

A Critical Discourse Analysis of Political Rhetoric: Examining Donald Trump and Joe Biden's First Pre-Electoral Debate in the 2024 Elections

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This paper presents a Critical Discourse Analysis of Donald Trump and Joe Biden in the context of the 2024 elections. Specifically, it examines their first pre-electoral debate, focusing on key topics such as the economy and employment, as well as immigration. The study aims to explore how the discursive practices of these two candidates differ in their attempts to persuade and/or manipulate their respective audiences. To achieve this, the analysis scrutinizes epistemic/effective markers and legitimizing strategies of subjectivity and intersubjectivity to assess their communicative events.

This research utilizes a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative analysis through the UAM Corpus Tool, which generates frequency counts and percentages, with a qualitative analysis to contextualize these findings within the candidates' discourse. Preliminary results show that Biden tends to use linguistic strategies that may lead to ambiguity and confusion, potentially making his messages more challenging for the audience to fully grasp and align with. Conversely, Trump, particularly when addressing immigration and framing immigrants as an outgroup, tends to communicate more directly and unambiguously. This directness could make his messaging more persuasive, as it reaches the audience more quickly and with greater clarity, minimizing the cognitive effort required to engage with the content. The study suggests that when audiences must exert additional effort to understand a message, it can lead to disengagement and reduced effectiveness of the communication.

Keywords: Epistemic/Effective Markers, Legitimizing Strategies, Critical Discourse Analysis, Donald Trump, Joe Biden.

1 Introduction

This paper addresses a topic where persuasion and manipulation are often prevalent: political discourse analysis (e.g., van Dijk 2008, 2015; Koller 2012, 2014; Gil-Bonilla 2018, 2020, 2024; among others). Specifically, this study compares the first pre-electoral debate between Joe Biden and Donald Trump in the 2024 elections. The objective is to examine the extent to which the stancetaking resources used by these two candidates differ in their efforts to capture voters' attention and secure their votes. To achieve this, Marín-Arrese's (2011a, 2011b) model is employed to analyze the stancetaking resources utilized by Biden and Trump. In particular, EFFECTIVE (EF, henceforth) and EPISTEMIC (EP, henceforth) stance markers, as proposed by Marín-Arrese (2011a, 2011b), are analyzed, along with the SUBJECTIVE and INTERSUBJECTIVE domains outlined in her framework. Effective stance refers to those stancetaking acts where speakers attempt to exert control or influence over the course of reality itself, whereas epistemic stance pertains to the speaker's knowledge or estimations regarding the realization of events. Subjectivity relates to how speakers engage personal responsibility in their arguments, while intersubjectivity pertains to how they share that responsibility with others (as further detailed in Section 2 below).

One should bear in mind that several studies have been conducted on this subject (e.g., Jiménez 2016; Rachman et al. 2017; Gil-Bonilla 2018, 2020, 2024). For instance, Gil-Bonilla

(2018, 2020) provides a discourse analysis comparing Trump's strategies as a businessman versus as a politician, contrasting his discourse across different periods. Furthermore, Gil-Bonilla (2024) extends this analysis by comparing Trump's 2015 pre-electoral debates with Hillary Clinton, his opponent at that time. In this context, it would be insightful to contrast the findings from that period with those in the present study to understand the extent to which Trump's discourse has evolved from one pre-electoral debate to another. Additionally, the current presidential candidate opposing Trump is different, and the period has changed significantly, marked by various radical and judicial challenges faced by Trump. Consequently, it may be presupposed that his discourse now may exhibit certain differences in tentativeness, which can be observable in the discourses analyzed in this study.

Jiménez (2016) compares Trump's discourse using linguistic strategies such as hedging devices, deixis, contrastive pairs, anaphora, parallelism, and metaphors. These strategies differ from those intended to be scrutinized in this research paper, which focus primarily on modality and evidentiality, along with the use of personal pronouns. Regarding Rachman et al. (2017), their analysis of Trump focuses on a presidential campaign in November 2015. This analysis may be interesting to contrast with the pre-electoral debate analysis proposed by Gil-Bonilla (2024), as differences may be found between Trump's discourse during a presidential campaign, when addressing the audience directly, and a pre-electoral debate, where the speaker addresses both the audience and opponent candidates. Rachman et al. (2017) employ van Dijk's (2008, 2015) model, which emphasizes the *us* vs. *them* polarization. This approach can further complement Gil-Bonilla's (2024) analysis by providing additional insights into the strategies used by Trump in different rhetorical contexts. Van Dijk's (2008, 2015) concept of ideological polarization can be linked to the mystification of responsibilities, as his *us* vs. *them* polarization provides insight into how speakers construct their group identity. For example, the use of *we* may often include the speaker and others in a shared accountability, while *them* can serve to avoid direct accountability by positioning others as an outgroup and distancing the speaker from the communicated event. This ideological polarization can be further elaborated by Marín-Arrese (2011a, 2011b), whose framework on mystification of responsibilities offers a more nuanced categorization through the use of pronouns.

Various studies (e.g., Budak et al. 2020; Abdurakhmanova & Redkozubova 2021) have examined political discourse involving Biden, sometimes comparing both Biden and Trump. Abdurakhmanova & Redkozubova (2021) analyze self-presentation and discrediting strategies used by both candidates in the 2020 political debates, noting the distinctive tactics each employs. Budak et al. (2020), in contrast, focus on Twitter user reactions to the first two debates, showing increased support for Biden after the first debate and maintained support after the second, with minimal improvement for Trump. Notably, in Budak et al.'s (2020) study, the candidates' discourse is not directly analyzed; instead, the focus is on user responses to the candidates' interventions. This approach diverges from the objectives of the present paper, which aims to scrutinize the stancetaking resources and discourse strategies of the candidates themselves. In other words, while prior studies often focus on the reactions of Twitter users—potential voters—to candidates' interventions, the present study concentrates on the candidates' discursive stancetaking strategies. Together, these studies can provide a fuller understanding of voter reactions through one study and, through the other (this current paper), insight into the linguistic strategies candidates employ to shape those reactions.

As has been noted, there appears to be a gap in studies comparing the two recent American presidential candidates, Biden and Trump. On the one hand, some studies emphasize user reactions rather than the language used by the candidates themselves. Additionally, while

several studies have analyzed Trump's discourse in prior elections, such as in 2015, it is valuable to explore whether his discourse aligns with these earlier analyses or reflects a notable evolution. Therefore, the analysis proposed in this paper seeks to address a gap in the critical discourse analysis of political discourse.

This study intends to employ a mixed-method approach. It will begin with a quantitative analysis using the UAM Corpus Tool (O'Donnell 2021), focusing on frequencies and percentages related to the categories proposed by Marín-Arrese (2011a, 2011b) in her model. Concurrently, a qualitative analysis will complement these quantitative results by presenting specific instances that illustrate the preferred stancetaking strategies used by Biden and Trump, examining the contexts in which these strategies are employed. The topics chosen for analysis are economy and employment, and immigration. Economy and employment are crucial in political debates due to their foundational role in a country's growth, while immigration is chosen for its significance in the scrutinized debates and its impact on voter perception, it is notable that a substantial number of American voters are naturalized immigrants. This analysis aims to address the following research questions:

(RQ1) Which types of stancetaking expressions and strategies to mystify responsibilities are most often used by Biden, the current president of the US, and by Trump, the previous president of the US and the current candidate for the American elections?

(RQ2) What function do these discursive strategies fulfill when addressing the different topics under scrutiny in this investigation (i.e., economy and immigration)?

After this introduction, which provides a general overview of the present paper, Section 2 introduces the theoretical model upon which this study is based. Section 3 describes the corpus collected and the software utilized for the quantitative analysis. Section 4 outlines the discussion and presents the results obtained from the analysis. Finally, Section 5 presents those concluding remarks where further avenues of research are outlined.

2 Theoretical framework

Marín-Arrese (2011a, 2011b) identifies two types of stancetaking strategies. Effective stance, which pertains to influence the course of reality itself, while epistemic stance relates to speakers' estimations regarding their knowledge and the potential realization of communicative events. Under the effective stance marker, various categories exist, such as deonticity, assessments, attitudinals, and directives. DEONTIC MARKERS involve modals that indicate necessity (e.g., *need to*, *it is necessary*) and/or obligation (e.g., *have to*, *must*) (as also noted in Downing & Locke 1992). ASSESSING MARKERS include expressions that convey judgments of desirability, necessity, or possibility regarding specific circumstances (e.g., *We are required to*,...) (for additional details, please refer to similar studies conducted by Oliveira 2020), along with other non-verbal expressions (e.g., *duty*,...). According to Marín-Arrese (2011a: 268), within assessments, one may also encounter impersonal constructions that indicate a generalized inclination or advisability of an event's occurrence, as well as describe the emotive reaction of the speaker towards the event (e.g., *It is crucial*, *It is urgent*, *It is right*, *It is time to*,...).

In terms of ATTITUDINALS, this category encompasses personal predicates that convey speakers' inclinations and volition (e.g., *I hope*, *I want*, *I'm not willing*,...), expressions of intention (e.g., *We resolved*, *I plan*,...), predicative adjectives (e.g., *We are resolved to*,...),

relational constructions involving nominals and sentence adverbs, and expressions of volitive modality such as modal verbs *will* and *won't* (Marín-Arrese 2011a). Regarding DIRECTIVES, they are characterized by the imperative mood, which can carry either a conventional force or a hortative value. For instance, verbs of communication used in a performative sense with a directive illocutionary force (e.g., *We are urging*,...), or other expressions that indicate the speaker's effective stance regarding the realization of the event (e.g., *We agree that*,...).

Within the realm of epistemic stance markers, expressions like epistemic modality and truth factual validity are identified. EPISTEMIC MODALITY pertains to the speaker's degree of certainty or uncertainty regarding the truth or likelihood of a proposition or statement. This can manifest as high certainty or necessity (e.g., *must*, *cannot*, *certainly*,...), medium certainty or probability (e.g., *will*, *would*, *should*, *probably*,...), and low certainty or possibility (e.g., *may*, *could*, *perhaps*,...) ¹. On the other hand, TRUTH FACTUAL VALIDITY involves judgments about the truth in the realization of communicative events (e.g., *The truth is*, *in my judgment*,...). When using this marker, the speaker references their presumed sincere viewpoint, simultaneously asserting a strong attitudinal stance that may resonate with others (González 2015).

Within epistemic stance markers, evidential expressions such as experiential, cognitive, and communicative evidentiality play crucial roles in discourse. EXPERIENTIAL EVIDENTIALITY involves expressions where speakers suggest personal experience of events (e.g., *We have seen*, *We have witnessed*, *We have experienced*,...). This strategy aims to present the speaker's discourse as direct proof to the audience, enhancing persuasiveness by compelling listeners to accept the speaker's assertions (as further noted in Gil-Bonilla 2024). Marín-Arrese (2011a) notes that experiential evidentiality encompasses lexical verbs (e.g., *It appears*, *That shows*, *That reveals*,...), predicative adjectives (e.g., *It became clear*, *It is obvious*,...), and sentence adverbs and adverbials (e.g., *clearly*, *palpably*,...).

COGNITIVE EVIDENTIALITY relates to the speaker's mental perspective and certainty. It includes expressions of mental state predicates (e.g., *I believe*, *I think*, *We know*, *I am convinced*,...), non-verbal markers (e.g., *doubtless*, *without doubt*), and relational or existential constructions involving nominals (e.g., *My guess was*, *There was no doubt in my mind*, *My belief*,...). Direct cognitive markers also fit within this category, indicating the speaker's access to information through mental processes (e.g., *I have come to the conclusion*, *I gather*,...). Predicates involving inferential processes and knowledge interpretation (e.g., *That means*,...) are also classified under cognitive evidentiality (Marín-Arrese 2011a: 274).

COMMUNICATIVE EVIDENTIALITY, according to Marín-Arrese (2011a: 275), involves speakers not only conveying knowledge of an event but also validating propositions by appealing to their authority as public figures. Through this marker, speakers position themselves as authoritative sources of evidence (e.g., *I say to you*, *I said*,...). These evidential markers collectively enrich discourse by shaping how speakers establish credibility, persuade audiences, and assert their perspectives on various topics.

These stancetaking resources encompass subjective and intersubjective domains, each indicating different levels of explicitness regarding the subject of enunciation and accountability shared with others, as exemplified in Marín-Arrese's (2011a, 2011b) model and further illustrated in Langacker (1991, 2000). SUBJECTIVE EXPLICIT (SE, henceforth) involves speakers explicitly stating themselves as the subject of enunciation, directly taking responsibility in their communicative acts (e.g., *I want*, *I hope*). SUBJECTIVE IMPLICIT (SI,

¹ For further details, see Marín-Arrese (2011a, 2011b).

henceforth), on the other hand, occurs when speakers do not position themselves explicitly as the subject of enunciation, thus avoiding direct personal accountability (e.g., *can*, *must* for deontic markers; *will*, *would* for epistemic markers; *Look*, *Let us recall* for directive markers).

INTERSUBJECTIVE EXPLICIT (IE, henceforth) involves speakers sharing accountability with others in their communicative practices, explicitly acknowledging multiple participants (e.g., *We believe*, *We think*). INTERSUBJECTIVE OPAQUE (IO, henceforth) refers to instances where the subject of enunciation remains implicit, obscuring direct accountability within the discourse. This marker implies speakers' engagement in their communicative events by using vague expressions to appear unclear. As Marín-Arrese (2011a) explains, this discursive strategy "evokes the conceptualizer as virtual or generalized" (p. 282). These communicative events are "based on evidence that can be tacitly shared or potentially accessible to the interlocutor or audience" (p. 282). This linguistic strategy allows speakers to present their conceptualized events as personal yet possibly shared with the addressee or others, maintaining some ambiguity while suggesting mutual understanding or accessibility to the underlying rationale.

Within the domain of intersubjective opaqueness, examples include impersonal modal predicates such as assessments (e.g., *it is right to*, *it is time to*), evidential adverbs indicating truth-factual validity (e.g., *frankly*), and impersonal evidential predicates like experiential evidentials (e.g., *it is evident*, *it was obvious*). Intersubjective opaque markers are also characterized by discourse deixis. Examples include cognitive evidentials (e.g., *That means*) and communicative ones (e.g., *That implies*). Additionally, agentless passives like *it was judged* are employed by speakers within this category to convey information without specifying the agent. These linguistic resources allow speakers to structure their discourse strategically, shaping how accountability and perspective are conveyed to their audience.

Table 1 below summarizes Marín-Arrese's (2011a, 2011b) categories, providing a structured overview of the classifications used in analyzing the stancetaking acts and responsibilities attributed to Biden and Trump.

Table 1²: Overview of stancetaking strategies and mystification of responsibilities

EFFECTIVE STANCE (EF)		EPISTEMIC STANCE (EP)		SUBJECTIVITY/ INTERSUBJECTIVITY	
Deonticity: These modals indicate possibility and/or necessity.	<i>must, should</i> ... <i>can, cannot</i> ... <i>have to, need to</i> ... <i>It is necessary to...</i>	Epistemic modality: Epistemic modals; adverbs, predicative adjs. and nominals.	<i>must, will, would, may...</i> <i>Certainly...</i> , <i>Perhaps...</i> , <i>Indeed ...</i>	Subjective explicit (SE): The speaker is the explicit point of reference.	<i>I saw..., I think..., I am aware..., For me, my judgement.</i> ..
Assessments: These markers express desirability, requirement or normativity.	<i>That requires ...; We are required to...; It is essential to...</i>	Truth-Factual validity: These markers involve judgments about the truth in the realization of	<i>I am confident that ...</i> <i>The truth is..., The fact is...</i>	Intersubjective explicit (IE): Speakers share accountability with others in	<i>We have experience d...</i> <i>We all know...</i>

² adapted from Marín-Arrese (2011a).

	<i>It is right to ...; It is fair to ...</i>	communicative events.	<i>In my judgement... , Frankly...</i>	their discursive events.	
Attitudinals: These modals express volition, intention, or commitment.	<i>I will/won't, I would not... I wanted/intended to ..., I hoped ...</i>	Experiential evidentiality: These markers involve expressions where speakers suggest personal experience of events.	<i>We have seen..., We have experience d...,</i>	Subjective implicit (SI): Speakers do not position themselves explicitly avoiding direct accountability.	<i>may, will, must, could, should... certainly, perhaps...</i>
Directives: These markers are used with a directive illocutionary force or a hortative value.	<i>We urging... Let me make it clear... Let us recall...</i>	Cognitive evidentiality: This marker relates to the speaker's mental perspective and certainty.	<i>I think..., I have come to the conclusion. .. We all know..., We have learned... That means..., Presumably..</i>	Intersubjective opaque (IO): The subject of enunciation remains implicit, obscuring direct accountability within his discourse.	<i>It is possible, It is likely... It seems, It is clear... That means, That implies... Obviously, Palpably...</i>
		Communicative evidentiality: This marker involves communication and verbal interaction.	<i>I say to you ..., I said... That suggests..., That implies...</i>		

3 Methodology

This study aims to compare the initial pre-electoral debate of Biden and Trump during the 2024 elections. The analysis will focus on the topics of economy and employment, as well as immigration, with the objective of examining how each candidate attempted to persuade or potentially manipulate their respective audiences. Specifically, this research paper centers on the first debate, hosted by CNN on June 27, 2024. Biden's participation in this debate comprised 7,078 words, while Trump's contributions totaled 7,619 words, indicating a rough equivalence in their word counts. However, it is crucial to emphasize that the UAM Corpus Tool includes a Chi-Square frequency feature, which identifies linguistic patterns between candidates. This feature is instrumental in highlighting significant instances where substantial and genuine differences in discourse occur, ensuring that these disparities are not mere coincidences. The research questions intended to be addressed in the discussion section are the following:

(RQ1) Which types of stancetaking expressions and strategies to mystify responsibilities are most often used by Biden, the current president of the US, and by

Trump, the previous president of the US and the current candidate for the American elections?

(RQ2) What function do these discursive strategies fulfill when addressing the different topics under scrutiny in this investigation (i.e., economy and immigration)?

Although this paper exclusively examines the first presidential debate, future research could benefit from analyzing subsequent debates to gather a wider range of instances. This approach would enable researchers to compare and/or contrast the findings from this study with those of other presidential debates. Such an extension would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how discourse strategies evolve across different debates and contexts, offering deeper insights into candidates' rhetorical tactics and their impact on voter perceptions.

3.1 UAM corpus tool software

The software utilized in this study facilitates the creation of customized schemes encompassing all the specific categories designated for analysis. The debate transcript, uploaded in TXT format as permitted by the UAM Corpus Tool (O'Donnell 2021), was processed using these schemes. One scheme incorporates variables designed to identify speakers (i.e., Biden and Trump), enabling the software to automatically attribute each candidate's contributions once they have been manually tagged in the TXT file. Importantly, the tool also enables the exclusion of irrelevant text segments, such as those involving moderators who ask questions and guide the debate. This selective approach ensures that the analysis focuses exclusively on the discourse directly produced by the candidates during the debate. The second scheme created for this study focuses on tagging segments of the debate related specifically to the topics of economy and employment, and immigration. This tagging process ensures that only the discourse pertinent to the chosen topics is included for analysis, while segments unrelated to these topics were disregarded. By applying this systematic approach, the study aims to precisely examine how Biden and Trump address and discuss these critical issues during their debate.

The final scheme to be created encompasses the categories of epistemic and effective stance as well as subjective and intersubjective domains. Each category within these domains is systematically tagged and labeled within the TXT file uploaded in the UAM Corpus Tool to facilitate the quantitative analysis. This approach ensures that the software accurately identifies and counts the occurrences of each category used by Biden and Trump across the specific topics of economy and employment, and immigration during their first pre-electoral debate. By structuring the analysis in this manner, the study aims to provide detailed insights into how the candidates employ various stancetaking strategies to convey their positions and influence voter perception on these crucial issues.

4 Analysis and discussion of results

This section pertains to the discussion of results. The quantitative analysis is presented in Table 2 below, highlighting instances of particular significance. Specifically, only cases where significance is denoted as +, ++, or +++ are included. According to the UAM Corpus Tool, + indicates weak significance, with occurrences observed in 90% of cases. ++ denotes medium significance, occurring in 95% of cases, while +++ indicates high significance, occurring in 98% of cases. Table 2 is segmented into different sections: a general overview displaying frequencies across various stancetaking markers employed by both candidates. Specifically, Biden utilizes a total of 80 tokens³, while Trump employs 64 tokens. Hence, while Biden uses more linguistic tokens than Trump, the disparity between the two candidates is not substantial, indicating a comparable quantitative usage of linguistic markers in both cases.

From a general perspective, it is observed that Biden utilizes effective stance markers, concretely, deontic ones in 23.75% of cases. This suggests, on the one hand, a perceived necessity and/or obligation in his discourse, as evidenced by the statement *we have to make sure that we have a fair tax system*. On the other hand, Trump demonstrates a higher frequency of epistemic stance markers, concretely, experiential evidentiality accounting for 12.50% of cases. Experiential evidentiality pertains to speakers' direct access to events, indicating they have potentially witnessed those events themselves, as exemplified by the statement, *But the numbers of – the amount of drugs and human trafficking in women coming across our border, the worst thing I've ever seen at numbers*.

Table 2: Stancetaking resources in Biden's and Trump's first pre-electoral debate

<i>GENERAL APPROACH</i>	Biden		Trump			
Feature	N	Percent	N	Percent	ChiSqu	Sign
Total Units	80		64			
EFFECTIVE						
deonticity	19	23.75	6	9.38	5.121	++
EPISTEMIC						
experiential evidentiality	1	1.25	1	12.50	7.680	+++
IMMIGRATION						
Feature	N	Percent	N	Percent	ChiSqu	Sign
Total Units	16		37			
EFFECTIVE						
deonticity	6	37.50	4	10.81	5.198	++
attitudinals	4	25.00	3	8.11	2.780	+

After providing a comprehensive overview of each candidate's discursive practices, the analysis now turns to a more specific examination of the topics addressed in their debates, with a focus on economy and employment, on the one hand, and immigration, on the other. As depicted in Table 2 above, there is a dedicated section for immigration, however, an economy and employment section is not outlined in this table due to the absence of significant quantitative differences, suggesting a similar approach in linguistic strategy usage by both candidates. Therefore, a qualitative approach will be presented to examine how these linguistic strategies employed by Biden and Trump differ from a qualitative perspective. This section is

³ The term "tokens" refers to the number of markers identified in each candidate's communicative events.

consequently divided into two subsections: the first concentrating on the economy and employment, and the second addressing immigration.

4.1 *The topic of economy and employment*

As previously noted, this topic does not show significant quantitative differences and is thus not illustrated in Table 2 above. Therefore, in this case, a qualitative approach will be presented to highlight distinctions and/or similarities in the communicative strategies employed by these two candidates. There are notable qualitative distinctions. For example, when Biden presents optimistic economic outcomes, he employs attitudinal markers such as *we're going to*, indicating a personal intention, like in *we're going to make sure that we reduce the price of housing. We're going to make sure we cap rents, so corporate greed can't take over*. In this context, *we're going to* and *make sure* serve distinct functions regarding the statement on reducing housing prices, constructing new units, and capping rents. *We're going to* expresses a high level of certainty and determination concerning the actions and outcomes discussed. It conveys a strong commitment and intent, suggesting confidence that these actions will indeed be undertaken and that the desired outcomes will be achieved. In contrast, *make sure* introduces an element of caution or moderation, functioning as a hedging device⁴. While *we're going to* indicates resolute intent and determination, *make sure* implies that efforts will be made to achieve the stated goals, but it does not assure success to the same degree.

Curiously, Biden continues to employ the expression *make sure* in conjunction with other various linguistic markers. Similar to previous instances, it is combined here with the deontic marker *we have to*, as seen in *We find ourselves in a situation where, number one, we have to make sure that we have a fair tax*, indicating necessity and/or obligation, emphasizing that ensuring a fair tax system is imperative and cannot be overlooked. When paired with *make sure*, the phrase balances the strong sense of obligation with a tone of caution or thoroughness. *Make sure* implies a proactive approach to ensure the goal is achieved effectively, despite the inherent complexities involved. This combination underscores the urgency and significance of the task while also acknowledging the need for careful planning and execution. Consider if the phrase were constructed without the expression *make sure*, as in *we have to have a fair tax*. In this formulation, the statement becomes more direct and less tentative, simplifying the complexity involved and potentially enhancing persuasiveness for the audience. The task at hand appears more straightforward and achievable, which could resonate more effectively with listeners by presenting the objective as more attainable and less burdened by uncertainties.

In the previous examples, the attitudinal marker *be going to* is employed in conjunction with explicit intersubjective markers (i.e., *we*) when addressing issues directly relevant to the audience's personal interests (e.g., *reduce the price of housing*). This strategy enhances the persuasiveness of the statements by actively engaging the listeners. It cultivates a sense of shared commitment and determination between the speaker and the audience, fostering a connection that underscores mutual involvement. Conversely, when addressing external entities such as foreign countries regarding tax obligations, implicit subjectivity is employed (i.e., *we have to*⁵) to avoid direct responsibility and to adopt a more tentative stance. This

⁴ For further details of this linguistic expression, see Kusumawati et al. (2021).

⁵ Upon analyzing the deontic markers, such as *we have to*, it became evident that they could be considered intersubjective explicit markers. However, it has been determined that these markers can be approached from both perspectives. In other words, they can be regarded as implicit subjective expressions as well, given that the source of the effective stance is the speaker/writer as a conceptualizer or, by proxy, some deontic controller (Chilton

strategic choice helps mitigate potential negative consequences that could arise from directly confronting or assigning responsibility to these external entities. It also ensures that the speaker does not appear confrontational or overly assertive towards other nations. By using implicit subjectivity, the speaker maintains a focus on internal responsibilities and commitments without explicitly implicating or confronting external entities. This approach aims to navigate diplomatic sensitivities and ensures that the discourse remains centered on domestic policies and obligations.

This notion of foreign countries paying taxes correlates to some extent with Trump's discourse in the 2015/2016 electoral debates (see Gil-Bonilla 2024). During this period, Trump implied that other countries were consistently taking economic advantage of the US and suggested that there should be equitable sharing where other countries contribute equally as the US does to them. In contrast, his opponent at the time, Clinton, did not explicitly advocate for this fair share concept but rather emphasized the necessity to establish agreements with other countries (Gil-Bonilla 2024). Therefore, Biden and Clinton, as representatives of the Democratic party respectively, appear to differ on this issue. These two candidates' priorities seem to have evolved over time, with Biden's current interests aligning to some extent with Trump's previous positions on international economic fairness. Further analysis will compare Trump's discourse with Biden's to explore these alignments and divergences in greater detail.

What is additionally intriguing is the nuanced use of the linguistic expression *be going to* in Biden's discourse. When used as a personal intention directed at the American audience, *be going to* is used as an attitudinal marker. However, when addressing his political opponent, Trump, *be going to* assumes an epistemic function, indicating a high likelihood based on informed judgment and evidence, such as when Biden states, *they all said that, if Trump is re-elected, we're likely to have a recession, and inflation is going to increasingly go up/ you know what the economists say? That's going to cost the average American \$2,500 a year and more(...)*. The phrase *is going to* indicates, in the first instance, a strong probability that inflation will rise under Trump's re-election, backed by the collective opinion of 15 Nobel laureate economists. This lends credibility and weight to the prediction. Similarly, the second instance denotes a high probability based on economists' analyses that a 10 percent tariff will result in significant costs for average Americans. Biden seems to leverage authoritative sources referring to 15 Nobel laureate and economists.

The reliance on figures of authority⁶ in persuasive discourse can lead to a lack of connection with the audience due to its potential to distance the speaker from the listeners. When speakers emphasize authority figures to bolster their arguments, it may create a perception of detachment and reduce the speaker's authenticity and relatability. Audiences often seek genuine engagement and personal connection in communication, and over-reliance on authority can diminish these elements. Moreover, it can raise concerns about bias or manipulation, as audiences may question whether the speaker is presenting a balanced perspective or selectively using authorities to support a particular agenda. To maintain a strong connection with the audience, speakers should balance appeals to authority with personal conviction, clarity of reasoning, and relevance to the audience's concerns.

Furthermore, this lack of engagement with the audience can be sustained with the dual functionality inherent in the use of *be going to* which can introduce ambiguity for the audience, challenging their ability to distinguish between the speaker's assertion of definitive plans and

2020). Ultimately, these markers have been scrutinized as implicit subjective markers following Marín-Arrese's (2011a, 2011b) model, which is the framework adopted for this study.

⁶ For further details about this concept, see Fairclough (2001).

their expression of likely predictions (see Dowding & Bowsworth 2018). Without clear differentiation between these nuances, listeners may experience uncertainty regarding the speaker's precise stance and intentions. This lack of clarity has the potential to diminish the effectiveness of the message and weaken the speaker's connection with the audience.

In Trump's discourse, the use of *be going to* as an attitudinal marker differs qualitatively from its usage by Biden. For example, when Trump says, *We're going to make this country successful again* or *We were going to have something that nobody else has had*, it serves as an attitudinal marker that bolsters confidence and certainty regarding actions and outcomes. These statements lack hedging devices such as *make sure*, which typically introduce caution or moderation, thus making Trump's expressions more direct and forceful. The absence of hedging eliminates doubt or ambiguity about the speaker's intentions, projecting an image of robust leadership and resolute action. The strength of these communicative events lies in their unequivocal nature, which reassures the audience of Trump's determination and capability to achieve the stated objectives. Moreover, Trump's use of *was/were going to* introduces the notion of past intentions that were not fulfilled, suggesting that these objectives remain valid and are intended to be pursued if he is re-elected. This combination of clear future commitments and the reference to past intentions enhances persuasiveness by conveying strong leadership, continuity, and purpose.

Furthermore, Trump also utilizes *be going to* with an epistemic function, albeit in a manner distinct from Biden's usage, as demonstrated by Trump's statement, *my retribution is going to be success*. Here, *be going to* functions as an epistemic marker indicating a high level of certainty regarding the speaker's future success. This stands in contrast to Biden's use of the same linguistic expression, where Biden often employs it to critique or caution against Trump, emphasizing potential negative outcomes or failures under Trump's leadership. In contrast, Trump uses *be going to* to underscore potential positive outcomes if re-elected, projecting confidence in his capacity to achieve success. By employing *be going to* with an epistemic function, Trump articulates a clear and optimistic vision of future achievements, aiming to persuade voters with a message of certainty and resolve. This strategic use of language not only sets apart Trump's forward-looking promises from Biden's criticisms but also seeks to instill confidence in his leadership and policies, portraying himself as an active and capable leader of delivering tangible results.

Trump employs not only epistemic modality but also experiential evidentiality like in *Because the tax cuts spurred the greatest economy that we've ever seen just prior to COVID, and even after COVID and They're taking black jobs and they're taking Hispanic jobs and you haven't seen it yet, but you're going to see something that's going to be the worst in our history*. These statements emphasize Trump's firsthand access to information, positioning him as having direct knowledge of events and outcomes. In the first instance, Trump explicitly ties the economic success to his policies—specifically, the tax cuts—implying a direct cause-effect relationship that personalizes the claim. This approach suggests that Trump possesses firsthand knowledge and experience regarding the impact of these policies on the economy, enhancing the credibility and persuasiveness of his argument. Similarly, the second instance predicts negative outcomes (*job losses for black and Hispanic communities*) with a confident assertion that these effects will soon manifest. Trump's use of phrases like *you haven't seen it yet, but you're going to see* positions him as a knowledgeable observer who anticipates future developments based on privileged insights or information. This authoritative stance strengthens the persuasiveness of Trump's message by framing his statements as informed predictions grounded in real experiences and observations.

4.2 The topic of immigration

Regarding the topic of immigration, notable differences between Biden and Trump are evident. As observed in Table 2, Biden's discourse shows a frequent use of deontic markers, accounting for 37.59% of cases, and attitudinals at 25%. Deontic markers signify the necessity or obligation to implement his policies, while attitudinals express his personal intentions. Thus, the following instances will further illustrate these cases with examples drawn from his communicative events. Interestingly, Trump's discourse does not exhibit significant quantitative differences, necessitating a qualitative comparison with Biden's discursive practices.

In Biden's debate discourse, concerning deontic markers, he employs language that addresses the issue of drug dealing, as illustrated by statements such as *We need those machines. We need those machines. And we're coming down very hard in every country in Asia in terms of precursors for fentanyl*, potentially suggesting the broader context of immigration and drug trafficking. By discussing fentanyl in this manner, Biden necessitates the audience to engage in additional cognitive processing to connect this issue to immigration, rather than using explicit language that directly mentions immigrants. This indirect approach may slow down the audience's comprehension but can also be interpreted as a strategy to avoid explicitly stigmatizing immigrants.

Furthermore, Biden's depiction of Mexico can be juxtaposed with Clinton's stance during the 2015/2016 election cycle, where she clearly articulated her commitment to protecting and supporting immigrants⁷. In contrast, Biden's portrayal of Mexico appears more ambiguous. For instance, the statement *Mexico is working with us to make sure they don't have the technology to be able to put it together. That's what we have to do. We need those machines* simultaneously frames Mexico as both an ingroup and an outgroup. The assertion that *Mexico is working with us* implies a cooperative relationship, suggesting that Mexico is a partner collaborating with the US towards a shared goal. This characterizes Mexico as part of the ingroup, actively contributing to the effort to prevent the misuse or unauthorized acquisition of certain technology.

Conversely, the statement implies a degree of suspicion or apprehension regarding Mexico's potential capabilities. The necessity to *make sure they don't have the technology* suggests that Mexico is perceived as a potential threat or competitor, positioning it as an outgroup. In this context, the US is concerned about the possibility that Mexico might acquire or misuse the technology, necessitating stringent preventive measures. Consequently, this discourse aligns with previous arguments indicating that President Biden's rhetoric occasionally mirrors that of former President Trump, portraying Mexico in this instance as a potential outgroup.

Another example where *make sure* is employed can be seen in statements such as *it [referring to an agreement] made sure that we are in a situation where you had no circumstance where they could come across the border with the number of border police there are now*. In this context, *made sure* can be considered as a booster⁸, as it serves to emphasize the effectiveness and certainty of the measures in place. By stating that the agreement *made sure* of a particular situation, the speaker is reinforcing the strength and reliability of the measures

⁷ see Gil-Bonilla (2024) for further details.

⁸ For further details about this concept, see Hyland (2004).

that prevent certain circumstances from occurring. When Biden references his opponent, Donald Trump, he utilizes the expression *make sure* in a similar fashion. For example, he states, *When he was president, he was taking—separating babies from their mothers, putting them in cages, making sure the families were separated. That’s not the right way to go.* In this context, *making sure* is used to emphasize the deliberate and intentional nature of the actions undertaken by the former president to separate families. This usage intensifies the critique by emphasizing the intentionality and decisiveness behind these actions, thereby reinforcing a negative judgment without hedging or caution.

Concerning these instances, one might infer that Biden delineates two distinct groups of immigrants. On the one hand, he addresses those involved in transporting fentanyl to the US, advocating measures to prevent their entry, aligning somewhat with Trump’s stance. On the other hand, when addressing immigrant children and mothers, Biden adopts a pathos strategy⁹, appealing emotionally and eliciting empathy for these vulnerable groups. This approach contrasts with Clinton’s position in the 2015/2016 elections (see Gil-Bonilla 2024), where she generally portrayed immigrants positively without emphasizing negative stereotypes such as drug dealers. Biden’s dual approach to immigration, therefore, may appear ambiguous to immigrant voters and Americans supportive of immigration, as it oscillates between aligning with Trump’s stricter policies and portraying compassion towards vulnerable immigrant populations.

Biden also utilizes attitudinal markers to convey his intentions regarding immigrants, which further reinforces previous observations that can create uncertainties among voters who support immigrants, as seen in statements like *Fentanyl and the byproducts of fentanyl went down for a while. And I wanted to make sure we use the machinery that can detect fentanyl, these big machines that roll over everything that comes across the border.* Here, Biden once again situates fentanyl within the broader context of immigration and drug trafficking. By discussing the detection of fentanyl at the border, he indirectly addresses the movement of drugs often associated with illegal immigration. This indirect reference prompts the audience to mentally connect fentanyl with issues surrounding immigration, suggesting that managing drug trafficking is integral to handling both border security and immigration matters.

The explicit subjective marker *I* combined with the attitudinal marker *wanted* clearly expresses Biden’s personal intention and commitment to addressing the fentanyl issue. This personalization underscores his direct involvement and responsibility in ensuring the implementation of detection machinery. However, the phrase *make sure* serves as a hedging device, introducing caution or acknowledging potential challenges. While Biden articulates a strong intent to deploy the machinery for detecting fentanyl, *make sure*, in this case, implies that there are complexities and uncertainties inherent in achieving this goal. This blend of personal commitment with a realistic recognition of challenges demonstrates a nuanced communication strategy. While this approach may be viewed as realistic, the use of hedging devices like *make sure* can give the audience the impression that the goals Biden aims to achieve are highly complex and difficult to attain. This perception could potentially make Biden’s communicative approach appear daunting or challenging to the audience.

Trump’s use of experiential evidential markers serves to emphasize his personal perspective and direct experience regarding immigration issues under Biden’s administration, as observed in statements such as *He opened the borders nobody’s ever seen anything like/But the numbers of – the amount of drugs and human trafficking in women coming across our*

⁹ For further details of this linguistic expression, see Padilla-Herrada (2015).

border, the worst thing I've ever seen at numbers – nobody's ever seen under him because the border is so bad. These markers imply a high level of certainty and urgency, suggesting that Trump's statements are grounded in his own observations or direct encounters with the situation at the border. By framing his concerns in this manner, Trump underscores the severity of the issues he perceives, aiming to convince the audience of the gravity of the situation based on his personal experiences. This approach contrasts with more detached or impersonal forms of communication, as it seeks to establish a strong emotional connection and credibility through Trump's firsthand accounts.

The discrepancy between Biden's and Trump's statements regarding fentanyl and border security underscores their strategic efforts to portray themselves as more capable leaders in combating drug trafficking. Biden's strategy emphasizes proactive measures, such as deploying detection machinery for fentanyl, utilizing more frequent ambiguous language to convey his approach. In contrast, Trump criticizes Biden's policies by using experiential evidentials such as *nobody's ever seen* and *the worst thing I've ever seen*, suggesting a personal and immediate understanding of the severity of the situation. This tactic aims to highlight Biden's perceived failures and inadequacies in managing the border, portraying Trump as more knowledgeable and effective in addressing the escalating challenges.

The deontic and attitudinal markers used by Trump will be also delineated and compared. Trump employs deontic markers to convey a strong sense of necessity and/or obligation regarding the removal of immigrants from the US, as seen in examples like in *we have to get a lot of these people out* and *we have to get them out fast, because they're going to destroy our country*. Trump employs deontic markers to convey a strong sense of necessity and/or obligation regarding the removal of immigrants from the US. This rhetoric is consistent with his historical stance towards immigrants, as observed in the 2015/2016 election period (see Gil-Bonilla 2024). Phrases such as *we have to* emphasize the urgency and critical nature of his proposed actions, implying that expelling immigrants is crucial to safeguarding the nation.

Additionally, Trump utilizes the expression *going to* not only as an attitudinal marker but as an epistemic one, signaling a high degree of certainty. When he asserts that *they're going to destroy our country*, he makes a definitive prediction regarding the detrimental effects of immigrants, bolstering his position with a sense of inevitability. This usage of *going to* enhances his argument by framing the threat as an assured future occurrence rather than a mere possibility, thereby intensifying the perceived urgency and seriousness of the issue.

Interestingly, Trump employs the same explicit attitudinal marker as Biden like in *I want to take care of people*, but with a contrasting focus. Here, Trump uses the explicit subjective marker *I* and the attitudinal marker *want* to articulate his personal commitment to caring for people. However, the context differs significantly from Biden's usage, where Biden emphasizes controlling the border to combat fentanyl trafficking. Instead, Trump's statement pivots towards expressing concern about immigrants taking over essential societal institutions such as schools, hospitals, and Social Security. This contrast underscores divergent priorities in their respective approaches to addressing immigration issues.

Trump's use of these markers indicates a dual strategy: while expressing concern for the well-being of Americans, he simultaneously frames immigrants negatively through a distinctive us-versus-them dynamic¹⁰. When Trump states *we're destroying our country* and refers to *they* taking over schools, hospitals, and potentially Social Security, he implicitly

¹⁰ For further details see van Dijk (2000).

assigns immigrants as responsible for these issues. This distinction between *we* (the presumed American citizens) and *they* (immigrants) establishes a stark division, implying that resources and institutions of the in-group are endangered by the out-group. This rhetorical approach reinforces Trump's narrative of protecting American interests and highlights perceived threats posed by immigration.

4.3 Discussion

This section aims to discuss the results obtained and simultaneously address the research questions posed. The research questions seek to analyze the stancetaking expressions employed by Biden and Trump, as well as the functions these usages serve for both candidates concerning the topics under scrutiny. As noted in the analysis of these candidates' discursive events, significant differences in the usage and function of linguistic strategies have been observed between Biden and Trump, with these differences varying across the topics analyzed.

Concerning the topic of economy and employment, it has been observed that both candidates use the expression *be going to* in contrasting ways. In Trump's case, it serves both as an attitudinal marker, as in *We're going to make this country successful again* and as an epistemic marker, such as in *My retribution is going to be success*. In both instances, Trump's discourse is consistent in expressing his intention to enhance the American economy. This approach is likely to resonate more with the American audience, as the prospect of economic growth is a widely shared interest that can benefit a broad demographic. In the case of Biden, he uses *be going to* as both an attitudinal marker like in *We're going to make sure that we reduce the price of housing* and an epistemic marker, as evidenced by *They all said that if Trump is re-elected, we're likely to have a recession, and inflation is going to increasingly go up*. The former aligns with Trump's usage in that it proposes benefits for American society. The latter, however, serves as a criticism or attack on Trump, employing the fallacy of authority by referencing authoritative figures who predict negative outcomes if Trump is re-elected. This dual usage reflects Biden's strategy of not only promising positive changes but also discrediting his opponent's potential impact on the economy.

Biden's usage of *be going to* can lead to ambiguity¹¹. This ambiguity arises because listeners may misunderstand Biden's intentions or need to exert extra cognitive effort to process the differing usages. Additionally, Biden's recurrent use of *make sure* can lead the audience to perceive his proposed economic policies as difficult or challenging to achieve, potentially making it harder for Biden to connect with the audience effectively.

Biden's use of the expression *make sure* can lead to ambiguity because it functions in different ways depending on the context. For instance, when used as a hedging device, as in *we're going to make sure that we reduce the price of housing*, it potentially reduces the strength and impact of his communicative events by introducing caution or uncertainty. However, Biden also uses *make sure* to criticize Trump, as seen in statements like *when he was president, he was taking – separating babies from their mothers, putting them in cages, making sure the families were separated. That's not the right way to go*. In this instance, it operates as a pathos device, eliciting pity and empathy for these vulnerable people. The dual usage of the same expression to convey opposing views can create controversy and ambiguity for the audience, making it difficult to discern the real function of the linguistic expression *make sure*.

¹¹ For further details about the concept *ambiguity*, see Kellas et al. (1988); Borowsky & Masson (1996); Rodd et al. (1999, 2000); Olsen (2017); Martin (2018); Maciejewski & Klepousniotou (2020); Nasr (2022).

In Biden's discourse, the expression *make sure* also functions as a booster, particularly evident in discussions on immigration, such as the statement about ensuring a situation where the number of border police prevents illegal crossings. This usage reinforces a consistent ambiguity in his rhetoric, where *make sure* serves as both a hedging device, as seen in *I wanted to make sure we use the machinery that can detect fentanyl* and as booster, as illustrated by *it [referring to an agreement] made sure that we are in a situation where you had no circumstance where they could come across the border with the number of border police there are now*. When addressing immigration, Biden appears more assertive and certain, which could be interpreted negatively towards certain groups. Conversely, the expression *make sure* also acts as a hedging device when he directly assumes responsibility, reflecting a tendency towards tentativeness and acknowledgment of complexities, such as in his statement about deploying detection machinery for fentanyl. In these instances, Biden's discourse suggests potential difficulties in achieving desired outcomes while also mitigating direct responsibility if those outcomes are not realized.

This ambiguity in Biden's discourse can be illustrated through other examples. There is a noticeable discordance in his statements as he sometimes aligns with Trump's rhetoric, particularly on border restrictions and the interconnection of fentanyl with immigrants. This approach diverges from Clinton's discourse during the 2015/2016 election, where she avoided such associations and displayed more empathy for immigrants (as noted in Gil-Bonilla 2024). Conversely, Biden occasionally aligns with Democrat perspectives, akin to Clinton, by showing support for foreign entities like immigrant children and mothers, which Trump opposes. When he criticizes Trump for separating children from their mothers, he conveys empathy and concern for these vulnerable groups, stating that such actions are *not the right way to go*. This inconsistency reinforces the ambiguity, as the audience may perceive Biden as alternately supporting and opposing immigrants. This dual stance can create confusion, leaving the audience uncertain about the specific circumstances in which Biden intends to support immigrants and how he evaluates these situations.

It can be inferred that Biden may be referring to immigrants as drug dealers because the transportation of drugs across the border is predominantly associated with immigrants rather than Americans. If an American were to transport drugs, which is also possible, they might use methods other than crossing the border illegally. This is because American citizens, being nationals, do not have the same need to cross the border illegally. Therefore, if they were to do so, it might be perceived as more suspicious, potentially implying involvement in illegal activities.

When Trump addresses the topic of immigration, he employs various linguistic expressions to convey his ideas without the ambiguity seen in Biden's discourse. For instance, Trump utilizes deontic markers such as *we have to get a lot of these people out* and attitudinals like *I want to take care of people* to consistently express his opposition to immigrants. When he speaks of helping people, as previously mentioned, he implies his intention to assist Americans, positioning them as the in-group, while portraying immigrants as a potential out-group. This consistent use of language aligns with Trump's stance on immigration, presenting a clear and direct message without the ambiguity found in Biden's statements.

Indeed, Trump's consistent use of expressions like *be going to* as an epistemic marker, as in *they're going to destroy our country* reinforces his portrayal of immigrants as an out-group and aligns with his steadfast stance on immigration. This consistent messaging contributes to a clear and direct communication style from Trump, where he maintains a cohesive narrative without veering into ambiguity or creating confusion for the audience. This

approach can make his discourse more straightforward and potentially easier for the audience to grasp compared to Biden, whose use of language sometimes introduces ambiguity and varies in alignment with his party's ideology. Thus, Trump's strategic consistency in discourse may contribute to his communicative effectiveness on immigration-related issues.

Based on the analysis conducted so far, it can be summarized that Trump employs linguistic strategies that include boosters, enhancing the persuasiveness and coherence of his discourse by maintaining a consistent narrative. In contrast, Biden's use of hedging devices, despite occasionally combining them with boosters such as *we have to*, introduces elements of caution and uncertainty that may weaken the impact of his discourse. This distinction in linguistic approach may have contributed to recent reactions from various newspapers, such as *The Telegraph* (2004) or *The Guardian* (2004), suggesting Trump as a potential winner in the upcoming elections. The linguistic analysis underscores how these strategies align with broader perceptions of communication effectiveness and political messaging.

5 Conclusions

By employing critical discourse analysis, it becomes feasible to uncover and scrutinize the linguistic and rhetorical strategies used by speakers to persuade and/or convince their audience, thereby revealing underlying discourses. Through such analysis, potential differences and/or similarities between the two candidates in the 2024 US elections, Biden and Trump, can be outlined. This analytical approach allows for an examination of how these candidates construct their discourses to reach their audience and promote their political policies and objectives. It delves into the nuances of language, strategy, and intentionality to uncover the deeper implications and impacts of their communication styles on public perception and electoral outcomes.

Further avenues of research could include an analysis of the upcoming pre-electoral debates to complement existing studies. Additionally, given the recent attempted assassination of Trump, it would be pertinent to examine whether his stance becomes more radical in subsequent debates, potentially advocating stricter immigration policies in response to the incident. Furthermore, investigating post-electoral speeches of both the victor and the defeated candidates would offer insights into the alignment or divergence of their positions from their pre-electoral discourse. Such research endeavors would enhance understanding of how political rhetoric evolves in response to events and its impact on public opinion and policy agendas.

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Abbreviations

EF	effective stance
EP	epistemic stance
IE	intersubjective explicit
IO	intersubjective opaque
SE	subjective explicit
SI	subjective implicit

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