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Research Paper

I've said this many times: Exploring Engagement Resources in Iran's 2024 Presidential Debates

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Abstract

This study investigates the rhetorical strategies employed by Iranian presidential candidates (Pezeshkian and Jalili) during the 2024 televised debates, with a focus on their use of heteroglossic resources as conceptualized within the Appraisal Model. The analysis compares candidates' discourse based on a corpus of 16,172 words. Adopting a quantitative-qualitative design, the study identifies remarkable differences in the candidates' deployment of heteroglossic markers. Quantitatively, Pezeshkian demonstrated a greater overall reliance on these resources, employing more contractive and expansive markers, in contrast to his competitor. Furthermore, Pezeshkian used inclusive and oppositional pronouns (we, they) more frequently, thereby constructing a rhetorical stance that emphasized collective identity and ideological differentiation. Qualitatively, while both candidates articulated their political positions through a combination of dialogic contraction and expansion, Pezeshkian's rhetorical style emerged as more persuasive and audience-oriented. These results underscore the pivotal role of heteroglossic strategies in shaping candidates' public personas.

***Keywords*:** Appraisal; Engagement; Heteroglossic Resources; Referential Pronouns; Presidential Debates.

1. Introduction

Presidential elections have been held in Iran since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Over this period, presidential debates have experienced their ups and downs. In the presidential elections of previous decades (1980 to 2005), candidates introduced themselves in pre-recorded programs and talked about their election programs and slogans. In fact, there were no debates between two or more candidates. This format evolved, and in 2009, presidential debates began occurring in pairs. In 2013, the format changed again, allowing all presidential candidates to participate in debates rather than just those in pairs, except when two candidates progressed to the second round of the presidential election. The fourteenth presidential election took place on June 8, 2024, featuring seven nationwide televised debates—five in the first round and two in the second. The first-round debates were held on June 17, 20, 21, 24, and 25, involving six candidates: Ghalibaf, Ghazizadeh Hashemi, Jalili, Pezeshkian, Pourmohammadi, and Zakani. Pezeshkian and Jalili qualified for the runoff stage of the presidential election.

Despite candidates employing various methods, such as social media and face-to-face meetings, to garner votes for themselves or their supporting factions or parties, nationwide televised presidential debates remained critically important for both candidates and the public. Candidates perceived them as an influential instrument for shaping and elevating public priorities (Cantú & Carreras, 2023), and the public's subsequent electoral decisions were frequently informed by their debate viewership. To command attention in debates and capture public interest, presidential candidates carefully select language that demonstrates their authority and clarifies their stance on various issues, as effective communication can give one political party an advantage over another (Bello, 2013).

Scholars have long emphasized the role of language in shaping presidential debates, highlighting how candidates use discourse to articulate visions, frame responses, and influence public opinion (Alavi-Nia & Jalilifar, 2013; Aljuraywi & Alyousef, 2022; Cantú & Carreras, 2023; Jalilifar & Alavi-Nia, 2012; Khramchenko, 2025; Rahmaida & Cahyono, 2022; Rose & Caldwell, 2020; Rahro et al., 2024; Thahara et al., 2024). As a prominent form of political discourse, presidential debates provide a distinctive communicative arena where candidates articulate their visions,

respond to emergent issues, and engage directly with voters (Jiménez-Preciado et al., 2025; Rahro et al., 2024; Sun & Liu, 2023). Within this context, heteroglossic markers that reflect how speakers position themselves relative to other voices and viewpoints (Martin & White, 2005) are central to understanding how candidates position themselves relative to competing voices and viewpoints. Such resources not only enable candidates to express their stance but also function strategically to strengthen alignment with audiences. Prior research has further shown that rhetorical devices, such as pronouns, along with directives, questions, and appeals to shared knowledge, are crucial in constructing interactive and persuasive discourse (Hyland, 2005, 2008; Van Dijk, 1993).

Despite this body of research, limited attention has been devoted to analyzing heteroglossic resources in presidential debates, particularly in the Iranian political context. This absence is significant, given the distinct ideological narratives and communicative norms that characterize Iranian political discourse (Zand-Moghadam & Bikineh, 2014) as reported in some studies (Allami & Barzegar, 2020; Rahimi Tehrani & Chalak, 2023). To date, no systematic study has examined how Iranian presidential candidates employ heteroglossic strategies to manage dialogic positioning and audience alignment.

To address this gap, the current study investigates how Iranian presidential candidates Pezeshkian and Jalili utilized heteroglossic strategies in the first round of the 2024 elections. By focusing on dialogic positioning, this research aims to enrich our understanding of how Iranian politicians construct legitimacy, manage alignment, and negotiate meaning with diverse audiences through strategic language choices. The findings of such a study may uncover the extent to which presidential candidates use heteroglossic resources to dialogically contract and expand their debates, potentially galvanizing the context to win the acquiescence of the public. Likewise, this study examines how referential expressions, often mediated through pronouns, are used by candidates. politicians use such rhetorical devices as a means of "enhancement of '*their'* negative actions and '*our'* positive actions" (Van Dijk, 1993, p. 264). To this aim, the current study addresses the following questions:

1. How do the two Iranian presidential candidates employ heteroglossic resources in their debate discourse?
2. In what ways do the candidates construct interactive and dialogic relationships with their audience?
3. How do the candidates articulate their stance, and what distinctive rhetorical patterns or idiosyncrasies can be identified in their discourse?

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Martin and White's (2005) Appraisal Model to examine how Iranian presidential candidates shaped their messages in televised debates. The appraisal framework highlights how candidates positioned themselves in relation to others by either opening up or closing down space for alternative viewpoints. Although this model provides resources for an extensive evaluation of engagement in an interaction, Hyland's (2005, 2008) model was used to complement our understanding of engagement. That is, how features like pronouns help candidates build alignment and a sense of solidarity. Together, the two perspectives provide a more comprehensive view of how candidates both articulate their stances and engage their audiences in the debate.

From a Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) perspective, language communicates interpersonal meanings that express individuals' attitudes and evaluations of the people they address and the topics they discuss (Halliday, 2014). The appraisal model, as an extension of the interpersonal function within SFL, emphasizes how evaluation is enacted through language and how such evaluative practices can be systematically examined in the analysis of texts and their surrounding social contexts (Don, 2021), within which interpersonal meaning is central to the communicative situation and the model itself (Martin & White, 2005). The fundamental reason for expressing an opinion is to elicit a response of solidarity from the addressee (Martin, 2000, p. 143), and it is not merely a personal matter. According to Martin and White (2005, p. 35), appraisal encompasses three main categories: Engagement, Attitude, and Graduation. These primary systems are further divided into several sub-systems. Figure 1, taken from Martin and White (2005, p. 38), illustrates the appraisal model, where square brackets indicate either/or choices, and curly brackets represent options that can be co-construed. The current study draws particularly on only one major aspect of the model to see how Iranian presidential candidates engage their audience to garner their support.

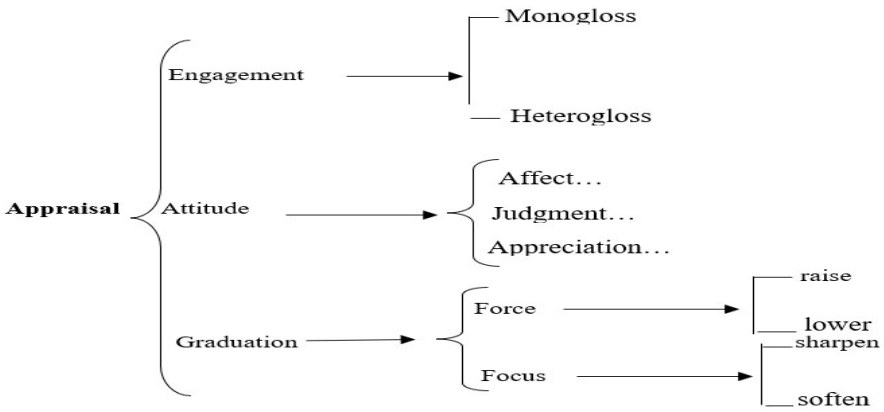


Figure 1. An Overview of Appraisal Resources

The engagement subsystem pertains to all the resources writers/speakers utilize to express their interpersonal stance in their texts/speeches (Martin & White, 2005). It is basically about the different ways speakers can position themselves in a conversation. It shows how someone signals their attitude toward what has already been said, or how they prepare for possible reactions to their own words. For example, a speaker might present an idea as if it is common knowledge that everyone agrees on, challenge an opposing view, or admit that their point is subjective and that other viewpoints are also reasonable. (Zaidi & White, 2021). This subsystem is broadly categorized into Monogloss and Heterogloss; the former does not allow for other voices or opinions, while the latter acknowledges alternative positions and voices (Martin & White, 2005).

Concerning the sub–systems of engagement, the emphasis is on heterogloss (Figure 2), the first sub–category of which, *contract*, is divided into two sub-types: *disclaim* and *proclaim*. These two sub-categories are further broken down into a few more sub-categories (Martin & White, 2005). *Deny* and *counter* fall under *disclaim*: *deny*, including markers like *not*, *no*, and *never,* introduces an alternative positive stance by rejecting it, while *counter*, encompassing instances such as *but*, *yet*, *amazing*, and *although,* supports the current proposition with a contrary position (Martin & White, 2005; Nakamura, 2009). *Proclaim* is segmented into three sub–types, namely *concur*, *pronounce*, and *endorse*. *Concur* covering instances like *naturally*, *obviously*, and *sure*, expects the reader/listener to have the same position or knowledge as the writer/speaker (Nakamura, 2009). *Pronounce* (like *I say*, *the facts of the matter are…*, and *indeed*) includes explicit authorial emphasis or intervention (Martin & White, 2005). Similarly, *endorse* refers to external sources construed by "the authorial voice as correct, valid, undeniable or otherwise maximally warrantable" (Martin & White, 2005, p. 126). Factivity verbs such as *demonstrate*, *prove*, *show*, *agree*, etc. can be put under this subcategory.

The second category of Heterogloss, *expand*, by which a writer makes allowance for alternative views, is split into two sub–systems, namely *entertain* and *attribute*. Based on the examples that Martin and White (2005) mention for the first sub–system, and other classifications (Liu, 2013), *entertain* is sorted out into *probability*, *appearance*, *opinion*, *modal verb*, *conditional verb*, *rhetorical question,* and *hearsay.* Generally, *entertain* shows an authorial position which can be considered as one of the other possible positions (Martin & White, 2005; Pascual & Unger, 2010). Similarly, within the framework of SFL, *entertain* is concerned with under the heading of "modals of probability" such as *may*, *might*, *perhaps*, "reality phase" like *it appears*, *it seems*, and "interpersonal metaphor" such as *in all probability* (Martin & White, 2005, pp. 104–105).

Attribute, as the other subcategory of *expand*, occurs as an external source by showing agreement, which can be a distance (Pascual & Unger, 2010), and in turn is broken up into two subtypes, namely *acknowledge* and *distance*. *Acknowledge* deals with presenting external viewpoints or evidence, but it does not rely on specific sources. Some of the reporting verbs, such as *say*, *report*, *state*, etc, can be codified as acknowledge (Martin & White, 2005, p. 112). *Distance* (e.g., *X claims that*) uses linguistic devices to make explicit distancing within the author/speaker's voice and the advanced

proposition. Likewise, unlike disclaim markers that reject the external voices, *distance* leaves room to explore the author/speaker's stance towards the advanced proposition (Martin & White, 2005)

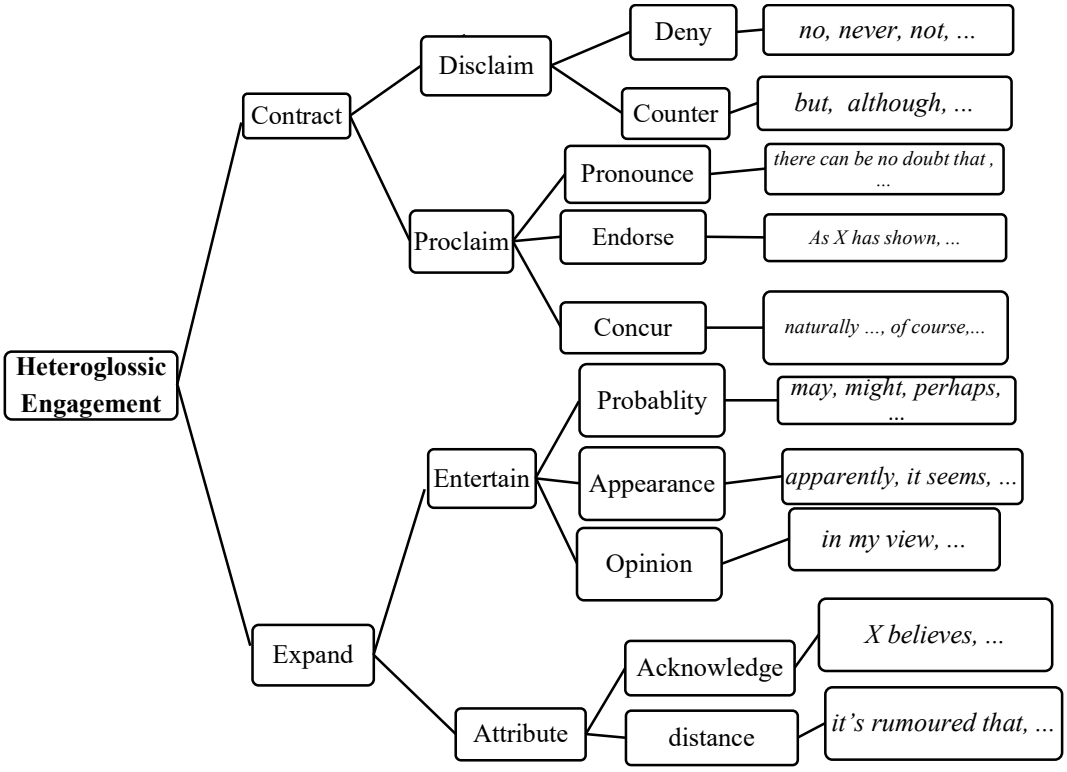


Figure 2. Heteroglossic Engagement and Its Divisions Adopted from Martin and White (2005)

The study also applies Hyland's (2005, 2008) concept of engagement resources to analyze how pronouns shape interaction in Iran's 2024 presidential debates. Engagement, as Hyland defines it, highlights how speakers involve their audience as active participants, a crucial strategy in political discourse where candidates must balance authority with solidarity. Pronouns emerge as particularly powerful tools in this process: *I* signals personal responsibility and commitment (Mah-e-Rab & Tahir, 2025), *we* fosters unity and shared identity (Gocheco, 2012), *you* draws the audience directly into the conversation, either through solidarity or challenge (Hyland, 2008), and *they* constructs an opposing group, often marked with negative traits (Van Dijk, 2008). By examining these subtle but strategic linguistic choices, the study shows how candidates use pronouns not just to express stance, but also to negotiate closeness, distance, and alignment with their audiences in a high-stakes political setting.

2.2. Appraisal and Evaluation in Political Discourse

Given the potential scope of the employment of the appraisal model, various studies have utilized this model across different genres, including historical discourse (Coffin, 2000), critical reading (Xinghua, 2010), research articles (Alia & Jomaa, 2023; Jalilifar et al., 2016; Jin, 2015), IELTS writing (Nakamura, 2009), argumentative writing (Mori, 2017), academic writing (Devira & Westin, 2021), theses and dissertation (Deng & He, 2023; Loghmani et al., 2019), and translation (Tajvidi & Arjani, 2017). The appraisal system, a component of Systemic Functional Linguistics, provides a nuanced framework for analyzing evaluative language, particularly in political discourse. Recent studies have increasingly turned to this framework to investigate how political actors convey ideologies, construct persuasive narratives, and influence public opinion. This literature review critically evaluates a selection of such studies, highlighting their contributions, limitations, and the emerging research gap related to engagement resources, specifically heteroglossic values.

Siyou and Zhangwen's (2018) comparative analysis of Xi Jinping and Donald Trump's speeches at the World Economic Forum marks a significant shift toward engagement resources. Their finding that both leaders favored heterogloss over monogloss and preferred dialogic contraction adds a vital dimension to appraisal studies. This study stands out for foregrounding dialogic positioning—a critical but often underexplored aspect of political discourse. Still, its single-event focus may constrain transferability, and the study falls short of contextualizing these rhetorical choices within broader ideological or cultural frameworks.

Berracheche (2020) examines attitudinal markers in Australian parliamentary debates on asylum seekers, revealing that both right- and left-wing parties employ affect, judgment, and appreciation to express ideological positions. This study successfully demonstrates the political utility of appraisal resources; however, it does not engage deeply with engagement markers, such as heteroglossic positioning or dialogic strategies, despite the inherently dialogic nature of parliamentary debate.

Ross and Caldwell (2020) narrow their focus to polarity in Trump's tweets during the 2016 campaign. Their analysis of Trump's frequent use of negative judgment—targeting Clinton's propriety, veracity, and capacity—highlights how appraisal resources are employed for character attacks. Although the study is valuable for its exploration of digital political discourse, its narrow scope on judgment and polarity may miss the broader dialogic strategies Trump employed to engage with his audience and adversaries.

The study by Aljuraywi and Alyousef (2022) makes a more comprehensive attempt to bridge qualitative and quantitative methodologies. By examining four political interviews during the 2020 U.S. presidential elections, they demonstrate the strategic deployment of affect, judgment, and appreciation by both candidates and interviewers. Their findings—that Biden and O'Donnell primarily utilized appreciation resources, whereas Trump and Stahl leaned toward affect—reflect a nuanced interplay between personal style and strategic communication. The study's strength lies in its integration of all three attitude sub-systems, but it falls short of addressing the engagement subsystem, thus overlooking the dialogic negotiation embedded in political language.

Cantú and Carreras (2023) take a broader comparative approach by analyzing presidential debates across 32 Latin American elections. Their findings underscore the significant role debates play in shaping electoral preferences, offering macro-level validation of the appraisal system's relevance in political communication. However, their work remains largely quantitative and does not operationalize appraisal resources in any systematic linguistic sense, thereby limiting its contribution to the deeper theoretical understanding of evaluative language practices.

In contrast, Thahara et al. (2024) offer a regionally specific and timely investigation into the expression of attitudinal values in media coverage of Indonesia's 2024 presidential debates. Their analysis of five JakartaPost.com articles reveals that appraisal-based evaluative language is instrumental in reflecting and reinforcing the ideological positions of candidates Anis Baswedan, Ganjar Pranowo, and Prabowo Subianto. While the study provides valuable insights into how political ideologies are linguistically constructed, it remains limited to attitude resources and does not extend into the realm of engagement or graduation—two equally critical components of the appraisal system. Moreover, its reliance on media representations rather than direct political discourse may raise concerns regarding source mediation and framing bias (Eisinger et al., 2007; Le, 2024).

Rahro et al. (2024) examined the political discourse strategies used by the 2021 Iranian presidential candidates, Ebrahim Raisi and Abdolnaser Hemmati, during televised debates. Their analysis revealed that while Hemmati frequently relied on negative irony, Raisi adopted a more positive rhetorical tone. In terms of pronoun usage, Hemmati employed first- and second-person pronouns more often than Raisi. He used *I* and *we* to stress his positive qualities and *you* to underscore his rival's shortcomings (p. 8). Although this study shed light on communicative tendencies within the Iranian political sphere and offered insights into how candidates deploy pronouns in political discourse, it did not extend to identifying the broader range of heteroglossic resources employed in the debates.

Taken together, these studies affirm the value of the appraisal framework in political discourse analysis, particularly in its application to attitude resources. However, a critical gap remains in the systematic exploration of engagement, especially heteroglossic resources such as disclaimers, counter-expectations, and dialogic contractions/expansions. This oversight is especially pronounced in studies focusing on non-Western political contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1. Design and Corpus

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative methods to analyze the use of heteroglossic resources, an integral sub-system of the appraisal model, in the televised debates of the 14th presidential election of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Martin and Rose (2007) emphasize that while quantitative analyses are valuable for identifying broad patterns, qualitative examination of distinctive instances is equally essential for deepening our understanding of texts. Using both approaches together allows researchers to capture not just what linguistic devices appear, but also why they matter, leading to a more balanced and meaningful understanding of political discourse. Guided by this perspective, the present study employed a quantitative analysis to calculate the relative frequencies and percentages of heteroglossic markers, complemented by a qualitative investigation of about half of the corpus to capture the nuances behind these patterns.

The data were drawn from the first two televised debates of the Iranian presidential election broadcast on national TV, which featured all six presidential candidates. Approximately, each lasted 4 hours, and each candidate had a total of 30 minutes to speak. This included six 4-minute rounds of speech and one 6-minute round of speech. These debates were chosen because they centered on pressing economic issues, such as inflation and household livelihoods, that seemed to be at the forefront of voters' concerns. In this context, the candidates appeared to frame their arguments in ways that highlighted their own capabilities, seeking to present themselves as best equipped to address these challenges and win public support. Also, among the candidates, Pezeshkian and Jalili progressed to the second round of the election with the highest number of votes. While Pezeshkian was widely regarded as representing the reformist camp, despite the absence of an official declaration, Jalili was aligned with the conservative faction. For this study, only the segments of the first and second debates featuring Pezeshkian and Jalili were analyzed, resulting in a corpus of 16,172 words. In this dataset, Pezeshkian contributed 8,129 words and Jalili 8,043 words, with a difference of just 86 words. Although this disparity is relatively minor, relying solely on raw counts could bias the descriptive analysis. To address this, the data were normalized to a rate of occurrences per 1,000 words, ensuring comparability between the two candidates.

3.2. Procedure

Appraisal resources can be examined using either a top-down or bottom-up analytical approach. As Martin and White (2005) describe, a top-down approach begins by identifying overall evaluative patterns (prosodies) before tracing them to specific linguistic realizations. In contrast, a bottom-up approach works in the opposite direction, starting with concrete realizations in the text and moving upward to reveal the broader evaluative stance. Both strategies have been widely applied in appraisal studies; for example, top-down analysis has been used to explore discourse organization (Lee, 2006), while bottom-up analysis has proven useful for uncovering how evaluation emerges through specific linguistic choices (Liu & Thompson, 2009). More recent research has also demonstrated the effectiveness of bottom-up analysis for examining evaluative meanings in contexts such as political discourse and media texts (Sun & Liu, 2023; Aljuraywi & Alyousef, 2022). For this study, the data analysis process commenced with a top-down approach and was subsequently complemented by a bottom-up analysis to more comprehensively identify the underlying functions.

To capture heteroglossic resources, the data were coded according to established subcategories (Table 1). For instance, the marker *does not* was coded as Contract > disclaim > deny, *but* as Contract > disclaim > counter, *definitely* as Contract > proclaim > concur, and *if* as Expand > entertain > conditional verb.

Table 1. *Coding Scheme for the Subcategories of Heteroglossic Resources*

Appraisal Items	Item Appraised	Heteroglossic Resources											
		Contract				Expand							
		Disclaim		Proclaim			Entertain					attribute	
		de	coun	con	pron	end	pro	app	o	cv	rq	ack	dist
رشد بدون اینها اتفاق نمی‌افتد Growth does not happen without these	Does not	+											
اما آمدند با شما توافق‌های طولانی مدت بستند But they came and made long-term agreements with you	But		+										
قطعاً پشت سرش خواهند آمد Others will definitely follow him	Definitely			+									
اگر چیزی میشود قانون If something becomes a law	If									+			

de= deny; coun= counter; con= concur; pron= pronoun; end= endorse; pro=probably; app= appearance; op= opinion; cv= conditional verb; rq= rhetorical question; ack= acknowledge; dist= distance

The selected corpus was transcribed and analyzed in two stages. In the first phase, the researcher identified and underlined tokens related to the engagement system, categorizing relevant linguistic items—such as verbs, adverbs, adjuncts, and negations—into appropriate subcategories (e.g., *deny*: *don’t*, *doesn’t*, *didn’t*; *counter*: *but*, *even*, *just*, etc.). After a 15-day interval, the corpus was re-examined to ensure consistency, with intra-rater reliability calculated using Cronbach’s alpha (0.95). To further validate the findings, an applied linguistics professor with expertise in appraisal theory independently reviewed the coded data, resulting in an inter-rater reliability score of 0.92.

In the second stage, fifty percent of the data were analyzed to identify how candidates articulate their views using interaction markers and to uncover specific expressive features that were not observable in the quantitative study. Sentences and discourses in which the various subcategories of interaction markers were used were carefully examined. Saturation of data was achieved after examining about 30 percent of the corpus, but the researcher continued analyzing the data until fifty percent. To ensure the validity of the qualitative analysis of the corpus, a quarter of the corpus was reviewed by a rater who was an expert in the appraisal system. There were minor differences between the researcher and the rater, but agreement on differing points was achieved through discussion and reference to Martin and White (2005).

4. Results

4.1. Quantitative Analysis

The analysis addressing the first research question examined the candidates' employment of heteroglossic resources in their debates. Overall, both candidates made extensive use of these resources (Table 2), with Jalili implementing 291 (36.18 times per 1000 words; 0.44%) markers in total and Pezeshkian 341 (41.94 times per 1000 words; 0.51%). This indicates that, in proportion to text length, Pezeshkian's discourse incorporated around 16% more heteroglossic markers than Jalili's, highlighting a stronger orientation toward dialogic positioning. When disaggregated, Jalili's heteroglossic markers materialized as 23.00 *contract* markers per 1000 words (0.28% of his total speech) and 13.17 *expand* markers per 1000 words (0.16%), while Pezeshkian's usage comprised 25.71 *contract* markers (0.31%) and 16.23 *expand* markers (0.19%). These figures indicate that Pezeshkian held a slight quantitative advantage in the overall employment of heteroglossic markers (Tables 3 and 4).

Table 2. *Heteroglossic Resources Used by Candidates*

	Total words	Heteroglossic Resources	Relative Frequency (Per 1000 Words)	Percentage
Jalili	8043	291	36.18	0.44%
Pezeshkian	8129	341	41.94	0.51%

Table 3. *Heteroglossic Resources Used by Jalili*

HR	Number	RF (Per 1000 Words)	Percentage
Contract	185	23.00	0.28%
Disclaim	91	11.31	0.14%
Deny	33	4.10	0.051%
Counter	58	7.21	0.09%
Proclaim	94	11.68	0.14%
Concur	38	4.72	0.05%
Pronounce	52	6.46	0.08%
Endorse	4	0.49	0.006%
Expand	106	13.17	0.16%
Entertain	85	10.56	0.13%
Probability	15	1.86	0.023%
Appearance	2	0.24	0.003%
Opinion	18	2.23	0.027%
Conditional verb	41	5.09	0.063%
Rhetorical Q.	9	1.11	0.013%
Attribute	21	2.61	0.032%
Acknowledge	17	2.11	0.026%
Distance	4	0.49	0.006%

HR=Heteroglossic Resources; RF=Relative Frequency

Table 4. *Heteroglossic Resources Used by Pezeshkian*

HR	Number	RF (Per 1000 Words)	Percentage
Contract	209	25.71	0.31%
Disclaim	132	16.23	0.19%
Deny	90	11.07	0.13%

Counter	42	5.16	0.06%
Proclaim	77	9.47	0.11%
Concur	22	2.70	0.03%
Pronounce	50	6.15	0.07%
Endorse	5	0.61	0.007%
Expand	132	16.23	0.19%
Entertain	82	10.08	0.12%
Probability	10	1.23	0.01%
Appearance	0	0	0.00%
Opinion	24	2.95	0.03%
Conditional verb	32	3.93	0.048%
Rhetorical Q.	16	1.96	0.024%
Attribute	50	6.15	0.075%
Acknowledge	33	4.05	0.049%
Distance	17	2.09	0.025%

HR=Heteroglossic Resources; RF=Relative Frequency

A closer examination of the subcategories within the heteroglossic resources (Tables 3 and 4) reveals nuanced differences in rhetorical strategy use. Within the domains of *disclaim* and *proclaim*, Jalili employed 91 *disclaim* markers (11.31 times per 1000 words) and 94 *proclaim* markers (11.68 times; 0.14%), whereas Pezeshkian utilized 132 *disclaim* markers (16.23 times; 0.19%) and 77 *proclaim* markers (9.47 times per 1000 words; 0.11%). These figures indicate that while Pezeshkian relied more heavily on *disclaim* markers, Jalili made greater use of *proclaim* markers. In the subcategories of *expand*, both candidates demonstrated closely similar relative frequencies in their use of *entertain* markers (10.56 per 1000 words for Jalili and 10.08 for Pezeshkian); however, Pezeshkian markedly surpassed Jalili in the use of *attribute* markers (6.15 vs 2.61 per 1000 words).

A more detailed examination of the subcategories further elucidated the distinct rhetorical strategies employed by the two candidates. Within the *disclaim* category, Jalili used 91 such markers, with 58 of them functioning as counters (7.21 per 1,000 words, or 0.09% of his total speech). Pezeshkian, on the other hand, relied far more on denials: 90 instances overall, which accounted for 11.07 per 1,000 words, or 0.13% of his speech. This comparison reveals that Pezeshkian's use of *deny* markers was nearly three times that of Jalili's, who, in contrast, demonstrated a stronger preference for *counter* markers.

In the *proclaim* subcategories, Jalili employed 38 *concur* markers (4.72 times per 1000 words or 0.058% of his total words), 52 *pronounce* markers (6.46; 0.08%), and 4 *endorse* markers (0.49; 0.006%), while Pezeshkian used 22 *concur* markers (2.7 times per 1000 words; 0.03% of his total speech), 50 *pronounce* markers (6.15; 0.07%), and 5 *endorse* markers (0.61; 0.007%). Additionally, Jalili more frequently utilized markers related to *probability*, *appearance*, and *conditional verbs*, whereas Pezeshkian showed a higher relative frequency of *opinion* markers and *rhetorical questions*. With respect to the *attribute* category, Pezeshkian stood out by employing nearly twice as many *acknowledge* markers (4.05 times per 1000 words) and more than four times as many *distance* markers (2.09) as Jalili (0.49).

In summary, across the twelve subcategories proportionally examined, both candidates exhibited similar usage in three areas: *pronounce*, *endorse*, and *appearance*. Pezeshkian led in five categories (*deny*, *opinion*, *rhetorical question*, *acknowledge*, and *distance*), while Jalili demonstrated a higher frequency in four (*counter*, *concur*, *probability*, and *conditional verb*). these patterns suggest two distinct rhetorical orientations. Jalili's style was more assertive and confrontational, as reflected in his heavier use of *proclaim* and *counter* markers. Pezeshkian, by contrast, favored *denials*, *acknowledgments*, and *distancing* strategies, giving his discourse a more dialogic and outward-looking quality, though still rooted in rejecting alternative claims.

Table 5. *Different Reference Pronouns Used by Candidates*

	Jalili (Total Words=8043)			Pezheshkian (Total Words=8129)		
Pronoun	Number	RF	Percentage	Number	RF	Percentage
I	88	10.94	0.136%	92	11.31	0.139%
You	69	8.57	0.10%	44	5.41	0.066%

We	141	17.53	0.21%	248	30.50	0.37%
They	14	1.74	0.021%	30	3.69	0.045%
People	40	4.97	0.061%	51	6.27	0.077%
Total	252	31.33	0.38%	465	57.20	0.70%

RF=Relative Frequency (Per 1000 Words)

With regard to pronoun usage (Table 5), both candidates predominantly favored the first-person plural *we* over other pronouns such as *I*, *you*, and *they*. Notably, Pezeshkian employed *we* with significantly greater relative frequency (30.50 per 1000 words or 0.37% of his total speech) compared to Jalili (17.53 or 0.21%). While both candidates ranked the first-person singular *I* as the second most frequently used pronoun (10.94 and 11.31 per 1000 words), Jalili made more frequent use of *you*, whereas Pezeshkian exhibited a higher relative frequency of *they* and the term *people*. These patterns align with the findings discussed in Research Question Two.

4.2. Qualitative Analysis

To further illuminate how each candidate articulated their positions via heteroglossic engagement resources (Research question 3), a qualitative analysis focusing on subcategories within the *contract* and *expand* markers was undertaken.

Table 6. *Extracts Taken from the Corpus for the Subcategories of Disclaim*

	Candidates	Extract	Types of Heteroglossic Resources	English Equivalent	Reference (Debates)
1	Jalili	نگاه‌مان نه به بعضی از ضعف‌های القایی باشد و فرصت‌های مان نبینیم حتما این موفقیت‌ها به دست نمی‌آید.	Contract> Disclaim> Deny	Don't	First
		If we focus on some of our inherent weaknesses and don't see our opportunities, these successes will certainly not be achieved.			
2	Pezeshkian	امکان ندارد بتوانیم بدون وارد شدن به چهارچوبها سرمایه خارجی را وارد کنیم.	Contract> Disclaim> Deny	Don't	First
		We don't attract foreign investment without engaging within established frameworks.			
3	Jalili	این یک رویکرد است، یک رویکرد هم نه همین شهید عزیز ما آقای رئیسی بود که آمد کارها را پیش برد.	Contract> Disclaim> Deny	Not	First
		This constitutes one approach; another approach, which is not like this, was embodied by our esteemed martyr, Mr. Raisi, who came forward and advanced the affairs.			
4	Pezeshkian	اول اختلافات باز باید حل شود، اولویت‌ها و شایستگی‌ها شاخص بندی شود، بر اساس آن بگذاریم، نه بر اساس جناح و دسته و گروه.	Contract> Disclaim> Deny	Not	Second
		First, disputes must be resolved again, priorities and merits must be indexed, and we must act on that basis, not based on factions.			

5	Pezeshkian	...ولی آدمی که نه دوره دیده نه علم دارد و نه تجربه دارد و یک جایی عملکرد خودش را نشان داده، آنهایی که تجربه داشته اند گذاشته اید کنار...	Contract> Disclaim> Counter	But	First
		...but people with no training, no knowledge, and no experience, whose track records already speak for themselves, are the ones being put in charge, while you pushed aside those with real expertise.			
6	Jalili	اما یک شرط دارد اینکه شما بدانید اگر میخواهید چنین رشدی حاصل شود باید فرصتهای کشور را بشناسید.	Contract> Disclaim> Counter	But	First
		But there is one condition: you must know that if you want such growth to be achieved, you have to recognize the country's opportunities.			
7	Pezeshkian	اینکه تحریم را بگوییم دور میزنیم، بله دور میزنیم، ولی در مسیر غلطی که میرویم کلی بخور بخور وجود دارد.	Contract> Disclaim> Counter	But	First
		we say we are bypassing sanctions, yes, we are bypassing them, but on the wrong path we're taking, there is a lot of corruption and profiteering.			
8	Pezeshkian	و اگر رشد ما درست نباشد... فقط با این کاری که می‌خواهیم انجام دهیم، فقر را در بین بقیه سیستم‌ها تقسیم خواهیم کرد.	Contract> Disclaim> Counter	Just	Second
		If growth isn't on track, ...then what we're planning to do will just make poverty ripple through everything else.			
9	Jalili	و فراتر از یک وزارت بهداشت فقط است و این جا آن کار ویژه‌ای است که باید دنبال کند.	Contract> Disclaim> Counter	Just	Second
		It's not just up to the Health Ministry; this is work that clearly needs to be carried out.			
10	Pezeshkian	هر دولتی بخواهد اولاً در این وضعیت با این نیروها و کارشناس‌ها، حتی آن برنامه هم قابل اجرا نیست.	Contract> Disclaim> Counter	Even	First
		Even if the government has a plan, it just won't work right now because the resources and expertise needed aren't in place.			

In the first *disclaim* subcategory, specifically the use of *deny* markers, the analysis demonstrates that both candidates primarily resorted to negative expressions such as *don't*, *doesn't*, and *no* (Table 6). Quantitative analysis revealed that Pezeshkian's higher reliance on these markers reflects a more confrontational rhetorical style, a finding also supported by qualitative examples. For instance, in one exchange, Pezeshkian challenged a pro-government candidate's claims by rejecting the argument that the administration had the capacity to attract foreign investment (Table 6, Extract 2). The corpus reveals that neither candidate preferred alternative *deny* markers such as *never*, *hardly*, or *seldom* to conclusively end a dialogue, as these markers act like negations and reject contrary positions. Shifting focus to the *counter* subcategory, both candidates primarily drew on connectors like *but*, *just*, and *even*. For example, Pezeshkian utilized these

counter markers to rationalize his disagreement with extant governmental policies (Table 6, Extracts 5, 7, and 8). Additionally, both candidates incorporated viewer references into their discourse. Pezeshkian combined the first-person plural with the second-person *you*, whereas Jalili primarily relied on the latter.

Table 7. *Extracts Taken from the Corpus for the Subcategories of Proclaim*

	Candidates	Extract	Types of Heteroglossic Resources	English Equivalent	Reference (Debates)
1	Jalili	مادامی که چرخه اقتصادی دچار مشکلات جدی باشد حتماً نمی‌توانید انجام بدهید.	Contract> Proclaim> Concur	Certainly	Second
		You certainly can't do it as long as the economic cycle is in serious trouble.			
2	Pezeshkian	مردم ببینند من در همان صفی ایستادم که خود آن‌ها ایستادند. قطع به یقین صدای شان در نمی‌آید.	Contract> Proclaim> Concur	Certainly	Second
		If the people observe that I have stood in the very same line in which they themselves stood, they will not certainly object.			
3	Jalili	مبارزه با پولشویی بله همان زمان ما اصرار داشتیم قانونش باید تصویب بشود قانونش را مجلس تصویب کرد.	Contract> Proclaim> Concur	Yes	Second
		Yes, we kept pressing for a law against money laundering, and parliament finally approved it.			
4	Pezeshkian	مدیر ارشد اگر صادق باشد و با مردم صادقانه بگوید و آنچه را که می‌گوید با تمام وجود به آن معتقد باشد، قطعاً بقیه پشت سرش خواهند آمد.	Contract> Proclaim> Concur	Definitely	Second
		If a senior manager is genuine, speaks honestly, and really believes what he's saying, others definitely follow.			
5	Jalili	برای جذب سرمایه گذاری شما حتماً باید قبلاً بسته انجام داده باشید.	Contract> Proclaim> Concur	Definitely	First
		To attract investment, you must definitely have executed a package (project) beforehand.			
6	Jalili	عرض من این است که امروز این رشد ۸ درصدی محقق می‌شود این رشد ۸ درصد می‌تواند انجام شود.	Contract> Proclaim> Pronounce	I say (Stress on the Words)	First
		I say that today this eight-percent growth will be realized; such an eight-percent growth is indeed achievable.			
7	Pezeshkian	من می‌گویم از روش‌های علمی و کارشناس‌ها و آن‌هایی که خبره هستند استفاده نکنیم، غیرممکن است.	Contract> Proclaim> Pronounce	I say	First
		I say that using scientific methods and experts is necessary.			
8	Pezeshkian	با این روند امکان پذیر نیست و ما باید نگاه مان را عوض کنیم.	Contract> Proclaim> Pronounce	We must	First

		Things can't keep going like this; we must adjust our outlook.			
9	Jalili	باید رئیس جمهور بداند چه مشکلاتی، چه نقص‌هایی وجود دارد.	Contract> Proclaim> Pronounce	The president must know	First
		The president must know what's going wrong and what's missing.			
10	Pezeshkian	من بارها این را گفته‌ام، کدامیک از ماها اگر مریض می‌شویم می‌رویم پزشکی که مثلا هم حزبی، هم جناحی و هم دسته‌ای است؟	Contract> Proclaim> Pronounce	I have said this (many times)	First
		I've said this many times: when any of us falls ill, do we choose a physician merely because they belong to our political party, faction, or group?"			
11	Jalili	من خدمت مردم عزیزمان عرض می‌کنم که بحث‌های خوبی مطرح شد.	Contract> Proclaim> Pronounce	I say	First
		I say to the esteemed people, we had some really constructive talks.			
12	Jalili	شما باید می‌دیدید. نتیجه اش چه شده بود؟ این که امروز فقط ۴ تا نگهبان در آن کارخانه بودند.	Contract> Proclaim> Pronounce	You should have seen/ you must have seen	First
		(You should have seen). The result spoke for itself: that factory had just four guards on duty.			
13	Pezeshkian	با تجربه روشن دنیا است که اگر ما به آن متکی بشویم می‌توانیم یک راه حلی پیدا کنیم.	Contract> Proclaim> Endorse	Clearly experienced	First
		If we lean on what the world has clearly experienced, we can figure out the answer.			
14	Jalili	اشاره کردم زمانی که من در شورای امنیت بودم این را نوشتیم که باید مبارزه با پولشویی دنبال شود.	Contract> Proclaim> Endorse	Pointed out	Second
		I pointed out that when I was on the Security Council, we made it clear that cracking down on money laundering had to continue.			
15	Pezeshkian	اگر ما دست به دست هم بدهیم، بنده در زندگی ام این را ثابت کرده ام و شعار نداده ام.	Contract> Proclaim> Endorse	Prove	Second
		I have proven through my life that when we work together, results follow. That's not just talk.			
16	Pezeshkian	در ۴۰ کشوری که بانک جهانی بررسی کرده، ۳ تا اصل و ۵ تا استراتژی در آن دیده شده که اگر این را در کشور ما عملیاتی کنیم.	Contract> Proclaim> Endorse	Found	First
		The World Bank investigated 40 countries and found three key principles and five strategies. If we follow those here, we can make real progress.			

Within the *proclaim* subcategory, both candidates adopted a range of markers to assert their positions persuasively. In Extracts 1 and 2 (Table 7), the shared use of *certainly* as a concurrence marker is evident, serving to reinforce their assertions. The use of *pronounce* markers by both candidates aimed to diminish the interpersonal gap with their audience—a tactic prominently reflected in Extracts 7 through 12. Notably, Pezeshkian tended toward more tangible and objective statements (as seen in Table 7, Extracts 7, 8, 10, and 13), while Jalili's formulations were relatively less concrete (as demonstrated in Table 7, Extracts 6, 9, and 11). Both candidates' deployment of *endorse* markers further contributed to a more cohesive and condensed dialogic space during the debates, as *endorse* markers involve presenting information from external sources as accurate, reliable, and well-supported, treating such propositions as valid or beyond dispute (Martin & White, 2005).

Table 8. *Extracts Taken from the Corpus for the Subcategories of Entertain*

	Candidates	Extract	Types of Heteroglossic Resources	English Equivalent	Reference (Debates)
1	Pezeshkian	حالا یک نفر دو نفر شاید این کار را نکند.	Expand> Entertain> Probability	Probably/Maybe	Second
		Now, maybe one or two people won't do this.			
2	Jalili	سوالی که شاید برای مردم است این است که چرا در کشور ما تورم این قدر مزمن ادامه دارد.	Expand> Entertain> Probability	May	First
		People may ask: Why is inflation still such a constant problem here?			
3	Pezeshkian	نگاه من در حوزه حکمرانی، حکمرانی اقتصادی و اجتماعی است.	Expand> Entertain> Opinion	For me	First
		For me, governing means paying attention to both the economy and society.			
4	Jalili	فکر می‌کنم که یک احترام به مردم این است که آن پرسشی را که داشتند متمرکز بشویم.	Expand> Entertain> Opinion	I think (I believe)	Second
		I believe respecting people starts with really listening to their questions and focusing on them.			
5	Pezeshkian	کدام رفرانس علمی این حرف را زده؟	Expand> Entertain> Rhetorical Q	Which scientific reference …?	First
		Which scientific reference says this?			
6	Jalili	جایی که ۱۸۰۰ ماشین ساختمانی تولید می‌کرد با یک واگذاری غلط رسید به صفر به ۴–۵ دانه، این حاصل چیست؟	Expand> Entertain> Rhetorical Q	What is …?	First
		A plant that used to roll out 1,800 machines now barely makes 4 or 5—all because of a bad call. So, what's the outcome?			
7	Jalili	اگر چیزی می‌شود قانون و فصل الخطاب و باید انجام شود، در چنین مقطعی و در چنین سطحی نباید در آن تردید ایجاد شود.	Expand> Entertain> Conditional Verb	If	First

		If a rule is established as law and must be enforced, it should not be questioned at such a critical stage or high level.			
8	Pezeshkian	اگر شفافیت را نیاوریم در اقتصاد و مسیرها را روشن نکنیم و صادر نکنیم، اگر با دنیا رابطه نداشته باشیم.	Expand> Entertain> Conditional Verb	If we …	Second
		If we don't open up the economy, set a clear direction, export, and connect with the world, we'll get nowhere.			

In the sphere of the *expand* category, particularly within the *entertain* subcategory, both candidates frequently invoked *conditional verbs* and expressions of *opinion*. Nevertheless, a divergence emerged: Pezeshkian more commonly integrated *rhetorical questions*, whereas Jalili showed a preference for *probability* markers. The qualitative findings suggest that Pezeshkian's strategic use of *opinion* markers enabled him to address broader issues, including global affairs and domestic socio-economic governance, while Jalili's application of similar markers remained more contextually confined within the debate (Table 8).

Table 9. *Extracts Taken from the Corpus for the Subcategories of Attribute*

	Candidates	Extract	Types of Heteroglossic Resources	English Equivalent	Reference (Debates)
1	Pezeshkian	همان چیزی که عزیزان گفتند، برای رشد ۸ درصدی ما سالانه ۲۰۰ میلیارد دلار پول می‌خواهیم.	Expand> Entertain> Acknowledge	Mention	First
		As mentioned, achieving 8% growth requires $200 billion each year.			
2	Pezeshkian	از نظر آمار و از نظر فساد در دنیا نفر پانزدهم از آخر هستیم.	Expand> Entertain> Acknowledge	Global data	First
		Global data on corruption ranks us fifteenth from the bottom.			
3	Jalili	همین الان باز روزانه طبق آماری که وجود دارد یعنی اگر ما ۲۶ میلیون خانوار در کشور داریم ما حدود دو و ۴۲ صدم درصد متاسفانه در سال کسانی داریم.	Expand> Entertain> Acknowledge	Current statistics show	Second
		The current statistics show that out of 26 million households, around 2.4% struggle with this every year.			
4	Jalili	همین بحث شبکه بهداشت سلامت ما را، من خاطرم است که من زمانی که معاون آمریکا اروپا بودم، از آمریکا آمدند الگوبرداری می‌کردند که شما این موفقیت را داشتید که این را می‌توانیم به بهترین شکل موفقیت بیشتری را به دست بیاید.	Expand> Entertain> Acknowledge	Said, "You've had success"	Second
		Talking about our health system, I remember when I was Deputy Foreign Minister for the U.S. and Europe, an American delegation came and said, "You've had success here, you can build on this and do even better."			

5	Pezeshkian	در تئوری بگوییم ما ال خواهیم کرد خیلی وقت‌ها از این حرف‌ها می‌زنیم، همه گفتند ما هشت درصد رشد می‌دهیم چرا ندادند؟ آن آدم‌هایی که ادعا می‌کنند، اگر قدرت به دست گرفتند و نتوانستند این کار را بکنند باید در مقابل این مردم محاکمه بشوند.	Expand> Entertain> Distance	Leaders made that claim	First
		We keep saying, "Yes, we'll do it, we'll hit 8% growth." But why hasn't it happened? If leaders made that claim and didn't deliver, they should answer to the people directly.			
6	Jalili	کسانی که می‌گفتند این‌ها با ما روابط نخواهند داشت مگر این که توافق یا فلان چیز امضا شود.	Expand> Entertain> Distance	Some said (claim)	First
		Some said they wouldn't engage with us without a signed agreement.			
7	Pezeshkian	یکی در همان جریان می‌گفت من با یک میلیون تومان شغل ایجاد می‌کنم اصلاً توهین است به شعور آدم.	Expand> Entertain> Distance	Someone even claimed	First
		Someone even claimed, "I can create a job with a million tomans." Honestly, that's just an insult to people's common sense.			
8	Pezeshkian	الان ادعا می‌کنیم، پشت سرش اجرا نمی‌توانیم جواب بدهیم، هیچ کس هم نیست بگوید چرا.	Expand> Entertain> Distance	Claim	First
		We claim publicly, but behind the scenes, there's no explanation, nobody steps up to say why.			
9	Pezeshkian	من وزیر دولت آقای خاتمی بودم از نظر اقتصاد و شاخص و عدد و رقم بروید نگاه کنید ببینید اونجا بیشتر ثبات بوده یا این چیزایی که می‌گویید.	Expand> Entertain> Distance	What is being claimed now	Second
		I served as a minister during Mr. Khatami's government. Look at the economic indicators from then and judge whether stability was greater than what is being claimed now.			
10	Jalili	بعضی‌ها می‌گویند یک نسلی است نه او زبان ما را می‌فهمد و نه ما زبان او را می‌فهمیم، نه اینطور نیست.	Expand> Entertain> Distance	Some claim	Second
		Some claim the issue is generational, that there's a disconnect in understanding, but I disagree.			

Table 9 brings further clarity to differences in *attribute* markers. Both candidates employed *acknowledge* markers to defend their positions and to persuade the audience to align with their views (as evident in Extracts 1 through 4); however, Pezeshkian's relative frequency in this area far surpassed Jalili's. In the second *attribute* subcategory, *distance* markers, Pezeshkian's relative frequency was approximately four times higher than Jalili's, signaling a clear intent to distinguish his perspective from that of his opponent (Table 9, Extracts 8 and 9). Moreover, when constructing sentences with *distance* markers, both candidates occasionally used ambiguous pronouns such as *individuals* or *someone* to serve as the subject (as observed in Table 9, Extracts 5 and 7 for Pezeshkian, and Extracts 6 and 10 for Jalili). Both candidates also consistently employed various reference pronouns, including the first-person plural and singular, second-person, third-person plural, and the term *people*, as documented in Tables 6, 7, 8, and 9.

In conclusion, the qualitative analysis of the corpus indicates that Pezeshkian strategically employed heteroglossic resources to emphasize themes such as internal cohesion, conflict resolution, the articulation of competence, and the reinforcement of public integrity. His discourse also highlighted the application of scientific approaches to problem-solving, coupled with a dual emphasis on national authority and global engagement. Conversely, Jalili's rhetorical strategy was primarily directed toward promoting domestic opportunities, expressing skepticism toward foreign influence, underscoring the necessity of a structured presidential agenda, advocating for an 8% economic growth target, addressing the needs of lower-income populations, and asserting the authority of the executive branch and government institutions. These findings underscore the rhetorical significance of engagement markers as powerful tools through which political actors articulate ideological positions and seek to shape public perception.

5. Discussion

This study critically investigates the deployment of heteroglossic engagement markers and reference pronouns by Iranian presidential candidates Jalili and Pezeshkian during the first two debates of the 2024 presidential election. The quantitative findings indicate not only the prominence of these linguistic resources, Jalili with 291 (36.18 per 1000 words) heteroglossic tokens and Pezeshkian with 341 (41.94 per 1000 words), but also their strategic use as deliberate rhetorical instruments. These results echo the observations of Aljuraywi and Alyousef (2022), who argue that political candidates actively utilize appraisal elements to construct persuasive narratives. While their study focused on attitude markers, the current research extends this insight to heteroglossic markers, demonstrating that political discourse may be far from spontaneous; rather, it can be a carefully orchestrated performance aimed at shaping ideological alignment.

A more granular quantitative breakdown reveals that although both candidates favor *contractive* strategies, Jalili at 0.28% (23.00 per 1000 words) and Pezeshkian at 0.31% (25.71 per 1000 words), they do so with divergent intentions. Pezeshkian's overwhelming reliance on *deny* markers (e.g., *don't*, *doesn't*) suggests a confrontational rhetorical style, one that seeks to invalidate opposing views decisively. This contrasts with Jalili's relatively balanced use of *counter* markers (e.g., *but*, *just*), which appear to function as calculated attempts to refute without fully excluding alternative perspectives. This stylistic contrast is not merely a matter of linguistic choice but reveals fundamentally different communicative goals: Pezeshkian aims to delegitimize alternatives, while Jalili leaves a narrow rhetorical aperture for dialogic variation—an observation supported by Martin and White (2005), Rahro et al. (2024), and Ross and Caldwell (2020).

Such differences align with broader ideological divides. Previous scholarship (e.g., Rahmaida & Cahyono, 2022) suggests that choices in evaluative language often mirror partisan commitments. The current study's token disparity (36.18 vs. 41.94 per 1000 words) reflects this dynamic: Jalili, representing conservative orthodoxy, emphasizes order, continuity, and hierarchical governance, while Pezeshkian foregrounds pluralism and reformist priorities. These findings echo Thahara et al. (2024), who noted similar partisan contrasts in Indonesian presidential debates, and Siyou and Zhangwen (2018), who observed that *contraction* markers dominate in high-stakes political exchanges.

Turning to *expand* markers, the candidates' near-identical use of *entertain* (Jalili: 10.56, Pezeshkian: 10.08 per 1000 words) conceals deeper rhetorical contrasts. Pezeshkian's preference for *rhetorical questions* reflects a dialogic openness that invites public deliberation. Jalili, on the other hand, wields *conditional verbs* to simulate policy inevitability and project executive certainty. This divergence reveals a fundamental tension: Pezeshkian appeals to collective reasoning, while Jalili positions himself as a resolute decision-maker. Similarly, Pezeshkian's superior use of *attribute* markers—particularly *acknowledge* and *distance*—suggests a deliberate strategy of grounding his claims in external evidence, thereby enhancing ethos and mitigating bias (Van Dijk, 1993).

Pronoun analysis further exposes their contrasting rhetorical architectures. Pezeshkian's heavy reliance on the inclusive *we* (248 instances; 30.50 per 1000 words) creates a discursive space of solidarity and collective agency, in stark contrast to Jalili's 141(17.53) uses. Pezeshkian's frequent reliance on the pronoun *we* reflects broader patterns in political discourse, as highlighted by Fadzilah and Noor (2021) in their analysis of Trump and Mahathir, and by Mah-e-Rab and Tahir (2025), who emphasize the pronoun's dominance in constructing collective identity and solidarity. Jalili's increased use of *you* (8.57 vs. Pezeshkian's 5.41 per 1000 words) reflects a more didactic, directive approach, potentially alienating rather than engaging audiences. This aligns with Jin's (2015) finding that inclusive pronouns bolster collective identity, whereas second-person references often serve to admonish or challenge. Notably, *people*, which ranked second in Rahro

et al. (2024), plays a diminished role here—possibly indicating a rhetorical shift toward more inclusive, rather than generic, collective representation. Pezeshkian's success in this regard seems especially pronounced.

Qualitative discourse analysis affirms these patterns. Pezeshkian's use of *deny* markers tends to be direct yet explanatory, offering reasoning that appeals to the electorate's logic and values. Jalili, conversely, amplifies negation with intensifiers like *certainly*, thereby foreclosing counter-interpretations—an approach associated with authoritarian tones (Martin & White, 2005). Pezeshkian's moderation arguably makes his denials more palatable, reinforcing the Reformist ethos of negotiation over assertion (Rahro et al., 2024). Meanwhile, Jalili's frequent use of *counter* markers lends his discourse an air of deliberative equilibrium, though one that remains ideologically bounded (Wodak, 2009).

The use of *proclaim* markers also illustrates their diverging persuasive techniques. Although Jalili exceeds Pezeshkian (11.68 vs. 9.47), his proclamations are often unsupported assertions (e.g., committing to 8% growth) lacking empirical substantiation. In contrast, Pezeshkian consistently bolsters his proclamations with data or expert testimony, significantly increasing their argumentative weight. His focus on scientific methodologies and the rejection of partisan interference in policy matters reflects a discourse rooted in verifiability and accountability.

In the realm of *entertain* markers, Pezeshkian employs *rhetorical questions* to stimulate cognitive engagement. Rather than imposing conclusions, he nudges the audience toward critical reflection—an approach lauded by Hyland (2008) for its dialogic efficacy. Furthermore, his use of *opinion* markers is tied to substantive issues in global diplomacy and governance, rendering his rhetoric both accessible and consequential. Jalili, by contrast, channels these markers into more reactive domains—legal compliance, opponent critique, and privatization. While his usage may be more frequent (10.56 per 1000 words), it lacks the thematic breadth and strategic nuance of Pezeshkian's, suggesting a narrower communicative scope.

Attribute markers offer further evidence of rhetorical asymmetry. Pezeshkian's discourse is empirically anchored; his repeated references to data serve as a persuasive tool targeting voters' rational faculties. Jalili, in contrast, frequently employs *distance* markers such as "some say," thereby diluting authorial responsibility and creating plausible deniability. While tactically effective in deflecting criticism, this also undermines argumentative transparency (Van Dijk, 1993).

Reference pronouns likewise expose ideological fault lines. Jalili's preference for *I* and *you* constructs a tone of authority and personal directive, in line with the conservative valorization of strong leadership (Beard, 2000). Statements like "The president must know" (Table 7, Extract 9) exemplify this top-down approach. Pezeshkian's higher frequency of *we* reinforces inclusive governance and participatory politics—traits associated with Reformist discourse (Aljuraywi & Alyousef, 2022). His Kurdish linguistic background may help explain his reliance on inclusive pronouns. Research by Hemmati (2013) shows that Kurdish-speaking learners of English tend to use *we* more frequently than their Arabic- and Persian-speaking counterparts, a transfer effect from Kurdish, where inclusive pronouns are common in prose and poetry. It is therefore plausible that Pezeshkian's frequent use of *we* in Persian, his second language, reflects the influence of his Kurdish first language.

The enduring binary of "us versus them" (Van Dijk, 2008; Wodak, 2009) is particularly salient in how both candidates deploy *I* and *you*. These pronouns, used assertively (Jalili: 88; Pezeshkian: 92), reflect direct involvement and ideological commitment. Yet even here, qualitative nuance matters. Pezeshkian uses *I* in tandem with *endorsement* or *distance* markers to highlight competence and align with evidence (e.g., Table 7, Extract 15; Table 9, Extract 9), while Jalili's uses, though more declarative, often target institutional critique or policy enforcement (e.g., Table 7, Extract 14).

6. Conclusion

The ability to effectively articulate political, economic, and social positions is indispensable for presidential candidates, particularly in the high-stakes arena of televised debates. As this study demonstrates, the strategic deployment of heteroglossic engagement markers is not merely a linguistic choice; it is a critical tool of political persuasion. By shaping dialogic space, these markers influence how candidates construct authority, appeal to audiences, and signal ideological alignment.

This study examined the rhetorical styles of two Iranian presidential candidates, Pezeshkian and Jalili, and shows how their language reflects deeper ideological divides. Pezeshkian emphasizes inclusivity, often using *we* and citing

evidence to project transparency, collaboration, and data-driven governance. His style positions him as a reformist voice, inviting dialogue and constructing a collective political identity. In contrast, Jalili relies heavily on *I* and *you*, along with decisive and contractive markers, to project authority and control. His discourse reflects a conservative ethos, built on certainty, prescriptive assertions, and a top-down vision of leadership.

By applying the appraisal framework, particularly heteroglossic resources, the research demonstrates how rhetorical strategies adapt across different political systems. Heteroglossic markers emerge not as superficial choices but as key tools for reflecting legitimacy, authority, and audience alignment. The contrasts between Jalili and Pezeshkian highlight broader tensions in Iranian politics: authority versus inclusivity, certainty versus negotiation, and centralized versus participatory governance. Language, in this context, becomes a vehicle not only for persuasion but for projecting values, identities, and competing models of political culture.

The findings have both theoretical and practical value. For scholars, the study extends appraisal theory, particularly heteroglossic resources, into the underexplored terrain of Iranian political discourse, revealing how universal rhetorical strategies take on context-specific meanings. For political actors, the research underscores how subtle choices, such as favoring *we* over *I*, can notably influence voter engagement. For journalists and educators, it offers a framework for moving beyond surface-level reporting and teaching how language actively shapes political identities.

Finally, this study is constrained by its relatively small dataset, limited to two candidates and two debates, its focus on rhetorical production without considering voters' perception and level of trust over time, and its exclusive attention to televised exchanges, all of which restrict the transferability of the findings and complicate cross-cultural comparison. These limitations, however, open important avenues for future research: broader analyses across multiple election cycles, audience-centered studies, and investigations into how presidential debate discourse circulates through translation, social media, and global news could provide deeper insights. Such longitudinal and cross-cultural approaches would enrich our understanding of how political language simultaneously reflects universal communicative strategies and local ideological specificities.

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The author declares no potential conflict of interest regarding the research, authorship, and publication of this article.

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