Comparative analysis of American and Russian political discourse: A discourse analysis study

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Abstract

This article provides an exhaustive analysis of American and Russian political discourse through the examination of the linguistic techniques employed by President Joe Biden and President Putin in their speeches. The aim of this research is to examine the linguistic approaches employed in referencing social and political traditions in the United States and Russia, investigate disparities in linguistic strategies within both political discourses, and assess variations in semantic outcomes. The analysis has been conducted to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the linguistic methods of referring to social and political traditions in America and Russia? (2) Do the linguistic strategies differ depending on the political discourse? (3) Is the semantic output different depending on the political discourse? The findings reveal marked differences between the two discourses, reflecting the social and political discrepancies between the political systems of the United States and Russia.

Keywords: discourse, political discourse, discourse analysis, American political system, Russian political system, comparative analysis

1. The notion of discourse

According to Crystal (2008: 148), discourse refers to a continuous segment of language that extends beyond a single sentence and can encompass various applications. Generally, discourse serves as a behavioural unit in linguistics with a pre-theoretical status, representing a collection of utterances that form a recognizable speech event. Examples of such events include conversations, jokes, sermons, and interviews, without specifically addressing their linguistic structure.

Fairclough (1995) emphasizes the role of discourse in meaning construction and participation in social processes. What is important, the truth or falsehood of linguistic instances is less important in this view and researchers rather focus on how truths develop during discourse production (Bleau, 2010: 23; Fairclough, 1995: 12-16; Locke, 2004: 14).

From the sociolinguistic perspective discourse is viewed as a group of ideas or patterns of thinking that can be identified in textual and verbal communications and reflected in wider

social structures. This approach highlights the connection between discourse and the social context in which it occurs (Lupton, 1992: 18).

2. Discourse analysis

According to Powers (2001: 1), discourse analysis is a relatively new linguistic field that emerged in the 1970s. It focuses on the analysis of the language in use, examining how language functions within specific contexts.

Discourse analysis employs various methods but shares common goals and assumptions. The objective is to understand how linguistic information or techniques function within specific contexts. The methodology of discourse analysis is influenced by critical social theory, ideology, false consciousness, foundationalism and postmodernism (Powers, 2001: 3).

Critical social theory, which is rooted in Marxist thought and literary criticism, scrutinizes oppressive social and political institutions and their impact on different social groups. It seeks to discover dominant ideologies that shape the experiences of the group members. Critical social theorists argue that there may not be a single true interpretation within discourse but multiple interpretations that vary depending on the context (Fairclough, 1995: 20). Althusser (1971: 19) defines ideology as representing the imaginary relationship of individuals to the real conditions of existence with the ability to mask systematic oppression. Marxist theory suggests that capitalistic ideology creates false consciousness among the working class that misleads them about the benefits of their work (Fairclough, 1995: 21; Powers, 2001: 3).

The postmodern approach to discourse analysis explores power relations within specific contexts and focuses on the meaning-making processes. It questions universal norms and underlines context-specific accounts. Postmodernism opts for practicality and moral openness, which results in increased participation in discourse (Powers, 2001: 4).

3. Political discourse

Rhetoric was regarded as a fundamental aspect of political discourse, which emphasized its role in persuading and influencing others (Roberts, 2004: 7). This historical perspective illustrates the enduring relevance of rhetorical skills in political communication. Political discourse has continued to serve as a means of conveying information about public policies and actions aimed at promoting social welfare (Wilson, 2001: 16).

While ancient rhetoric focused on the skills and techniques necessary to achieve specific political objectives, modern views on political discourse have shifted towards linguistic analysis and its relation to socio-political factors. It was not until the 1980s and 1990s that political discourse began to be characterized in linguistic terms by scholars such as Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak (Fairclough, 1995; Wodak, 1989). This shift in thinking highlights the evolving nature of political discourse and its analysis (Wilson, 2001: 17).

Political discourse can be approached through exclusive and inclusive approaches (Dunmire, 2012: 740). The exclusive approach limits analysis to the text and speeches of politicians and political institutions (van Dijk, 1997: 41). Conversely, the inclusive approach

regards the broader context of power dynamics, which encompasses collaborative acts among participants during a discursive performance. It acknowledges that political discourse is influenced by social, cultural and economic forces that influence each other (Muntigl, 2002: 2).

A critical social theory accentuates the role of political discourse as a manifestation of power, domination and potential abuse. Such an analytical perspective explores the impact of discourse structures and practices on political power dynamics. Socio-cultural factors also play a crucial role in shaping political discourse by reinforcing the interrelation between language and social influences (Fairclough, 1995: 30; Rojo and van Dijk, 1997: 29).

Furthermore, political discourse is intricately linked to the media, expanding its scope beyond traditional political institutions to encompass media language, science and technology. This symbiotic relationship broadens the range of linguistic accounts applicable to political communication. Moreover, political discourse expands beyond formal political settings to include everyday language and increases accessibility for discourse participants by breaking social and linguistic barriers (Fetzer and Lauerbach, 2007: 63).

The cultural context is another shaping force in political discourse, as acceptability and appropriateness of communication practices vary among different cultures (Fetzer and Lauerbach, 2007: 67). For instance, the conversationalisation of political discourse is considered acceptable in the Anglo-American culture but might face criticism and rejection in Middle Eastern societies. Political discourse cannot be treated as a monolithic entity as it encompasses various subtypes representing particular social groups, such as feminist or nationalistic groups, each with distinct objectives and characteristics (Whisnant, 2012: 14).

In order to fully understand political discourse, it is imperative to consider its close relationship with political cognition, which connects individual and collective properties of politics (van Dijk, 2002: 204). Political cognition serves as a bridge between personal beliefs and shared political representation, encompassing knowledge, ideologies, attitudes and cognitive processing. It recognizes that political discourse is shaped by subjective experiences acquired through political cognition, combining shared and personal beliefs expressed through linguistic and discursive tools (van Dijk, 2002: 208).

4. Sociolinguistic background of political discourse

Sociolinguistics studies the relationship between language and society. It investigates how language and society influence each other. The sociolinguistic perspective recognizes the importance of the social context in language analysis and considers the speaker's personal experience as valuable data (Hudson, 1996: 31). In the realm of political discourse, language is seen as an integral part of social life and analysing discourse is crucial for understanding the construction of social reality (Fairclough, 2003). Political discourse is embedded in the socio-cultural context and plays a role in shaping social patterns and behaviours (Fairclough, 1995: 28). Language in political discourse is seen as an ideological tool that constructs social and political relationships (Coupland, 2016: 44).

Several sociolinguistic notions are important for analysing political discourse. Recontextualisation is a process where social events are incorporated into new social contexts through linguistic adaptations (Blackledge, 2006: 24). Representation and misrepresentation

are important tools in controlling society through discourse and they include the analysis of the ideological effects of discourse in relation to social and historical contexts (Blackledge, 2005: 53). Social practice and social functions highlight the role of discourse as a performance that serves cultural, social and political purposes within institutions and society (van Dijk, 1997: 18). Social theory connects discourse to social patterns and relations and it aims to understand how discourse shapes and transforms communities and societies (Lemke, 2005: 5). When analysing political discourse, it is imperative to integrate social and linguistic theories to provide a comprehensive analysis that goes beyond purely linguistic perspectives (Wilson, 2001: 22).

5. American and Russian political systems

American and Russian political systems are characterised by several key features that have been shaped by socio-cultural and historical factors. They create a sociolinguistic basis for the discourse analysis.

5.1. *American political system*

Religion has played a significant role in the development of the American political system. The early Puritan settlers viewed America as a promised land and sought to create an earthly paradise in the shape of Heaven through hard work and dedication. This religious influence is evident in the Declaration of Independence, which mentions the idea of absolute rights bestowed by God (Paraschiavescu, 2012: 31).

The American political image is further shaped by the notion of *American paradise*. It was conceived as a utopian vision of a new land, often described as a heavenly garden or a biblical promised land. The vast American landscapes were perceived as a promise of happiness and fulfilment, creating an image of an earthly paradise. This perception was reinforced by the metaphorical association of America with femininity and desire (Girgus, 1990: 7). However, it is argued that the notion of American paradise served as propaganda to conceal the paradoxes within the political and economic systems of the United States. Stern (1938) suggests that the artificial paradise was created to mask the economic hardships and inequalities experienced by many Americans. The Great Depression exposed these paradoxes, including high unemployment, wage cuts and social unrest (Stern, 1938: 42).

Despite the complexities and paradoxes, American paradise can be viewed as both a positive definition of life in a new country and an ironic reflection of the contradictions within American society. It represents the ideals of independence, hard work and dedication, while also acknowledging the challenges present in the political and economic systems of America (Stern, 1938: 24).

The concept of *American optimism* is rooted in the belief that America was destined to become an Earthly paradise, characterised by territorial expansion and a disposition to adopt the most positive outlook (Paraschivescu, 2012: 32; Wright, 1950: 20). This optimism, deeply influenced by Puritan faith, guided frontmen in their mission to expand territory and create an earthly Eden through hard work and loyal dedication to God's plan (Wright, 1950: 23). The Puritans saw themselves as God's elects destined to build a heavenly home on Earth

(Paraschivescu, 2012: 33; Wright, 1950: 22). Despite numerous challenges such as trade taxes, natural dangers, internal conflicts and racial segregation, American optimism has contributed to the country's current high, global position (Lienesch 2014: 10). In short, American optimism can be understood as a religious element, an attitude, or a defining aspect of American society and government.

Presidential power holds a central position in the American political system. Presidents exercise power through persuasion, using their position and rhetoric to gain support for their policies (Jones, 1990: 15), They can influence the Congress through veto power and public persuasion through media and foreign policy (Jones, 1990: 20). Moreover, presidents determine the government's agenda and are expected to play a role in representing the national interest (King, 1990: 15; Nelson, 2020: 49).

The perception of parties in American politics has evolved over time. The Founding Fathers initially opposed parties but later recognised the need for a party system to control leaders' self-interest and corruption. Parties serve as communication channels between leaders and voters, allowing for the expression of needs and proposals for social and political changes (Reichley, 2000: 7). They also ensure continuity in government policies and enable diverse social groups to unite under a common party coalition (Hofstadter, 2011: 80; Reichley, 2000: 7).

5.2. Russian political system

According to Surkov (2008: 15), Russian political culture is characterized by political wholeness, idealization of political goals and personification of political institutions. Political wholeness is achieved through the centralization of power and the merging of politically active groups into national parties. Idealism is emphasized in Russian society, with a focus on utopian ideals and a sense of exclusivity and being different. Charismatic personalities play a crucial role in Russian politics, where the leaders personify the values of political groups. However, excessive centralization leads to the malfunctioning of public institutions and hinders socio-economic development (Surkov, 2008: 19).

Evans (2008) and Lukin (2009) discuss the characteristics of an ideal Russian state and leader. Russian society seeks a strong state with powerful public institutions that impose strict control and promote common social ideologies. The government should concentrate on the improvement of living conditions, the development of key industrial sectors and the provision of a robust welfare system. An ideal leader is viewed as influential, ambitious and rooted in traditional Soviet institutions. The leader's rhetoric should resonate with society, uphold conservative and paternalistic values as well as emphasize social order. The leader exercises manual control and is responsible for maintaining discipline and ensuring the execution of tasks (Evans, 2008: 18; Lukin, 2009: 81).

Russian nationalism highlights the return of Russia as a global power and rejects the dissociation of state and civil society. Centralization of power is seen as necessary to maintain social order and national pride. Western democratization is viewed as a threat to Russian independence and the rhetoric of Russian nationalism seeks to keep society ideologically homogeneous (Evans, 2008: 29).

Social unity is highly valued in the Russian political system. Unity is achieved through social consensus, ideological agreement and political wholeness. The centralisation of power ensures the fulfilment of social goals and prevents external influences (Evans, 2008: 23). Russian civil society is characterised by political apathy and passivity. The state's interference is considered imperative for social stability. Any social organisations that deviate from established norms are marginalized. Civil society is willing to sacrifice personal liberties for financial improvement and the nation's integrity (Lukin, 2009: 75; Sukrov, 2008: 24).

The modern democratic system in Russia combines elements of democratic pluralism and autocracy. While there are elections, opposition in parliament and some independent media, executive control is strict and the opposition is disregarded (Lukin, 2009). The concept of *managed democracy* is used to describe the authoritarian features of the Russian political system, including the centralisation of power and control over institutions and media (Lukin, 2009: 85; Waller, 2005: 25).

6. Discourse analysis study

Political discourses of America and Russia have been repeatedly at the center of attention in linguistic and sociolinguistic circles. Anikin (2015: 12-28) examined the correlation between metaphors used in Russian political discourse and discovered that political metaphors have a stable core but are influenced by trends towards interaction and globalization. Mammadov (2010: 67-87) conducted a comparative analysis of metaphors in American and Russian political discourses, which revealed the existence of shared as well as diverse metaphorical expressions that reflect distinct methods of presenting beliefs and viewpoints in both cultures. Lepekhova (2012: 52-64) analysed presidential addresses by Putin and Obama. The results showed that American politics emphasizes solidarity while Russian political discourse focuses on national identity and the formation of otherness. Vestermark's (2007: 17-29) study on political metaphors in American inauguration speeches found that presidents of the USA (George Bush, George W. Bush, Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton) used a wide choice of metaphors to personalize America and evoke emotions in the audience, depending on the context and intended meaning. Yuzhakova (2018: 20-36) addressed ethnic stereotyping in English political media texts. The findings revealed that stereotypes were frequently employed to shape public opinion and influence attitudes towards Russia. To amplify the impact, speakers often utilised both auto-stereotypes and hetero-stereotypes to generate a contrasting effect. Hetero-stereotypes refer to perceptions of groups that an individual does not belong to (out-group), while auto-stereotypes pertain to perceptions of the individual's own group (in-group) (Manz, 1968: 16).

6.1. Rationale and methodology

The objective of this study was to investigate linguistic methods of referring to social and political traditions in America and Russia, explore differences in linguistic techniques across both political discourses and examine differences in semantic output. Studies mentioned in previous section focused on specific linguistic or sociolinguistic properties using mainly

quantitative methods. This study took a more holistic approach to political discourse, aiming to analyse how linguistic manipulations influence perception and language's role in referring to political traditions. Given the ongoing Russian war against Ukraine, it was principal to understand the power of language in political speeches, particularly those delivered by President Putin, and their impact on society. Moreover, a comparative discourse analysis of American and Russian political discourses was meant to provide insights into the linguistic techniques used to address political and social issues.

Three political speeches were used as data sources: President Joe Biden's *State of the Union Address* delivered on February 7, 2023 (biden), President Vladimir Putin's speeches to the Russian Federation citizens delivered on September 21, 2022 (putin 1), and to the Federal Assembly speech delivered on February 21, 2023 (putin 2). The reason behind choosing this specific speech delivered by President Biden was that it encompassed similar topics to those covered by President Putin: the state welfare, economy and military conflict between Russia and Ukraine. The choice of two Russian speeches was to ensure comparable data volume, as the American speech was longer. The analysis of the Russian speeches was based on official translations. The study employed the DIMEAN (Diskurslinguistische Mehrebenen-Analyse) method, also known as Multimodal Discourse Analysis, which considers discourse complexity through linguistic techniques (Pirini, 2017: 21; Spitzmüller, 2014: 1-28). The analysis included 3 layers: intratextual (texts), agent (actors) and transtextual (knowledge).

The discourse analysis involved listening to the speeches, recording remarks in a research journal, categorizing examples and comparing them. Categories were formulated to answer research questions and facilitate interpretation, focusing on the linguistic means of referencing political traditions, the use of grammatical structures and additional remarks.

The main results of the discourse analysis are presented in the next two sections. They focus on references to political traditions and the use of grammatical structures, respectively. Some additional remarks are given in the subsequent section.

6.2. Referencing political traditions

President Biden's speech prominently reflects American traditions and values. The phrases *light over dark, hope over fear, unity over division, stability over chaos* highlight the theme of American optimism. Similarly, the use of alliteration in the phrase *pain to purpose* conveys resilience and determination which is a crucial principle of American optimism. References to the American dream are evident in statements such as *Everything is a possibility* and *A pathway to citizenship for dreamers*. Puritan traditions are evoked through phrases like *We have been sent here to finish the job* and *dignity of work*. The president's role as a collective voice of the nation is highlighted in statements like *I have your back*. The importance of political cooperation is emphasised in phrases such as *bipartisan legislation* or *Democrats and Republicans came together*.

Speeches delivered by President Putin are less equipped with references to political traditions. This situation may be associated with the war in Ukraine; thus the propagandist system provides only selected and suitable information for Russian propagandistic rhetoric.

Power vertical[1] and Putin's dominant role within the governmental hierarchy are reflected throughout both speeches. For example, the statement *I want all levels of government to pay attention to this* indicates the autocratic nature of Putin's position and his decision-making force. The Russian president highlights the importance of social unity through patriotic references in his speech: *This support primarily revealed their true patriotism – a feeling that is truly inherent in our nation* (Putin 2). Putin also emphasises the paternalistic and protective role of the state: *The state and the society will certainly support you* (Putin 2).

In contrast to Russian political discourse, the speech delivered by President Biden underscores the interconnection of society and the state that is imperative to achieve societal well-being: *To build an economy from the bottom up and the middle out, not from the top down.* This statement highlights the importance of creating an economy that benefits all levels of society.

6.3. *The use of grammatical structures*

Both speakers frequently use the imperative construction *let* (Rus. *Позвольте* or *давайте*). However, the semantic perception differs depending on the speaker. When applied by President Biden, it creates an inclusive and cooperative tone, inviting collaboration beyond political divisions as it is constructed with the use of the 1st person plural pronoun *us*: *Let's finish the job.* In contrast, President Putin uses the imperative in the 1st person singular pronoun *me*, which portrays him as a teacher or preacher, delivering lectures and indoctrinating his audience: *Let me reiterate that they were the ones who started this war* (Putin 2).

Rhetorical questions are also noticeable in both speakers' addresses. President Biden's use of rhetorical questions is intended to foster unity and mutual motivation within society. By employing the 1st person plural pronoun, he positions himself as an equal while maintaining his leadership status: *Would we stand for sovereignty?* Conversely, President Putin's rhetorical questions have a defensive nature, aiming to present the West as a hostile society: *And what, after such statements, they are supposed to tour our defence facilities […] as if nothing happened?* (Putin 1). The use of the 1st person singular pronoun serves to unite society and create an antagonistic narrative against the West, portraying Russia as a protector and victim of the Western system.

President Biden and President Putin's use of the 1st person singular pronoun reflects their respective leadership styles. Biden employs this pronoun to assert his executive force and present his presidency in a positive light: *I will not raise taxes on anyone making under 400 grand.* On the other hand, the use of the 1st person singular pronoun highlights the autocratic nature of his role in Russian politics: *I want the regions to stay on track to meet these objectives* (Putin 2). In regard to the use of the 1st person plural pronoun, President Biden applies it to foster inclusivity and collaboration, inviting different political parties to contribute to the American success: *We are building back pride.* In contrast, Putin's application of the 1st person plural pronoun reinforces the dominance of the power vertical in Russian politics, providing a

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[1] Power vertical refers to the centralized and hierarchical structure of political power in a state (Surkov, 2008).

sense of stability and a strong governing system for the society: *We will keep this issue under constant review* (Putin 1).

Both leaders use the 2nd person pronouns to address their audiences. The semantic function of these pronouns differs in the political discourses analysed. The use of *you* by Biden helps to create a direct and inclusive attitude towards the audience: *You came together.* It comes in contrast to the more formal and distant style of President Putin: *I instruct you* or *let me remind you* (Putin 1 & Putin 2). Biden's use of direct addressing creates a sense of closeness, respect and teamwork, while Putin maintains an authoritative role, giving orders and asserting his superior position. This distinction is influenced by the linguistic differences between English and Russian, where Russian employs conjugation to indicate the desired pronoun and has formal and informal second-person pronouns (*ты* /tɨ/ and *вы* /vɨ/). The inherent formality of the Russian language enhances Putin's authoritarian speech style.

Both presidents make use of numerals and statistics in their speeches, although the precision and relevance of the data presented are questionable. Numerals are employed for propagandistic purposes, aiming to create a positive reaction in the audience and portray the respective governments in a favourable light: *We've created […] 12 million new jobs-more jobs created in two years than any President has created in four years* (Biden). Additionally, the provision of sources in the Russian speeches lacks precision and credibility, as can be seen in the following example: *As for agricultural production, it recorded two-digit growth rates last year […] Experts believe that it will rely on a fundamentally new model and structure* (Putin 2).

Model verbs and conditional sentences are also utilised by both speakers but with different semantic functions. President Biden uses modal verbs to express necessity (*must*) and obligation, correctness and probability (*should*), while President Putin employs them to give instructions and reinforce his authority (*must* and *should*). Zero and first conditional types are used by Biden to ensure the effectiveness of presidential actions: *If anyone tries to cut Medicare I will stop them*, and to emphasise the potential for cooperation: *And there is nothing, nothing beyond our capacity if we do it together*, whereas Putin applies such structures to create a sense of determination and present Russia as a strong and independent power: *We will not be the first to proceed with these tests, but if the United States goes ahead with them, we will as well* (Putin 2).

6.4. Additional remarks

President Biden employs straightforward language to describe the military situation in Ukraine, for example, *war* or *invasion*. The choice of nouns portrays the tragic outcomes of the conflict and implies Russian aggression. In contrast, President Putin avoids directly naming the war in Ukraine and instead uses terms such as *military operation*, *pre-emptive* or *special operation* (Putin 1). He presents Russia's military actions as necessary and aimed at protecting and liberating Donbas. The Russian president also employs highly pejorative language to vilify the West (e.g., *destroy, rule, master*), depicting Western leaders as liars and accusing them of destroying the international order. He uses figurative language (e.g., *be torn to pieces by butchers*) to evoke negative emotions and portray the West as brutal and indifferent.

7. Conclusions

The research reported here focused on recent speeches delivered by President Joe Biden and President Vladimir Putin. The previous political discourse-related studies on metaphors, national identity and ethnic stereotypes had a considerably narrower scope of interest, but this study took a more comprehensive approach by comparing linguistic methods in both discourses and investigating how those methods are reflected on the socio-cultural level. The findings show that both presidents have employed similar strategies like the imperative mood and rhetorical questions, but the semantic output is different. The American discourse emphasizes cooperation and democratic values, while the Russian discourse exhibits an autocratic approach that restrains social roles. Additionally, the linguistic methods used to describe the war in Ukraine are different as Biden uses direct terms, while Putin employs more neutral language. The analysis revealed the use of linguistic methods such as pejorative and figurative language in order to create a negative portrayal of the West and support Russian propaganda.

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