


A Critical discourse analysis (CDA) of Obama and Trump's speeches on Afghan policy

 Rameen Fatima¹

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Abstract

This research analyzes the persuasive appeals President Obama and Donald Trump used in speeches regarding the Afghan policy using American Exceptionalism, Power and Ideology. The research used critical discourse analysis (CDA) within this study. For this purpose, the key speeches by both presidents were chosen: pronouns, voice, nominalization, word choice, and metaphors. The findings reveal that while both leaders aimed to justify America's prolonged military involvement in Afghanistan, they employed distinct approaches. While Obama was politer and more appealed to ethical considerations pointing to the mission's just nature, Trump was more forceful and utilitarian, framing the conflict as an endeavor for which the cost and benefits are clear. Thus, the study shows the significance of the CDA method of political speech analysis for ideology and hegemony detection and stresses that the problem of power usage accountability remains actual on the international level. The research also advocates the exploration of the speech acts towards a narrower range of power and the utilization of more kinds of analyses on a greater selection of speeches for a better understanding of the multifaceted connection between language, power, and international relations.

Keywords: Obama, Trump, Afghan Policy, America, Afghanistan, CDA

1 Introduction

The United States got directly involved in Afghanistan following the September 11, 2001, terrorism in the United States. The United States took the leading role in the military operations for the reason that it wanted to neutralize al-Qaeda and depose the Taliban regime since it sponsors terrorism (Ayalon et al., [2022](#)). In due course, this mission changed, and different American presidents applied various measures to address the ongoing war. Republican Presidents George Bush and Donald Trump had to deal with the ugly realities of the Afghan war (Lynch, [2019](#)). At the same time, Democratic President Barack Obama also had to face the bitter realities of the Afghan war. Attempting to get Afghanistan to stand still, Obama, who took office in 2009, ordered a surge in troops, accompanied, however, by an assurance of withdrawal (Ayoub, [2023](#)). Obama's

¹Master of Science English Language and Linguistics University of Stirling, UK
Corresponding author: rameenf22@gmail.com



administration policy towards Afghanistan was limited to conducting airstrikes along with quiet talks with the Taliban to force a peace deal to enable the withdrawal of international forces (Obama, [2009](#)). When Trump came to power in 2017, he offered a combination of a military strategy and peace talks with the Taliban for a quick end to the conflict and the withdrawal of the US troops (Mirza & Malik, [2020](#); Trump, [2017](#)).

Reasons include political oratory as a valuable method of mobilizing the masses and determination of international policies. The language of political leaders includes the ability to define a conflict, legitimize warfare, and build a nation (Dimitriu, [2020](#); Hammersley, [2013](#)). As applied to the Afghan war, both Obama and Trump thus used their bully pulpits to mobilize domestic and international support for U. S. actions in Afghanistan (Ali, [2021](#)). Their speeches are not only policy, but the aspect of power, tools for shaping ideologies, or warfare that influences the direction of the war. According to Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis framework, it is possible to pay attention to how language is used in political discourse as a source of power relations, ideologies, and conception of the social world (Catalano & Waugh, [2020](#)).

This article intends to compare the use of the rhetoric adopted by President Obama and Trump in their speeches on Afghanistan. Specifically, it will investigate how each president referred to language as a tool to justify military operations, instill the idea of America's uniqueness, and frame the Afghan war to the American public. In that way, the article will demonstrate how both leaders shaped their stories to support their overall foreign policy and domestic political agendas.

2 Literature Review

2.1 Discourse and Politics

Discourse is a key concept for the Critical Discourse Analysis because it enables us to deliberate upon the language as practice. As a broad term within the domain of conversation, Foucault's ([1972](#)) included all things that can convey meaning under the rubric of discourse. Discourse, for Foucault, is an 'assemblage of sequences of signs in so far as they are statements, sometimes the field of all statements, a series of statements (énoncés), and sometimes practice operating at the level of statements' (Foucault, [1972](#) p, 80). This understanding of discourse is important for analyzing political speeches because it can be seen how language is used and deployed regarding power relations, politics, and policy (Aunphattanasilp, [2019](#)).

In the same way, other researchers such as Kress and van Leeuwen ([2020](#)), while discussing media discourse, have taken cognizance of the visual aspect of media discourse (Wodak & Meyer, [2015](#)) "Discourse is a recontextualized social practice". This implication means that discourse is spoken and expressed through things like colors and, hence, how the message is delivered and perceived (Kress & Bezemer, [2023](#)). Bakhtin ([2014](#)) in his work adds to the notion of the social aspect of the use of language and approaches verbal communication as a social activity.

Another concept that has great significance is intertextuality, which was forwarded by Kristeva ([1986](#)). Interpersonal speech is constructed in the background of another's tradition of speech. We read what others have said or written. Discourse is assumed to be with language and its varieties, and it gives centrality to language and society as a mode of production and meaning (Wootton, [2024](#)). This view is quite similar to that postulated by Chouliaraki and Fairclough ([2021](#)) that even if the practices are in some ways non-discursive, they invariably entail the use of language.

In the context of the nature of political discourse, Van Dijk ([1993](#)) categorizes the discourse by its authors or actors, including politicians. He also rightly points out that all the actors are involved in the activity and practice of this political discourse and are defined in relation to these actors (Anderson & Holloway, [2020](#)). As such, they are 'textual' practices referring specifically to the ways in which language is employed in political texts, speeches, debates, media, etc., as ways of studying the functions of language in the explicit construction of political realities and

manipulation of public opinion (Van Dijk, [1993](#)).

Chilton ([2004](#)) says that political actors agree that language matters and is always wielded as a chip. This paper shows how and why power and ideology work in political language and some of the tactics or techniques of language management, such as framing and persuasion, legitimization, delegitimization, mitigation, and other forms indicated in the literature (Chilton [2004](#)).

2.2 Critical Linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis

Critical linguistics has emerged as a primary area of investigation, although many forms, methods, styles, and uses have been distinguished (Schmitt & Celce-Murcia, [2019](#)). Critical Study in Language has links with critical linguistics, and there are several apparent associations between language systems and social processes. According to Fowler et al. ([1979](#)), "The systematic exploitation of these structures is related to the position of the given text in the socio-economic system" (Fowler et al., [1979](#), p. 185).

Probably the most influential work within CDA is Norman Fairclough's work, which has introduced, among other things, the use of ideology in terms of the loading of particular ways of using language and the relation of the power regime or power relations (Fairclough & Wodak [1997](#), p. 225). Fairclough's CDA 3D model ([2023](#)) denotes three interrelated processes of Description, Interpretation, and Explanation in the study of discourse, including political discourse. Next, it is especially suitable when it comes to analyzing the political speeches as it implies a rather consistent breaking down of the text with direct reference to the goal in view of the text, which is the policies, the hidden agendas, or the manifesto.

Teun Van Dijk's work on the Social Impact: Of Discrimination Through and By Language ([1993](#), [2008](#)) is also important for comprehending how language sustains relations of power and social injustice. His work on the discourse, cognition, and society triangle expounds on how and through which power abuse is done and exercised by texts and talk of dominant groups or institutions (Van Dijk [1993](#)). This approach is critical in understanding the working and existence of the discourses of President Obama and Trump in supporting continued American dominance in foreign policy, taking the case of Afghanistan.

The Discourse Historical Method (DHA) expands more on the effects of the contextual background on the structure, function, and content of any discourse. It is very effective for studying identity and discrimination in discourse when the linguistic means of constructing national identities are investigated (Wodak, [1999](#); [2009](#)). According to Wodak ([2011](#)), it is crucial not to isolate the concept of context from the analysis, and thanks to that, it is possible to explain the main rhetorical practices noticed in the Afghan policy speeches of Obama and Trump.

2.3 Fairclough's CDA 3D Model

Nevertheless, for analyzing political discourse, the CDA 3D model developed by Fairclough, which associates several phenomena within social reality with language, is the most important. Following Fairclough ([2023](#)), this sociocultural practice can be noticed on the personal, institutional, and societal levels. Originally introduced as Description, Interpretation, and Explanation, he applies the three stages to analyze political language and, more specifically, how speeches and remarks function to disseminate policies, agendas, and manifestos.

Quite a number of academic scholars have adopted the Fairclough's CDA 3D model to examine politicians' political discourse. Among them are Bello ([2013](#)), Handayani and Pranoto ([2018](#)), Wudie ([2020](#)), and Zheni ([2020](#)). This model is especially useful when studying Obama's and Trump's speeches as it enables one to consider all aspects of the linguistic manipulation used in their speeches regarding Afghan policy.

2.4 Metaphors in Political Discourse

The metaphors that are employed in the political speeches by politicians belong to the most visually stimulating rhetorical means that are employed by the political speakers. Lakoff and Johnson's (2008, 1999) work on cognitive semantics shows how metaphors map abstract ideas with concrete entities, making different linguistic components acquire new meanings and cognitions. The primary role of metaphors is critical for studying political discourse since metaphors are employed to define national values, and politics and mobilize emotions.

According to Chilton (2004) such metaphors in the political discourse may well mirror and perpetuate the dominant 'ordering' of knowledge and power. He speaks on how metaphors are wielded to build and dismantle various systems of beliefs that shape public opinion and influence the formulation of policies (Chilton, 2004). Charteris-Black (2009) also extends his work on metaphors of power by explaining how metaphors in political speeches create beliefs of togetherness, order, and values within people. For example, using terms such as the "American Family" or the "Family of Nations" creates an impression of a united group.

Applying the CDA of political discourse, especially in Obama's and Trump's speeches, can show how metaphors were used to legitimate actions, build up worldviews, and mobilize attitudes. Interpreting the figurative language employed by these leaders gives an understanding of other general features of their foreign policy and the influence of their speech on the population and relations with other states.

2.5 Empirical Studies

Research on the use of language in American presidential speeches has offered a litany of analyses that focus on the linguistic semiotics, pragmatics, and semantics of Political speeches. Lingga et al.'s (2021) research on the references, ellipses, and conjunctions in the speeches of Obama and Trump shows how language makes the speeches coherent and persuasive.

A recent study by Umaraj and Hassan (2020) used the CDA of Trump's speech when declaring the intention to run for the presidency to show how rhetorical appeals, including exaggeration, numbers, personal guarantee, unfounded claims, and implicit beliefs, worked to the gallery. Similarly, AlAfnan (2021) compared the inaugural speeches of Trump and Biden, employing SFL and the CDA of Fairclough to demonstrate the variations in the employment of spoken language rhetoric and political beliefs of the two politicians.

Other works, such as Mohammadi et al. (2020), Tekaya (2014), and Zheni (2020), also employed CDA to examine the topoi of political speeches in terms of polarization, exaggeration, and self-representation. He pointed out that these studies offer significant knowledge of how language is employed to create and sustain power relations in political discourse.

Other research by Dawood and Hameed (2021) and Raissouni (2020) has focused on the metaphors used in presidential speeches on national identity terrorism and war. These studies show how metaphors are employed to put a spin on political questions, appeal to at least one of the probed feelings, and influence people's attitudes.

3 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The research design used in this study is descriptive qualitative research that is appropriate when analyzing political factors. Explorative research is always best suited to contexts and subtle characteristics of artifacts under analysis, in this case, the speeches of President Obama and Trump referring to the policies in Afghanistan. Hence, unlike quantitative studies, this research aims to address questions concerning what candidates mean or imply when speaking or writing in search

of themes, ideologies, or strategies that may not emerge when analyzing the mere frequency of terms or discursive features.

3.2 Source of Data

The following research uses data from four speeches or comments made by American presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump. Two speeches of each president have been chosen so as to give a picture of how he or she approached this issue and the rhetorical strategies he or she used. The speeches have, therefore, been retrieved from the official website of the White House through whitehouse.gov, as this site has most of the president's speeches, campaigns, remarks, and press releases. This site was created in 1994, during the Clinton administration, and remains the official site to find all information coming from the U. S presidency.

The selected speeches are as follows:

1. Barack Obama's December 1, 2009 speech outlined his administration's policy on Afghanistan in the first years of his presidency.
2. Barack Obama's speech on the 15 of October in the year 2015 after the killing of Osama bin Laden, which was a landmark in the war against Al-Qaeda in his second term.
3. The speech delivered in 2017 by Donald Trump in relation to his initial position and plan for the war in Afghanistan.
4. Speech with Donald Trump at CPAC 2020, where he discussed his and his administration's stances and approaches to the War in Afghanistan in the final year of his presidency.

These speeches are used to assess how these presidents, separately, explained their policies, their targets and goals, and how they swayed the opinion of the masses and foreign entities.

3.3 Methods Used for Analyzing Data

A multi-method analysis of the selected speeches includes Fairclough's 3D model of CDA, Charteris-Black's CMA, and Van Dijk's Ideological Square. This background is intended to analyze the type of third-face appeal that Obama and Trump have been appealing to in their Afghan policy speeches.

- Fairclough's CDA 3D Model: This model looks at the level of text, discursive practice, and sociocultural practice in relation to discourse. That is useful in explaining how language is used to build up ideas, exercise dominance, and manipulate the population.
- Van Dijk's Ideological Square: This approach is centered on how language is employed to create divisions, normally in the 'us and them' format that will be used in identifying the use of the pronouns as well as other markers to see how the presidents framed the United States and the adversaries.
- Charteris-Black's Conceptual Metaphor Analysis (CMA): It will analyze and clarify the metaphors used in the speeches. The examination will show how metaphors were employed to establish specific mental frameworks regarding the Afghan war, provide policymakers with the ideological backing to proceed with their choices, and, not least of all, enlist or sway the public emotionally.

By doing so, the study proposes to provide answers to the following research questions on how Obama and Trump erected America's superpower status, the use of persuasion strategies, and the use of metaphorical analysis in relation to Afghan policy. In this research, the language used in these speeches will be examined systematically to give a rich account of the political language concerning the war in Afghanistan.

4 Findings

This research looks into the techniques President Obama and Donald Trump used to address the Afghanistan conflict. Examining four speeches of each president, they show how each of them defined the Afghan war and the differences in their approaches, which could be attributed to their political beliefs, how they manage people, and their goals. The analysis utilizes the range of CDA, such as Fairclough's 3D model of CDA, Van Dijk's ideological square, and Charteris-Black's metaphor analysis to reveal the ideology, stylistic features, voices, pronouns, metaphors, and nominalization used by them.

4.1 Use of Pronouns

Pronoun analysis provides insights into how Obama and Trump built their political discourse regarding the Afghan war. Obama often employed first-person plural pronouns such as 'we' and 'our', thus building a sense of inclusion in the president and his administration, the military, and the population. In his speech in 2009, he had a clear sense of ethics of responsibility, 'we,' 'our,' as if America is on the frontline in the fight against terrorism. Words such as 'we will follow the following goals in Afghanistan' are inclusive to the extent that Obama included the military strategy as a national one.

In contrast, Trump also used the first person singular significantly more frequently, which, together with the third person plural, was directed to foregrounding the agency of the collective "we". Used in the self-associating descriptive form of Address, the first-person pronoun 'I' dominated the 2020 speech at the CPAC the most with Donald Trump using it 295 times showing more assertive ownership of actions and policies. For instance, Trump often used first-person pronouns to stress his personal authority; for example, 'I directed the Secretary of Defense'.

Table 1: Pronoun Usage in Obama and Trump Speeches

Pronouns	Obama 2009	Obama 2015	Trump 2017	Trump 2020
We	32	25	28	225
Our	18	15	20	155
I	21	16	19	295
They	19	17	22	25

The following table shows the number of times Obama has used collective pronouns in his speeches in an attempt to create a unity aspect, unlike Trump, who kept on pushing for individual accountability and leadership.

4.2 Polarization and "Us vs. Them" Rhetoric

In this respect, Obama, like Trump, used the Manichean narrative and focused on the 'us vs them' binary of America and its foes. Obama also used the third person when speaking about the Taliban and Al Qaeda; he never included them in the 'We' category but presented them as enemies. This was done to give a moral basis to the military operations conducted by the USA, as in the words, "It attacked our military ... The Taliban sheltered it."

On the other hand, Trump was more of a warrior and often used the 'us and them' strategy when comparing his Military policies with those of his predecessors, including Obama. Trump framed his actions as correcting the "mistakes" of the past, which is evident in his speech: This is an utterance that people like Trump cannot do in Afghanistan what their leaders did in Iraq; this is an example where the "us" of Trump encompassed Trump, his administration, and his supporters and the "them" include the terrorists, the previous administrations, and the Democrats.

4.3 Use of Voice

Obama consciously uses the active and passive voice to report responsibility and dissociate the

administration from some activities. The active voice gives America agency regarding positive actions, such as 'We are ending the Iraq war responsibly.' Passivation minimizes negative actions or effects, such as 'America and our allies had to wage war.'

On the other hand, Trump widely used an active voice to make decisions and gave the impression that he personally intervened in the decision-making processes. Phrases like 'I directed Secretary of Defense' are typical of Trump's authoritative style and his aspiration to be considered the main commander-in-chief. In particular, his reliance on passive voice was rare, which supported his assertiveness and simplified argumentation, even in subjects such as war and military deployments.

4.4 Nominalization and Word Choice

Nominalization is partly involved in agenda building with respect to the Afghan war because it turns action into an object of cognizance so that requisite accountability and associated action are shifted away from particular people and actions and put within a framework of organizational norms. Obama often employed nominalizations like 'commitment,' 'strategy,' and 'conclusion' with the aim of framing the Afghan war as an ordered and ethically driven endeavor. For example, Obama said, "Our strategy will end this war responsibly," which redefined the war as something under the administration's control rather than the people's.

Trump, in addition to applying nominalizations, liked plainer and even threatening words. Terms such as 'victory,' 'win,' and 'frustration' were used to convey the consequences of the rivalry. For example, Trump asserted, "We will win... We need to recognize the nature of the world as it is today," which is characterized by assertiveness and task orientation.

Table 2: Key Nominalizations in Obama and Trump Speeches

Nominalization	Obama	Trump
Strategy	14	8
Commitment	12	5
Conclusion	9	3
Victory	5	22
Frustration	2	12

Below is a simple comparison showing how Obama used the more concrete and diffuse language of "strategy" and "commitment," while Trump's language was more concerned with "victory" and "frustration."

4.5 Metaphors

Another vital aspect of both presidents' choices of words to sell their message to the public was the general use of metaphors to describe the conflict. Obama often used the metaphors of 'journey' and 'mission' when referring to the moral and strategic goals of the Afghan war. For instance, he said, 'You deserve a mission that is clear to all and worthy of your service,' putting the war in a positive light.

However, Trump, for instance, employed metaphors drawn from the 'game' domain to portray the war as a simple zero-sum game. There are examples where he spoke about 'victory' over the 'enemy'; for instance, he said, "We will win...in the end, we will win." This made the issues at the core of the war very easy to understand as black and white – and firmly placed Lincoln on the white side.

Table 3: Metaphor Source Domains in Obama and Trump Speeches

Source Domain	Obama	Trump
Journey	12	4
Mission	10	6
Game	5	20
Crime	8	10
Religion	6	9

The table below superimposes the metaphors used by Trump and Obama. As can be seen, the two significantly differ in framing the concepts, with Trump using competitive and games metaphors while Obama uses mission and moral metaphors.

All in all, it is Post-Colonial criticism of the speeches of Obama and Trump to underscore that even though they made similar appeals to justify the US presence in Afghanistan and assert the superiority of American values, or American exceptionalism, they did it in different ways. Obama was more about calling for a shared sense of responsibility and the moral imperative to act. While Kerry's main appeal was based on cooperation, mutual trust, and the importance of diplomacy and the pursuit of peace, Trump's language was more triumphalist, occasionally even macho, emphasizing victory and national power. Both presidents, however, used language to turn the conflict into a 'them against us' strategy, thereby supporting their respective political doctrines and the rationale for their policies within the scope of the Afghan war.

5 Conclusion

From the discourse of Obama and Trump on Afghan policy, it is discerned that they had different but complementary ways of advancing America's hegemony and legitimizing its continued warfare in Afghanistan. Both leaders appeared to assert American Exceptionalism and conveniently used black-and-white rhetoric to distinguish between the protagonists 'We' – America and its allies, and the antagonists 'They,' terrorists and every other competitor. In contrast, Obama was more of a diplomat, and his rhetoric targeted the moral imperative, presenting the war agenda as an ethical endeavor, a necessity for maintaining peace in the world. Trump was less emotionally charged and more assertively direct in his language. Therefore, while using similar metaphors for conflict, he emphasized the goal to win and ultimately minimize the costs of war outcomes.

This work asserts that critical discourse analysis is a valuable approach for apprehending the manner by which language constructs ideologies and power relations across international relations. Companies that would benefit from such hegemonic language range from arms-dealing corporations to those that have a vested interest in the continued militarization of the U. S in world affairs. Consequently, more needs to be done to critically analyze such a discourse so that prudent use of power can be exercised where more consideration is paid to the direct stakeholders in these policies. It would be highly useful to widen the sample of speeches under discussion and apply more comprehensive analytical techniques; this approach aims to offer a more investigated and reserved representation of the relation between language, power, and society in the construction of the global processes.

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