The cooperative principle encourages dialogue which stimulates mutually beneficial collaboration and creates an atmosphere of harmony, balance, respect and shared goals. On the other hand, adversarial communication, which stems from noncooperation, can lead to contention and discord in political discourse. This binary is rooted in the seminal work of conversational maxims proposed by Grice (1975). A breach in any of the Gricean maxims marks a pivot towards potential conflict in the speech act. Such conflict is not merely a byproduct of divergent views, but rather a complex result of synergistic interconnectedness among participants, their actions, the resultant consequences, the stakeholders with vested interests, and the substantive nature of these interests. Awareness of these aspects offers an important understanding of the undercurrents of human communicative interaction, crucial for the resolution of conflicts in discourse.

The concept of *verbal warfare* involves the strategic use of language to gain an upper hand and undermine adversaries. This idea is in line with the notion that discourse manipulation is a key factor in maintaining power structures, particularly in political communicative situations. According to this perspective, language is used not only to communicate but also to influence, dominate, and maintain or transform the narrative to one's advantage, aligning with the observations of researchers such as van Dijk (2006) and the explorations of Smits (2022) on the use of language in various forms of conflict and power struggles.

Adversarial communicative strategies are often embedded in an authoritarian paradigm. They reflect human proclivity for asserting dominance, foster an egocentric stance, and seek to impose a hierarchical structure upon social interactions. Indeed, the origin of the term *strategy* is found in the field of military arts and much later adapted by pragmatics and functional linguistics to describe a method of interaction that eschews collaboration in favor of achieving total ascendancy over an adversary. In American political discourse, such strategies are meticulously crafted to exert influence. Their tactics are closely connected with linguistic persuasion and creating a pragmatic effect of impact.

In political campaigning, for instance, the whole nature of communication is purely adversarial as the ambitions of candidates extend well beyond simply winning over the opponent's followers. Their strategic plan aims at garnering the attention of the undecided electorate, effectively engaging even those who may have disengaged from the electoral process or were undecided about their participation in the vote.

By analyzing empirical data from a functional-linguistic perspective, we revealed and explained the communicative intentions of speech producers and the language means they used to achieve them. By treating the text as the outcome of communicative activity and examining how language expression and extralinguistic factors contributed to the understanding of speech producers' goals, we managed to reconstruct the cognitive-pragmatic mechanism behind the speaker's strategic planning and tactical execution in each discourse fragment.

Based on our findings, we identified several key communicative strategies typical of contemporary American political discourse in its noncooperative mode. These are the strategies of coercion and persuasion, discrediting, and control over the situation. Each of these strategies allows for the effective achievement of objectives or the defense of one's positions in a 'win-lose' verbal interaction.

4.1. Coercion and Persuasion

The goal-setting of every speech act guides its planning. In American political discourse, as in any other type of national culture-specific political communication, speakers value showing their superiority over others and making the addressee do what they want through various manipulation techniques. Therefore, it is only reasonable to identify the strategy of coercion and persuasion as an independent vector in the development of the semantic space of adversarial discourse.

The coercion strategy relies on the tactic of threat. A threat is an illocutionary speech act that aims to provoke a certain emotion in the recipients besides a particular action. Analysis of the empirical data shows that this tactic often seeks to force a concession. The speaker usually has sanctioned authority over the listener, which enables them to fulfil their wants and needs.

Consider the following example: In a prime-time speech at Independence Historical Park in Philadelphia, President Joe Biden condemned Donald Trump and his ardent followers:

'I know, because I've been able to work with these mainstream Republicans. But there's no question that the Republican party today is dominated, driven, and intimidated by Donald Trump and the MAGA Republicans and that is a threat to this country' (Hutzler, 2022).

In this fragment, Biden begins by asserting his authority and credibility through the use of the discourse element *I know*. Lexemes *dominated, driven,* and *intimidated* bear negative connotations and describe the actions and influence of Donald Trump and the MAGA Republicans on the Republican party, suggesting a lack of autonomy and freedom for the party members. This implies that Trump and his supporters are aggressive and coercive and that they have a strong and unified agenda. The noun *threat* helps label the situation as dangerous and alarming, and evokes fear and anxiety in the audience as the country is allegedly vulnerable and in need of protection.

Threats in American political discourse can be direct or indirectly vague, without addressing a rival and concentrating on the explicit verbalization of consequences. In the following example, Biden threatens China, if it continues to challenge the United States:

'And we'll also take on directly the challenges posed by our prosperity, security, and democratic values by our most serious competitor, China.

We'll confront China's economic abuses; counter its aggressive, coercive action; to push back on China's attack on human rights, intellectual property, and global governance' (The White House, 2021).

In the President's speech, the rival country is nominated three times to highlight the openness of the confrontation. The discourse elements *confront*, *counter*, and *push back on* verbalizing the consequences for China, while *economic abuses*, *aggressive, coercive action*, and *attack* create a negative pragmatic effect and strengthen an unflattering image of China in the minds of the audience.

A less concrete threat can be found in the speech by Vivek Ramaswamy at the 4th GOP presidential debate:

'If you thought COVID was bad, what's coming with this climate agenda is far worse. We should not be bending the knee to this new religion' (Bradner, 2023).

Ramaswamy threatens the audience with the consequences of the Democratic party's political views but makes a deliberate choice of not stating directly who is being criticized. The word *agenda* correlates with the lexemes *COVID* and *climate* to generate an implication that a nationwide disaster and questionable political decisions made by the current administration in the White House can be repeated in the nearest future.

Another persuasive tactic of the communicative strategy of coercion and persuasion is imperative. This tactic is characterized by indicating the speaker's will and urging another participant of the discourse to perform a certain action. The directive intention of the imperative is driven by the desire of one interlocutor to influence the others. In confrontational rhetoric, the imperative tactic is often employed to point out errors made by the opponent or criticize a competing political agenda and also suggest ways to correct the wrongs. It involves using imperative sentences, modal verbs, or other expressions to give orders, instructions, or requests to others. Consider the following example of Bernie Sanders asserting his domination by categorically ordering to stop fracking in a heated debate with Joe Biden:

'I'm talking about stopping fracking as soon as we possibly can. I'm talking about telling the fossil fuel industry that they are going to stop destroying this planet—no ifs, buts and maybes about it' (Phillips, 2020).

The tactic of imperative in this fragment is a vehicle for expressing Sanders's strong conviction and urgency about the issue of fracking and fossil fuels. The senator uses the first-person pronoun *I* to emphasize his personal stance and authority. He also repeats the phrase *I'm talking* twice to reinforce the message and draw attention to his words. The discourse element *no ifs, buts and maybes* categorically rules out any objections, doubts, or alternatives. Imperative aims to persuade the audience to agree with Sanders's position and take action against fracking and fossil fuels, serving as a powerful tool of persuasion.

In written political discourse, imperatives are typical of statements and documents expressing the official position of the country on controversial global and domestic issues. For example, the statement by the ambassadors to

Myanmar, featuring the verb *call* and the first-person plural pronoun *We* to demonstrate unity and express the strong condemnation and demand of the international community towards the military coup in Myanmar:

> *'We call on Myanmar's military to cease all violence against people of Myanmar, release all detainees, lift martial law and the nationwide state of emergency, remove telecommunications restrictions, and restore the democratically elected government'* (US Embassy in Burma, 2021).

Importantly, the strategy of coercion and persuasion is more directed towards resolving a confrontational communicative situation rather than exacerbating it. This is because, through verbal tactical means, the speaker attempts to influence the opponent, compelling them to act in their favor, rather than undermining their political status, as occurs when employing the discrediting strategy.

The pervasive use of the coercion and persuasion strategy significantly impacts audience perception by creating a sense of urgency and crisis. For instance, phrases like "*threat to this country*" or warnings about future disasters generate an atmosphere of impending danger. Such an approach sways public opinion through emotional appeals rather than rational argumentation. Recent research supports this observation. Iyengar et al. (2019) and Brady et al. (2017) have demonstrated that such emotional manipulation is a key driver of political polarization, as it intensifies affective responses to political messages and amplifies the divide between opposing viewpoints.

It is necessary to note, however, that coercion strategies don't always succeed. There are cases where opponents effectively counter these tactics, for example, through media fact-checking or rival politicians offering strong rebuttals. These instances, observed in the empirical material, reveal the constraints of coercion-based approaches. The back-and-forth between different communicative strategies, as seen in these counter-narratives, plays a crucial role in molding public discourse. This ongoing exchange of competing narratives illustrates how various rhetorical techniques influence and modify polarized political conversations.

4.2. Discrediting

American political discourse is driven predominantly by the quest for and maintenance of power. A key feature of this institutional discourse is its agonality, which involves intense and passionate opposition among the participants who advocate different perspectives on the same ideas, concepts and views. This agonality leads to the division of discourse participants into distinct groups, creating an 'us versus them' dynamic in the public communicative sphere, radically shaping the sociopolitical landscape.

The communicative category of otherness affects all aspects of verbal interaction, influencing the choice of communicative strategies, genres, and forms of politeness. The conventional distinction of speech act participants into 'us' and 'them' is a long-existing characteristic of any political discourse, resulting in a polarization of political life based on ideological orientations and views.

The linguistic expression of otherness is often achieved through the strategic use of discrediting. It aims to destroy the opponent's reputation and create a clear distance from their political ideologies and actions. This strategic option puts communication participants in hostile positions, creating separate circles of 'us' and 'them.' Importantly, the main goal for participants in political communication, under such conditions, goes beyond the mere creation of a supportive circle; it involves the gradual erosion of the opponent's reputation to attract their followers and electorate.

The polarization process can be triggered by various factors, such as the personal characteristics of the opponents or the negative evaluation of their arguments. Identifying and exploiting the flaws of the interlocutors and presenting oneself or one's political group as superior to the adversary underpins the communicative strategy of discrediting. For instance, in the 2020 presidential debate, Donald Trump said the following to Joe Biden:

> *'Donald J. Trump: Did you use the word smart? So you said you went to Delaware State, but you forgot the name of your college. You didn't go to Delaware State. You graduated either the lowest or almost the lowest in your class. Don't ever use the word smart with me. Don't ever use that word.*
>
> *Joe Biden: Oh, give me a break.*
>
> *Donald J. Trump: Because you know what? There's nothing smart about you, Joe. 47 years you've done nothing'* (Rev, 2020).

This is an example of the communicative tactic of insult, which aims to humiliate and offend the opponent. Trump uses it to attack Biden's intelligence and academic performance, implying that he is not qualified or competent to be president. The discourse elements *nothing smart about you*, *graduated the lowest*, *forgot the name of your college*, and *didn't go to Delaware State* create a pragmatic effect of disbelief in Biden's intellectual abilities and good memory. Trump also tries to assert his own superiority and dominance over Biden with the phrase *Don't ever use the word smart with me*, hinting at his own cleverness.

In the same debate, Joe Biden resorts to discrediting his rival with a different communicative tactic:

'*Chris Wallace: All right. Do you want to just quickly finish up? Because I want to move on to our next-*

Joe Biden: Yes, I would. He's been totally irresponsible the way in which he has handled the social distancing and people wearing masks, basically encouraged them not to. He's a fool on this' (Rev, 2020).

This showcases the tactic of accusation, which aims to blame and criticize the opponent for their actions or inactions. Biden uses *totally irresponsible* and *encouraged them not to* to discredit Trump's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, accusing him of being inefficient and stupid (*He's a fool on this*) for not following or promoting the public health guidelines. Biden also tries to appeal to the audience's fear and anger over the pandemic (hence the use of medically-themed discourse elements *social distancing* and *wearing masks*) and portray Trump as a threat to their safety and well-being. Polarization over health threats and fears is an effective tool in post-COVID political communication.

Some common themes of personal accusations in American political discourse are unpatriotic behavior, an immoral lifestyle, mental incapacity, collaboration with ideological enemies of the state, betrayal, violation of human rights and freedoms, lack of tolerance, and hypocrisy. Personal accusations, though morally dubious, remain one of the most popular ways to discredit an opponent. For example, the following quote by Hillary Clinton speaking about Donald Trump:

'*We have a man who is accused of sexual assault sitting in the Oval Office, don't we? And the very credible accusations against him have not been taken seriously*' (Ducharme, 2017).

Clinton appeals to the emotions of the audience, such as anger, indignation, or sympathy, and tries to persuade them to support her own political agenda. She uses rhetorical questions, such as *don't we?* to involve the recipients and make them agree with her point of view. Strong adjectives, such as *very credible*, emphasize the validity of the accusations and contrast them with Trump's denial. The communicative tactic of personal accusations, regardless of their severity, is used in American political discourse to discredit and undermine the opponent's character and credibility by a synergistic combination of the speaker's assumed authority, convincing manner of speech, seriousness of allegations, and persuasiveness of thought-through rhetoric.

The tactics of insult, accusation, and unproven undermining of authority have a lot in common as they help discredit political figures, but differ slightly in their functionality. Insult does not rely on any rational argument, but only on emotive expression, for example, strong epithets, stylistic coloring, deeply negative connotations. The goal of the speaker who uses insults is to injure the opponent, by arousing their anger, resentment, or embarrassment. Insults are often impulsive verbal responses, triggered by the opponent's offensive or provocative statements or accusations. This strategy is frequently used in election discourse, where the candidates tend to evaluate their rivals negatively. Accusations, on the other hand, expose the opponent's actions and motives, while unproven undermining of authority questions the opponent's competence and legitimacy. These tactics are often used in combination to create a negative image of the rival and influence public opinion. However, they also have different effects and risks, depending on the context, the audience, and the evidence (or lack of such).

Mockery is a communicative tactic that, unlike insult and accusation, does not aim to offend or harm the target of discredit. It does not prevent the possibility of dialogue between the speaker and their opponent. In American political discourse, mockery is a popular tactic as it shows the speaker's ability to use irony, humor, and self-assurance, presenting the counterpart in a ridiculous or absurd way. For example, in a speech at the Democratic National Convention in 2016, Hillary Clinton was mocking Donald Trump for his hypocrisy and inconsistency:

'*That sales pitch he's making to be your president? Put your faith in him – and you'll win big? That's the same sales pitch he made to all those small businesses. Then Trump walked away, and left working people holding the bag.*

He also talks a big game about putting America First. Please explain to me what part of America First leads him to make Trump ties in China, not Colorado.

Trump suits in Mexico, not Michigan. Trump furniture in Turkey, not Ohio. Trump picture frames in India, not Wisconsin.

Donald Trump says he wants to make America great again – well, he could start by actually making things in America again' (CNN, 2016).

In this fragment, Clinton points out the contradiction between Trump's slogan of *America First* and his business practices of outsourcing his products to other countries. She implies that he is not a true patriot, nor is he qualified to lead the country. The discourse elements *all those small businesses*, *left working people holding the bag*, *in China, not Colorado*, *Mexico, not Michigan*, *Turkey, not Ohio*, and *India,* and *not Wisconsin* appeal to the audience's sense of nationalism and pride, persuading them to vote for her. Rhetorical questions, such as *Please explain to me* and *what part of America First* challenge and ridicule Trump's logic and credibility. The use of repetition, such as *Trump tie*, *Trump suits*, *Trump furniture*, and *Trump picture frames*, emphasizes the extent of Trump's outsourcing and contrasts it with the names of American states. The passage shows how mockery criticizes the rival's questionable practices without resorting to direct personal accusations and hate speech.

Thus, the communicative strategy of discrediting is a common and effective way of influencing political discourse in the United States. It aims to create an 'us versus them' pragmatics, when the opponent is portrayed as the other, the enemy, or the threat. The speaker uses various tactics and language means, such as insult, accusation, exaggeration, mockery, and ridicule, to undermine the opponent's authority, reputation, and actions. These strategies not only appeal to the emotions of the audience, but also shape the narratives, sentiments, and opinions of the public. Tactical language means, which are employed to discredit rivals in the process of confrontational interaction, manipulate the recipient's consciousness and modify the recipients' concept of 'us versus them'—a conditional boundary that separates supporters and opponents of a particular political figure.

The frequent use of the discrediting strategy generates increased polarization by continuously reinforcing negative perceptions of opponents and entrenching ideological divides (Fairclough, 2010). This not only diminishes the quality of American political discourse but also hampers constructive dialogue and consensus-building.

As for the counter-narratives, in the selected corpus of texts there are instances where discrediting is countered effectively, such as through fact-checking initiatives or by opponents addressing the discredited claims directly. These counter-narratives can mitigate the impact of discrediting but are often overshadowed by the sheer volume of adversarial tactics used.

4.3. Control Over the Conflict Situation

For politicians, seizing the initiative in a debate and gaining control over the communicative situation are the two most important professional skills which define the success of campaigns and struggles for power. Therefore, these intentions shape the whole process of planning the functional perspective of discourse and possess a specific arsenal of tactical means and maneuvers, such as imposing a topic on the interlocutor, maintaining a topic against the opponent's wishes, or ignoring the declared topic.

In the third Republican debate in 2015, the host opened the discussions with the question 'What's your biggest weakness?' to all the potential presidential candidates. Carly Fiorina chose not to answer:

'FIORINA: Well, gee, after the last debate, I was told that I didn't smile enough. (LAUGHTER)

QUINTANILLA: Fixed it.

FIORINA: But I also think that these are very serious times; 75 per cent of the American people think the federal government is corrupt. I agree with them. And this big powerful, corrupt bureaucracy works now only for the big, the powerful, the wealthy and the well-connected. Meantime, wages have stagnated for 40 years. We have more Americans out of work or just Americans who quit looking for work for 40 years' (The Washington Post, 2015).

Fiorina's response can be seen as an example of ignoring the declared topic, which is one of the tactical means of controlling the communicative situation in political discourse. By not answering the question about her biggest

weakness, she avoids exposing any vulnerability or flaw that could damage her public image or credibility. Instead, she shifts the focus to the problems of the federal government and the need for a change of leadership, which are more relevant and appealing to her audience.

The very same fragment can also serve as a good example of the tactic of reframing negative coverage, which diverts attention and influences public perception in political discourse. By joking about her lack of smile in the previous debate and using the informal *gee* to tone down the conversation, she acknowledges the criticism but also downplays its importance. Fiorina implies that smiling is not a priority for her, because she is more concerned about the serious issues facing the country. She also contrasts her seriousness with the corruption and inefficiency of the government (*corrupt bureaucracy*) which she blames for the economic and social problems of the American people (*wages have stagnated*, *more Americans out of work*).

Interruption as a communicative tactic is an effective way to gain control over the situation and impose a sensitive topic on the interlocutor to reveal their weaknesses to the audience. For example, Donald Trump attacked Joe Biden during the presidential debate with discrediting questions and remarks about his son Hunter:

> ‘*Biden: My son was in Iraq. He spent a year there. He got the Brown Star. He got the Conspicuous Service Medal. He was not a loser. He was a Patriot and the people left behind there were heroes.*
>
> *Trump: Really?*
>
> *Biden: And I resent-*
>
> *Trump: Are you talking Hunter, are you talking about Hunter.*
>
> *Biden: I'm talking about my son, Beau Biden, you're talking about Hunter?*
>
> *Trump: I don't know Beau. I know Hunter. Hunter got thrown out of the military. He was thrown out dishonorably discharged.*
>
> *Biden: That's not true he was not dishonorably discharged.*
>
> *Trump: For cocaine use. And he didn't have a job until you became vice president'* (Rev, 2020).

In this debate, Trump frequently interrupts Biden and the moderator, Chris Wallace, to prevent them from finishing their sentences or making their points. This is a way of dominating the conversation.

The communicative behavior of speakers in conflictual political discourse rarely manifests one distinctly expressed intention. More often, it is based on several communicative intentions being executed simultaneously with an array of tactical means. In the example above, Trump combines the strategies of discrediting, coercion, and control to achieve his complex communicative goals and win the favor of voters.

Biden tries to correct Trump's false or misleading statements by asserting the truth or providing evidence. He denies Trump's accusations and defends his son's reputation (*was in Iraq*, *got the Brown Star, got the Conspicuous Service Medal*, *was a Patriot*). Restoring trust and credibility and challenging Trump's claims is an example of another strategy, logically deducible from the existence of the strategies of coercion, discrediting, and control. It is the communicative strategy of self-defense, where all the speaker's verbal means are directed to avoid or minimize personal damage, improve one's tarnished public image, and restore chances in the struggle for power.

The strategy of controlling the conflict situation demonstrates the competitive nature of political communication, where dominating the narrative is crucial for securing voter support. It aligns well with Mannan's (2013) framework, which emphasizes the importance of strategic topic management in achieving communicative goals.

Considering counter-measures, opponents often attempt to counter the control strategy by reinforcing their own messages, using similar tactics, or leveraging media platforms to correct or redirect the discourse. These counter-narratives demonstrate the ongoing struggle for narrative dominance in polarized political communication.

4.4. Expressiveness as a Universal Tactic

The empirical analysis revealed that linguistic expressiveness adds an extra persuasive layer to the functional-pragmatic space of political discourse. It makes the speaker's words memorable, arguments perceptible, and reasoning

compelling. The aesthetic and intellectual pleasure derived from well-thought-out rhetoric and the skilful selection of linguistic expressions make the use of stylistic techniques a suitable means of implementing most, if not all, communicative strategies in adversarial interaction.

One of the most common stylistic devices used by American politicians is hyperbole, which is an exaggerated statement or claim that is not meant to be taken literally. Hyperbole can serve various communicative purposes, such as emphasizing a point, creating a contrast, or arousing emotions.

For example, Joe Biden used hyperbole to stress the importance and urgency of the 2020 presidential election, saying:

'You all know in your gut, not because I'm running, that this is maybe the most important election, no matter how young or old you are, you've ever voted in' (Selk, 2019).

By using the words *the most important*, *maybe*, and *ever*, Biden implies that the stakes are high and that the voters have a crucial role to play in the outcome of the election.

Another stylistic technique that combines hyperbole with repetition and irony is the one used by Donald Trump in his campaign rallies, where he often repeated the following statement:

'We're going to win. We're going to win so much. We're going to win at trade, we're going to win at the border. We're going to win so much, you're going to be so sick and tired of winning, you're going to come to me and go 'Please, please, we can't win anymore.' You've heard this one. You'll say 'Please, Mr. President, we beg you sir, we don't want to win anymore. It's too much. It's not fair to everybody else. And I'm going to say 'I'm sorry, but we're going to keep winning, winning, winning, We're going to make America great again' (Lutey, n.d.).

This statement is intended to convey a sense of confidence and assurance, as well as to add a humorous and memorable element to the speech. It also aims to create a positive and optimistic vision, suggesting an abundance of success and victories under Trump's leadership. The words *to win* and *winning* are repeated 11 times in a very short passage. The use of repetition, coupled with the ironic portrayal of potential reluctance from the audience (*please, we can't win anymore*), contributes to the rhetorical effect of the fragment, which is to persuade the listeners to support Trump and his agenda.

Humor is another stylistic technique that can be used to enhance the expressiveness of political discourse. On the one hand, it can be used to ridicule, mock, or criticize the opponents. On the other hand, humor lightens the mood and establishes rapport with the audience. For instance, Ted Cruz used humor to attack Donald Trump's personality, saying:

'Donald Trump is such a narcissist that Barack Obama looks at him and goes, 'Dude, what's your problem?' (Shabad, 2016).

This fragment demonstrates a joke that compares Trump's narcissism to Obama's, implying that Trump is even more self-centered and arrogant than the former president, who was often accused of being narcissistic by his critics. The use of humor in this case serves the function of discrediting Trump and appealing to the audience's sense of humor.

Metaphor is another powerful stylistic technique that adds extra expressiveness to American political discourse. This device can be used to create vivid images, simplify complex concepts, or evoke emotions. For example, Donald Trump used metaphor to express his sympathy and support for the Americans affected by the COVID-19 pandemic:

'We also stand in solidarity with the thousands of Americans who are ill and waging a brave fight against the virus' (Garden, 2020).

This fragment illustrates the use of the metaphor of war to describe the situation of the sick people, who are portrayed as brave soldiers fighting against a vicious enemy. The metaphor here serves to create a sense of unity and solidarity, as well as to acknowledge the suffering and courage of the people.

These examples show that expressiveness is a universal tactic that can be used to implement various communicative strategies in noncooperative American political discourse. Expressiveness can help the speakers achieve their communicative goals, such as persuading, informing, entertaining, or inspiring the audience. Expressiveness also

helps speakers to create their own distinctive style and image, as well as to influence the perception and evaluation of their opponents. Therefore, expressiveness is a valuable and effective tool for political communication.

The only downside of this tactic observed in the empirical data is that although it can amplify positive messages, it can also backfire if overused or perceived as insincere, leading to skepticism among voters. Effective use, to our mind, requires balancing aesthetic appeal with substantive content.

4.5. Frequency Analysis of Adversarial Communicative Strategies and Tactics

To complement our qualitative analysis and provide a more comprehensive understanding of communicative strategies in American political discourse, we conducted a frequency analysis of the tactics identified in the study's corpus. This quantitative approach allows us to infer the prevalence of broader communicative strategies and offers important data on the nature of adversarial political communication.

The analysis of the empirical materials revealed distinct patterns in the use of various communicative tactics. By aggregating these tactics, we can draw conclusions about the frequency and importance of the overarching communicative strategies they represent. The frequency of each strategy and tactic was recorded and normalized per 1,000 words to account for variations in text length (see Figures 1 & 2 below).

The discrediting strategy emerged as the most common, with a combined frequency of 383 occurrences per 1,000 words when considering personal attacks (142 occurrences), accusations (156 occurrences), and mockery (85 occurrences). This high frequency underscores the central role that discrediting plays in American political discourse as well as the intensely adversarial nature of contemporary American political communication, aligning with van Dijk's (2006) assertion that discourse manipulation is pivotal in a fight for power. Politicians frequently use these tactics to undermine their opponents' credibility, shape public perception, establish their own superiority, suggesting a prioritization of destroying the public image of opponents over promoting ideas. Such statistical prevalence may contribute to increased polarization and potentially deteriorate the quality of political debate in the US, as voters are frequently exposed to negative messaging, which could lead to increased cynicism and disengagement from the political process.

The strategy of control over the conflict situation was the second most common, with a total of 224 occurrences per 1,000 words, combining topic switches (97 occurrences) and interruptions (127 occurrences). The quantitative data support our qualitative observations about the importance of dominating conversations and steering discourse in favorable directions. The frequency of these tactics highlights the competitive nature of political communication, where controlling the narrative is crucial.

The prevalence of the communicative strategies of discrediting and control contributes to an increasing level of political polarization by perpetuating an "us vs. them" mentality and hindering constructive dialogue. This supports Fairclough's (2010) findings that adversarial communication can erode democratic deliberation and lead to societal division.

Coercion, represented by threats and imperatives in our analysis, was the least frequently observed strategy with 63 occurrences per 1,000 words. This lower frequency suggests that although coercion is a significant strategy, it may be used more subtly or less overtly than other forms of verbal confrontation. The relative infrequency of overt threats might indicate a preference for more indirect forms of persuasion or pressure in public political discourse. The preference for indirect tactics (57%) over direct tactics (43%) indicates a strategic choice to influence audiences while maintaining a facade of civility, suggesting politicians' adeptness at using subtle linguistic means and techniques without appearing overly aggressive. As there is always a possibility of a public or media backlash against directly hostile political rhetoric, it drives the preference for indirectness among discourse participants, the effectiveness of indirect tactics being in an opportunity to sway public opinions without triggering immediate defensive reactions.

The limited use of self-defense strategy with a total of 36 occurrences per 1,000 words points to a focus on offensive communicative strategies. Possibly, it reflects a perceived weakness in appearing defensive or even the fast-paced nature of contemporary American political discourse. This distribution suggests a shift away from policy-focused debate towards personality-driven political theater, potentially influenced by media formats like short TV segments, press releases, and social media platforms like X (formerly known as Twitter) or TikTok, that is, politicians might simply be relying on other channels for defensive communication.
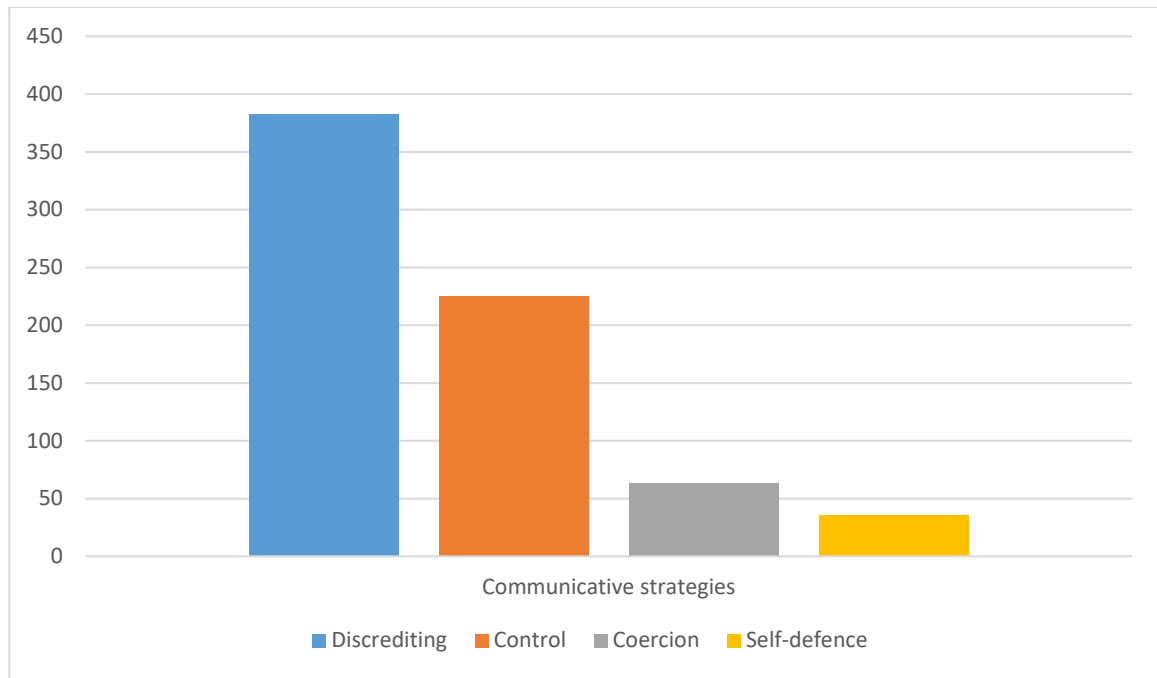
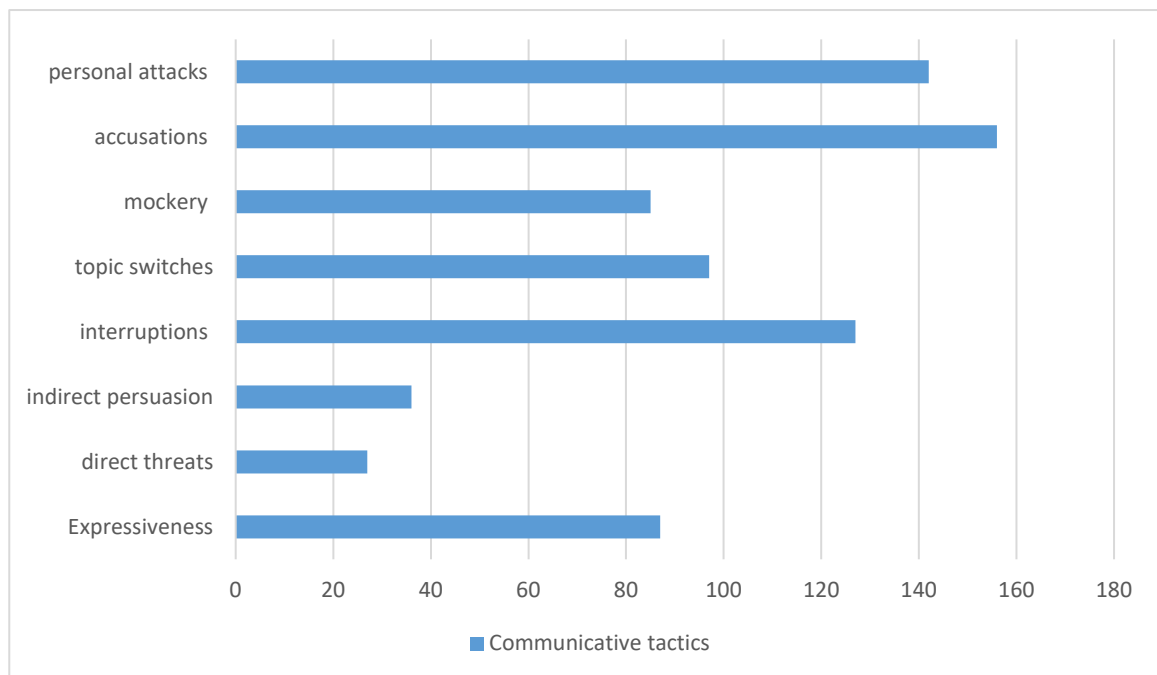*Figure 1.* Frequency Analysis of Adversarial Communicative Strategies, Occurrences per 1,000 Words

Figure 2. Frequency Analysis of Adversarial Communicative Tactics, Occurrences per 1,000 Words

Expressiveness, represented in our empirical data by irony, humor, hyperbole (87 occurrences), occupies a middle ground in terms of frequency. This aligns with our qualitative finding that expressiveness serves as a universal tactic, employed across various strategies to enhance the pragmatic impact of communication.

These findings raise concerns about the quality of information voters receive and the potential for these communication strategies to exacerbate political polarization. They highlight the importance of enhancing media literacy and civic education programs to help citizens critically analyze political communication.

Shahid Chamran University of Ahvaz

The frequency analysis provides a quantitative backbone to our qualitative observations, giving a more profound understanding of the tactical arsenal available in current American political discourse. It highlights the confrontational and strategic nature of political communication, revealing the specific mechanisms by which American politicians attempt to gain advantage in verbal interactions. These data not only contribute to our academic understanding of political discourse but also have significant implications for the health of democratic processes and the informed participation of citizens in political life.

This analysis opens avenues for further research, including longitudinal studies to track changes in communicative strategy use over time, contrastive and comparative analyses across different national culture-specific political systems, studies of the effectiveness of these strategies in shaping and modifying public opinion, and exploration of potential countermeasures to mitigate negative pragmatic effects of these communicative patterns.

5. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to investigate how American politicians strategically plan and tactically execute their communicative intentions in adversarial situations of political discourse. A functional-linguistic approach was adopted, and a corpus of texts from presidential debates and significant political discussions was analyzed. The choice of communicative strategies and tactics by politicians in American political communication, where verbal conflicts and polarization are rampant, can have a major impact on the narrative repertoire and the power distribution in society.

Political communication is constantly changing, and it is important to comprehend the communicative strategies that politicians use. Language is not only a means of expression, but also a tactical instrument for gaining control, asserting dominance, and influencing public opinion. Strategic planning of the functional perspective is underpinned by key communicative intentions such as persuasion, coercion, discrediting, and the desire for control of the situation. The corresponding tactical moves include threats, imperatives, personal attacks, insults, accusations, exaggerations, mockery, ridicule, imposing or switching topics, interruptions, and reframing negativity. On the discourse level, they are carried out through the use of words with negative connotations, imperative phrases and sentences, modal verbs, repetitions, hyperboles, litotes, juxtaposition of contextually antonymic discourse elements, personal pronouns, humor, and irony.

The study also emphasized the pervasive tactic of expressiveness, where politicians used language means such as hyperbole, repetition, humor, and metaphor to enhance the persuasive effect of political discourse. These stylistic devices were strategically employed to make the messages memorable, arguments clear, and reasoning convincing, thereby affecting public perception and engagement.

The communicative behavior observed in adversarial political discourse was rarely driven by a single expressed intention. Rather, politicians skillfully combined various strategies, such as coercion, discrediting, and control, to achieve complex communicative goals. This demonstrated the strategic flexibility of linguistic choices in the pursuit of power and public favor.

The findings of this study offer useful ideas for politicians, communication strategists, and educators involved in teaching English for specific purposes to professional diplomats. Understanding the choices of communicative strategies, decoding intentions and recognizing manipulation provide a guide for effective communication in conflictual situations, enabling speakers to strategically predetermine and modify discourse perception to their advantage.

Conflict of Interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

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