

**“OVIDIUS” UNIVERSITY OF CONSTANȚA**

**Doctoral School of Humanities**

**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)**

**PhD Coordinator:  
Prof. Univ. Dr. Emerit Adina Ciugureanu**

**PhD Student:  
Fatima Farhoud**

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## **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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