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Nino Chubinidze
Akaki Tsereteli State University
PhD student
nino.chubinide@atsu.edu.ge

THE PASSIVE VOICE AS A MANIPULATIVE TECHNIQUE IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Abstract: In this article, we refer to the essential features of political discourse and present the definition of the term political discourse. According to various scholars Graber(1993); Chilton(2002); Van Dijk(1996, 1989b); Chudinov (2006); Sheygal(2004); we propose the following definition of this notion: political discourse is an aggregate of various speech acts and mechanism considered to be a powerful means of political signaling, functioning as public law, oriented at a target audience, which is determined and expressed in verbal form. Every politician has a role to play and their rhetoric serves a distinct function (informative, persuasive, control, agonistic, etc.) reflecting public thinking and attitudes, as stated by Van Dijk(1997).

The article identifies key features of political discourse such as agonistic character i.e. competitiveness, aggressiveness, ideological credo, manipulation and theatricality. For their part, Wodak (1997, 1989) and Burke (1966) in turn argue that political discourse serves institutional purposes, reinforces social hierarchies, and performs symbolic functions. Emphasis is placed on the passive voice both in relation to political discourse functions and as a discursive apparatus that accomplishes the political actors' aims of being able to narrate, manage and control public opinion and power struggles. On the basis of the examples from recent political speeches given by Donald Trump, Liz Truss, and Joe Biden, the study shows how passive constructions can obscure agency, pass blame, and heighten ideological or dramatic effects. The research results show that passive voice constructions not only serve linguistic purposes but also can be used as manipulative device to enhance performative and strategic dimensions of political communication.

Key words: political discourse, specific features of political discourse, passive voice.

Language: English

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Introduction

Public discourse is regarded as an open social interaction the objective of which is mainly to affect public opinions and shape ideologies. Chilton and Schaffner (2002:2) consider the political activity as inherently linguistic whereas Graber (1993:305-332) view it as a diplomatic tool. Sheigal (2000) expands the idea and assesses it as a tool of communication done in the very attempt to gain power and influence in leadership. Political discourse, according to Baranov (1991), is the culmination of all discourses that employ political information and create public policy ideas. "The struggle over whose voices and what forms of political language possess authority

within the public sphere of discourse is pivotal to the reproduction of relationships of dominance and subordination in modern society" (Epstein, 1994: 28).

Political discourse is more than linguistic communication; it is a strategic, professional practice molded by a certain socio-political and historical contents. As Levenkova (2011) argues, it reflects the nationally and culturally conditioned mindset of its speakers and serves as a linguistic expression of public activity within political culture. According to scholars it reflects a unity of linguistic form, knowledge, and purposeful action (van Dijk, 1996), often functioning as speech profoundly ingrained in social life (Arutyunova, 1990) and influenced by

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psychological, societal, and situational context. Politics, as a form of social activity is composed of speech acts, making political discourse as a platform of institutional communication with its specialized language and symbols (Karasik,2004). Functions of political discourse include: **Informative**(representing events) **Control** (manipulating public opinion); **Persuasive** (influencing masses); **Argumentative** (explaining actions); **Informative** (representing events);**Interpretive** (providing several models for events); **Social identification** (integrating and differentiating social identification); **Delimitive** defining group boundaries; **Agonistic** (verbal altercation with adversaries).

Politicians frequently state their ideological and political beliefs while employing veiled language to avoid directly addressing sensitive or controversial topics. Their assessments are typically polarized by their clearly expressed positive and negative standards. This ambiguity serves several purposes: it gives cover for politicians to obscure accountability. With a little bit of ambiguity, they can avoid responsibility or shield themselves from criticism from rivals.

Methodology of the research is based on lingo-semiotic and anthropocentric-communicative methodology. This entails examining political discourse from a pragmatic, syntactic and semantic perspective. However, while using grammatical category of voice, especially, passive voice constructions, the speakers' communication goal and strategy, as well as their linguistic proficiency and socio-cultural background knowledge is taken into consideration. The research is also based on analyses made by sociologists while referring to plenty more definitions of political speech.

Literature Review

A lot of papers have been written about political discourse in recent years. It is obvious that concept of discourse is interdisciplinary in nature and is studied in a variety of scientific fields, including rhetoric, stylistics, cognitive linguistics, text linguistics, and socio-psycholinguistics. Several discourse-analytical studies of political discourse concern the language used by professional politicians and political institutions (Chilton,2004:14). Regarding this, Van Dijk, 1997:13 expands this idea, noting that any speech act with political actors, public, groups and individuals, as well as their organizations and institutions qualifies as political discourse. According to Chudunov (2006), every political discourse is shaped purposefully by the addresser's goals, the audience comprehension and perception and the broader political moment. Politicians are the actors who define political speech. On his part, Van Dijk (2000) differentiates two sorts of knowledge: "general cultural knowledge shared by participants of various social groups" which is unquestionable, objective,

and serves as the foundation for communication and "knowledge shared by participants of a separate social group" which meets the criteria of the first with only one limitation – the similarity is true only for a particular society. For everyone else, this knowledge seems to be just a belief, ideology or an opinion. Van Dijk (1997: 12) further defines that every speech of a politician has a specific purpose and function, as it represents the implementation of his intention. In order to show a higher degree of correctness, he claims that participants in political discourse—referred to as "political actors"—present their statements in a formal linguistic style, choosing terms based on the particular context and requirements. (ibid., p. 14).

Fairclough (1989) uses the terms "power in discourse" and "power beyond discourse" to explain the connection between language and power. Certain groups utilize language as a tactical instrument to seize and maintain power.

Political figures, furthermore, occasionally coin new terms, addressing how political realities are shaped and perceived. All of these newly fabricated words are merely a political tool or a manipulative device to dumb down complicated issues, disguise controversial policies, or give rise to specific ideologies. For example,

"Don't forget people running and every one of these clowns represented somebody. And I defeated them so badly that they've never gotten over it. They do commercials. These people are sick. They're sick. They're sad, sad people. And on top of everything else, we've had to soundly defeat, we're in the process of doing it, it's much deeper than I thought, the Deep Staters, right? "

Donald Trump – Rally Speech, Gastonia, NC (Oct 21, 2024)

In this instance, Trump portrays the deep state as a strong, rather plot-oriented group of bureaucrats with a long history. The deep state is portrayed in the text as a covert enemy obstructing his policies.

Trump portrays the deep state here as a strong, almost conspiratorial group of bureaucrats with a long history. According to the phrase, the deep state is a covert enemy obstructing his policies.

Another example is when Former UK PM used the term in a transatlantic context:

"Even the IMF intervened. And even President Biden intervened... Can you imagine being attacked on your economic policies by the inventor of Bidenomics?"

Liz Truss – CPAC Speech (Feb 2024)

This sarcastic critique aims to delegitimize the authority of international actors who contradict and obstruct the speaker's policies. By using sarcasm, the speaker attempts to take away the addressee's credibility by an implausible, hypocritical or absurd statement whilst at the same time strengthening her own legitimacy.

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The term “political theatre” which was coined by Aydarova (2016) describes a new model of political communication that increasingly resembles a theatrical performance. This metaphor stands for how political actors stage their communication strategically—not to transparently inform, but rather to provoke certain emotional and cognitive responses in the audience.

Political discourse refers to public speech that is directed at a target audience and at the same time respects a political agenda. This type of discourse is perceived as a powerful tool for political signaling. Discourse structures are often multifunctional and can function in different contexts. For example, lexical jargon, the so-called political term, can be considered as one example. A structure with many functions can in no way be limited to the framework of political discourse (Fairclough, 2010: 23-24)

According to Orwell (1946), political language should avoid the terms that are manipulative or pointless. This emphasizes the significance of discursive resistance and critical awareness—opposing and rejecting meaningless political jargon.

In political discourse, the passive voice serves as more than a grammatical structure—it functions as a rhetorical strategy for managing risk, shaping narratives, and exercising control. They allow politicians to shift the focus from who did what to what happened, which affects interpretation and limits accountability. They are framed as instruments for ideological reframing. Either deepening political polarization or encouraging manufactured unanimity depends on this shift in narrative.

Since the primary aim of political discourse is the pursuit and retention of power, political language is typically crafted to be clear and targeted toward a particular audience group (Wodak, 1997: 42). Many linguists regard persuasion as the core function of political discourse. Functions such as defining and communicating political positions (orientation), mobilizing and uniting supporters (integration), and confronting opponents (aggression, reflecting atonality) are central to political communication. At the heart of its semiotic structure lies a semantic triad—orientation, integration, and atonality—which frames the fundamental opposition between “ins - outs” (Sheygal, 2000: 15).

In the given article we are going to focus on specific features of political discourse which are as follows (Sheygal, 2000)

1. Agonistic Character (Competitiveness)

- Political discourse functions like a **verbal duel** between government and opposition.
- Notable throughout parliamentary discussions and **election campaigns**.

2. Aggressiveness

- Central to power struggle and dominance.
- Manifests as **verbal abuse** directed at opponents in public settings

- Speech acts of aggression include: Commands and categorical demands; Threats and condemnation; Use of hostile rhetoric to **downgrade opponents' status**. Aggression is said to be built upon dominance, which results from violence and creates a hierarchical order in interpersonal relationships (Sheygal, 2004).

3. Ideological Credo

- Reflects shared beliefs, values, and social representations.

- a system of ideas and ideals which forms the basis of economic or political theory and policy;

4. Manipulation and Theatricality

- manipulation of consciousness and control of the actions of politicians and the electorate
- theatricality of political discourse
- Politicians “act” consciously to impress and persuade.

Along with being informative, perceptions and ideas are shared with the public, reflecting societal attitudes and ways in which language reflects power, ideology and social hierarchies (Fairclough 2010). The issue of language as a tool for social control and power dynamics is covered in R. Wodak's writings. According to R. Wodak, who enumerates the key concepts of the approach, “institutions – are status-oriented organizations: belonging to a certain social stratum, gender, age, education, and so on they determine each other and become specifically interconnected, thus being instrumental in institutional perception and attitude” (Wodak 1997: 23-24).

As an example of the dramaturgical approach, J. Combs views a political campaign as a ritual drama staged in a consecutive way with clear political rules and scripts. Its ritualistic nature lends it certain predictability and keeps it within civilized boundaries. The candidate and their team are required to perform specific scenes and convey particular ideas to meet audience expectation (Combs 1981: 530). Kenneth Burke's dramaturgical approach to communication enables politics to be viewed as symbolic interaction within a social context; it takes place on a stage, is carried out by agents/actors pursuing specific goals, and involves the performance of actions through various communicative means (Burke 1966) which thoroughly supports Sheygal's notion of manipulation as a core feature of discourse.

Results and Discussions

The passive voice essentially serves as a discursive disguise that is in line with the agonistic, aggressive, ideological, and dramatic aspects of political discourse. This enables political actors to successfully stage their narratives, manage public perception, and negotiate power struggles.

Is the passive voice right decision to fulfill political purposes?

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Chart 1: Specific Features of Political Discourse and Passive Voice

Political Discourse Function	Example	Passive construction	Implied Agent	Discourse Effect
1. Agonistic Character (Competitive-ness)	Our government is controlled by the people“ Donald Trump –The Inagural Address, (Jan20, 2017)	<i>Is controlled</i>	Not omitted “the people” are named	Highlights democratic legitimacy while omitting mechanisms or agents of control (e.g., institutions).
	“Our magnificent law-abiding American citizens are not protected“ President Trump’s speech ahead of Capitol riot, (Jan 13,2021)	<i>Are not protected</i>	Government or law enforcement agencies	Implies blame on the state while avoiding direct naming—as mostly used in oppositional rhetoric.
	“They’ve been using the administrative state to make sure conservative policies are thwarted.” Liz Truss – CPAC Speech (Feb 2024)	were thwarted	Media, institutions,	Emphasizes systemic opposition to conservative agenda.
	“the Trump rally was a rally that he should have been able to be conducted peacefully without any problem” Joe Biden on Trump shooting(Jul 14, 2024)	should have been able to be conducted	Rally organizers (possibly Trump team)	Suggests expected normalcy and civil behavior; highlights violation of political norms.
2. Aggressiveness	“Our children are taught to be ashamed of themselves...” President Trump’s speech ahead of Capitol riot, (Jan 13,2021)	<i>are taught</i>	Implied: education system, teachers	Aggressively criticizes ideological enemies (education system) without naming them directly.
	“Look, there is no place in America for this kind of violence. It’s sick. It’s sick. ...We cannot allow for this to be happening.” Joe Biden on Trump shooting(Jul 14, 2024)	<i>to be happening</i>	Society broadly (implied)	Urgent moral tone; passive voice stresses helplessness if action isn’t taken.
	“This war would have been over in two weeks.” Meeting between President Donald Trump and Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenski, (Feb 28, 2025)	<i>would have been over</i>	Implied: Russia	Claims U.S. prolongs war, asserts dominance in global politics, erases Ukrainian agency.
	“\$350 billion was given to you.”(ibid.)	<i>was given</i>	Implied: U.S government	Projects U.S. as benevolent, implies Ukrainian dependence. Reinforces power hierarchy.

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	Instead of projecting strength – and we know that dictators only respond to strength – we have projected weakness. And that is what is being projected from the White House at the moment. Liz Truss – CPAC Speech (Feb 2024)	is being projected	Implied: Biden administration	Uses passive voice to critique the U.S. government without direct accusation; implies failure and weakness as a pattern of behavior. Note: This rhetorical duel, which depicts the U.S. leadership as failing both locally and internationally, underscores the agonistic nature of the claim that the White House is the cause of weakness.
	“The Green New Deal will be ended.” Donald Trump’s Inagural speech, (Jan 20, 2025)	<i>will be ended</i>	Implied: new administration or political force	Signals intent to reverse ideological agenda. Omits agent for strategic distancing or universality.
3. Ideological Character	“Our sovereignty will be reclaimed.” Donald Trump’s Inagural speech, (Jan 20, 2025)	<i>will be reclaimed</i>	Implied: by citizens or the government	Aligns political action with national ideology; vague agent suggests collective effort.
	It is my hope that our recent presidential election will be remembered as the greatest and most consequential election in the history of our country. Donald Trump’s Inagural speech, (Jan 20, 2025)	<i>will be remembered</i>	Implied: by history, citizens	Elevates ideological narrative; agent obscured to universalize the event’s significance.
	“Our history is being challenged and even our biology is being challenged.” Liz Truss – CPAC Speech (Feb 2024)	is being challenged	Implied: ideological left, “woke” movements	Expands the reach of ideology by posing a danger to not only historical heritage but also science and identity. uses linguistic escalation to raise the emotional stakes. Note: Escalation and contrast are also used to create theatricality, moving from “values” to “history” to “biology” and engrossing audiences in a story of social disintegration.
	“The Anglo-American values... are being questioned and undermined.”(ibid.)	are being questioned and undermined	Implied: the political left, global elites,	connects the audience with a common intellectual heritage by portraying present

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The political discourse represents a distinct communicative phenomenon that emerges at the intersection of political and media discourse. Subjectivity and intentionality are its defining characteristics, and its goal is to influence a large audience. By using these characteristics, political discourse in the mass media deliberately constructs political realities in order to enact power, shape ideologies and influence public opinion.

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