

“OVIDIUS” UNIVERSITY OF CONSTANȚA

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Domain: Philology

**SUMMARY IN ENGLISH OF
THE DOCTORAL THESIS**

**Critical Discourse Analysis of Twenty-First Century American Political Speeches (Barack
Obama, Donald Trump, Joe Biden)**

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Theoretical Views on Critical Discourse Analysis	8
1.1. Critical Discourse Analysis	8
1.2. Norman Fairclough's views on CDA	11
1.3. CDA and semiosis	12
1.4. Methodology of Research	20
1.5. Intertextuality	21
1.6. Recontextualization	25
1.7. Systemic Functional Linguistics (Halliday)	27
1.7.1. The ideational function	28
1.7.2. The interpersonal function	29
1.7.3. The textual function	30
1.7.4. Transitivity	30
1.7.5. Material processes	32
1.7.6. Relational processes	32
1.7.7. Mood	33
1.7.8. Modality	35
1.7.9. Personal pronouns	36
1.8. Conclusion	37
 Chapter Two: An analysis of Barack Obama's political discourses – case study 1	 38
2.1. Introduction	38
2.2. An introduction to Obama's speeches	39
2.3. A semiotic analysis of Obama's speeches	41
2.3.1. The description level	42
2.3.2. Vocabulary	43
2.3.3. Metaphors	47
2.3.4. Passivization	52
2.4. Interpretation level (Discursive Practice)	54
2.4.1. Interpretation of context	55
2.4.2. Presuppositions	56
2.5. Explanation level	58
2.6. Intertextuality in Obama's speeches.....	61
2.7. Systemic Functional Linguistics analysis of Obama's speeches	64
2.7.1. The Ideational function	65
2.7.1.1. The Mental process	66
2.7.1.2. The Material process	67
2.7.1.3. The Relational process	67
2.7.1.4. The Behavioural process	68
2.7.1.5. The Verbal process	68
2.7.1.6. The Existential process	69
2.7.2. Transitivity in Obama's speeches	69
2.7.3. The Interpersonal Function	71

2.7.3.1. Analysis of the use of pronouns	72
2.7.4. Modality analysis.....	77
2.8. Conclusion	81
Chapter Three: An Analysis of Donald Trump’s Political Discourses – case study 2	83
3.1. Introduction	83
3.2. Donald Trump’s political speeches – A general view	85
3.3. A semiotic analysis of Donald Trump’s speeches	87
3.3.1. The description level	87
3.3.2. Vocabulary	88
3.3.3. Metaphors	96
3.3.4. Passivization	102
3.4. Interpretation level (Discursive Practice)	105
3.4.1. Interpretation of context	105
3.4.2. Presuppositions	112
3.5. Explanation level	114
3.6. Intertextuality	119
3.7. Systemic Functional Linguistics analysis of Trump’s speeches	121
3.7.1. Transitivity in Trump’s speeches	121
3.7.2. The Material Process	124
3.7.3. The Mental process	127
3.7.4. The Relational process	128
3.7.5. The Existential process	131
3.7.6. The Verbal process	132
3.7.7. The Behavioural Process	134
3.8. Modality	135
3.9. Analysis of the use of pronouns in Trump’s speeches	137
3.10. Conclusion	144
Chapter Four: An Analysis of Joe Biden’s Political Discourses – case study 3	146
4.1. Introduction	146
4.2. Introduction to Joe Biden’s speeches	147
4.3. Semiotic analysis of Biden’s speeches	149
4.3.1. Vocabulary	149
4.3.2. Metaphors	160
4.3.3. Passivization	163
4.4. Interpretation of context	160
4.4.1. Presuppositions	164
4.5. Explanation level	172
4.6. Intertextuality	178
4.7. Systemic Functional Linguistics analysis of Biden’s speeches	184
4.7.1. The Ideational function	185
4.7.1.1. The Material process	186
4.7.1.2. The Relational processes	190
4.7.1.3. The Existential process	191
4.7.1.4. The Verbal Process	192
4.7.1.5. The Mental process	193

4.7.1.6. The Behavioral process	194
4.7.2. The Interpersonal Function	195
4.7.2.1. Analysis of pronoun use in Biden's speeches	195
4.7.3. Modality analysis	201
4.8. Conclusion	205

Chapter Five: Democratic versus Republican Presidential Speeches:

A Comparative Study	198
5.1 Introduction	198
5.2. Comparative Analysis of Key Issues	199
5.2.1. Unity and National Identity	199
5.2.2. Parties and Governance	200
5.2.3. Social Justice and Equality	202
5.2.4. Leadership in Times of Crisis	203
5.2.5. Approach to Global Leadership	204
5.2.6. Economic Priorities and Vision	204
5.2.7. Communication Style and Public Engagement	206
5.3. Comparative Analysis of Metaphors	207
5.3.1. Journey Metaphors	208
5.3.2. Health and Healing Metaphors	208
5.3.3. Container and Flood Metaphors	209
5.3.4. War Metaphors	209
5.3.5. Economic and Resource Metaphors	209
5.3.6. Historical and Cultural Metaphors	210
5.4. Lexical Patterns in Presidential Rhetoric: Commonalities and Divergences between Biden, Obama, and Trump	211
5.4.1. Emphasis on Unity and Inclusivity	212
5.4.2. Focus on Hope and Optimism	212
5.4.3. Use of Inclusive and Aspirational Language	212
5.4.4. Appeal to Moral and Ethical Values	213
5.5. Passivization	213
5.6. Presupposition Use in Obama, Trump, and Biden's Speeches	214
5.7. A Comparative Analysis of Transitivity	216
5.7.1. Existential Processes	216
5.7.2. Verbal Processes	217
5.7.3. Behavioral Processes	218
5.8. A Comparative Analysis of Pronoun Use	219
5.9. A Comparative Analysis of Modality Usage	220
5.10. Conclusion	221
Conclusions	222
Bibliography	234

Key words:

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), semiotics, modality, Transitivity, campaign speeches, Intertextuality, metaphors, presidential rhetoric, political discourse

Summary in English of the Doctoral Thesis

Introduction and Context

This study employs a comprehensive multi-stage approach by integrating Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) theory to explore the presidential speeches of Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden. The methodology is designed to analyze how language is used in order to reflect, and shape, political ideologies, highlighting the interplay between language, power, and ideology in contemporary political discourse. The analysis is structured into four stages: symbolic representation, discourse analysis through CDA, linguistic analysis through SFL, and a comparative analysis of the selected speeches. The research focuses on the way in which each president employs language to construct political narratives, legitimize their policies, and connect with their audiences.

The main goals to be attained in this research are:

1. **To examine how language is used by Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden in order to construct political narratives and communicate ideologies.** The research explores how linguistic features such as vocabulary, modality, and transitivity contribute to shaping public perception, legitimizing policies, and reinforcing political stances.
2. **To identify the rhetorical strategies and linguistic patterns that define the unique communication styles of each president.** The research delves into each president's use of language, focusing on their representation of political issues, their relationship with the electorate, and their positioning within the broader political landscape.
3. **To analyze the interaction between language and power in presidential discourse.** The research aims to uncover how language constructs, maintains, or challenges power relations and ideologies through the use of metaphors, presuppositions, and intertextual references.
4. **To provide a comparative evaluation of presidential rhetoric in terms of its effectiveness, ideological alignment, and influence on public discourse.** By comparing the speeches of Obama, Trump, and Biden, the study highlights the distinct rhetorical strategies each leader employs to connect with different segments of the electorate and respond to political challenges.

Corpus of the Study

The corpus of this study encompasses selected speeches from three prominent U.S. presidents: Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden. Each president delivered key speeches during vital or critical moments of their respective campaigns, reflecting their political ideologies, rhetorical strategies, and approaches to engaging with the American public. The analysis focuses on how these speeches articulate their visions for the nation and respond to contemporary social and political issues. For each president I used the speeches on key moments of the campaign: the acceptance speech, a campaign rally speech, remarks at the party's congressional campaign

committee, victory speech and inaugural speech. The sites the speeches have been taken from are mentioned both in footnotes and at the end as part of electronic bibliography.

Thus, the corpus used for Barack Obama contains **Victory Speech (Obama S1, 2,227 words)** delivered on November 6, 2012, in Chicago, **Inaugural Address (Obama S2, 2,137 words)** held on January 21, 2013, **Nominee Acceptance Speech (Obama S3, 4,686 words)**, delivered on September 6, 2012, **Campaign Rally Speech in Hollywood, Florida (Obama S4, 3,376 words)**, held on November 4, 2012, and **Remarks at the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (Obama S5, 2,511 words)**, delivered on September 6, 2014.

For Donald Trump, the following addresses have been chosen: **Victory Speech (Trump S1, 1,444 words)**, November 9, 2016, **Inaugural Address (Trump S2, 1,618 words)**, January 20, 2017, **Acceptance Speech (Trump S3, 5,144 words)**, held at the 2020 Republican National Convention, **Remarks at Charlotte Convention Center (Trump S4, 3,169 words)**, On August 18, 2016, and **Remarks on the 2020 Election (Trump S5, 2,634 words)**, delivered on November 5, 2020, after the loss of the second term.

For Joe Biden, four speeches have been selected as they are considered to best express his political and social views: **Inaugural Address (Biden S1, 1,461 words)**, January 20, 2021, **Victory Speech (Biden S2, 2,500 words)**, delivered on November 7, 2020, **Gettysburg Speech (Biden S3, 2,093 words)**, October 6, 2020, and the **Democratic National Convention Speech (Biden S4, 3,000 words)**, delivered on August 20, 2020.

All these speeches were sourced from reputable archives, including the Miller Center, the American Presidency Project, and official White House transcripts, ensuring the texts analyzed are authentic and complete. The structured analysis of these speeches will provide insights into the rhetorical strategies employed by each president and the socio-political context of their leadership.

Chapter overview

The thesis is structured in five chapters. The first one outlines the theoretical framework and methodological approach for analyzing presidential speeches through Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The study has employed key concepts from Norman Fairclough's CDA and M.A.K. Halliday's SFL to explore how meaning is constructed and conveyed in political discourse. The theoretical chapter introduces Fairclough's CDA, focusing on how language shapes and is shaped by social power dynamics. Fairclough's approach involves examining texts through three primary dimensions: semiosis, intertextuality, and recontextualization. This research has focused on two dimensions: **semiosis and intertextuality**. M.A.K. Halliday's SFL theory provides another critical perspective. SFL focuses on the functional aspects of language, examining how different grammatical choices fulfill various communicative purposes. Halliday's theory identifies three major functions of language: **ideational** (representing experiences and ideas), **interpersonal** (establishing relationships and attitudes), and **textual** (organizing information within a text). Halliday's theory focuses on the following linguistics elements, such as **Modality** (Modality in language expresses the speaker's attitude toward the truth of a statement or the likelihood of an event that is occurring. By applying it to the presidential discourses the analysis has revealed how speakers express certainty, obligation, and permission, which influences the reception and interpretation of their messages); **Personal Pronouns** (The use of personal pronouns such as "I," "we," and "you" has been analyzed with a view to revealing particular ways in which speakers create relationships with their audience. Pronouns help establish identity, inclusivity, and authority); **Transitivity** (The concept of transitivity examines how

actions and processes are represented in speeches. It has been used with the purpose of identifying who is acting, who is receiving the action, and how these roles affect the construction of meaning in the presidential speeches.)

The second chapter, deals with an in-depth analysis of Barack Obama's speeches from his 2012 presidential campaign through the lens of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis and Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics. One can note, for instance that Obama makes use of strong metaphors to create powerful images and draw the public's attention. He is also fond of passivization and intertextuality, quoting from the Declaration of Independence and influential American figures such as Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln and Bill Clinton.

Chapter Three analyzes Donald Trump's political discourses. The study explores how these speeches reflect power dynamics, societal issues, and ideologies, particularly through Trump's assertive rhetoric and divisive narratives, demonstrating how his language strategies enhance his political influence and connect with his audience.

Chapter Four analyzes Joe Biden's political speeches. The chapter focuses on various linguistic and rhetorical strategies used by Biden, particularly in speeches delivered during the 2020 presidential campaign and his inaugural address. The analysis explores Biden's use of language to address ideological perspectives, focusing on elements such as vocabulary, transitivity, modality, and personal pronouns. The textual strategies employed by Biden emphasize his interest in equality, fairness, inclusiveness, and social activism and reflect his dedication to social justice and institutional improvement.

In the **Fifth Chapter**, a comparative analysis of presidential speeches by Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden is conducted in order to explore how each leader employs linguistic strategies to shape his rhetorical strategies and influence the voters. The chapter examines the sample speeches from each president to identify patterns in the use of various language processes.

Conclusions, Contributions, Implications

The comparative analysis of campaign speeches by Barack Obama, Donald Trump, and Joe Biden highlights how linguistic strategies contribute to their distinct leadership styles and political messaging. Each leader's use of language plays a critical role in shaping the audience's perceptions, reinforcing ideological positions, and influencing the broader political landscape.

Obama's speeches are characterized by his use of inclusive pronouns, metaphors of hope, and intertextual references to create a sense of unity and shared purpose. His rhetoric positions him as a forward-looking leader who appeals to national togetherness. Trump, on the other hand, employs combative language and divisive pronouns, often utilizing metaphors that evoke a sense of urgency and conflict. His speeches reinforce a narrative of protecting the nation from perceived threats, thus solidifying his stance as a defender. Biden's approach centers on themes of empathy, healing, and renewal, utilizing relational and mental processes to connect emotionally with his audience and promote collective responsibility.

The analysis shows that each leader's rhetorical style aligns closely with their political identity and ideological stance. Obama's rhetoric fosters unity and progress, Trump's speeches emphasize division and action, and Biden's addresses seek to rebuild trust and national solidarity. These differences are reflected in the use of pronouns, transitivity, modality, and intertextuality, which shape social identities and power relations in distinct ways.

Key contributions of the research include:

- Providing a detailed comparison of the rhetorical strategies used by three influential U.S. political figures.
- Utilizing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) frameworks to explore how language constructs political narratives.
- Enhancing understanding of how leaders' linguistic choices resonate with different audience segments and affect public perception.

The implications of these findings extend to the fields of political communication, campaign strategy, and media studies. Political communicators can leverage the insights to refine messaging strategies that align with target audience values and emotions. Additionally, media professionals and researchers can examine how media coverage of these speeches further shapes public discourse and political realities.

The study opens several ways for future research, such as analyzing the evolution of Trump's rhetoric across multiple campaigns or comparing the speech patterns of Kamala Harris and Donald Trump in the 2024 presidential campaign. This research also suggests incorporating media analysis to better understand the relationship between political rhetoric and media representation, providing a more holistic view of political communication in contemporary U.S. politics.

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