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## A Critical Discourse Analysis of Richard Nixon's Political Speeches

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### Abstract

This research provides a critical analysis of Richard Nixon's Watergate speeches through Fairclough's (1995) Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, highlighting how language functions as a means of sustaining political power and legitimacy during times of crisis. The central problem addressed in this research concerns how Nixon's discourse constructs and controls agency, accountability, and public perception through linguistic and rhetorical strategies. Specifically, the study aims to identify how ergative verbs, passive constructions, and modality serve to shape meanings of blame, responsibility, and authority; to explore the discursive strategies through which Nixon negotiates self-legitimation; and to analyze how these linguistic patterns reflect and reproduce broader ideological and power relations between the presidency and the public.

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It is hypothesized that Nixon's use of passives and ergative verbs obscures personal agency, while his moral appeals and references to national duty enhance credibility and deflect blame. These findings reveal how political discourse operates as a mechanism of power, ideology, and persuasion in maintaining institutional legitimacy. This study focuses on fifteen selected excerpts from Richard M. Nixon. A qualitative form of analysis is adopted in this study.

**Keywords:** discourse analysis, ergative verbs, modality, passive constructions

### تحليل الخطاب النقدي في الخطاب السياسية لريتشارد نيكسون

م. صدى علي حامد

قسم التاريخ، كلية الآداب، جامعة تكريت، تكريت، العراق

#### المستخلص

يقدم هذا البحث تحليلاً نقدياً لخطابات ووترغيت للرئيس ريتشارد نيكسون في ضوء إطار التحليل النقدي للخطاب الذي قدّمه نورمان فيركلاف (1995)، مع تسليط الضوء على دور اللغة بوصفها وسيلةً لصيانة السلطة السياسية والشرعية في أوقات الأزمات، إذ تتمثل المشكلة الرئيسية التي تعالجها الدراسة في الكيفية التي يبني بها نيكسون خطابه ويتحكم من خلاله في مفاهيم الفاعلية والمساءلة وتشكيل الرأي العام عبر استراتيجيات لغوية وبلاغية محددة، وتهدف تحديداً إلى الكشف عن كيفية استخدام أفعال المطاوعة والتراكيب المبنية للمجهول وأدوات التعبير عن الاحتمال والوجوب وكذلك تحليل الأساليب الخطابية التي يستخدمها من أجل تبرير نفسه وتعزيز شرعيته، إضافةً إلى تحليل كيفية انعكاس هذه الأنماط اللغوية وإعادة إنتاجها للعلاقات الأيديولوجية وعلاقات القوة الأوسع بين مؤسسة الرئاسة والجمهور، وتقتضى الدراسة أن استخداماً للمبني للمجهول وأفعال المطاوعة يسهم في طمس الفاعلية الشخصية، في حين أن توظيفه للنداءات الأخلاقية والإشارات إلى الواجب الوطني يعزز مصداقيته ويساعد على تحويل اللوم بعيداً عنه، وتكشف النتائج أن الخطاب السياسي يعمل بوصفه آليةً للسلطة والأيديولوجيا والإقناع في

سبيل الحفاظ على الشرعية المؤسسية، وتركز الدراسة على خمس عشرة مقتطفًا مختارًا من خطابه. تعتمد هذه الدراسة على التحليل النوعي .

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** تحليل الخطاب، أفعال المطاوعة، النمطية، التراكيب المبنية للمجهول

## **1-Introduction**

Political discourse plays a central role in shaping public understanding, legitimizing political actions, and directing national attitudes. Among the many political figures whose rhetoric has had a lasting impact, Richard Nixon stands out as a president who led the United States during periods of war, foreign tension, and domestic scandal. His speeches—delivered during the Vietnam War, the Cold War, and the Watergate crisis—represent a valuable field for examining how political language is used to persuade audiences, manage public opinion, and protect political authority.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides an effective framework for uncovering the hidden ideological structures and power relations embedded in such political communication. Drawing on approaches developed by scholars such as Fairclough, Van Dijk, and Wodak , CDA allows researchers to examine how linguistic choices contribute to constructing political realities. Within this study, particular attention is given to three key linguistic features that frequently appear in political rhetoric: ergative verbs, passive constructions, and modality. These elements are not merely grammatical structures; they serve important strategic functions in political persuasion.

This research applies CDA to selected speeches by Richard Nixon in order to highlight how ergative structures, passive forms, and modal expressions function within his discourse. By analyzing these linguistic strategies, the study aims to reveal how Nixon constructed legitimacy, justified policy decisions, and managed crises through carefully crafted language.

## **2. Discourse Analysis**

Discourse analysis is regarded as a methodological technique that explores language and communication in order to reveal underlying power, social, and cultural processes. It

emphasizes the significance of language as a social construct that both reflects and shapes reality of power dynamics and context (Fairclough, 1989:11).

Fairclough mentions that discourse analysis is a new "cross discipline" that draws from a variety of well-established fields, including linguistics, sociology, anthropology, and cognitive psychology.

According to Yule (1996:129) a discourse is an investigation of language use in light of the social and psychological elements that affect communication. The word "discourse" comes from the Latin word "discursus," which means "speech" or "conversation".

Discourse analysis has developed into a number of subfields, each with its own approach and perspective. For example, critical discourse analysis is discourse-analytic research that focuses on how text and speech in social and political contexts are used to enact, reproduce, legitimize, and oppose social-power abuse and inequality. (Van Dijk, 2015:466) On the other hand, he suggests that conversation analysis understands the pattern and structure of spoken interaction.

Furthermore, the general meaning of the word discourse varies depending on the various contexts and speakers' belief systems when they are communicating in various spheres of social life. Nevertheless, speaking of discourse is not limited to written and spoken language; it also encompasses visual images. (Ibrahim,2018:18)

## **2.1 Discourse as a Social Activity**

Fairclough (1989:22) says that language is not a phenomenon that exists outside society; rather, it is a component of it. He argues that the relationship between language and society is not external but a dialectical and internal connection.

Fairclough confirms that language is a component of society, and linguistic phenomena are a particular kind of social phenomenon. He describes language as a social process by examining the differences between text and discourse.

## **2.2 Discourse and Text Analysis**

Fairclough thinks that a text is not a process; it is a product. He adds that a text is only one aspect of discourse, which is the entire process of social interaction. Fairclough feels that the social interaction process involves not just the text but also the producing

process whereby the text serves as a product, and the process of interpretation from which the text acts as a resource.(ibid.)

Fairclough (1989:24) asserts that text analysis is merely an element of discourse analysis. This involves the analysis of both interpretive and creative processes. From a discourse analysis viewpoint, the formal characteristics of a text might be seen as traces of the process of creation on the one hand, and contrary as cues during the interaction process(ibid.)

### **2.3 Critical Discourse Analysis**

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is discourse-analytic research that focuses on how text and speech in social and political contexts are used to enact, reproduce, legitimize, and oppose social-power abuse and inequality (Van Dijk, 2015:466)

Critical discourse analysis is a critical viewpoint that can be found in all fields of discourse studies, including sociolinguistics, ethnography of communication, discourse grammar, discourse pragmatics, rhetoric, stylistics, narrative analysis, argumentation analysis, multimodal discourse analysis and social semiotics, the psychology of discourse processing and conversation analysis, among others. Additionally, CDA has parallels in "critical" advancements in the social sciences, psychology, stylistics, pragmatics, sociolinguistics, and others, some of which date back to the early 1970s. (Van Dijk, 2015:467).

Among other things, critical discourse research has certain characteristics: It is mainly concerned with social and political issues rather than just studying discourse structures in isolation from their social and political settings. More precisely, CDA examines how speech structures implement, validate, and acknowledge, perpetuate, or contest dominance (power) dynamics in society. Van Dijk argues that the basic principles of CDA are as follows:

- 1-CDA tackles social issues.
- 2- Culture and society are made up of discourse.
- 3- Ideological work is done through discourse.
- 4-Discourse analysis is both explanative and interpretive.

### **2.4 Levels of Critical Discourse Analysis**

Fairclough (1989:26) describes the stages of critical discourse analysis as follows:

- 1- The stage of description, which deals with the basic characteristics of the text.
- 2- Interpretation focuses on the connection between interaction and text.
- 3-Explanation focuses on how interaction and social context are related.

## **2.5 Political Discourse**

Political discourse has been a major focus of CDA, which is not surprising given its particular emphasis in the critical analysis of power abuse and resistance to it. Even before the term CDA was coined, similar analytical concerns were evident in Chilton's early research on the nuclear armaments debate, Orwellian language, and security metaphors. (VanDijk, 2015:478).

The CDA approach to political discourse has been spearheaded across numerous nations, topics, genres, empirical research, and methodologies. Fairclough's research on political discourse has given careful consideration to globalization challenges, frequently from a political economic standpoint. Fairclough's strategy for CDA particularly highlights the necessity of connecting discursive practices and discourse structures to macro-level social and political institutions (Ibid.)

## **2.6 Passivation in English**

Abushihab (2014:36) states that passivation is “a term used in the grammatical analysis of voice, referring to a sentence, clause, or verb form where the grammatical subject is typically the recipient or goal of the action denoted by the verb”. He indicates that modern English has two grammatical voices: the active voice and the passive voice. The difference between active and passive voice lies in how the verb relates to the subject. In an active sentence, the subject performs the action, whereas in a passive sentence the subject receives the action or is omitted. Since passive constructions require a direct object, only transitive verbs can be passivized, while intransitive verbs cannot occur in the passive voice. Passive sentences are formed by using a tense of the verb to be followed by the past participle of the main verb.

Ashihab (2025:198.) mentions that passivation is “a grammatical process in which the structure of the whole sentence changes without affecting the meaning”. He points out that “the passive voice of a verb simply means the form of the verb used when the subject is being acted upon rather than doing something”.

Folse (2016: 187) asserts that the active voice is used to state an action clearly and directly, with the doer of the action serving as the subject of the sentence. He believes that the passive voice is used when an action is described indirectly rather than stated straightforwardly. The subject of the sentence functions as the recipient of the action, while the original doer appears as the object, introduced by the preposition "by".

### **2.6.1 Uses of Passive Voice**

Eastwood (1999, 134) believes the passive voice is used in both spoken and written language, though it occurs more frequently in writing. It is particularly common in textbooks and reports, where identifying the agent of the action is often unnecessary.

Folse (2009: 244) indicates that the passive voice is used when the performer of the action is not the most important piece of information. In a passive sentence, the subject can be a person or an object that undergoes the action. When the writer or speaker wants to identify the doer in a passive sentence, they can include it using "by + agent phrase." Examples:

(1) The president was elected by the people.

The phrase by the people can be left out because it does not provide new information and is not the most important element of the text. (ibid.)

Crystal (1991) mentions that English passivation is classified into two main types, the first of which is the agentive passive, where the agent is explicitly stated as example:

(2) a-Manal broke the window.

b- The window was broken by Manal. (Agentive Passive)

The second type is the agentless passive, in which the sentence does not specify who performs the action. Example:

(3) a-Nada cleans the house.

b- The house is cleaned. (Agentless Passive)

### **2.6.2 Classifications of Passive Voice**

Toyota (2009, 476 - 477) describes the English passive as follows:

"It is commonly classified into two types: verbal passive and adjectival passive. The difference determined is based on the features of the past participle. When it behaves like a verb, the form is called the verbal passive; when it exhibits adjectival characteristics, it is called the adjectival passive. " The passive constructed with auxiliary 'get' is called the get-passive.

Folse (2009, 245) argues that the syntactic patterns of get-passives and be-passives are very similar, as both are formed with a past participle. The get-passive expresses a sudden or dynamic change, whereas the be-passive emphasizes the resulting state. Here, the past participle acts as an adjective that characterizes the subject. The use of get is regarded as informal and is consequently far more frequent in spoken language than in writing.

## **2.7 Ergative Verbs:**

Karshieva (2024:133 ) points out that ergative verbs are rare class of verbs that reveal “a syntactic alternation between transitive and intransitive structures.” What makes them special is their ability to transform the syntactic role of their subject and object by depending on the construction. Al-Sabae(2018:37) admits that “one of the prominent features of ergative construction is that the object of the transitive construction corresponds to the subject of the ergative construction”. For instance :

(4) A-Noor opened the door. (transitive)

B- The door opened . (intransitive ergativity)

The verb “open” works ergatively by taking a transitive form in the first example and an intransitive form in the second. The construction (1-a) is "process oriented". This means that the focus is on the event instead of the "doer" of the action. While construction (1-b) is "agent oriented" which means that the focus is on the doer of the event. (Halliday 1967:47).

Lyons (1968:352) says that ergative verbs in English are those verbs which are one-place predicates that is the influence of the verb influences back to the subject.

### **2.7.1 Classification of Ergative Verbs:**

Ergative verbs can be classified as follows:

#### **2.7.1.1 Change**

Aziz( 2021:13) argues that ergative verbs often denote processes that transform something from one state into another. Ergative verbs that refer to events where some type of change occurs are:(age, break, begin, bend, bleach, burst, change, burn, continue, crack,

decrease, darken, diminish, dispersed, drown, double, dry, empty, end, finish, fade, grow, improve, open, increase, quicken, rot, shatter, shrink, shut, split, slow, spread, start, stop, stick, stretch, tear, thicken, widen, and worsen).

#### **2.7.1.2 Food, Vehicle, Movement**

Many ergative verbs associate specifically to definite areas of meaning. For instance, some relate to cooking and food, others illustrate the physical movement, and some of them involve a vehicle as the object of the transitive verb or the subject of the intransitive verb. These verbs are arranged as follows:

- a- Verbs describing physical movement (move, drop, balance, rest, rock, shake, spin, stand, turn, swing, and steady).
- b- Verbs describing food (fry, boil, cook, defrost, bake, melt, thicken, simmer, and roast).
- c- Verbs describing vehicles (fly, crash, drive, back, park, reverse, run, and sail).

#### **2.7.1.3 Limitation on Ergative Subject**

Aziz( 2021:13) asserts that a number of verbs can be used simultaneously with one or two nouns only. For example:

(5) a- He fired a gun.

b-The gun fired.

The following verbs are employed ergatively with the noun, and type of noun, which is given:

- 1-catch (clothing article)
- 2- fire (pistol, rifle, a gun )
- 3- play (music)
- 4- ring (the alarm, a bell)
- 5- show (anger, an emotion such as fear)
- 6- sound (the alarm, a horn).(ibid.)

#### **2.7.1.4 Ergative Verbs Requiring Further Details**

Aziz( 2021:13-14) mentions that there are a number of ergative verbs that normally have an adverb or some other phrases or clauses when they are used intransitively. This

structure is used when you wish to point out how something behaves. Thus, the individual who performs the act is not necessary. Examples:

(6) Cotton washes well if they treat it carefully.

(7) She likes the new car. It handles beautifully.

Ergative verbs that are followed by some further information when they are used intransitively are:

“Clean, freeze, handle, mark, polish, sell, stain, and wash.”

### **2.7.1.5 The Difference Between Ergative and Transitive Processes**

Han & Mahzoun (2019:70) argue that transitive clauses focus mainly on the actor, the participant who performs the action. Ergative clauses, however, center on the medium. The meaning of the thing that undergoes the event is presented as an essential part of what happens. Further analysis shows that some ergative verbs can function either as transitive or intransitive verbs (such as melt and break), while others only appear in ergative, intransitive structures (like happen or arrive). This distinction means that verbs in the first group can take passive constructions, but verbs in the second group cannot .

Han & Mahzoun (2019:70) add an additional point, explaining that while ergative and passive constructions may look similar in form, they operate differently in terms of syntax. English learners often choose agentless passive clauses rather than ergative ones because the two share several common traits: both function as intransitives, both omit the agent, and both place the patient or affected entity in the subject position.

## **2.8 Modality in English**

Portner (2005:154) observes that modality constitutes a major semantic category. It is also viewed as a type of linguistic meaning concerned with expressing possibility and necessity.

It refers to “language whose meaning depends on alternate possible worlds” . Modality is closely associated with modal auxiliary verbs, such as must can, should, etc., to convey probability, possibility, permissibility, necessity and obligation.

The most commonly used modal verbs are will, can, should, must, may, ought to, might, could, would, need, dare, have to, and be able to. In short, modality concerns the possibility and necessity within a given possible world.

Palmer (1979: 2) believes that "Modality in English is defined in terms of the modal auxiliaries, we shall, by including will, have to include within the system of modality both futurity, which seems to belong more to the system of tense, and volition, which has little in common with the more obvious modal concepts of possibility and necessity but belongs more with the verbs of wanting, hoping, etc. which are essentially lexical rather than grammatical in English".

He argues that modality is concerned with expressing possibility and necessity. Modals are part of the lexical category, and the expression of modality is linked to this category, specifically to modal auxiliaries or modal verbs.

### **2.8.1 Modality and Meaning**

Griffiths (2006:101) argues that modality is "the term for a cluster of meanings centered on the notions of necessity and possibility: what must be or what merely might be." Modality is generally associated with necessity, possibility, certainty, permissibility, and obligation.

zang (2019:880) also mentions that modality is a category of meaning in semantics. "It operates at the sentence level and it is a cover term for devices which allow speakers to express varying degrees of commitment to, or belief in, a proposition".

### **2.8.2 Classification of Modality**

Lyons (1977:823) categorizes modals into epistemic and deontic, which is regarded as the two primary semantic forms of modality. It relates to the necessity and possibility of a statement when there is definite evidence. It indicates the degree of certainty or evidence a speaker has regarding the proposition expressed in their statement. In fact, "Epistemic interpretations have to do with knowledge and understanding" (Griffiths, 2006:101). For Example:

(8) There is no answer , Ahmed must have gone.

The speaker does not have direct proof that Ahmed has left, but they are drawing a logical conclusion based on the situation.

Epistemic modality differs from logical modality, which is universally true in all situations. Epistemic modality can be further divided into two subtypes: epistemic necessity and epistemic possibility. Epistemic necessity is not always certain, even though it is based on actual knowledge of the world. Example :

(9) The cat must have died out.

The speaker does not have direct evidence that the cat is extinct but is making a logical conclusion based on available information.

In contrast, epistemic possibility does not rely on knowledge of the real world; it merely presents one potential scenario based on the speaker's assumption. Example:

(10) He might be at home at this moment.

The speaker is uncertain about her exact location and is merely proposing a possibility based on their guess.

Griffiths (2006:101) thinks that deontic modality expresses the speaker's level of obligation, permission, or intention regarding a proposition. It associated to "constraints grounded in society: duty, morality, laws, rules etc." A deontic proposition typically relates to obligations, permissions, hopes, or requirements.

Deontic modality primarily relies on modal verbs like can, must, have to and ought to, in order to convey its meanings. Deontic modality is further categorized into deontic necessity and deontic possibility. Deontic necessity deals with responsibilities and regulations that people are expected to comply with. Example:

(11) You must wear a helmet.

whereas deontic possibility relates to propositions that are allowed or permitted.

(12) You may go home.

The definitions of modal verbs are another way that modality is investigated. Modalities are divided into two groups based on the meaning-constricting elements: those that incorporate two distinct forms of inherent human supremacy such as permission, obligation, and volition and those involving human judgment including necessity, possibility, and prediction. (Alani,2025:309)

### **3. Methodology**

This study examines how ergative verbs influence agency and responsibility in political discourse using a qualitative discourse analysis methodology. It studies how Richard Nixon used tactics of self-legitimation and blame during the political crisis, with a particular focus on his Watergate speeches.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is essentially a qualitative form of analysis, according to Norman Fairclough (1995). The goal of critical discourse analysis (CDA), is to identify and understand meaning in speech, writing, and other means of communication. It focuses at how language use reflects social inequity, ideology, and power dynamics. This form of analysis is adopted in this study.

### **3.1 The Adopted Model:**

Fairclough's (1995) model serves as the foundation for the analysis. These three dimensions are summarized as follows:

1-Textual Level :

a-Studying language features including pronouns, modality, passives, and ergative verbs.

b- Discusses the ways in these features encode legitimacy, accountability, and agency.

2-Discursive Practice:

Examines the production, mediation, and interpretation of the speeches.

3- Social Practice:

Analysing how Nixon's rhetoric reflects and perpetuates power dynamics in society and ideology, especially the legitimacy of the president and public confidence . This study can connect linguistic tactics to social and ideological roles in political discourse through this framework.

### **3.2. Sources of Data**

This research concentrates on fifteen excerpts by Richard M. Nixon. Nixon, had previously served California as both a U.S. Representative and Senator, became the 37th President of the United States, serving from 1969 to 1974. He remains the only president to resign from office, a consequence of the Watergate scandal, despite his achievements in ending U.S. military involvement in Vietnam and strengthening diplomatic relations with China and the Soviet Union. (Freidel & Sidey 2006 :32) These excerpts are from Richard M. Nixon's speech to the nation on April 30, 1973, regarding the Watergate investigations.

The official transcript, which is kept online by The American Presidency Project, an archive of presidential materials (Nixon, 1973). The excerpts are analyzed from three aspects textual, discursive and social in order to discover how Nixon uses language to negotiate agency and responsibility at a time of political crisis. In this section the researcher studies language features. They are shown in the following figure:

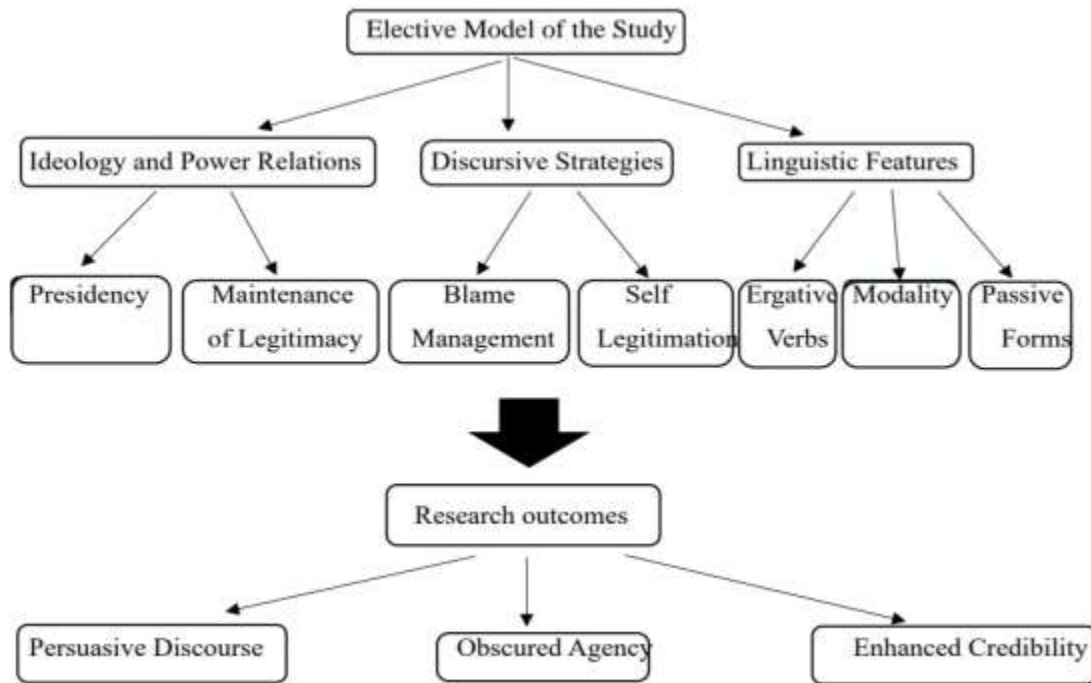


Figure 1. Eclectic Model of the Analysis

#### 4.1 Textual Analysis:

The language features are as described below:

##### a. Passive Constructions:

Based on specific textual elements, selected excerpts from Nixon's speech have been subjected to analysis.

##### Excerpt (1)

**"Whatever may appear to have been the case, the truth is that mistakes were made in the handling of Watergate." (Nixon, 1973)**

##### Analysis

The passive construction "mistakes were made" is a basic one. While the agent is

completely left out, the grammatical subject "mistakes" acquires the action of the verb "were made.". There is no obvious indication of who created the errors because of the passive structure. Nixon portrays the misconduct as a simple occurrence by using the passive voice as an action carried out by individuals instead .

This reduces individual accountability and refocuses public focus from particular actors to a broader feeling of misfortune. The ideological purpose of this passive creation is to normalize political accountability as an ambiguous

#### **Excerpt (2)**

**“Actions were taken without my knowledge that were wrong.” (Nixon, 1973)**

#### **Analysis**

In the sentence “Actions were taken”, the simple past passive is used. There is no indication of the agent who carried out the actions. Nixon's decision to remain inactive permits him to admit fault while distancing himself from the activities that were carried out. The grammatical construction refrains from explicitly naming those who are responsible, but the phrase "without my knowledge" affirms his innocence. Agency is recontextualized by the passive form, which switches the emphasis from the offenders to the act itself. Linguistic mitigation, a defining characteristic of political crisis speech, is evident in this instance. Nixon's passive construction contributes in striking a balance between denial and admission: He confirms that things happened and that they were wrong (being transparent), but he denies deliberate involvement (maintaining credibility).

#### **Expert (3)**

**“Considerations were made that were wrong, and acts were undertaken that should not have been.” (Nixon, 1973)**

#### **Analysis**

The agents are missing from the passive forms of the two main phrases, “Considerations were made” and “acts were undertaken”. This grammatical pattern conveys the sense of impartial reporting as opposed to intimate admission. The passive is used repeatedly throughout clauses, which further reduces personal responsibility and presents the actions as unavoidable or bureaucratic. Power and ideology are expressed

textually through the repetitive passive patterns. It illustrates how people in positions of power manage representation.

#### B .Ergative verbs

The excerpts that are chosen from Nixon's speech focus on an internal endurance process instead of an external one.

##### **Excerpt (4)**

**"The system has been tested, and it has survived." (Nixon, 1973)**

##### **Analysis**

The ergative verbs in this sentence are "test" and "survive". While "test" can be used transitively, in the phrase "The system has been tested", the action is presented as occurring to the system rather than being performed by a specific agent. By using the ergative form "tested", Nixon emphasizes the government's trial and resilience rather than focusing on those responsible for the crisis. Similarly, "survive" suggests an internal process of endurance rather than an externally caused action. From Fairclough's textual perspective, the use of these ergative verbs helps reinforce authority by portraying the system as autonomous and self-repairing, forming part of a broader political strategy to reassure the public.

##### **Excerpt (5)**

**"Faith in the integrity of our institutions must be restored". (Nixon, 1973)**

##### **Analysis**

The ergative verb in this sentence is "restore". The ergative construction of this statement "must be restored" prevents the identification of an explicit restorer, the person in the position of reestablishing public trust. This ergative use adds to the ambiguity associated with agency. Here, the ideological use of ergative language turns the human task of restoring trust into an independent, unavoidable healing process.

##### **Excerpt (6)**

**"Confidence must be regained (Nixon, 1973)**

##### **Analysis**

“Regain” here is an ergative verb. It represents a change of state from loss to recovery, but Nixon employs it in a way that cancels the subject which is important for the regaining. Human intervention is slightly detached from the process by the ergative construction. This linguistic choice conveys the idea of unavoidable renewal. It is implied that confidence is something that can naturally return. It implies that the issue will be resolved with time or national resolve. Nixon uses this to support his larger plan to present the crisis as an impersonal disruption in a self-correcting system. Instead of encoding a material process, the ergative choice records a relational one. The concept of institutional survival, as opposed to political accountability, is quietly reinforced.

### c-Modality

Texts from Nixon’s speeches are selected depending on several modal verbs.

#### Excerpt (7)

**“Whatever may now be said about the period of the Watergate investigation, I want the American people to know that I have always believed that the presidency must be above suspicion.” (Nixon, 1973)**

#### Analysis

“May” and “must” here are modal verbs. They indicate possibility or uncertainty. The phrase “may now be said” shows epistemic modality. Nixon admits that there may be varying opinions or interpretations of the Watergate probe. By means of that he puts himself linguistically apart from criticism from the public. The Phrase “must be above suspicion” indicates deontic modality. It signals obligation as well as moral necessity. Nixon affirms an ideal principle regarding presidency. This reinforces the idea of moral obligation rather than individual fault by moving the emphasis from human responsibility to institutional integrity. The phrase “whatever may now be said” presents opposition as opinion rather than reality and reduces confrontation. The modal “must” gives the proposition more moral significance by portraying it as a standard. The presidency is elevated by the modal structure (“must be above suspicion”). Nixon mediates public doubt through the use of modality. The deontic must restate strict institutional values, while the epistemic may enable him to seem open to disagreement. The discursive approach acknowledges uncertainty and combines authority and flexibility. The employment of must

serves to restore confidence in the presidency within the larger sociopolitical framework of Watergate. This indicates an effort to recast the controversy as a systemic problem as opposed to a personal failure.

**Excerpt(8)**

**“We**

**must recognize, however, that what has been charged today involves allegations of wrongdoing by some of the same individuals who worked for me in this administration.” (Nixon, 1973)**

**Analysis**

“Must ” here is a modal verb. It shows obligation and necessity. The phrase “We must recognize” achieves a collectivizing strategy. The modal “must” reduces the possibility of an accusation by transforming acknowledgment into a moral obligation rather than a guilty admission. Nixon uses the pronoun “we” with “must” to compose solidarity among the public. “Must” operates ideologically to reinstate order and common moral obligation during the early 1970s crisis of legitimacy.

**Excerpt (9)**

**“We will restore faith in the integrity of our government, and in the process, we will demonstrate that our system of laws works” (Nixon, 1973).**

**Analysis**

Modal verb “will” shows strong prediction and intention. The modal “will” conveys confidence and control, implying that integrity restoration is essential. Here, “Will” creates a discourse focused on the future, providing comfort and hope for the country following a crisis. It provides ideological support for democratic institutions by portraying the incident as a one-time anomaly rather than a structural weakness.

**4.2 Discursive Analysis:**

Certain excerpts from Nixon's speech have been examined. The production, distribution, and consumption processes are the main topics of this examination. The analysis shows how Nixon's rhetoric throughout the Watergate scandal attempted to control legitimacy.

**Excerpt (10)**

**“Mistakes were made in the handling of this matter.” (Nixon, 1973)**

This statement was given in the same televised speech, so it reached a large audience quickly. The passive phrase “were made” does not say who made the mistakes. Because of this, responsibility is presented in a general and unclear way instead of being linked to a specific person. The expression “this matter” also makes the scandal sound less direct and less serious. From a discursive point of view, this wording reduces clear blame and moves attention away from individuals. The audience is guided to see the issue as a procedural problem rather than intentional wrongdoing. In this way, mistakes are admitted without clearly identifying who is responsible. As a result, the discourse helps protect presidential authority while appearing responsive to public concern.

**Excerpt (11)**

**“I am not a crook.” (Nixon, 1973)**

This statement was made during a press conference when many people were beginning to lose trust in Nixon. Because it was shown on television and reported in newspapers, it quickly reached a large audience. The sentence is short and direct, and it begins with the pronoun “I” which makes the denial very personal. From a discursive point of view, the statement is a way to defend himself and protect his image. The strong wording presents his innocence as a clear fact. However, the need to say this so clearly also shows how serious the crisis was. The audience can either believe him or doubt his statement. In general, the statement shows his attempt to keep authority at a time when public trust was weak.

**Excerpt (12)**

**“There can be no whitewash at the White House.” (Nixon, 1973)**

This statement was made to show that Nixon was being open and honest. It was broadcast across the country, so many people heard it at a time when trust was low. The phrase “no whitewash” clearly means that nothing would be hidden. From a discursive point of view, the statement presents Nixon as a leader who supports fairness and the law. It tries to rebuild public trust by promising that nothing will be hidden. The audience is

encouraged to see the administration as cooperating with the investigation. However, the need to deny a cover-up also shows that many people were already suspicious. Overall, the statement works as an attempt to protect his authority and restore public confidence.

#### **4.3 Social Practice:**

Elected excerpts from Nixon's speeches have analysed. This analysis indicates how the power of the presidency is reflected in Nixon's Watergate speech. It seeks to keep its legitimacy and authority by influencing the public's perception of accountability and responsibility.

##### **Excerpt (13)**

**“There can be no whitewash at the White House.”(Nixon, 1973)**

This statement was made when many people and the media were suspicious. It shows that the president follows the law and tries to be fair. By saying there will be no “whitewash,” Nixon promises honesty and openness. It also protects the White House's image and reassures the public. Overall, the statement helps keep presidential authority and responds to calls for honesty.

##### **Excerpt (14)**

**“I accept full responsibility for my actions and for those of my administration.”  
(Nixon, 1973)**

This statement was made during a time of political crisis and low public trust in the presidency. It aims to protect the authority of the presidential office. Although Nixon accepts responsibility, he includes “my administration” which spreads the blame and avoids personal accountability. This shows how the presidency maintains stability and legitimacy even under investigation. The statement supports the idea that the president remains in control despite mistakes. Overall, it helps preserve public confidence in the office during a difficult political period.

## **Excerpt (15)**

**“The American people have a right to know.” (Nixon,1973)**

This statement shows that Nixon responded to public demand for transparency. It emphasizes that the government should be open and accountable. By saying this, he presents the presidency as responsible and attentive to citizens' concerns. Overall, it helps maintain public trust and presidential authority.

## **5-Findings and Discussions**

The analysis indicates that:

1- Nixon often relied on ergative verb forms to reduce the sense of his direct responsibility, portraying political events as unfolding on their own or being triggered by external factors.

2- Ergative structures assist two functions:

a-Shifting responsibilities away from the speaker, Nixon avoids mentioning specific agents, particularly himself, when discussing misconduct. This fits the trend of political rhetoric where politicians try to deflect blame from their own shortcomings or scandals.

b- Overcoming the current political crisis: Nixon portrays political crisis as a regretful external event, instead of viewing it as an outcome of intentional political actions. He presents Watergate as something that happened as opposed to something that people did.

3- According to Fairclough, ergativity functions as an ideological instrument that hides the speaker's political identity and reduces blame.

4- There are many passive constructions in the speeches. These passives are often seen in context when there is blame, poor management, or unlawful activity.

6- Using passives strategically serves some ideological purposes, including:

a-Providing the actor's background

In his speeches, Nixon doesn't say who committed misconduct or suppressed information. This choice of language produces ambiguity, which diffuses guilt and makes it challenging to determine who is responsible.

b- Putting action ahead of accountability.

The action itself takes precedence over the person performing it. As a result, Nixon can recognize problems without taking responsibility for them.

7- According to CDA, passive voice becomes a tool for maintaining institutional power, controlling face, and creating a positive political narrative.

8- Nixon frequently uses modal verbs in his talks, particularly:

a- Possibility/uncertainty: may, might, can.

b-Obligation: must, should.

c-Prediction: will.

9- Nixon's persuasive method relies heavily on modality in three main ways:

a- Projecting power and leadership

A president facing a national scandal needs to project a sense of confidence and authority, which is supported by obligation modals “will” and “must”. Nixon employs modality to regain his power and the confidence of the public. Nixon used modality to regain control and reestablish credibility.

b-Reducing Obligation

Admissions of misconduct are softened by low-certainty modalities (may, might). Rather than declaring that “illegal acts occurred” Nixon downplays the seriousness of the claims by framing them as “possible misunderstandings.”

10- The results support the original hypotheses.

a- Ergative verbs and passive constructions were deliberately employed to disperse responsibility and conceal agency.

b-Modality used as a persuasive device to establish moral validity, project authority and lessen guilt.

c-Nixon's speech demonstrates how political language functions as a tool for ideology, power, and self-preservation.

These findings support the more general critical discourse analysis view that political speeches are carefully constructed linguistic performances intended to sustain institutional power and influence public opinion rather than neutral texts.

## **Conclusion**

This research has shown that:

1- Richard Nixon's political speeches are crafted forms of discourse designed to advance specific ideological and political goals, rather than being neutral statements. By applying Critical Discourse Analysis, the study highlights how language is purposefully used to influence public opinion, justify political actions, and strengthen the power dynamics between the speaker and the audience.

2- The analysis shows that Nixon regularly employed linguistic strategies to reduce his personal accountability while highlighting collective or impersonal agency. This is reflected in his frequent use of passive voice and ergative verbs.

3- Pronoun use was fundamental in shaping both solidarity and power relations in Nixon's speeches. The repeated use of the inclusive pronoun "we" positioned the president as part of the American collective, promoting a sense of shared responsibility and national unity, while the pronoun "they" was strategically used to otherize opponents or external actors, thereby reinforcing an ideological "us versus them" distinction.

4- Modality functioned as a powerful persuasive resource in Nixon's discourse. Deontic modality was used to express obligation, duty, and moral necessity, whereas epistemic modality conveyed degrees of certainty and likelihood, which enhanced the persuasiveness of political statements and framed presidential decisions as logical and inevitable.

5- The study validates critical discourse analysis as an effective methodological approach for revealing implicit meanings and underlying power relations in political discourse. By connecting linguistic features with broader social and political contexts, CDA provides deeper insight into how language operates as a tool for persuasion, authority, and control.

6- The research demonstrates that Nixon's political speeches reveal the deliberate use of language by political leaders to shape social reality, legitimize political authority, and guide public ideology. By focusing on grammatical patterns, the study adds to CDA scholarship by showing how political discourse is constructed and maintained through linguistic choices.

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