Maja Stevanović*
University of Belgrade, Faculty of Philosophy
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5846-0462

Tijana Vesić Pavlović**
University of Belgrade, Faculty of Mechanical Engineering
https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5786-975X

"I MEAN, WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? YOU HAVE THE MORALS OF AN ALLEY CAT" – THE NEGATIVE EVALUATIONS OF THE POLITICAL OPPONENT IN THE 2024 US PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES***

Abstract
The paper focuses on the rhetoric of the two US presidential debates held in 2024 between the Republican and Democrat presidential nominees, the first between Joseph Biden and Donald Trump, and the second one between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump. We investigate the strategies of discrediting the political opponent, such as insults, pronoun-based oppositions, repetitions and three-part lists, and metaphors. It is shown that both the Republican and Democrat nominees abundantly used these devices and relied on similar argumentative strategies in the debates, which may have had an evaluative and persuasive function and

*   maja.stevanovic@f.bg.ac.rs
** tvesic@mas.bg.ac.rs

deepened the political polarization. This has contributed to the impression of the predominantly hostile and polarizing rhetoric employed in the 2024 debates.

1. Introduction

A political debate is often referred to as the ultimate job interview for presidential nominees. In a face-to-face format, each nominee addresses the key issues of their political policy hoping that the undecided voters, in particular, would be able to compare their answers and pick the nominee whose platform best matches their beliefs. In other words, both candidates attempt to present the best version of their arguments and make the best possible persuasive case for the viewers (Warner & McKinney, 2013). However, a constructive debate most often seems to be aimed at construing the negative image of the political 'other' instead of validating the positive image of the political 'self' by means of neutral counterarguments, which leads to a disparaging rhetoric and the presence of different negative evaluations of the opponent in the debates.

This paper explores the negative portrayals of opponents featured in two debates held during the US presidential campaign in 2024 between the Republican and Democrat presidential nominees, the first one between Donald Trump and Joe Biden, and the second one between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris. Against the wider background of Political Discourse Analysis (PDA), which outlines the nature and common argumentative strategies of political discourse (Van Dijk 1997, 2002; D'Errico et al., 2014; Poggi & D'Errico, 2022a), and Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA), which proposes that metaphor analysis should be considered an important component of critical discourse analysis (Charteris-Black 2004, 2011), we aim at investigating the strategies of discrediting the political opponent in the debates. We specifically focus on insults, as the most overt means of offending the political authority of the 'other', but also on other persuasive devices used in argumentation, such as pronoun-based (WE-THEY or I-(S)HE) oppositions, repetitions or three-part lists and conceptual metaphors.

The paper is organized as follows. In section 2, we provide a description of the theoretical framework used in the analysis, followed by previous studies that dealt with the features of political discourse, and, specifically, election debates, in the context of US politics. Section 3 contains details on the materials used in the analysis and the applied methodology. The results of our analysis are presented and interpreted in section 4, and the concluding remarks are laid out in section 5.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Political discourse and persuasion

It is natural that the study of political discourse has gained considerable attention since "much political action and participation is accomplished by discourse and communication" (Van Dijk, 2002: 203). Political discourse is identified by "its actors or authors, viz., politicians" (Van Dijk, 1997: 12) and the context in which it occurs, i.e. "various political and communicative events and encounters" (such as parliamentary sessions, election campaigns, rallies, interviews with the media, etc.) (Van Dijk, 1997: 14). Apart from the normativity of an official discourse (which includes formal styles of address, established formats and structures of communication and an overall informative intent – to provide clear, accurate and factual information), a distinct feature of political discourse is that it is highly persuasive (Van Dijk, 1997, 2002; Charteris-Black 2011). Persuasion entails "the intention, act and effect of changing an audience's thinking" and it contains "a type of language that changes cognition, rather than simply describes it" (Charteris-Black, 2011: 13). The term rhetoric describes the way in which persuasion is undertaken, more specifically, "the methods that the speaker uses to persuade" (Charteris-Black, 2011: 13) which are mainly directed at influencing public opinion and action towards certain political goals by means of discrediting political opponents. Persuasion thus figures as the very element of the political 'self' which serves to accomplish "the perlocutionary effect of voting" (Johansson, 2008: 399). Poggi & D'Errico (2022a: 3) argue that "a persuasive politician must be good, clever, and strong", which implies being positively evaluated on three criteria: benevolence (which concerns moral evaluation), competence (referring to intelligence, knowledge, communication skills), and dominance (implying determination, persistency and ability to influence others) (*ibid.*).

Different rhetorical devices may be used in political discourse to achieve persuasion, many of which also carry a negative evaluation of the opponents. Insults are used in political discourse as a means for discrediting opponents, usually through attributing negative properties by placing the adversary in the degrading category (D'Errico et al., 2014; Poggi & D'Errico, 2022b). Insults may be subsumed into the so-called abusive type of *ad hominem* argument, which can be found in the cases where "one party in a discussion criticizes or attempts to refute the other party's argument by directly attacking the second party personally" (Walton 1998: 2). Hence, the said party launches an attack on the character of the opponents, labelling them as a bad person. The aspects of the opponent's character that are usually in focus in these cases comprise honesty, judgment skills, cognitive skills, perception of one's circumstances and personal moral standards (Walton 1998: 209). In previous studies in different languages, it has been shown that political opponents are often labelled as being dishonest, immoral, incompetent, easily swayed, or prone to cheating (D'Errico et al., 2014; Poggi & D'Errico, 2022b). Most commonly, insults may take the form of direct verbal insults accomplished through an informative sentence such as "*You are an X*", where X stands for either a noun or an adjective which expresses the belonging of an opponent to a negative category (Poggi & D'Errico, 2022b: 172). Impoliteness and offence can also be expressed through figurative language, such as conceptual metaphors and metonymies. In the study on the offences found in a specific corpus of tweets, Demjén and Hardaker (2016: 360) classified the metaphor- and metonymy-based insults in the following way: those that convey impoliteness by referring to childhood and development (e.g. *crybaby*), prostitution, sex, and sexual organs (e.g. *cunt*, *hooker*), references to social activities, scenarios, and characters that metonymically stand for social stereotypes (e.g. *cat lady*, *hulk*), animals (e.g. *bitch*, *cow*) and things and (often worthless) objects (e.g. *shit*, *crap*).

Politicians also frequently utilize the distinction between *us* and *them*, with the evaluations of *us* and *our* actions being framed in positive terms, and the evaluations of *them* and *their* actions framed in negative terms (Van Dijk, 1997: 28). While the WE-THEY opposition essentially builds a positive in-group or a negative out-group identity, other pronoun-based oppositions (such as I-(S)HE or I-THEY) focus on the individual politician in opposition to another individual or group. In terms of rhetorical purposes, such oppositions are primarily used to emphasize individual accountability

which implies taking personal credit for success or assigning blame to specific individuals or groups for failures.

Another device used to draw attention of the audience and communicate the desired political messages is repetition, which may operate "at the level of sounds (alliterations and rhymes), sentence forms (parallelisms) and meaning (semantic repetition)" (Van Dijk, 1997: 35). In political debates, repetition signals to the audience that a specific message is worthy of attention. A special form of repetition, commonly known as a three-part list, consists of three parallel clauses, phrases or words in a sequence. When a speaker presents information, arguments or descriptions in sets of three, the first two items usually establish a pattern while the third part of the list reinforces the first two and creates a sense of completeness and persuasiveness of the message being conveyed (Charteris-Black, 2011).

A glance at virtually any media related to public-interest topics quickly yields examples of important subjects being discussed in metaphorical ways. In political discourse, the figurative framing of political issues is an important rhetorical device used for achieving persuasion (Charteris-Black, 2009, 2011; Lakoff, 2014; Musolff, 2006). Within the Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), metaphorical expressions are surface realizations of a cross-domain mapping which enables us to understand abstract domains of experience via concrete domains. The structural similarity between the domains is represented in the form TARGET DOMAIN IS SOURCE DOMAIN, e.g. LIFE IS A JOURNEY (Kövecses, 2010; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003[1980]). The primary function of conceptual metaphors in political discourse is to "frame how we view or understand political issues by eliminating alternative points of view" (Charteris-Black, 2011: 32) where framing denotes the process of using language to evoke specific conceptually structured background knowledge with the aim of shaping how certain abstract concepts are understood and interpreted (Charteris-Black 2004; Lakoff, 2014). Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) highlights the fact that metaphor does not exist independently in words but that it is rather an aspect of our interpretation of its use in particular context and insists on "identifying the propositions that underlie the cognitive basis of metaphors and reveal the intentions of speakers" (Charteris-Black 2004: 11). This approach also proposes that conceptual metaphors used in political discourse are almost always "a conscious linguistic choice" (Charteris-Black 2004: 30) as they help form opinions, reveal underlying ideologies and attitudes and prioritize one interpretation over the other. In terms of the specific US political landscape,

Lakoff and associates (Lakoff, 1996, 2014; Lakoff & Wehling, 2016) have shown that the Conservatives frame their messages in accordance with the STRICT FATHER model, which emphasizes self-discipline, hierarchy, and individual responsibility, while the Progressives embrace the NURTURANT PARENT model, which puts forth empathy, compassion, equality, and collective care. The specific nature of these frames brings about different forms of moral reasoning in these two groups, which, in turn, influence the perception of different relevant issues in politics, such as taxation, healthcare, crime, the environment, abortion etc.

2.2. Previous studies on the rhetoric of the US election debates

Election debates in the United States of America have a long tradition. There are various studies that investigated the strategies used to confront the opponent in these debates, as well as the effect they had on viewers/ voters. Benoit et al. (2003) conducted a meta-analysis of the effects of watching US presidential debates and reached several important conclusions: first of all, debates can have agenda-setting effects; they can change the perceptions of the personality of candidates, impact vote preference, as well as increase issue knowledge, and thus influence the voters' preferences for the candidates' stands on particular issues. Still, according to this study, debates do not have a significant effect on the perceptions of candidates' leadership ability or their competences. Romero et al. (2015) analyzed the transcripts of US presidential debates from 1976 to 2012 with the aim of finding out whether matching the opponent's linguistic style, which might lead to greater perspective taking, would improve polling numbers. It was shown that the candidates who managed to match the linguistic style of their opponent did increase their standing in the polls. Jarman (2005) explored the reactions of voters to the second presidential debate held between G. W. Bush and J. Kerry in 2004, noting that the audience's reactions were strongly affected by the voters' political affiliation (Republican or Democrat). Hence, it may be argued that watching the debates actually reinforced the existing standpoints of the audience. Further, Warner and McKinney (2013) proved that the debates may actually increase political polarization between the supporters of different parties.

One strand of relevant previous research focused on the particular features of the rhetoric of the Republicans and Democrats in their

communication with the electorate. Painter and Fernandes (2021) explored the candidates' word choices and rhetorical styles in a longitudinal study conducted on the vast number of general election debates and primary debates. They showed that Democrats used fairly more realism, activity and commonality in their rhetoric, while the Republican candidates relied more on rhetorical certainty. These authors also found that rhetorical certainty in speeches tended to change over time, being more present in the 1960s and 1970s than in the 2010s and 2020s general election debates. Khajavi and Rasti (2020) analyzed the 2020 speeches from the election campaign in the presidential race between B. Obama and M. Romney. These were the most frequently used strategies in the speeches aiming to win the attention of voters: self-representation, negative representation of others, legitimization and delegitimization, and persuasion. Still, while Obama mostly relied on evoking the myth of the American dream, the prevailing strategy of the Republican candidate was the negative representation of other, which did not seem to bring Romney success.

The use of the 1st person plural in speeches and debates is also a means of taking a certain stance in the political discourse. The study that focused on the self-identifications of American politicians in their speeches during the interviews and the debate in the 2008 election (Proctor & Su, 2011) found that the 1st person plural could be used to evoke nationalistic emotions, as well as to achieve career goals; the pronominal choice was also proved to indicate the strength of the relation between a politician and his/her party.

The 2016 presidential campaign and the ensuing debate gathered a lot of attention since it was the first mixed-gender presidential race in the US, with Donald Trump and Hilary Clinton as the Republican and Democrat nominees. Carsten et al. (2019) analyzed the rhetoric of these two candidates, showing that Trump used more negative, aggressive and hostile rhetoric than Clinton, but also that there was a link between the attitudes of his followers towards gender and attributing effectiveness and charisma to Trump. Grebelsky-Lichtman and Katz (2019) focused on both the verbal and nonverbal patterns of communication in this same debate. They found that Trump mainly used the masculine, while Clinton expressed the feminine patterns of communication. Further, these authors argue that, since this was a mixed-gender debate, the contenders' conduct was in keeping with the features of their gender, mainly when it comes to nonverbal conduct. In the debates of the same presidential race, Clinton

used the pronoun *I* more frequently than Trump, which may indicate that she tried to put forth expressing herself as an individual, while Trump used the pronoun *we* more often than Clinton, which may imply that he wanted to create togetherness with the audience in discussing important issues (Krawrungruang & Yaoharee, 2018). Bucy et al. (2020) analyzed the verbal, nonverbal and tonal coding of the messages during the first Trump and Clinton debate of 2016, labelling Trump's debate style as norm-violating and transgressive, frequently crossing the boundaries of what is deemed moral and socially acceptable.

The most recent study on the semantic and pragmatic features of the US election debates by Wicke and Bolognesi (2025) analyzed the debate between K. Harris and D. Trump held in 2024. The authors concluded that the two nominees used different figurative frames, with Trump relying on those of crisis and decline, and Harris utilizing those of empowerment and recovery.

The overview of previous relevant studies on the rhetoric, and consequently, the effect of the US presidential race speeches and debates, shows that the framing of relevant issues in the debates can have a significant impact on shaping the public perception of the competence of the candidate. Our study focuses on specific rhetorical devices which the 2024 US presidential candidates used in the debates to discredit the political opponent and thus strengthen their own image as a better candidate.

3. Corpus and methodology

At the beginning of the US presidential campaign 2024, the contenders were Joseph Biden, as the nominee of the Democratic Party, and Donald Trump, as the nominee of the Republican Party. However, due to increased concerns regarding Biden's age and health, the Democratic nominee was changed and Kamala Harris was endorsed instead of Biden. Hence, the two presidential debates in the 2024 presidential race were held between different people. The first was the debate between the Democratic nominee, Joseph Biden, and the Republican nominee, Donald Trump; it was hosted by CNN and took place on June 27, 2024. The second debate was sponsored by ABC and it was held on September 10, 2024. The participants were Donald Trump and the new Democratic nominee, Kamala Harris. Each of the debates lasted around 90 minutes and was

moderated using a set of predefined rules; no live audience was present, no opening statements were made and the contenders were not allowed to ask each other questions.

The corpus for the analysis includes the transcripts of these two debates available on the CNN and ABC websites[1] (35,161 words in total). The number of words and sentences uttered per candidate in each debate are shown in Table 1[2].

Table 1: The number of candidates' words and sentences
in each of the debates

	Total number of words	Total number of sentences	Average words per sentence
The first debate			
Joseph Biden	6,704	480	13.97
Donald Trump	8,087	709	11.4
The second debate			
Kamala Harris	5,203	318	16.41
Donald Trump	7,963	813	9.80

The topics of the debates covered similar issues, namely, the state of the US economy, the war in Ukraine, the Middle East, climate issues, immigration, healthcare, democracy, etc. The key words for each debate are shown in Figure 1[3].

---

[1] The transcript of the first debate between Biden and Trump is available at https://edition.cnn.com/2024/06/27/politics/read-biden-trump-debate-rush-transcript/index.html; the transcript of the second debate between Harris and Trump is available at https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/harris-trump-presidential-debate-transcript/story?id=113560542.

[2] The data presented in Table 1 were obtained via online readability software https://www.webfx.com/tools/read-able.

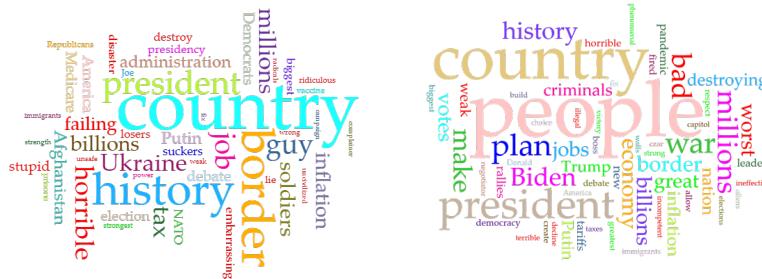[3] The key words were extracted and the figures created via https://voyant-tools.org.

Figure 1: The key words in each of the debates

1a) Key words in the
Biden vs. Trump debate

1b) Key words in the
Harris vs. Trump debate

Having collected the materials, the authors proceeded with the analysis that included identifying the instances of negative evaluations of their political opponent and registering the insults, pronoun-based oppositions, repetitions, three-part lists and conceptual metaphors in keeping with the definitions provided in previous studies, mentioned in subsection 2.1. In the following section, we will present the examples of these rhetorical devices identified in the two debates and elaborate on their use and effect.

4. Research results and discussion

This section is organized into four subsections, each outlining and discussing the use of one of the investigated rhetorical devices in the debates, substantiated by relevant examples from each debate.

4.1. Insults

In the first debate, both nominees used the insults aiming to show the opponent's lack of benevolence, implying that the other was a liar (JB[4]: ex. 1, DT: ex. 2) or a person of loose morality (JB: ex. 3, an insult that references an animal). They also attempted to downgrade the opponent

---

[4] Initials of the nominee who uttered a specific example are given so as to provide information on the origin of the example.

on grounds of lack of competence, labelling the other as someone who speaks nonsense (JB: ex. 4, 5, DT: ex. 6), who is incompetent (JB: ex. 7) or has done a terrible job acting as a president (DT: ex. 8), to such an extent that he should be ashamed of himself (DT: ex. 9) or labelled as the worst president in history (JB: ex. 10).

1. *Every single thing he said is a lie*, every single one. (JB)
2. *I've never seen anybody lie like this guy. He lies – I've never seen it.* (DT)
3. How many billions of dollars do you owe in civil penalties for molesting a woman in public, for doing a whole range of things, of having sex with a porn star on the night – and – while your wife was pregnant? *I mean, what are you talking about? You have the morals of an alley cat.* (JB)
4. *He has no idea what the hell he's talking about.* (JB)
5. *I've never heard so much malarkey in my whole life.* (JB)
6. *He made that up.* He put it in the commercials. *He made up the suckers and losers* so he should apologize to me right now. (DT)
7. And now I'm the oldest. This guy's three years younger and *a lot less competent.* (JB)
8. So – and about so many other things, too. I wasn't really going to run until *I saw the horrible job he did. He's destroying our country.* (DT)
9. What they've done to some people that are so innocent, *you ought to be ashamed of yourself, what you have done, how you've destroyed the lives of so many people.* (DT)
10. And by the way, *worst president in history* – 159 presidential scholars voted him the worst president in the history of the United States of America. (JB)

Similarly, in the second debate, both candidates insulted the opponent commenting on their lack of benevolence and lack of competence; hence, both Harris and Trump described the other as liars (KH: ex. 11, DT: ex. 12) and as incompetent persons (ex. 13−17); additionally, when calling on Trump for his supposed lack of competence, Harris also suffused her insults with ridicule[5], claiming that he spoke about fictional characters and

---

[5] Ridicule is frequent in political debates as a means of "discrediting a person by showing some feature that makes him look ridiculous" (Poggi & D'Errico 2022c: 185).

provided fake facts (KH: ex. 16), thus becoming an object of derision in the eyes of major world leaders.

11. But I'm going to tell you all, in this debate tonight, *you're going to hear from the same old, tired playbook, a bunch of lies, grievances and name-calling*. (KH)

12. Excuse me, I have to respond. *Another lie. It's another lie*. (DT)

13. So, Donald Trump *has no plan for you* […] because *he is more interested in defending himself than he is in looking out for you*. (KH)

14. And just to finish off, *she doesn't have a plan*. She copied Biden's plan. (DT)

15. And by the way, that's why Russia attacked Ukraine. Because *they saw how incompetent she and her boss are*. (DT)

16. *You will see during the course of his rallies he talks about fictional characters like Hannibal Lecter. He will talk about windmills cause cancer. And world leaders are laughing at Donald Trump*. I have talked with military leaders, some of whom worked with you. And *they say you're a disgrace.* (KH)

17. She's worse than Biden. In my opinion, *I think he's the worst president in the history of our country. She goes down as the worst vice president in the history of our country*. (DT)

Both Democratic nominees wanted to discredit Trump claiming that he supported anti-democratic regimes, which, consequently, implies he wished to become a dictator himself (JB: ex. 18, KH: ex. 19). Trump, on the other hand, tried to impute the leftist ideas to Harris, calling her a Marxist (DT: ex. 20).

18. And our – *those who he cuddles up to, from Kim Jong-un who he sends love letters to, or Putin*, et cetera, they don't want to screw around with us. (JB)

19. *It is well known that he admires dictators, wants to be a dictator one day one according to himself…. And it is absolutely well known that these dictators and autocrats are rooting for you to be president again because they're so clear, they can manipulate you with flattery and favors*. (KH)

20. Everybody knows *she's a Marxist*. (DT)

4.2. Pronoun-based oppositions

In terms of contextual relevance, the most salient pronoun-based opposition in the Trump-Biden debate reveals that positive self-representation and negative other-representation relies primarily on the direct I-HE opposition which contains contrastive parallelisms. This opposition indicates that both Trump and Biden are self-centered, trying to establish themselves as dominant singular leaders who take credit for the acts that conversely put blame on the opponent, as illustrated by ex. 21−25.

21. All of the different things *I approved*, *he abandoned*. (DT)
22. Well, *I took two tests*, cognitive tests. *He took none*. (DT)
23. The reason he's got jobs is because *I cut the regulations* that gave jobs, but *he's putting a lot of those regulations back on.* (DT)
24. *He – out of the Paris Peace Accord –* Climate Accord, *I immediately joined* it. (JB)
25. *He wants to undo* all that *I've done*. (JB)

The WE-HE opposition appears to be weaker and used with a different purpose – to emphasize the positive collective efforts of one administration in opposition to the self-willingness or the negative perception of the main representative of the other (ex. 26, 27).

26. *We put more police on the street* than any administration has. *He wants to cut the cops*. (JB)
27. All over the world *we were respected*, and then *he comes in* and *he's now laughed at*. (DT)

With both Biden and Trump trying to represent themselves as authoritative actors, it is not surprising that the WE-THEY opposition manifests itself as the weakest in their respective speeches. The relevant examples (28, 29) which substantiate this opposition predominantly include accusations or praiseworthy statements on the part of opposing parties.

28. *They're going to destroy Social Security*. (DT)
29. *We created 15,000 new jobs*. (JB)

The Trump-Harris debate is dominated by indirect I-SHE and I-HE oppositions. Trump uses the pronoun *I* primarily for highlighting his personal accomplishments and portraying himself as a strong leader (ex. 32). He effectively uses the pronoun *she* to discredit Harris as a worthy

political opponent by equating her with Biden (where the name of the president (Biden) metonymically stands for his political views, aims and policies), which further implies that Trump is trying to portray Harris as a presidential candidate who has not had any distinctive accomplishments and can only be metonymically framed as an extension of the previous administration rather than a new leader (ex. 30). Harris, on the other hand, uses the pronoun *I* to distance herself from both Trump and Biden (once again metonymically framed in terms of their respective political backgrounds) and establish herself as a valid political opponent (ex. 31). The pronoun *he* is mainly used in accusatory statements (ex. 33).

30. *She is Biden*. […] *she has no policy*. (DT)
31. Clearly, *I am not Joe Biden,* and *I am certainly not Donald Trump*. (KH)
32. And *I did something that nobody thought was possible*. (DT)
33. *He bypassed the Afghan government. He negotiated directly with a terrorist organization called the Taliban*. (KH)

As opposed to Trump's speech, where the WE-THEY and I-THEY oppositions are used to a lesser extent (ex. 34, 35), such oppositions are virtually non-existent in Harris' speech, possibly because she wants to single out Trump and highlight his personal accountability against the background of his administration on the one hand and downplay her lack of personal accomplishments on the other. The only option that seems plausible for Harris to rely on in this respect is the WE-HE opposition, as in ex. 36.

34. *We had no inflation*, virtually no inflation, *they had the highest inflation*, perhaps in the history of our country. (DT)
35. *But the only jobs they got were bounce-back jobs*. But *I was the one that created them*. (DT)
36. Donald Trump said he was going to allow Medicare to negotiate drug prices. *He never did. We did*. (KH)

4.3. Repetitions and three-part lists

Trump deliberately uses repetitions to reiterate specific accusations against Biden and force him into a defensive position. Repetitions in Biden's speech do not illustrate the same discursive strategy and have the function of non-deliberate lexical fillers – phrases used in speech that do not contribute

to the meaning of the sentence but serve to fill pauses or hesitations in speech, allowing him to gather his thoughts (ex. 38).

37. *He's given $200 billion* now or more to Ukraine. *He's given $200 billion*. That's a lot of money. (DT)
38. I've passed *the most extensive*, it was *the most extensive* climate change legislation *in history*, *in history*. (JB)

While three-part lists are coherently and frequently used by Trump for discrediting Biden in terms of his immigration policy and his ability to wield power in foreign policy affairs (ex. 39, 40), Biden uses the same rhetorical strategy only for outlining the main agenda of his administration in the current political campaign (ex. 41).

39. He decided to open up our border to *people that are from prisons, people that are from mental institutions, people that are from insane asylums*. (DT)
40. *They don't respect him. They don't fear him. They have nothing going with this gentleman* and he's going to drive us into World War Three. (DT)
41. *We're going to make sure that we reduce the price of housing. We're going to make sure we build 2 million new units. We're going to make sure we cap rents*, so corporate greed can't take over. (JB)

In the second debate, Trump resorts to using repetition as yet another rhetorical device for emphasizing the indistinctive nature of Harris' political strategies and policies as the main drawback of her presidential nomination (ex. 42). Harris, on the other hand, seems to be compelled to stand her ground against such an accusation by employing the repetitive contrastive parallelism (ex. 43).

42. *She doesn't have a plan*. Take a look at her plan. *She doesn't have a plan*. (DT)
43. I believe in what we can do to strengthen our small businesses, which is why *I have a plan. I have a plan* to give startup businesses $50,000 tax deduction… *I have a plan*. (KH)

Trump relies on three-part lists to discredit Harris for the lack of taking concrete steps in the name of the policies that she proposes. Harris, however, employs the same rhetorical device in a more effective fashion because she relies on the audience centric approach. When Harris repeatedly uses the objective personal pronoun *us* as part of the three-part list, she is creating a

sense of unity, aligning herself with the American people (particularly the audience she is trying to reach) and positioning herself as someone who shares the struggles of Trump's wrongdoings (ex. 45). Conversely, by using the possessive adjective *your* as part of the same rhetorical device, she deliberately distances herself from the audience with the aim of prioritizing and personalizing the *needs*, *dreams* and *desires* of individual members of the audience that Trump does not seem to care about (ex. 46).

44. So, she just started by saying *she's going to do this, she's going to do that, she's going to do all these wonderful things.* Why hasn't she done it? (DT)

45. *Donald Trump left us the worst unemployment* since the Great Depression. *Donald Trump left us the worst public health epidemic* in a century. *Donald Trump left us the worst attack on our democracy* since the Civil War. (KH)

46. You will not hear him talk about *your needs*, *your dreams*, and *your desires*. (KH)

4.4. Metaphors

In the Trump-Harris debate, Trump deliberately employs the COUNTRY IS A BUSINESS metaphor by highlighting the entailment which implies that RUNNING A COUNTRY can be understood as RUNNING A BUSINESS ORGANIZATION. The analogy, which specifically frames the leader of a country as being similar to a Chief Executive Officer (CEO) in a company, draws on his identity as a businessman which he skillfully uses with two aims – (1) to discredit Harris by referring to Biden as *her boss* (DT: ex. 47) which further frames their political partnership in corporate terms (e.g. CEO and Vice-President (VP)) to reflect the hierarchy of power and Harris' subordinate position, and (2) to position himself as the boss and those around him (cabinet members, appointees, etc.) as employees who were *fired* for poor performance (DT: ex. 48). The pragmatic implications of the latter serve to portray Trump as a strong leader – the one who is in control, expects results and takes decisive actions when expectations are not met.

47. And by the way, that's why Russia attacked Ukraine. Because they saw how incompetent *she* and *her boss* are. (DT)

48. *I fired* most of those people. They *did* bad things or a *bad job*. *I fired* them. (DT)

Kamala Harris, on the other hand, plays along with the general implications of the imposed metaphor, but employs a rhetorical reversal of Trump's own framing (ex. 49):

49. Donald Trump *was fired by 81 million people*. So, let's be clear about that. (KH)

By claiming that Trump *was fired by 81 million people*, Harris evokes reference to the people who cast their votes for Joe Biden in the 2020 presidential election and thus reframes the metaphor to emphasize a different hierarchy of power – as the incumbent president, Trump was the employee of the people of the USA who negatively reviewed his performance and decided to dismiss him.

Yet another particularly salient metaphor, primarily initiated by Harris, revolves around the conceptualization of time in spatial terms. The metaphorical conceptualization of TIME in terms of SPACE typically implies talking about THE FUTURE as being IN FRONT of us and THE PAST as being BEHIND us (Lakoff & Johnson 2003 [1980]). Harris relies on this conventional metaphor in her closing statement to frame her political campaign as progressive and future-oriented.

50. So I think you've heard tonight two very different visions for our country. One that is focused on the future and the other that is focused on the past. And an attempt *to take us backward*. But *we're not going back*. (KH)

In his response (ex. 51), Trump insists that the desirable future for the people of the USA lies in the restoration of the past and reframes the metaphor to suit the overall goal of his political campaign – *Make America Great Again*.

51. They want to bring our country *back*. They want to *make America great again*. (DT)

The final sentence in Harris' closing statement represents a metaphorically used three-part list which once again evokes the need for progress, change and new leadership (ex. 52).

52. I say *we don't have to go back*. *Let's not go back*. *We're not going back*. (KH)

5. Conclusion

The focus of our paper was on the rhetorical devices (insults, pronoun-based oppositions, repetitions and three-part lists, and conceptual metaphors) used in the 2024 US presidential debates for negatively evaluating the political opponent and thus winning political points in one's own presidential race. Our findings indicate that the 2024 debates were marked by a high degree of polarization, with each candidate employing these specific rhetorical strategies to present themselves positively and portray the opponent negatively.

Based on the analysis, we may argue that insults were primarily used for personal attacks to undermine the opponent's character, credibility and competence. Trump and Biden questioned one another's benevolence, repeatedly implying dishonesty – portraying the other as a *liar* or someone of dubious morality. Both also challenged their opponent's competence, depicting the other as incompetent or ineffective to the point of disgrace. Harris, in particular, combined allegations of incompetence with ridicule, highlighting Trump's references to fictional characters and fake facts and claiming that world leaders view him with derision.

In terms of pronoun-based oppositions, our analysis has shown that singular oppositions (I-HE and I-SHE) outweigh the collective one (WE-THEY), which implies that nominees tried to reinforce their image as singular dominant leaders. The direct I-HE opposition was used by both Trump and Biden to contrast their own actions with the opponent's failures, whereas the I-(S)HE opposition in the second debate was more indirect and without any specific contrastive parallelisms. Biden and Harris, however, additionally employed the direct WE–HE opposition to stress the collective Democratic achievements and isolate Trump's individual accountability.

In both debates, Trump frequently relied on repetitions to make accusations (e.g. *He's given $200 billion* or *She doesn't have a plan*), while Harris combined repetitions and three-part lists to create a sense of unity with the audience. Finally, the conceptual metaphors identified in the Trump-Harris debate effectively frame the nominees' opposing ideologies. Trump evoked the COUNTRY IS A BUSINESS metaphor to assert decisive leadership (e.g. *I fired them*), while Harris reversed the metaphor to empower the voters. The TIME IS SPACE metaphor was initiated by Harris to frame voting for Trump as regressive, and voting for her party as progressive and future-oriented (e.g. *We're not going back*).

The overall analysis of the rhetorical devices presented in this paper suggests that presidential opponents strategically employed all of the said devices to persuade the audience to reach a decision on (il)legitimacy – who deserves power and who deserves blame. Bearing in mind the results of the presidential election, namely, the fact that Donald Trump won and became the US president for the second time, it may be argued that the specific combination of the strategies he employed in the analysed debates did have more effect on the voters. Still, this was one of the many factors which might have contributed to Donald Trump winning the 2024 US presidential race.

The identified frequent use of different discrediting devices in the analysed debates is in keeping with the findings of the previous studies on the rhetoric of the US presidential debates, for instance, those that emphasise that the negative representation of the political opponent is very often present in the presidential debates (Khajavi and Rasti, 2020). Thus, the current study provides a contribution to the body of existing research on the rhetoric of the US presidential debates, since it proves that negative representation strategies are still amply used to delegitimize the opponent in the debates. Still, there are certain limitations to the paper, which should be mentioned. We focused only on a few selected rhetorical devices and on the written transcripts of the debates, while non-verbal cues may have been analysed as well. The analysis of other speeches of these candidates during the 2024 election campaign (e.g. election rally speeches) might have provided a more accurate picture of the prevalence of certain rhetorical devices in the candidates' verbal style. Future research could therefore extend this analysis by broadening the range of rhetorical strategies under examination, as well as by incorporating a broader set of election speeches to be analysed.

Acknowledgements

References

Benoit, W. L. et al. (2003). A meta-analysis of the effects of viewing U.S. presidential debates. *Communication Monographs*, 70(4), 335–350. https://doi.org/10.1080/0363775032000179133

Bucy, E. P. et al. (2020). Performing populism: Trump's transgressive debate style and the dynamics of Twitter response. *New Media & Society*, 22(4), 634−658. https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444819893984

Carsten M.K. et al. (2019). A follower-centric approach to the 2016 US presidential election: Candidate rhetoric and follower attributions of charisma and Effectiveness. *Leadership*, 15(2), 179–204. https://doi.org/10.1177/1742715018817930

Charteris-Black, J. (2004). *Corpus Approaches to Critical Metaphor Analysis*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Charteris-Black, J. (2009). Metaphor and political communication. In: A. Musolff and J. Zinken (eds.), *Metaphor and discourse* (pp. 97−115). London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Charteris-Black, J. (2011). *Politicians and Rhetoric. The persuasive power of metaphor. Second edition*. London: Palgrave Macmillan UK.

Demjén, Z. and C. Hardaker (2016). Metaphor, impoliteness, and offence in online communication. In: Semino, E. and Z. Demjén (eds.), *The Routledge handbook of metaphor and language*. London and New York: Routledge, 371−386.

D'Errico, F. et al. (2014). Aggressive language and insults in digital political participation. In: Kommers, P. et al. (eds.), *Proceedings of multiconference on computer science and information systems: Web based communities and social media.* Lisboa: Universidad de Lisboa, 105−114.

Grebelsky-Lichtman, T. and R. Katz (2019). When a man debates a woman: Trump vs. Clinton in the first mixed gender presidential debates. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 28(6), 699–719. https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2019.1566890

Jarman, J. W. (2005). Political Affiliation and Presidential Debates: A Real-Time Analysis of the Effect of the Arguments Used in the Presidential Debates. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 49(2), 229−242. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764205280921

Johansson, M. (2008). Presentation of the political self: Commitment in electoral media dialogue. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, *27*(4), 397−408.

Khajavi, Y. and A. Rasti (2020). A discourse analytic investigation into politicians' use of rhetorical and persuasive strategies: The case of US election speeches. *Cogent Arts & Humanities*, 7(1):1740051. https://doi.org/10.1080/23311983.2020.1740051.

Kövecses, Z. (2010). *Metaphor: A practical introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Krawrungruang K. and O. Yaoharee (2018). The Use of Personal Pronoun in Political Discourse: A Case Study of the Final 2016 United States Presidential Election Debate. *rEFLections*, 25(1): 85–96.

Lakoff, G. (1996). *Moral Politics: What Conservatives Know That Liberals Don't*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Lakoff, G. (2014). *The all new don't think of an elephant!: Know your values and frame the debate*. Suite: Chelsea Green Publishing.

Lakoff, G. and E. Wehling (2016). *Your brain's politics: How the science of mind explains the political divide*. Luton: Andrews UK Limited.

Lakoff. G. and M. Johnson (2003 [1980]). *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Musolff, A. (2006). Metaphor scenarios in public discourse. *Metaphor and symbol*, 21(1), 23−38.

Painter, D. L. and J. Fernandes (2021). They're Not Just Words: The Verbal Style of U.S. Presidential Debate Rhetoric. *Communication Studies*, 72(5), 899–914. https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2021.1975145

Poggi, I. and F. D'Errico (2022a). *Social Influence, Power, and Multimodal Communication*. London/New York: Routledge.

Poggi, I. and F. D'Errico (2022b). Attacking the opponent's image: Insult as a weapon for political discredit. In: Poggi, I. and F. D'Errico (eds.), *Social Influence, Power, and Multimodal Communication*. London/New York: Routledge, 163−182.

Poggi, I. and F. D'Errico (2022c). A laughter will bury you: Ridicule as a discrediting move. In: Poggi, I. and F. D'Errico (eds.), *Social Influence, Power, and Multimodal Communication*. London/New York: Routledge, 183−194.

Proctor K. and L. Su (2011). The 1st person plural in political discourse – American politicians in interviews and in a debate. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43(13), 3251–3266.

Romero D. M. et al. (2015). Mimicry is presidential: Linguistic style matching in presidential debates and improved polling numbers.

Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin. 41(10): 1311–1319. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167215602061.

Van Dijk, T. A. (1997). What is political discourse analysis? *Belgian Journal of Linguistics*, *11*(1), 11−52.

Van Dijk, T. A. (2002). Political discourse and political cognition. In: Chilton, P. and C. Schäffner (eds.), *Politics as text and talk: Analytic approaches to political discourse*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 203−237.

Walton, D. (1998). *Ad hominem arguments*. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press.

Warner, B. R. and M. S. McKinney (2013). To unite and divide: The polarizing effect of presidential debates. *Communication Studies*, 64(5), 508−527. https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2013.832341

Wicke, P. and M. M. Bolognesi (2025). Red and blue language: Word choices in the Trump and Harris 2024 presidential debate. *PLOS ONE,* 20(6): e0324715. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0324715.