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

DISCOURSE, POWER, IDEOLOGY AND THE CAMOUFLAGE OF RESPONSIBILITY: PASSIVE VOICE TECHNIQUES IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE

Abstract: Since the 1960s, discourse has increasingly been recognized as a form of power that shapes perception and constructs social reality through sophisticated linguistic and rhetorical tools. Political discourse, in particular, does more than convey information; it shapes meaning, mobilizes support, and legitimizes authority. Ideological polarization, emotional narratives, and the use of passive voice constructions create narratives that influence not only communication but also political self-perception within society. This article explores how political discourse intertwines with power and emotions and how political actors employ it as a strategic tool for rhetorical manipulation and shaping public opinion.

The aim of the article is to study the use of language to establish political narratives and influence public opinion using the example of the political discourse of foreign politicians. Political discourse operates through a complex network of strategies that serve both to communicate ideas and to consolidate power structures in society. Therefore, through a critical discourse analysis approach, the research highlights the media uses passive constructions to objectively report events, however, in practice, this rhetorical strategy often serves to shape public sentiment, suppress the agent, and deliberately manipulate narratives.

Key words: political discourse, discourse analysis, passive voice.

Language: English

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Introduction

Political discourse plays an important role in the formulation of public opinion, as it influences the attitudes, beliefs and behaviors of society. Along with being informative, impressions and ideas are made public, reflecting public thinking and attitudes. Decoding political discourse - how power, ideology and social hierarchies are reflected in language, is closely related to critical discourse analysis. (Fairclough, 2010). Social relations are very complex in nature and include many layers against the background of the relationships between relations. Discourse is viewed not as a one-way mediation, but as a social interaction whose main goal is the formation of public opinion.

Since 1960s, scholars have increasingly recognized that discourse-especially political discourse-functions as a form of power, shaping reception and reality through subtle linguistic and rhetorical tools (Porto 2007). Halliday (1994) emphasizes that reality itself is constructed through processes such as doing, sensing, meaning, making, while Kock (2004) distinguishes between discourse that serves public interest and discourse that undermines it. Political discourse, though largely about politics itself, often intersects with broader societal issues like immigration, racism, crime, blurring the lines between political and social concerns. While elite actors dominate political narratives, non-elite individuals appear only selectively, often for emotional appeal. The structure

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of political discourse typically includes modality-expressing what must, should, or might be done-serving both persuasive and strategic functions (Lycan, 1994; Coates, 1990; Chaiken& Eagly, 1976) and often in a discursive way using passive voice constructions for more ambiguity. Evaluative language is also central, reflecting deep ideological polarization:” We” are framed as democratic and just, while “They” are often depicted as undemocratic or dangerous (Chomsky, 1985, van Dijk, 1995a). These patterns reveal how political discourse not only communicate but construct meaning, mobilizes support and legitimizes power.

Another common feature in political discourse is verbosity, or the inclusion of irrelevant elaborations. Speakers often amplify their own achievements while exaggerating the faults or threats posed by opponents. This is achieved through rhetorical devices by offering too much or too little information in strategic ways. These irrelevant additions are also evident in racist discourse, particularly when minority status is unnecessarily highlighted in descriptions of criminal acts(van Dijk 1991,1993c)

On the flip side, strategic deletions of expected information- such as through indirectness or implicitness-can also serve partisan goals. By omitting relevant facts or agents, speakers can subtly manipulate audience interpretation while maintaining plausible deniability.

The main purpose of using passive voice constructions in a political discourse is the intention to avoid assigning blame, create vagueness and shift focus from agents to outcomes. When the subject is omitted, as is common passive constructions, the statement tends to appear more neutral and impersonal, reducing potential bias and subjectivity(Wankhade et al.,2022). The stylistic choice is especially valued in contexts, where the emphasis is placed on findings and processes rather than individuals. However, scholars such as Strelan(2020) argue for the importance of recognizing the existence of agents, emphasizing that every action. While the passive voice facilitates a focus on the object of the sentence, it often obscures who is responsible for the action, which can limit clarity and accountability (Meluzzi et al.,2021).

Despite its benefits, passive voice has been criticized for ambiguity. Studies by Paolazzi et al. (2019) and Warren et al.,(2021) indicate that while passive constructions may be processed more quickly by readers, they often result in lower comprehension compared to active voice. This suggests that passive voice, may sacrifice some degree of clarity. Strunk and White (2009) support the use of passive voice in specific contexts-particularly when the aim is to maintain formal tone, emphasize results, or avoid overt subjectivity. Ultimately, the choice of active and passive voice depends on the addressers’ purposes.

Methodology of the research is grounded in a lingo-semiotic and anthropocentric-communicative approach which involves analyzing political discourse through pragmatic, syntactic and semantic perspective. Particular attention is given to the use of passive voice which is examined in the light of the speaker’s communicative goals, strategic choices, linguistic competence and socio-cultural background. The analysis further incorporates sociological and psychological insight to better understand how language is used as a mechanism of influence and control within public communication.

Literature Review

Political discourse is ideologically polarized, typically portraying “us” and our actions as good and democratic, while depicting “them” as bad and threatening. This bias, known as the Ideological Square(van Dijk, 1995a), emphasizes our virtues and their flaws while downplaying our own negatives traits and their positive ones. Such semantic polarization shapes how topics are framed, supporting persuasion, political competition and legitimation.

In political communication, messages that are verbose, hyperbolic, dishonest or morally questionable, are often dismissed under the broad and negative label of “rhetoric”. This labeling reflects the inherently persuasive nature of such language, especially in political contexts where influencing public perception is key. Traditionally, the study of political communication has been reduced to rhetorical analysis, focusing on how language persuades rather than informs(e.g. Campbell & Jamieson 1990; Clinton 1988).

Discourse analysis goes beyond simply studying language by connecting it to the broader political context- revealing how power, ideology, and social inequality are embedded in everyday talk and text.

Based on theoretical considerations, we can conclude that politicians emphasize all the important nuances that positively assess their and their team’s actions or ideology, and always have a negative assessment of others. However, it is worth noting that implicitly, information can create a bad impression of them and, conversely, a positive impression of their opponents. Discourse semantics has a variety of tools for implementing such additional strategies at the local level. One of the well-known steps is the moment of non-recognition, which is a semantic step aimed at avoiding a bad impression when posting a negative topic. In the discourse of racism, such denials are known as apparent negation (‘I have nothing against Blacks, but...’) or apparent concession (There are also smart Blacks, but...’). (Dijk 1998: 32) (van Dijk 1991, 1993c).

Discourse analysis becomes a valuable tool. By closely examining how these speeches are structured-what is emphasized, what is omitted, how certain groups are framed-researchers can uncover the

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underlying ideological functions of communication. This form of analysis not only helps to identify hidden racist rhetoric but also contributes to broader political and legal discussions about how to counteract discriminatory discourse effectively. A number of scholars have contributed to this area, including van Dijk 1988, 1991, 1993c, Wodak 1991, Blommaert & Verschueren 1991, 1992;).

Harold Laswell(1970) argued that political behavior stems from personal emotional struggles, with individuals seeking power to compensate for inner conflicts. His psychoanalytic approach emphasized those emotions like fear or low-esteem significantly shaping political actions. Later political psychologists recognized that people – both citizens and leaders-don’t always make rational decisions due to limited cognitive capacity. Instead, they rely on shortcuts to simplify complex information. While we imagine political leaders making decisions alone, most often decisions are made in groups to ensure legitimacy and share responsibility. Ultimately, political behavior is shaped as much by psychological and emotional factors as by rational strategy.

Emotional prejudices predict discriminatory behaviors with far more accuracy than negative stereotypes or other beliefs. The study of racism in political psychology has evolved from viewing prejudice as a personality defect to recognizing it as a complex interaction of emotional, cognitive, and social factors. Social Dominance theory (SDT) explains racism as a desire among high status groups through internalized “legitimizing myths”(Houghton 2009: 185-188).

Freud’s theory of personality explains human behavior as the result of interactions among three internal forces: the id, ego, and superego. The id seeks instant gratification of basic urges, while the ego develops to meditate between these desires and the demands of reality. Later, the superego emerges, reflecting moral standards learned from society. A healthy personality relies on the ego maintaining balance between id’s impulses and the superego’s strict ideals. When the balance is off, behavior may become overly selfish or excessively moralistic. To cope with internal conflict, the ego uses defense mechanisms like repression and denial (Freud, 1967).

Many phenomena in politics are driven by emotions and feelings rather than purely rational information processing. Political stimuli often trigger strong emotions such as liking, dislike, anger, fear, and anxiety. The emotional response is not limited to politics alone. Psychologist Robert Zajonc highlights that when meeting someone, we immediately experience feelings of attraction or repulsion and constantly evaluate other’s behaviors, motives, consequences, making emotional judgement a fundamental part of human interaction-even beyond social situations(Zajonc, 1980:153).

Politics is as much about “feeling” as it is about “thinking.”In order to understand political emotions better, though, it helps to categorize the different kinds of political feelings possible, and what we colloquially term “emotion” should really be distinguished in various ways (Ottati & Wyer, 1993).

Political perception is shaped as much by emotion as by rational thought. People respond to political figures not just through logical evaluation, or disgust. As psychologists like Robert Zajonc and political scholars suggest, emotional responses are embedded in almost every social and political judgement we make. Political images, therefore, are largely constructed through long-term emotional evaluations rather than purely objective analysis. Whether it’s strong approval, deep dislike, or indifference, these affective responses play a central role in how political leaders are viewed and remembered.

Results and Discussions

Politicians usually convey their ideological and political views using veiled language to avoid direct discussion of sensitive or controversial topics. Their assessments are accordingly polarized, as reflected in the fact that, beyond ambiguously formulated opinions, they strategically avoid taking responsibility and resort to passive constructions as a means of shielding themselves from harsh criticism.

For example,

“It is known that there have been no summits between Russia and the U.S. for four years...”

“It is known” here is used manipulatively. One thing is for certain. No subject is given. The phrase gives an air of universal agreement while dodging responsibility for the deterioration of relationships.

Trump: we were interfered with by the Russia, Russia, Russia hoax.”What was done was very criminal.....”

<https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/politics/how-to-watch-updates-on-the-trump-putin-meeting-in-alaska-on-abc-news/ar-AA1KzATb>

Passive voice constructions (we were interfered, what was done ..) signal harsh language for political opponents. Instead of saying the media of “Democrats” pushed a false narrative, the passive hides who did what, framing Trump as a victim directly confronting the accusers. This is a good example of highly polarized framing as well, characterizing the investigations as a hoax and criminal and leaving no nuance or acknowledgement of opposing perspectives.

This statement reinforces a polarized U.S. domestic narrative where the speaker characterizes political opposition or investigation as criminal and entirely fabricated. This exploits emotional divisions.

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Everything that's happening is a tragedy for us, and a terrible wound."

"We will always remember other historical examples when our countries defeated common enemies together..."

Emotional and tribal framing suggests that Russia is the primary victim in the Ukraine war-which can be assessed as highly polarizing.

This emphasizes nostalgic unity, subtly positioning current antagonists(NATO, WEST) as non-cooperative outsiders.

Putin on Ukraine:

We have always considered the Ukrainian nation, and I've said it multiple times, a brotherly nation . How strange it may sound in these conditions. We have the same roots ..." while presented as a statement of unity, this framing of Ukraine as a brotherly nation with the same roots has historically been used by Russian officials to deny Ukraine's sovereignty and national identity, which can carry ethnonationalist undertones. It reflects a paternalistic view that Ukraine is not fully distinct from Russia- a position deeply offensive to many Ukrainians and seen as a form of cultural imperialism.

While not explicit, Russia's official rhetoric (often echoed by Putin in other contexts frequently blames western liberal values) or foreign ideologies for domestic issues or global instability. That kind of framing can be used to devalue multiculturalism or portray foreign cultural influences as corrosive, which flirts with xenophobic narratives.

Political discourse often disguises controversial or discriminatory messages through indirect and strategic language. Politicians and media frequently use euphemisms (e.g "economic refugees" van Dijk 1988) and metaphors (e.g., "floods" or "waves "of migrants) to frame immigration in threatening terms without appearing explicitly racist or xenophobic. These linguistic choices serve political functions: they justify tough immigration policies, shape public opinion, and avoid legal or moral scrutiny. Instead of openly expressing exclusionary views, elites rely on covert language strategies that still communicate negative sentiments about minorities and refugees to an audience already primed to accept them, especially under the guise of protecting national interests.

Emotional responses like disgust or fear, particularly toward marginalized outgroups, have been shown through brain imaging to bypass rational processing, indicating a deep-seated, often unconscious, bias. This research suggests that racism often operates beneath the surface of awareness, and that political behavior-especially in group contexts-can be shaped by these unacknowledged emotional mechanisms.

For example, during the second week of Donald Trump's second term-mass deportations commenced.

„Thousands of undocumented immigrants — many without any criminal history — have already been detained and deported.”[The Root: 2025].]

<https://www.theroot.com/15-of-the-craziest-moments-in-2025-1851750421>

Passive constructions present a fact in a neutral manner and does not express any form of empathy or care towards the affected individuals, which can lead to resentment. Passive constructions imply negativity and conflict, which always generate dissatisfaction and negative emotions among opponents. The construction conceals the initiators of the arrests or deportations which can make the action appear more neutral by shifting the focus onto the action itself.

As for another example, we would like to provide the discourse of President Trump's first address to a joint session of congress in his second term, delivered on March 4, 2025. In this speech, he triumphantly proclaimed the ushering in of the "Golder Age of America", referring actions taken over since Trumps' second inaugural address in the Capitol Rotunda, where he declared, "The Golden Age of America begins right now".

"And virtually all of them, including murders, drug dealers, gang members and people from mental institutions and insane asylums, were released into our country." <https://time.com/7264688/trump-speech-congress-2025-transcript/>

Discrimination is signaled by grouping. This groups all undocumented immigrants with violent criminals and mentally ill individuals painting an entire population with a dangerous and dehumanizing stereotype. This contributes to a polarization effect.

By casting immigration as a threat, while portraying those who support or allow it (implied Democrats) as irresponsible or even hostile to America safety.

e.g. "\$ 22 billion from HHS provide free housing and cars for illegal aliens."

Use of the term "illegal aliens" rather than undocumented immigrants is considered stigmatizing and dehumanizing by many and frames government support for immigrants as wasteful and unjust, stirring anger against both immigrants and those who advocate for them.

However, a person's moral choice, as a fundamental aspect of human society, morality and value system, is not always a constant value in favor of one side; sometimes situations arise where a subject may make radically different decisions, even in order to fulfill a publicly stated commitment. This is conditioned by the moral values and experiences. Being faced with a moral choice is a form of responsibility that a person bears when making difficult decisions, which can create reactive aggression within opposing groups.

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Analyzing Hillary Clintons 2016 Democratic primary campaign in relation to black voters we can evaluate it critically through the framework of racial politics. Her political discourse frequently presents black voters as political capital- a bloc to be “won over”, “secured”, or “leveraged”. This framing reinforces a long-standing pattern in U.S. politics where black communities are valued for their votes but not necessarily empowered as autonomous political actors.

Signing the 1994 Crime Bill is one of the most directly relevant points of racial criticism. Hillary Clinton supported it and even referred to black youth as “super-predators” –represents a deeply racialized and discriminatory moment in political history. While both Clintons attempted to apologize or reframe their positions during the 2016 campaign, these apologies were largely perceived as political necessities rather than evidence of transformative understanding of structural racism. <https://time.com/4238230/hillary-clinton-black-lives-matter-superpredator/>
<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/factcheck/2020/10/24/fact-check-hillary-clinton-called-some-criminals-super-predators/6021383002/>

The passage explores the psychological dimensions of political behavior, particularly the roles of group decision-making, emotion, and racial attitudes. It emphasizes that political judgements are rarely made in cold, rational vacuum- they are deeply influenced by feelings, moods, and long-term emotional evaluations. Group dynamics can enhance decision-making by offering diverse perspectives and reducing psychological strain. Emotionally charged reactions shape how people respond to political figures and events.

The passage also touches on the importance of stereotypes, unconscious biases, and emotional shortcuts in forming political judgements. Finally it underscores that race remains a major factor in shaping both life outcomes and political attitudes, and highlights the ongoing challenge of understanding and confronting racism through psychological theory.

Conclusion

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.

Based on this analysis, we can conclude that political rhetoric often deliberately uses linguistic strategies to obscure real political motives, minimize responsibility, and reinforce specific ideological positions. These strategies serve not only to convey facts, but also to manage the emotional reactions of the audience.

Key findings of this study include:

- Politicians actively use disguised language to avoid direct responsibility and discussion of sensitive topics
- Passive constructions and ambiguous formulations serve to avoid criticism and cover up the subject
- Rhetoric is often strongly polarized, which contributes to the demonization of opponents and the deepening of divided identities
- Emotional frames and nostalgic references are used to simulate national unity and exclude opponents
- Xenophobic and racist narratives imperceptibly create discriminatory attitudes
- Political language reflects deep-seated biases that have a strong emotional impact, while conscious biases can determine political behavior and public sentiment
- The language choices of the media and political elites create ideological frames that facilitate public manipulation, the identification of enemies creating an image and maintaining social tension

Ultimately, political discourse does more than reflect ideology—it actively shapes it. Through language, ideologies are built, reinforced, and challenged. Recognizing the rhetorical strategies at work in political speech is crucial for developing critical media literacy and resisting manipulative or discriminatory messages in public communication.

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