



A critical discourse analysis of Joe Biden's justificatory speeches about the US the troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan

Ahmed Fleih Hassan ^{1*}, Dr. Sadiq Mahdi Kadhim Al Shamiri ²

¹ Ph.D. Candidate, Department of English, College of Education for Human Sciences, University of Babylon, Iraq

² Assistant Professor, Department of English, College of Education for Human Sciences, University of Babylon, Iraq

* Corresponding Author: Ahmed Fleih Hassan

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Abstract

This paper conducts a critical discourse analysis of justification in the speeches of the American president of the United States of America, Joe Biden, about the US troops' withdrawal from Afghanistan. It aims to analyze the manipulative language that the American president uses in order to justify the decision to withdraw in 2021. The paper tries to bridge a gap in the linguistic research concerning critically investigating the concept of 'justification' in Biden's speeches. The analysis is done by answering the following questions: (1) What manipulative language strategies does the US president employ in his speech in order to justify his decision to withdraw? (2) What speech acts and rhetorical strategies does the president employ to persuade his audience to accept and support his decision to withdraw? The paper adopts van Dijk's (2006c) 'Discourse and Manipulation' as a model for analyzing the selected data. The paper concluded that the American president uses a particular effective and manipulative language in order to justify the decision to withdraw, and ideologically, the American president, depending on his status and power, tries to use particular speech acts and rhetorical strategies to impose his ideologies to get his decision justified.

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1. Introduction

It is believed that language is an intricate and sophisticated type of communication. Words and word combinations are often used in language to communicate politically and socially sensitive meanings. Political figures commonly employ this elegant rhetorical device to persuade the public. By employing stronger and more convincing language, they do this in order to support their own positions and objectives. Politicians usually use the wording to soften and reconcile a certain viewpoint (Johnson et.al, 2000) ^[10]. Political discourse study primarily focuses on discourse patterns that appear in certain political situations or domains, such as legislative processes or parliamentary debates (Wodak & Meyer, 2009) ^[21]. It can therefore be defined as a subfield of discourse analysis that makes certain political actors' discursive actions transparent in order to disclose their implicit political goals and viewpoints. It is common knowledge that political speeches are intended more for persuasion than for instruction or amusement. Political speech is characterized as deliberate communication intended to initiate a dialogue between the speaker and the audience (Gee & Handford, 2012) ^[7].

2. Critical Discourse Analysis

The term discourse refers to the structural analysis of written and spoken materials outside of sentences. The analysis of language use in relation to context is referred to here as discourse. Social psychologists are especially interested in argument structure beyond sentence-level analysis. A critical linguist concentrates on social and political topics while utilizing complex models of meaning and interpretation to analyze texts (Mill, 1997) ^[13].

The primary goal of CDA is to ascertain the structure of written or spoken texts by examining linguistic characteristics and textual structures; it also investigates underlying ideological components and power relations. In addition, CDA discusses social frames, semiotics, linguistic analysis, and language power dynamics as text analysis tools (Luke, 2002) ^[11].

Van Dijk (2010) ^[19] defined discourse as a communication event that includes written and spoken words, gestures, facial expressions, images, and mass media. Language systems are used for discourse in social, political, and cultural spheres. According to Paltridge (2012) ^[15], CDA has given rise to methods for the empirical study of the relationships between discourse and achievements in culture and society across a range of social domains. A critical discourse analysis The CDA domain was developed by linguists collaboratively in the late 1980s. Gee and Handford (2012) ^[7] claim that discourse analysis (DA) simply examines language as a communication action; it does not examine meaning combinations, coherence, or sentence structure. As DA evolves, contemporary academics from a variety of fields, such as sociology, anthropology, and philosophy, have an influence. Critical linguistics (CL), also referred to as the study of language usage, communication, and interaction, is made possible by this innovation. Critical discourse analysis is a method for examining matters of ideology and power. Van Dijk (2015) ^[20] notes that in situations such as laws and orders, language is used to establish authority and impose power. Talking in this situation could kill everyone's ideas. Therefore, as we can see from the media and political discussions, powerful and controlled groups often use different discourses to build their ideas and govern the less dominated organizations.

3. Major Concepts of CDA

Power

Holmes (2005) ^[9] notes that this type of control consists of both a social and a cognitive component. Put another way, they control the discourse and actions of the prevailing groups as well as the knowledge that is accepted in society. Further, van Dijk (2015) ^[20] stresses that language and power are consistently related because power is a transforming and dynamic aspect of interaction that is both enacted and challenged in every interaction. Because of this, power keeps being essential to the development of the knowledge society, demonstrating that knowledge is produced, used, sold, and consumed rather than just happening to people. Powerful entities that shape people's knowledge include politicians, media companies, parents, educational institutions, and the mass media. Consequently, power and dominance are portrayed as a specific control link between social groups or organizations rather than as a quality of interpersonal relationships.

Ideology

Ideology is crucial to the establishment and upkeep of uneven power relations. In a narrow sense, "ideology" refers to the hegemonic behaviors and dominance that a specific group adopts in a given circumstance; in a broad sense, however, it refers to a wide range of viewpoints that address the fundamental elements of how society ought to be structured (Schwarzmantel, 2008) ^[16]. Therefore, Van Dijk (2015) ^[20] distinguishes between ideologies and attitudes. Attitudes, in contrast to concepts, are exclusive to groups. For example,

most people are aware of their rights regarding immigration and abortion, but their opinions on these subjects, such as whether or not they should be legalized, may vary depending on the beliefs they hold. Critical theory aims to increase people's awareness and make clear the ways in which they are being misled, even when these are divergent interpretations of ideology.

4. Political Discourse

The sociopolitical nature of the ideological discourse is crucial. In this discourse, social attributes like gender, class, and race are connected to structural units deduced in different contexts. Political discourse is further defined as the dialogue between political actors at different levels, such as presidents, prime ministers, members of parliament, and government officials. The main goal of political discourse is to utilize language that influences listeners to adopt political beliefs or make decisions (van Dijk, 2002) ^[17]. According to Chilton and Schaffner (2003) ^[5], a dominant and strong character competes with a less powerful, wealthy, or free figure in every political discourse, among other characteristics. Manipulation is the most potent strategy in political discourse.

The most efficient form of communication is speech. Politicians, in particular, can use it to achieve their goals by influencing the public through their plans, deeds, and policies. Political language, speeches, and rhetorical discourses are used by politicians and media professionals to influence the link between language and politics. It reinforces the notion that the purpose and theme of political speeches are what define them. "Thematic" because they deal with political topics, and "functional" because they perform a range of functions related to various political undertakings (Sharndama, 2016) ^[23].

5. The Concept of Justification

Whenever someone says or does something, they are undoubtedly engaging in the game of providing and obtaining excuses. A person's moral standing—the degree to which an action is morally righteous, ethically acceptable, or even the right thing to do—justifies their acting in a particular way. The only problem left to be solved is justification when there is sufficient evidence. At first, an action that causes pain or suffering might seem wrong, but after considering all the available facts or doing a longer or more thorough meditation, it might be decided that the action is appropriate, right, and justified (Brandom, 2000) ^[4]. There is a significant difference between justification theories that apply to different types of beliefs based on whether the reason for the belief is internal or external to the believer's thinking the internalist perspective. It is argued that a person's conviction can be sufficiently supported by their intellect alone. It is evident from internalism's argument that an individual's internal mental processes influence how their beliefs are created as well as how they come to be. On the other hand, an externalist would claim that since the opinion was formed elsewhere, the person's faith in Aristotle is not supported by the evidence. According to externalism, a believer's justification could rely, at least somewhat, on elements that are not available to or contained within their own thoughts (BonJour & Sosa, 2003) ^[2]. A person is nonetheless justified, in the opinion of Goldberg (2007) ^[8], even if they are unable to justify their actions.

6. Justification in Politics

Wodak (2002) ^[22] asserts that justification and legitimation in political discourse are mostly related to contested past actions or events, which may have an impact on the construction of historical narratives. To put it another way, they are trying to maintain the status quo in society. The rationale and validity of political decisions made for the present and the future follow the same rules. According to Forest (2011) ^[6], there is no set reservoir of established moral truths that can be used to justify norms, behaviors, or beliefs. The first goal of justice shifts from actual conversation and concrete social situations to the development of processes that allow for compromise and all of its justifications. The right to justification is therefore entirely reasonable. The method of deliberative democracy formalizes a logic. Alexy (2012) ^[1] contends that democracy's primary characteristic is its political practice of reasoning and argumentation. The public recognizes as legitimate only those standards, laws, or decisions that come from a consensus reached via reason. Political and moral justifications are therefore related to one another. According to Brandom (2013) ^[3], moral differences are prevalent; therefore, it's not apparent why it's appropriate to demand obedience from legislators. This makes having this quality appealing. Political justification, which addresses the issue of moral disagreement through a unique kind of reasoning, allows only political ideas to be used as an explanation. By guaranteeing that a decision's topic, issue, or circumstances allow authorized government actors to supersede private decision-making, the requirement that legislation be politically justified aims to make it fair to expect people to defer.

7. Methodology

7.1. Data Collection and Description

The data in the current paper is a speech delivered by American President Joe Biden, it is about the 2001 United States military withdrawal from Afghanistan. The data was taken from the official website of the White House. It was a manuscript conference delivered by US President Joe Biden and was titled "Remarks by President Biden on the End of the War in Afghanistan" on August 31, 2021, at 3:28 p.m. At <https://www.whitehouse.gov/>.

7.2. The Model

The study uses van Dijk's "Discourse and Manipulation" (2006). According to Van Dijk, one of the main strategies in CDA is manipulation, which includes the abuse of authority using discourse language. Manipulation is a mental process since it affects the recipients' brains (van Dijk, 2006) ^[18]. Four levels of analysis are therefore applied. They are listed in the following order:

1. Syntactic Level: In ideological speeches, **pronouns** are employed to convey sentiment and emotion, with "We" denoting unity and "I" highlighting authority. Both **passive and active** voice sentences are used, with active structures addressing outgroup members' harmful activities. **Nominalization** is also frequently employed in ideological discourse to emphasize the speaker's authority and dominance.

2. Semantic Level: Significant semantic approaches are used to describe actors and actions, influencing how recipients build knowledge through **generalization vs. specification** and varying degrees of specificity. When individuals from in-group and out-group speak, **comparisons** predominate,

discerning favorable and negative recommendations. Politicians often exposes **explicitness** biases in their own group's messaging, drawing attention to negative stereotypes of members of the other group.

3. Pragmatic Level: The speech act, or illocutionary act, must be the primary subject of discussion at this point in the analysis. The pragmatic level is important when analyzing the meaning behind well-constructed and syntactically correct statements. Politicians often make **promises** in order to achieve their goals when talking about the activities they plan to undertake. The use of **warnings** is another method used to analyze speech behaviors. It provides guidance and teaching, as well as defense against adverse and hostile situations. The third type used in political speech analysis is **justifications**.

4. Rhetorical Level

Rhetorical tactics, such as the **number game, metaphor** and **repetition**, are crucial in political speeches to build credibility. The number game involves using statistical data to illustrate achievements, while metaphorical language is used to denote both good and bad qualities. Metaphorical language is used in political discourse to denote both good and bad qualities. Repetition is another rhetorical technique used to draw attention to points of contention, emphasizing the persuasive power of repetition at various language levels. In addition, Rhetorical emphasis is placed on repetition as a persuasive device at various language levels to hold the attention of the audience.

1.8 Data Analysis

1. Syntactic Level

Pronouns

Pronouns are frequently used by speakers to refer to other individuals or to describe themselves. Speakers in political speeches often disparage the other side while praising themselves. Pronouns "I" and "WE" are frequently employed. Based on the findings of the current investigation, he refers to himself and his position as president with authority and dominance when he says, "I give you my word" or "I believe." "We completed" or "we did it today" refers to all Americans as one nation, with the president being one of them. He utilizes the pronoun "we" in these statements. He uses the pronouns "I" and "WE" to highlight the role that the US military has played in the 20-year war in Afghanistan.

Activation

Politicians employ a range of syntactic forms in their speeches. When emphasizing the performer of the action or providing clarification—particularly when stressing the speaker's own outstanding behavior or the terrible behavior of others—the active voice is always utilized. The president mostly used passive-voice syntactic constructions, such as "*In April, I made the decision to end this war,*" to minimize the achievements of the other previous American regimes in Afghanistan. When talking about the achievements of America during its presence in Afghanistan, such as the lifting of thousands of people, the training of Afghans, the provision of all necessary supplies, and the continued support that America will continue to provide to Afghanistan even after the military withdrawal, the president frequently uses the active voice.

Nominalization

Nominalization is another syntactic device used by politicians in their speeches. Biden used nominalization in his

assessment of the conflict's conclusion when he states, "There's nothing low-grade, low-risk, or low-cost about any war. The conflict in Afghanistan needs to end. The president uses this nominalization to show that those who oppose the military withdrawal don't know a lot of things. Furthermore, he wants to emphasize that the war must end since, given America's triumph in Afghanistan, there is no need to fight for a third decade. It is well recognized that one should anticipate losses in every conflict and treat them as such.

2. Semantic Level

Generalization

The generalization strategy is employed by the speaker to highlight the good aspects of a group, most notably when he says "we will continue" to underline that America will keep supporting Afghanistan. A similar method is applied to the discussion of the beneficial work that American civilians and military personnel accomplished in Afghanistan over a 20-year period. In addition to making generalizations, the speaker highlights certain aspects that he took into account prior to making his decision to withdraw by using the specification technique. In his address, he makes a point of highlighting the need for the withdrawal, saying things like "the war must end" and "the wise decision." With these kinds of statements, he tries to convince and sway his listeners or highlight the importance of his tactics.

Comparison

When comparing the terrorist groups known as the Taliban under his presidency to those under the previous American administration, the president draws comparisons in his speech. He compares the power and authority of the Taliban with those of the US government prior to his arrival. He says that prior to his arrival, the Taliban held almost total control of the country and were in their strongest position since 2001. "And by the time I came to office, the Taliban was in its strongest military position since 2001, controlling or contesting nearly half of the country." He uses comparison as a semantic approach to show that he has archived what others before him were unable to.

Explicitness

Explicitness is one of the strategies the president uses in his speech. This strategy demonstrates how direct the speaker is in articulating his opinions and ideas. It is used frequently in the work, and one of its purposes is to highlight the support that Afghans gave in order to show that they embraced the American presence in their nation. The argument put forth is that hundreds of Afghans work together to aid them in their military endeavors. In his speech, the president specifically mentions it when he says, "We got out locally employed staff of the United States Embassy and their families, totaling roughly 2,500 people. We got thousands of Afghan translators, interpreters, and others who supported the United States out as well." Additionally, Biden makes it clear to the Afghan people that anyone who wants to relocate to the US is welcome to do so.

3. Pragmatic level

Promise

Political speakers also use the promise method to accomplish their objectives and persuade the audience to support them. Considering the data that was selected for this paper, Biden says, "When I was running for president, I made a

commitment to the American people that I would end this war. And today, I've honored that commitment. It was time to be honest with the American people again." Speech acts of promise are included in the excerpt above because the speaker asserts that he made promises to his supporters during his political campaigns to end the 20-year war in Afghanistan, which claimed the lives of many American families' sons and daughters. President Biden highlights the need for the war to end and lists this commitment as one of the justifications for the US military's withdrawal from Afghanistan. He made a promise to show the Americans that he was a man of acts, not words.

Warning

Political speeches use caution, whether explicitly or indirectly, for a number of reasons. In the passage that follows, the speaker uses an indirect speech act based on a prior agreement between the Taliban and the previous US administration to warn Americans about the dangers they would face if they did not leave. Biden says, "The fact is, everything has changed. My predecessor had made a deal with the Taliban. When I came into office, we faced a deadline of May 1. The Taliban onslaught was coming." In this speech, Biden calls for the US and its partners to back the choice to leave Afghanistan because things have changed since he took office and because their stay there is finite and subject to a set timeline. The United States committed to evacuate by May 2021; otherwise, the Taliban threatened to keep attacking Americans there. The last American president put this arrangement in place. There is a verbal act of caution in this speech.

Justification

With regard to the overall justifications—political, economic, and even social—Biden's post after US forces left Afghanistan is abundant. The ruling is being revoked in favor of a single claim. As he states, it is very evident: "And here's a critical thing to understand: The world is changing. We're engaged in serious competition with China. We're dealing with challenges on multiple fronts with Russia. We're confronted with cyber-attacks and nuclear proliferation." In the passage above, President Biden explains his decision to go by saying that he would not start a third decade of warfare and that there was no longer a compelling reason to continue the war in Afghanistan. He lists several reasons why the US government ought to obstruct this course of action. He cautions that political and economic issues need to be addressed for the sake of the US, its allies, and the American people. In order to show that the decision was not taken at random, the president employs a direct, spoken act of justification.

4. Rhetorical level

Number game

Politicians constantly use a variety of rhetorical strategies in their speeches to control the language, make it sound convincing, and win over the attention and support of the audience. Throughout his address, Biden argues that the US withdrawal was justified by saying, "After 20,744 American servicemen and women injured and the loss of 2,461 American personnel, including 13 lives lost just this week," the president uses a number-game strategy throughout the speech in the extract above, using numbers that demonstrate large losses to support his position. He uses the American

losses incurred during the course of the 20-year struggle as evidence for his retreat. Using facts to support their positions and gain the support of the public is a method that politicians commonly use. In order to persuade his audience that he disagrees with the number of American lives lost in Afghanistan, which was a factor in the decision to depart, he used persuasive strategies while justifying his decision.

Metaphor

Metaphor is one of the tools that presenters employ, particularly when discussing ideas that carry greater weight than others. Politicians frequently use metaphor to highlight or minimize negative parts of their own or other people's inaccurate portrayals. President Biden states, "*As we turn the page on the foreign policy that has guided our nation the last two decades,*" he provides a quite long list of arguments in favor of the disengagement from Afghanistan. The idea that America will start a new era and that ending the war will be one of its methods is one of these defenses. Then he talks about the rising competition between Russia and China.

Repetition

In his speech, President Biden makes use of a number of rhetorical strategies related to the US decision to remove its armed forces. Repetition is one of the best strategies. He says, "*We will continue to support the Afghan people through diplomacy, international influence, and humanitarian aid. We'll continue to push for regional diplomacy and engagement to prevent violence and instability. We'll continue to speak out for the basic rights of the Afghan people, especially women and girls, as we speak out for women and girls all around the globe.*" In the excerpt above, the speaker emphasizes multiple times that "we will continue" to signify that the United States will support the Afghan people going forward and is willing to take on the responsibility of putting an end to violence and instability. The speaker also says that the United States will continue to support national human rights and stand up for the rights of Afghans, especially women and girls. This repeat is meant to show that America will not stop supporting Afghanistan even after the military leaves.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the American president uses different ideological strategies in order to make his language more effective and persuasive. He uses that manipulative language to get his decision of the US military withdrawal from Afghanistan supported by his audience as well as by the international community. On a syntactic level, the pronoun "I" is used by the president to show his position and dominance and to refer to himself. The pronoun "we" is also used to convey the message that he considers himself one of the American people. On the semantic level, generalization, comparison, and explicitness when referring to the current and previous governments are necessary to get his policies accepted by his audience. On a pragmatic level, he uses different speech acts, whether directly or indirectly. Speech acts of promise, warning, and justifying are used to justify the withdrawal of the military, while the president is listing a number of reasons that make America change its political strategy. On the rhetorical level, the president uses number games, metaphors, and repetition as justificatory tools to justify his decision to withdraw from Afghanistan.

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