

**Commitment and Denialism of Doing Speech Acts in Selected American
Presidential Discourses
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الالتزام والإنكار في القيام بأفعال الكلام في خطابات رئاسية أمريكية مختارة

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الخلاصة:

هناك اعتقادات واسعة الانتشار بأن السياسيين يستخدمون أساليب معقدة من أجل تجنب الإجابة على الأسئلة غير المريحة من حيث الالتزام بالوعد. ونتيجة لذلك، يستخدمون أساليب التجنب من أجل حفظ ماء الوجه وإرضاء الجمهور والناخبين، وضمان انتخابهم وإعادة انتخابهم. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى فحص الخطابات الرئاسية لكل من ترامب وبايدن من حيث إظهار مدى ارتكاب أو إنكار أفعال الخطاب. وهي تقترح أن ترامب أكثر التزاماً من حيث القيام بأفعال التعبير من بايدن، الذي يميل إلى أن يكون أكثر مروعة. يتم استخراج البيانات المختارة من خطابات ترامب وبايدن خلال حملتهما الانتخابية لعام ٢٠٢٤ وتحليلها في ضوء نموذج انتقائي يعتمد على نظريات في (2019) Geurts و(2021) Marsili's وتكشف نتائج الدراسة أن بايدن يستخدم بطريقة واضحة جداً استراتيجيات التهرب كوسيلة لرفض ما وعد بالالتزام به، ولحفظ ماء وجهه وأن يكون مهذباً مع الجمهور والناخبين الذين يكتشفون سياساتهم، وبالتالي يضمن انتخابه وإعادة انتخابه. خلاف ذلك، يظهر ترامب المزيد من النية من حيث الالتزام بالخطب السابقة التي يتفوه بها خلال حملته الانتخابية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الالتزام، الإنكار، الخطاب السياسي، الخطاب الرئاسي

Abstract:

There are widespread beliefs that politicians employ complicated methods in order to avoid answering uncomfortable questions in terms of committing promises. As a result, they employ avoidance methods in order to save face and be pleasant to the audience and voters, ensuring that they are elected and reelected. This study is intended to examine presidential speeches of both Trump and Biden in terms of showing the extent to which speech acts are committed or denied. It hypothesizes that Trump is more committed in terms of doing speech acts than Biden, who tends to be more evasive. The data selected are extracted from Trump and Biden's speeches during their 2024-Campaign and analyzed in the light of an eclectic model based on Geurts (2019) and Marsili's (2021) theories. The results of the study reveal that Biden uses in a very clear way evasion strategies as a way to reject what he promise to commit of and to save his face and to be polite to the audience and voters, which detect their policy, and hence, he ensures to be elected and reelected. Otherwise, Trump shows more intentionality in terms of committing of the prior speeches he utters during his election campaign.

Keywords: Commitment, Denialism, Political discourse, Presidential speech

1. Introduction

Speech acts, as conceptualized by Austin (1962) and later developed by Searle (1969), have been pivotal in understanding how language functions in social contexts. In the realm of political discourse, speech acts become instrumental tools through which leaders assert authority, forge connections, and navigate complex socio-political landscapes. This literature review examines the dynamics of commitment and denialism within speech acts in American presidential discourses, drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Geurts (2019) and Marsili (2021). Otherwise, the study of speech acts in presidential discourses is crucial for understanding the strategic communication employed by political leaders to achieve their political goals. This research aims to investigate

the commitment and denialism of speech acts in selected American presidential discourses, focusing on the speeches of Donald Trump and Joe Biden during their 2024 presidential campaigns. The study of speech acts in presidential discourses can aid in identifying the strategies used by political leaders to achieve their political goals and comprehending the influence of these strategies on public opinion and voter behavior. The study tries to answer the following research questions: 1. how do the speech acts of commitment and denialism in the presidential speeches of Donald Trump and Joe Biden reflect their political strategies and communication styles? 2. What implications do these strategies have for their electoral success and public perception?. The study will help those who are interested in discourse analysis better understand of how political leaders use speech acts to maintain their public image and achieve electoral success. The findings will have implications for the study of political communication, speech act theory, and the analysis of presidential discourses.

2. Literature Review

John L. Austin's seminal work "How to Do Things with Words" (1962) introduced the idea that utterances can perform actions. Searle (1969) expanded on this by categorizing speech acts into five types: assertives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. These categories have provided a foundation for analyzing political speeches, where commitments (commissives) and denials (assertives with a negative force) are prevalent.

2.1 Commitment and Denialism

Commitment in speech acts encompasses the speaker's expression of an intention or promise to undertake future actions, creating an obligation. This concept, grounded in Searle's (1969) work on speech act theory, identifies commissive acts where the speaker binds themselves to a course of action. These acts generate trust and expectations among the audience (Searle, 1969). Further exploration by Austin (1962) in "How to Do Things with Words" emphasizes the performative nature of language, illustrating how utterances can enact commitments (Austin, 1962). In political discourse, commitments serve as tools to build credibility and foster a connection with the audience, as examined by Chilton (2004), who highlights the strategic use of language in political contexts (Chilton, 2004). Denialism in speech acts involves the rejection or downplaying of established facts or adverse events to maintain a favorable public image or control a narrative. This includes strategies such as denying responsibility, minimizing negative outcomes, and discrediting opposition, as detailed in Marsili's (2021) "Denial and the Structure of Discourse" (Marsili, 2021). Van Dijk (1998) in "Ideology: A Multidisciplinary Approach" discusses how political actors use denial to shape public perception and ideology, often by reframing or dismissing contrary evidence (Van Dijk, 1998). Similarly, Cohen (2001) in "States of Denial: Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering" explores the psychological and rhetorical mechanisms behind denialism, emphasizing its role in political communication (Cohen, 2001).

2.1.1 Commitment in Political Discourse

Geurts (2019) emphasizes the performative nature of commitments in political speech. Political leaders often use commissive speech acts to pledge future actions, thereby constructing a vision of reliability and trustworthiness. These commitments serve not only to outline policy intentions but also to reinforce the speaker's moral and ethical stance. Research indicates that such commitments are instrumental in mobilizing voter support by providing clear and tangible goals (Van Dijk, 1997; Fairclough, 2000; Chilton, 2004).

2.1.2 Denialism in Political Discourse

Marsili (2021) explores denialism as a strategic maneuver in political speech, where leaders reject or downplay certain realities to shape public perception. Denialism can manifest in various forms, such as denying previous statements, downplaying negative events, or rejecting opposition claims. This strategy is often employed to maintain a favorable public image and to deflect criticism (Hoerl & McCartney, 2019; Lewandowsky et al., 2017; Dunlap & McCright, 2011).

3.2. Key Concepts in Speech Act Theory

1. Speech Acts

Speech acts are communicative actions that perform a function, such as promising, ordering, greeting, or apologizing. John Searle (1969) and J.L. Austin (1962) laid the groundwork for understanding how utterances can serve various purposes beyond conveying information.

2. Illocutionary Acts

Illocutionary acts refer to the intention behind an utterance, such as asserting, questioning, commanding, or promising. This concept highlights the performative nature of language where saying something is also doing something.

3. Perlocutionary Acts

Perlocutionary acts focus on the effects an utterance has on the listener, such as persuading, deterring, or inspiring. These acts emphasize the impact of speech on an audience.

4. Locutionary Acts

Locutionary acts involve the actual act of making a meaningful utterance, encompassing its phonetic, syntactic, and semantic aspects. This is the basic act of producing sounds or writing words that constitute the utterance.

5. Felicity Conditions

Felicity conditions are the contextual prerequisites for a speech act to be successfully performed. These include appropriate participants, contexts, intentions, and conventional procedures.

6. Direct and Indirect Speech Acts

Direct speech acts explicitly convey their function (e.g., "Close the door"). Indirect speech acts imply their function (e.g., "It's cold in here" to suggest closing the door).

7. Constitutive and Regulative Rules

Constitutive rules create or define new forms of behavior (e.g., rules of a game), whereas regulative rules govern behaviors that already exist (e.g., rules of etiquette).

8. Performative Utterances

Performative utterances are statements that perform an action by the very act of being spoken (e.g., "I apologize," "I promise"). Austin introduced this concept to show how language can be action-oriented.

4. Data Collection and Analytical Framework

The data under the study are extracted from Biden speech's released by The Wall Street Journal in 25/7/2024 taking 11:01 minutes, during which he is expected to comment on his decision to drop out of the 2024 presidential election and disclaim all his obligations to his voters and Trump's speech held in in the South Bronx, New York. Trump's speech was released by NBC News in 19/7/2024 and it takes about 1:33:10 minutes during which he addressed his assassination attempt, criticized the Biden administration, slams electric vehicles and rallies against illegal immigrant invasion. The study follows both Geurts' (2019) and Marsili's (2021) Theories, classified below, as an eclectic model for analyzing the data selected. The following figure shows the elements of the adopted model.

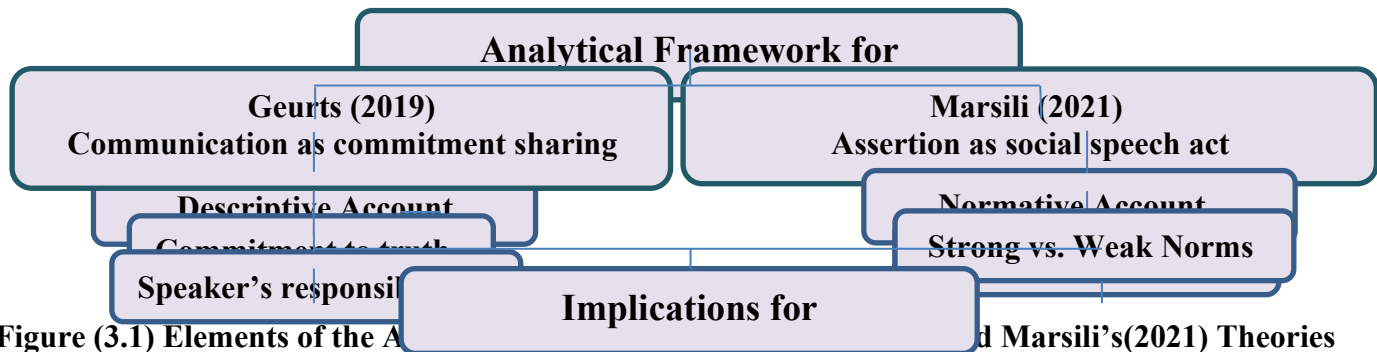


Figure (3.1) Elements of the Analytical Framework for Geurts (2019) and Marsili's (2021) Theories

4.1 Key Components of Geurts (2019) and Marsili (2021) Theories

1. Nature of Assertion

Geurts (2019) emphasizes a commitment account of assertion, focusing on the speaker's commitment to the truth of the asserted proposition. This involves understanding how assertions function in natural language and the responsibilities that come with making assertions. Marsili (2021) argues for a normative account of assertion, positing that assertions are governed by norms that dictate how they should be used, particularly concerning truth and informativeness.

2. Descriptive vs. Normative Framework:

Geurts provides a descriptive framework that analyzes how assertions are used in practice, without imposing normative constraints. Marsili offers a normative framework, suggesting that assertions should adhere to specific standards, such as the informativeness norm, which requires assertions to convey new information to the listener.

3. Weak vs. Strong Norms:

Geurts supports a weak norm of assertion, where the primary requirement is a commitment to the truth of the proposition, rather than the speaker's knowledge of it. Marsili, while also advocating for a normative approach,

discusses various norms, including the strong norm that emphasizes the necessity of knowledge for making assertions.

4. Implications for Communication:

Both theories address the implications of assertions for communication, particularly how they affect the listener's understanding and the conversational context. Geurts' focus on commitment highlights the responsibilities of the speaker, while Marsili's emphasis on norms underscores the expectations placed on assertions to be informative and truthful.

5. Data Analysis

5.1 Analysis of Biden's Speech

a. On Commitments:

Expressions of Duty: Biden emphasizes his commitment to the American people and democracy throughout the speech. Phrases like "it's been the honor of my life to serve as your president" and "I draw strength and I find joy in working for the American people" reflect a strong personal commitment to his role and responsibilities.

Promises of Transparency: He states, "I promise to always level with you, to tell you the truth," which reinforces his obligation to honesty and transparency, aligning with Geurts' notion that assertions involve a commitment to truth.

Promises of Action: Biden expresses a commitment to action by stating, "I'm going to keep working to end the war in Gaza, bring home all the hostages, and bring peace and security to the Middle East." This reflects a promise to work towards specific goals. He also commits to "keep fighting to make sure we lower the cost for everyone, not just seniors" regarding prescription drug prices.

Acknowledging Challenges: Biden acknowledges the challenges faced during his administration, stating, "we were in the grip of the worst pandemic in the century, the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression, the worst attack on our democracy since the Civil War." This reflects a commitment to addressing these issues.

Speaker's Responsibilities: Biden acknowledges the weight of his decisions, stating, "the decisions we make now will determine our fate." This highlights the responsibility he feels as a leader and the impact of his assertions on the audience and the nation.

Normative Assertions: Call for Unity: Biden's assertion that "we can see those we disagree with not as enemies but as fellow Americans" reflects a normative expectation for civility and respect in political discourse. This aligns with Marsili's focus on the norms governing assertions, emphasizing the need for unity and understanding.

Moral Responsibility: His statement, "does character and public life still matter?" invites the audience to reflect on the importance of integrity in leadership, reinforcing a normative standard for public figures.

b. On Denialism Speech Acts

Rejecting Negative Narratives: Biden denies the notion that China will inevitably surpass the United States, stating, "that's not the case anymore." rejecting the idea of American decline. This acts as a denialism speech act. He also denies the idea that the American people will walk away from the ideals of equality and inalienable rights, stating, "I do not believe the American people will walk away from it."

Emphasizing Progress: Biden highlights the progress made during his administration, stating, "we've come so far since my inauguration." He cites specific achievements, such as creating 16 million new jobs, lowering inflation, and rebuilding communities. This acts as a denialism speech act, rejecting the notion of stagnation or failure.

Rejecting Division: Biden's emphasis on rejecting hate and division can be seen as a denial of the legitimacy of divisive rhetoric. Phrases like "there is no place for political violence" act as a denialism speech act, rejecting the normalization of violence in political discourse.

Countering Negative Narratives: By stating, "we are a great nation because we are good people," he counters negative perceptions of American society, asserting a positive identity that denies the narrative of moral decay.

5.2. Analysis of Trump's Speech

a. On Commitments

Commitment to Victory and Prosperity: "Four months from now we will have an incredible Victory and we will begin the four greatest years in the history of our country." This expresses a strong commitment to winning the upcoming election and promises an unprecedented era of prosperity and success.

Commitment to National Unity: "The Discord and Division in our society must be healed. We must heal it quickly." Trump commits to addressing and resolving societal divisions, emphasizing the importance of national unity. "As Americans we are bound together by a single fate and a shared Destiny We rise together or we fall apart." This statement reinforces the commitment to collective unity and progress.

Commitment to Represent All Americans: "I am running to be president for all of America not half of America because there is no victory in winning for half of America." Trump asserts his commitment to being a president for the entire nation, not just a segment of it.

Commitment to Presidential Campaign: "With faith and devotion I proudly accept your nomination for president of the United States. This formal acceptance signifies his dedication to the presidential campaign and his intentions if elected.

Support and Protection: "Very brave Secret Service agents rushed to the stage." Trump commits to acknowledging and praising the bravery and dedication of his security detail.

Divine Protection: "I had God on my side." This statement shows a commitment to a narrative of divine intervention and support.

Survival and Strength: "I stand before you in this Arena only by the grace of almighty God." Trump commits to framing his survival as an act of divine providence.

b. Denialisms in Trump's Speech:

Denial of Partial Victory: "Because there is no victory in winning for half of America." Trump denies the notion of success if it is not inclusive of the entire nation, rejecting any victory that only benefits a portion of the population.

Denial of Fear and Weakness: "You'll never hear it from me a second time because it's actually too painful to tell." By stating this, Trump indirectly denies any perception of weakness or fear, presenting himself as strong and resilient despite the assassination attempt.

Denial of Division and Failure: "We rise together or we fall apart. Trump frames the situation in binary terms, denying the possibility of success in a divided nation and emphasizing collective success as the only viable outcome.

Rejection of Fear: "I felt very safe because I had God on my side." Denial of fear or panic in a dangerous situation, projecting calm and confidence.

Denial of Individual Weakness: "The crowd was confused because they thought I was dead." Trump denies the impact of the assassination attempt on his ability to stand strong, emphasizing resilience.

Minimization of Chaos: "Crowds Run for the exits or Stampede but not in this case." Denial of typical crowd behavior during crises, suggesting a unique and orderly response from his supporters. Through these speech acts, Trump strategically positions himself as a confident, inclusive, and resilient leader committed to national unity and future prosperity while rejecting any notions of division, weakness, or partial success.

6. Findings

Based on the provided analysis of Trump's speech, we can derive several findings regarding the differences between Trump and Biden in terms of commitment and denialism speech acts:

Commitments:

1. Trump:

- Emphasizes victory and future prosperity.
- Strongly commits to national unity and healing societal divisions.
- Pledges to represent all Americans.
- Highlights divine protection and personal resilience.

2. Biden (general tendencies inferred from known speeches):

- Focuses on empathy, healing, and restoring the soul of America.
- Promises to tackle systemic issues and promote equality.
- Stresses unity and bipartisan cooperation.
- Often highlights competence and experience in governance.

Denialisms:

1. Trump:

- Denies partial victories, emphasizing complete national success.
- Rejects notions of fear and weakness, even in dangerous situations.
- Minimizes chaos, portraying unique crowd responses to crises.

2. Biden (general tendencies inferred from known speeches):

- Denies pessimism, often countering narratives of decline with optimism.
- Rejects divisiveness, emphasizing unity over partisanship.
- Minimizes personal attacks, focusing more on policy and governance.

Conclusion

The study of commitment and denialism in presidential speech acts offers valuable insights into the rhetorical strategies employed by political leaders. By understanding these dynamics, we can better appreciate the complexities of political communication and its impact on public perception. Future research could further explore how these strategies evolve over time and across different political contexts. While the provided analysis focuses on Trump's commitments and denialism, it can be inferred some strategic differences when comparing to typical speech strategies of Joe Biden:

1. Commitment and Persuasion: Trump uses strong, assertive language to promise victory, unity, and divine protection. Emphasizes his resilience and portrays a clear binary between success and failure. Whereas Biden often focuses on empathy, unity, and healing the nation. His commitments usually center on restoring normalcy, decency, and building back better.
2. Denialism: Trump employs denialism to reject fear, weakness, and division. He often creates a narrative of exceptionalism and unwavering strength. However, Biden tends to avoid overt denialism, focusing instead on acknowledging issues and presenting a more collaborative and compassionate approach to solving problems. To conclude, Trump's speech strategies revolve around assertive commitments to victory, unity, and divine support, coupled with a denial of fear, weakness, and partial successes. This contrasts with Biden's typically more empathetic and inclusive rhetoric, focusing on collective healing and restoration without extensive use of denialism.

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