

Critical Jokes in American Political Speeches 2023: A Critical Pragmatic Analysis

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Summary:

The present paper investigates critical jokes in English political speeches, especially in American ones delivered in 2023. It aims to show how such jokes function in political dialogues and how they mirror criticism over indirect language. In order to achieve the aims of the study and to validate its hypotheses, the study has followed the following procedures: 1- Review the related literature. 2- Choose a purpose full data that approaches the demands of this study. 3- Analyse the selected data according to an eclectic model of analysis that is a mixture of critical and pragmatic devices. The study has concluded the following:

- 1- Political figures focus primarily on irony and indirect meaning.
- 2- political humor functions as a controlled rhetorical procedure that shapes public insight, manages criticism, and conveys power inside formal political discourse.

1. Introduction

Political speeches are not only used to present ideas, defend policies, or convince audiences, but they furthermore employ humor as an active communicative policy. In many political perspectives, speakers use jokes to draw attention, diminish tension, criticize foes, and express thoughts in a secondary way. Among the different types of humor, critical jokes are particularly important because they go outside entertainment and carry social, political, and ideological significances. Critical jokes in political speeches regularly depend on pragmatic and rhetorical strategies such as irony, sarcasm, exaggeration, implicature, and shared background knowledge. Over these strategies, politicians can disparage political organizations, media discourse,

public policies, or political numbers without direct clash. Like this, humor becomes a strategic linguistic device that permits speakers to direct criticism in a socially suitable and persuasive way.

The present paper investigates critical jokes in English political speeches, especially in American ones delivered in 2023. It aims to show how such jokes function in political dialogues and how they mirror criticism over indirect language. Since political language is strictly related to power, ideology, and persuasion, the study of humorous political dialogue is vital in understanding how politicians accomplish meaning and influence audiences.

1.1 The Statement of the Problem

Political discourse has been extensively studied in linguistics richly. On the other hand, the usage of critical jokes in political speeches has not received enough attention as a serious linguistic and pragmatic phenomenon. Several people consider jokes as mere fun, but in political speeches they often achieve deeper purposes related to criticism, persuasion, ideology, and public image.

The problem of the current study lies in the point that critical jokes in political speeches usually convey meanings outside their accurate wording. They are often based on irony, sarcasm, implicature, and exaggeration, which make criticism indirect. As a consequence, there is a need to explore how politicians use such jokes, what pragmatic tools they rely on, and what communicative purposes these jokes serve in political discourse.

1.2 The Questions of the Study

The study tries to answer the following:

1. What are the main kinds of critical jokes used in English political speeches?
2. What pragmatic tools are employed?
3. How do politicians use jokes to express criticism indirectly?

1.3 The Aims of the Study

The study aims to achieve the following:

1. Identifying the critical jokes used in English political speeches.
2. Showing the main pragmatic tools employed in the selected jokes.
3. Pinpointing the indirectness of criticism.

1.4 The Limits of the Study

This study is limited to analyse six American critical jokes selected purposefully from American formal political speeches delivered in 2023. The study is also limited to analyzing the selected jokes in terms of their context, type, pragmatic tools, and communicative function.

1.5 The Value of the Study

The study is valuable due to its contribution in the fields of Discourse Analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis, Pragmatics, and Political Discourse Analysis. It is precious to people interested in reporting or translating political speeches, and political criticism

2. Literature Review

2.1 Introduction

This section reviews relevant literature, beginning with Discourse Analysis (DA), which examines language usage in social contexts to shape meaning. Then, it addresses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), highlighting the role of language in reflecting ideologies and power relations. Furthermore, the section observes jokes, with focus on Political Discourse Analysis (PDA), critical jokes as tools of social and political critique.

2.2 Discourse Analysis

Discourse signifies language that is used in actual communicative situations. It includes interaction between writers and readers, speakers and listeners or within a social and cultural setting. Discourse is observed as a kind of communication molded by its social function, emphasizing that language meaning relays on context. So understanding discourse involves more than grammar or vocabulary; it includes studying how people use language to accomplish goals such as persuading, informing, or expressing identity (Leech, 1983, p. 84).

According to Richards et al. (1992, p. 111), DA contains both written and spoken forms of communication; such as conversations, interviews and essays. It stresses on how members create meaningful interaction by choosing appropriate words, pronouns, and sentence structures. As a result, affective use of those linguistic elements helps building coherent discourse.

one space one space The word 'discourse' is usually defined as "language beyond the sentence," and the analysis of discourse is therefore concerned with studying language in texts and conversation. Unlike traditional linguistic description, language-users are capable of more than purely distinguishing correct from incorrect forms. According to (Canning & Walker, 2024, p.1), DA investigates the ways in which language is used and organized in written and spoken texts to produce meanings and takes into account the social contexts of construction, and the social roles and distinctiveness of those involved".

2.3 Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a form of discourse analysis that assumes a critical perspective on language usage, investigating texts and other discourse types to reveal ideologies and values hidden within the one space texts. It aims to reveal the interests and power relationships existing within institutional and socio-historical texts by analyzing how language is employed (Richards & Schmidt, 2010, p. 145).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) began in the late 1970s as a significant division of discourse studies. It aims to discover how power and control are expressed and maintained in society. Fairclough, (1992, p.28) defines CDA as a method that connects language with social theory. It examines how communication shapes and reflects social relations. This method studies how political, economic, and media institutions use language to reinforce their influence and spread ideologies.

CDA, therefore, focuses not only on linguistic constructions but also on how they serve social and political purposes.

van Dijk (2001, p.352) describes CDA as the "study of how social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted and reproduced by text and talk within social and political contexts". He clarifies that language can be a device used by powerful parties such as politicians, media, or business leaders to effect or control others. It aims to expose these hidden mechanisms by analyzing the meanings and structures of communiqué. Through this process, researchers are able to uncover how power relationships and ideologies are built and maintained through normal language use. Moreover, it highlights the role of ideology in determining how people think and act.

According to Coffin (2001, p. 99), CDA helps show how particular linguistic selections produce ideological positions and emphasize unequal power relations. It also reveals how individuals or groups use language to confirm actions, silence others, or promote their worldviews. In this common sense, CDA is both a linguistic and a social practice. It studies how words effect thoughts and how power is drilled through discourse. CDA's final goal is to promote social awareness and justice through understanding the power of language not only to analyze texts.

2.4 Jokes

According to The Britannica Dictionary (2025), 'joke' as a linguistic item refers to something said or done with the purpose of causing laughter. It includes short humorous statements or short-term stories that is closed with a surprising and funny twist. The item also extends, in a disapproving common sense, to describe a somebody or something that is not taken seriously as it lacks reliability. As a verb, 'to joke' means to make comments proposed to amuse, either commonly or by mocking someone or something. The expression joking aside (or joking apart in British English) is commonly used to shift from a light-hearted remark to a serious point. The adverb jokingly is used to describe speech delivered in a playful or humorous manner. (Dictionary.com, 2025).

A 'joke' is a complicated and fascinating element of human conduct. It is asserted that jokes are a defining feature of humankind, analogous to speech. It is evident in social customs and cultural products, and its application is highly regarded in interpersonal exchanges (Ritchie, 2004, p.12). Jokes are defined as "small stories or a short series of words, both made up, in a spoken or written format, intended to make the hearer or reader laugh" (Yus, 2025, 3).

2.4.1 Critical Jokes

Critical jokes occupy a significant status in humor research since they do not only make people laugh; they communicate attitudes, experiment assumptions, and critique social customs. Scholars interested in humor theory, generally deal with critical jokes as a communicative phenomenon that goes further than entertainment. In linguistics and communication revisions, humor is regularly analyzed not just for what makes it funny, but for what it does in communication and discourse. In critical

jokes and other types of humor, aggressive and sexual instincts are made socially satisfactory to society, so someone might say what is forbidden under the umbrella of joking (Oring, 2010, p.xi).

Attardo's work in humor studies shows that some humorous forms target social categories or performances with evaluative intention, which situates critical jokes as means of commentary rather than fine mirth-making (Attardo, 2020, p.25).

2.4.2 Major Functions of Critical Jokes

One of the most powerful outlines for understanding the functions of humor, containing critical humor, comes from communication research. Meyer (2000, p.310) recognizes four main functions of humor:

(1) identification, which bonds those who share morals with the joke-teller. (2) clarification, that helps focus on or crystallize thoughts. (3) enforcement, that faintly strengthens social norms and (4) differentiation, that draws limitations, regularly by separating "US" from "THEM" via entertaining criticism. In the setting of critical jokes, 'enforcement' and 'differentiation' are particularly relevant. They utilize humor to highlight deviance or criticism and to locate audiences relative to the target of critique.

Critical jokes are powerful since they can carry evaluative power without obvious aggression. In many societies, direct criticism of authoritative parties or figures can be unsafe. In fact, critical humor suggests a more indirect means. By framing critique as a joke, talkers can mask thoughtful objections under the excuse of playfulness, that can lessen social tension (Meyer, 2000, p.312).

2.4.3 Features of Critical Jokes

In conditions, where expressing criticism could be dangerous or socially sensitive, critical jokes serve as a means of indirect disagreement. A study of American jokes shows that talkers repeatedly employ pun words that are spelled and spoken the same but have dissimilar meanings to make fun of politics and society. This strategy lets ones show their displeasure without direct confrontation (Ali, 2019, p.45).

Critical jokes are a sort of humor that goes further than just making people laugh. They commonly use irony, satire, or double meaning to make fun of or think about social and political issues. In a critical-pragmatic analysis of American jokes, (Lutfi,

2020, p.7) shows that jokes depend on cognitive and linguistic procedures such as incongruity, ambiguity, and pragmatic context to produce connotations that exceed their literal understanding. Jokes are not neutral or merely entertaining; they may own layers that convey nuanced social or ideological criticism.

2.4.4 Types of Critical Jokes

In the broader humor literature, types of critical jokes are distinguished according to various forms such as; satire, parody, irony, and sarcasm, all of which have critical potential. **Satire** uses humor to expose and mock social or political failings, often with the aim of prompting reproduction or reform (Nilsen & Nilsen, 2025). **Parody** imitates an unusual work or style to make known its assumptions, acting as critique over mimicry (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004, p.147). **Irony and sarcasm** work by saying a bit that denies the surface meaning, often emphasizing a deeper critique of the goal's behavior or claims (Attardo, 2020).

Lastly, a distinction in critical joke types lies in who the target is, and how obvious the criticism is. **Satirical jokes** typically target wide social institutions, customs, or figures, inviting readers or listeners to question the status quo (Nilsen & Nilsen, 2025). **Parodic jokes** frequently mimic a specific style or person, making critique via sensitive imitation (Buijzen & Valkenburg, 2004, p.147). **Irony-based jokes** depend on an understood mismatch between appearance and intention, which indirectly invites audiences to measure that mismatch (Attardo, 2020, p. 25).

2.5 Political Discourse Analysis

The wider intellectual background of Political Discourse Analysis (henceforth, PDA) echoes major changes in linguistics and political theory. Edelman (1964, 1988) argues that political language actively constructs reality rather than merely describing it. These perspectives align with Halliday's socio-functional view of language as a system of socially motivated choices (Halliday, 1978, 1994). Together, they support Muntigl's claim that PDA must also engage with alternative political practices that challenge dominant power structures (Muntigl, 2002, p.5). Schäffner (1996) notes that political discourse deals mainly with power and decision-making. Politicians use language strategically to gain support, justify actions, and guide citizens' behavior. Therefore, analyzing political language reveals how leaders

attempt to control meaning and opinion through careful wording and framing (Schäffner, 1996). Chilton connects political discourse to human cognition (Chilton, 2004, p.3).

Okulska and Cap conceptualize political discourse as socially anchored action (Okulska & Cap, 2010, pp.3–15), and van Dijk emphasizes that political discourse is a central site of power abuse and domination, arguing that groups who control influential discourse possess greater capacity to shape public beliefs and actions (van Dijk, 1993, 1997).

Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) is a specialized field of discourse analysis that studies how language functions in political contexts. It focuses on speeches, debates, interviews, and other political communications that aim to shape public opinion. van Dijk (1998, p. 11) explains that political discourse is not limited to politicians but includes all participants involved in political communication, such as journalists, voters, and institutions. PDA investigates how political actors use language to express ideologies, defend policies, and influence audiences. It shows how words become tools for persuasion, authority, and leadership (van Dijk, 1998, p. 11).

Political Discourse Analysis (PDA) offers a comprehensive framework for examining how political language constructs, maintains, and challenges power.

3. Data Analysis

3.1 Introduction

This section presents a detailed critical–pragmatic analysis of six American political jokes chosen purposefully from American political speeches delivered during 2023. The analysis observes how humor tasks as a strategic communicative means in formal political discourse. Separately, each joke is inspected systematically in terms of its contextual background (who, when, and where), its nature, the pragmatic devices it employs, and its communicative purpose.

3.2 Data Collection

Six political jokes are chosen for purpose that are delivered during formal public speeches by American political leaders during 2023. The speeches were recited at high-profile public events such as official gatherings, campaign rallies, press dinners, political conferences. They are attended by politicians, journalists, and people of

high status. The jokes under analysis were commonly circulated through news reports, television broadcasts, and online media platforms which enlarged their interpretive impact and public visibility. They were selected as they explicitly reproduce critical attitudes toward political institutions, media discourse, bureaucratic practices, and public opinion.

3.3 Data Analysis

Joke 1

Joe Biden said: **"I'm really excited to be here tonight with the only group of Americans who have a lower approval rating than I do."**

This is a self-disapproving political joke. It mainly depends on irony and implicature. The irony is mirrored in the contrast between the talker's confirmed excitement and his reference to low support ratings. Instead of evading criticism, the talker turns it into humor. The implicature comes from the indirect contrast between himself and the media which suggests that both of them suffer from low public trust. As a conclusion, in this humorous comparison, the talker softens criticism and presents himself as self-aware and fully amicable.

Joke 2

Barack Obama said: **"Donald Trump has been saying that the media is rigged against him. Which is funny, because he's been appearing on every show except Sesame Street."**

This is an other-directed critical joke. Sarcasm and intertextual reference are its main bases. The sarcastic influence appears in the word "funny" that does not voice simple amusement but rather distrust in Trump's assertion. The reference to "Sesame Street" points to a shared cultural knowledge and exaggerates Trump's media publicity. Thus, the joke weakens the dispute that media is unfair to him. The joke is used here to represent paradox and weaken the reliability of the political claim without using direct accusation.

Joke 3

Hillary Clinton said: **"I took a break from my rigorous nap schedule to be here tonight."**

This is a self-disparaging political joke. It is based on irony and exaggeration. The irony is represented in the description of a "nap schedule" as "rigorous" which creates an intentional paradox. The exaggeration has reinforced the humorous influence by overstressing laziness or inactivity. By joking about herself in this way, the Clinton assumes a possible criticism in front of others can be used against her. That might make her appear frank and relatable and it also helps to lessen the force of undesirable stereotypes.

Joke 4

Barack Obama: **"The best way to get something done in this country is not to have endless meetings about meetings."**

This joke is analyzed as a critical official joke. It implies understatement and irony. The repetition in "meetings about meetings" climaxes bureaucratic inefficiency and suggests prevention with extreme procedure. Humor makes the criticism more satisfactory socially and by media.

Joke 5

Joe Biden: **"I'm not sure how you prepare for something like this. I just watched cable news until I got angry."**

A critical evaluative joke is presented in this extract. It rests on irony and shared cultural presupposition. The irony lies in showing anger as a procedure of preparation. The presupposition is that the audience already comprehends "cable news" as a source frequently linked with tension, sensationalism, and political clash. It criticizes media discourse by signifying that any exposure to it might produce emotional response rather than balanced perception.

Joke 6

Donald Trump: **"I'd end Ukraine war within 24 hours or before taking office"**

When Trump was told again in a meeting with 'Time Magazine' that he had said 'he would end the Russian war on Ukraine on "day one," he demanded he hadn't been speaking literally or seriously. He adds sarcastically, "Well, I said that figuratively, and I said that as an exaggeration, as to make a point, and you know, it gets, of course, by the false news [unintelligible]. Clearly, people know that when I said that,

it was said in joke, but it was also said that it will be ended. So Trump, here has used jokes like an ad for his election campaign

3.4 Findings and Results

The analysis of the six selected political jokes exposes clear outlines in the use of pragmatic strategies. The findings illustrate that irony is the most central pragmatic tool across the data. It is depicted in all six jokes, either directly or in grouping with other tools. Sometimes, it operates via clear contrast between literal and intended meaning. This recurrent use shows that irony is the dominant mechanism through which political criticism is made softer and socially acceptable in formal public settings. Implicature and indirect meaning also play a substantial role in the analysed data. Though implicature is explicitly identified in one joke, indirect criticism is current in most of data under scrutiny. The talkers rarely criticize organizations or persons directly. Instead, they depend on audience inference. That suggests the idea that political humor functions over contextual awareness and shared background knowledge. The addressees are anticipated to recognize cultural references, paradoxes, overstatements one space without overt explanation.

In addition, findings show variant in the direction of criticism. Two jokes are self-deprecating, one is other-directed, and two are institutionally or media-directed. Self-deprecating humor is used to build solidarity and construct an image of modesty and self-awareness. Other-directed humor challenges political opponents while avoiding direct confrontation. Jokes about the institution and the media are revealing dissatisfaction of the general public towards bureaucratic practices and sensationalist media reporting. The distribution above shows clearly that jokes have more strategic value for politicians. In particular, they help to perform different functions including self-presentation, attack, and institutional criticism. As one can see from the analysis, jokes told by politicians in their political speeches do not serve an entertaining purpose only. They are used strategically to decrease social tension, avoid face-threatening acts, enhance audience solidarity, and frame criticism more diplomatically.

Moreover, sometimes jokes are told in order to satisfy personal ambitions and announce important achievements.

4. Conclusions

It is concluded that:

Political figures focus primarily on irony and indirect meaning to express criticism in a socially adequate way, allowing them to challenge political opponents, media narratives, or official inefficiency without direct clash. Through shared cultural references, implicature, and exaggeration speakers invite audiences to conclude deeper evaluative connotations while protecting their public image, and maintaining politeness. Self-deprecating jokes support to build credibility, and solidarity, whereas institution-directed humor climaxes broader social displeasure. Generally speaking, political humor functions as a controlled rhetorical procedure that shapes public insight, manages criticism, and conveys power inside formal political discourse.

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النكات النقدية في الخطابات السياسية الأمريكية 2023: تحليل تداولي نقدي

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الكلمات المفتاحية: النكات النقدية، الخطابات السياسية، التداولية، تحليل الخطاب النقدي، تحليل الخطاب السياسية

الملخص:

تتناول الورقة البحثية النكات النقدية في الخطابات السياسية الإنجليزية، وخاصة الأمريكية منها والتي أُلقيت عام ٢٠٢٣. وتهدف الدراسة إلى توضيح كيفية توظيف هذه النكات في الحوارات السياسية، وتعكس النقد الموجه بلغة غير المباشرة. ولتحقيق أهداف الدراسة والتحقق من صحة فرضياتها، اتبعت الدراسة الإجراءات التالية: ١- مراجعة الأدبيات ذات الصلة. ٢- اختيار عينة هادفة تلي متطلبات هذه الدراسة. ٣- تحليل البيانات المختارة وفقاً لنموذج تحليل انتقائي يجمع بين الأدوات التحليلية النقدية والبراغماتية. وقد خلصت الدراسة إلى ما يلي:

- ١- يركز السياسيون بشكل أساسي على السخرية والمعنى غير المباشر.
- ٢- تعمل الفكاهة السياسية كإجراء بلاغي مُحكم يُشكل الوعي العام، ويُدير النقد، ويُجسد السلطة داخل الخطاب السياسي الرسمي.