

**UNIVERSITY OF TARTU
DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH STUDIES**

**CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF DONALD TRUMP'S AND JOE
BIDEN'S SPEECHES**

BA thesis

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ABSTRACT

This thesis analyses the rhetoric of Donald Trump and Joe Biden in their Inaugural and State of the Union Addresses using the textual dimension of Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model. The research aims to examine how the two presidents construct representations of "the people" and how their rhetorical strategies differ in vocabulary, grammar, and textual structures.

The paper begins with a literature review focusing on presidential rhetoric, studies of Inaugural and State of the Union Addresses, and research on Trump and Biden. The short overview of the methodology presents the questions suggested by Norman Fairclough for the textual level of analysis that serve as the basis for the analysis.

The analysis shows that Trump's speeches are characterised by populist, polarising, and informal language, emotional appeals, repetition, and an "us versus them" narrative. Biden's rhetoric, in contrast, is more inclusive and unity-oriented, emphasising democracy, collective responsibility, and national healing. The findings also show that both presidents rely strongly on the pronoun "we" to construct collective identity, although the function of this inclusiveness differs ideologically.

Keywords: Donald Trump, Joe Biden, Inaugural Address, State of the Union Address, CDA, Norman Fairclough

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis analyses the rhetoric of Donald Trump and Joe Biden in their Inaugural and State of the Union Addresses through the textual dimension of Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model. The research aims to examine how the two presidents construct representations of "the people" and how their rhetorical strategies differ in vocabulary, grammar, and textual structures.

The paper starts with a literature review of presidential rhetoric in the United States, research on Inaugural and State of the Union Addresses and previous studies focusing on Donald Trump and Joe Biden. The research shows how different presidents have communicated across the nation's history. Earlier presidents focused more on legal terms, formal language, and authoritative speaking. The latest presidents, however, have shifted their rhetoric more towards informal language, with idealistic, persuasive, and emotive tactics. The thesis also focuses on religious rhetoric, as it has played an important role in the politics of the United States.

For the textual analysis, I will use Norman Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) model. However, the analysis will focus only on the textual level, due to the number of the speeches analysed and the length of this thesis. According to Norman and Isabela Fairclough (2012: 26), political discourse is a key target of CDA because politics is essentially a mechanism for making decisions and several questions can be asked about how and why these decisions are made. Numerous studies have also applied this model to political speeches worldwide. However, most papers focus on only one political figure, and there are fewer comparisons of rhetoric. While Trump has received considerable attention due to his unusual rhetorical style, I will compare him to his predecessor, who has received far less analysis.

My analysis will closely examine Trump's and Biden's addresses using ten questions (and sub-questions) created by Norman Fairclough. I will show examples of vocabulary, grammar and textual structures in each speech and how similar or different they are throughout the whole discourse. The study will also focus on ideologies, especially religious language, including civil religion. Each address will be studied separately outside of the paper, and the findings will be synthesised in the text.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

1.1 Research on Presidential Rhetoric

According to Laracey (2009: 909), early presidents in their public rhetoric generally avoided addressing policy specifics and instead focused on patriotism and national principles. However, Laracey (2009: 909) also believes that there are examples of the first presidents actively communicating with the public. In his opinion, there are four types of communicators: Open Communicators, Veiled Communicators, Patriotic Cheerleaders, and Silent Heads (Laracey 2009: 910). Open Communicators publicly addressed specific policy issues in their own names, through speeches or public letters. Veiled Communicators addressed policy issues through anonymous commentaries, written by the presidents or by advisers. Patriotic Cheerleaders, however, did not address policy issues and instead delivered public speeches on general themes of national unity and principle. Lastly, Silent Heads said little beyond occasional written communications with Congress and rarely spoke publicly. His research reveals that eight of 24 pre-twentieth-century presidents (for example, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Zachary Taylor) communicated openly with the public on policy matters (Laracey 2009: 911). In contrast, seven communicated their positions in a thinly veiled manner (such as Andrew Jackson and Franklin Pierce), indicating that 15 of 24

presidents disclosed their political decisions to the public in some manner (Laracey 2009: 911).

The latest American presidents have been found to use more informal language, idealistic terminology, and persuasion tactics. According to Lim (2002: 333), the 20th century witnessed a shift towards a more anti-intellectual rhetoric, with an increased tendency to avoid references to cognitive and evaluative processes. Presidential rhetoric has also become more informal, with fewer references to legal and judicial terms and an increased use of casual and slang language (Lim 2002: 333). Another contrast is the use of persuasive and ideological language. Bostdorff (1992) argues that Jimmy Carter's rhetoric was grounded in idealist terminology, centred on what Americans are and what the nation ought to be. This demonstrates the roles of both idealism and pragmatism in presidential rhetoric, especially during a crisis. For persuasion tactics, the recurring moves are emotional appeal, repetition, personalisation, and direct mobilisation. For instance, Donald Trump is described as using hyperbole, negative labelling, and short slogans, while Joe Biden is characterised as using unity-oriented language, such as antithesis and rhetorical questions (Savchuk 2025: 277-278).

One of the recurring sources of reference in American political rhetoric has been the Bible. The first presidents of the United States may have made more explicit references to the Bible than their successors. According to Dreisbach (2011: 402), the founders, including the first presidents, read and were familiar with the Bible. For example, George Washington (1931, 35: 229) stated in his Farewell Address in 1796 that anyone who laboured to subvert a public role for religion and morality could not call himself a patriot. Political scientist Donald S. Lutz (1992) reported that the Bible was cited more frequently than any European writer or even any European school of thought, such as the Enlightenment (cited in Dreisbach 2011: 402-403).

A few years later, in 1800, presidential candidate Thomas Jefferson metaphorically built a wall of separation between Church and State by stating that the legislature should “make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” (cited in Dreisbach 2003). Dreisbach (2003) believes that this wall had less to do with the separation between Church and government and more with the separation between federal and state governments on matters of religion.

According to some political scientists, religion has been making its comeback in the American political landscape in the 20th and 21st centuries. This can be seen in the movement of Evangelical Christians that have shifted the Republican Party to the right on social issues, while the Democratic Party is moving to the left (Putnam and Campbell 2010). The result may be a political party division between religious and secular Americans (Wilcox and Robinson 2007). Williams (2010) argues that the Evangelicals began developing an alliance with the Republican Party in the early Cold War and that alliance sharpened in the culture wars around sex education, the Equal Rights Amendment, abortion, and gay rights. According to him, by the early twenty-first century, the Christian Right was the most powerful interest group in the Republican Party and used its position to reshape the nation's political agenda (Williams 2010). This is likely to influence political rhetoric as well.

However, religion has appeared in other ways as well. Starting in the 1960s, the concept of civil religion began to be used to explain the role of religion in American politics. Bellah (1967) argues that civil religion is nondenominational, meaning that when presidents use the word *God*, they are not conveying their own private religion, but rather appealing to a religious common denominator shared by the majority of Americans. He believes that civil religion is a shared set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that imbues public and political life with a religious dimension (Bellah 1967: 3).

One of the first presidents to speak on civil religion was Ronald Reagan, whose reputation and use of civil religion rhetoric, among other things, made him the “Great Communicator” (Ritter and Henry 1992: 121). He is said to have turned civil religion into a political weapon by rendering silent those who would oppose him (Weiler and Pearce 1992: 29). Schonhardt-Bailey, Yager, and Lahlou (2012: 484) demonstrate in their research that Reagan used civil religion rhetoric more than usual: 59% of the discourse in his seminal speeches and 48% in his State of the Union speeches focused on civil religion themes. Although the latest presidents have included some of these same themes in their State of the Union speeches, none were as explicit or as extensive as Reagan, particularly in their use of “God” (Schonhardt-Bailey et al 2012: 482-484).

Similarly to Ronald Reagan, Barack Obama’s rhetoric stands out among other presidents and has been widely studied. Coe and Reitzes (2010: 392) argue that his way of speaking was popular even before he was elected president of the United States, as he delivered speeches on hope and change, unity in the face of partisanship, and improving schools, health care, and the economy. After being elected president, Obama began speaking of civil religion almost as much as Reagan had. Frank (2009: 606) suggests that “he established in his inaugural a rhetorical blueprint of his presidency that recovers and recasts the cosmopolitan strand of American civil religion”.

The literature suggests that presidential rhetoric has always played a role in politics and in its understanding. The founders and the earliest presidents have been thoroughly analysed, and their speeches have received significant attention. As it seems, religion, and later civil religion, was one of the major themes discussed and stands out in the present political scene as well. It is worth noting that other presidents’ connections to civil religion have also been studied, including Benjamin Harrison (Calhoun 1993) and Jimmy Carter (Flowers 1983).

1.2 Studies on Inaugural and State of the Union Addresses

Since the president assumes the role of an official leader of the nation, their words carry great importance and are widely publicised to the public. Each president delivers numerous speeches during their time in office, but the ones that stand out the most are usually the Inaugural and the State of the Union Addresses.

The Inaugural Address is the starting speech of one's presidency, which establishes the overall political vision of the person the voters have chosen to rule them for four years (Campbell et al 1985: 394). The State of the Union Address is a form of communication between the President and Congress in which the President provides information and policy proposals for the upcoming legislative year. In recent decades, the audience of the speech has expanded: the President addresses both the nation and Members of Congress, while before the speech was only meant as information to the Congress (Shogan 2015: 1).

Coe and Neumann (2011: 731) suggest that a presidential speech should include four qualities to be analysed rhetorically: it must be a form of spoken communication, address the American people, be broadcast to the nation, and be controlled by the president. It is suggested that the president must be in complete control of the message when speaking to the whole country. These speeches include the Inaugural addresses and the State of the Union addresses (Coe and Neumann 2011: 731).

Inaugural addresses tend to be a popular research topic because there are continuities across presidents and the speeches are expected to have tremendous political significance. These speeches are unlikely to contain much discussion of specific policies and are largely ceremonial addresses (Coe and Neumann 2011: 729). In his address, the incoming president wants to reassure his fellow citizens that he is the president of the whole nation, including those who did not vote for him. Ericson (1997: 728-729) demonstrates, through the analysis of 52 Inaugural addresses, that they are remarkably similar and voice the same 11 themes:

civic virtue, nonpartisanship, national unity, general policy principles, cooperation with Congress, popular support, a providential supreme being, the American mission, political continuity, the president's role as defender of the Constitution and union, and federalism (Ericson 1997: 728-729).

Providential supreme being is the most popular theme and has been used in every speech delivered before Ericson wrote his analysis, followed closely by civic virtue, which has been mentioned in 88% of the speeches (Ericson 1997: 730). The two least used are defender of the Constitution and union and federalism, with the former appearing in 44% of the addresses and the latter in 46% (Ericson 1997: 730). The analysis also shows that the last two themes, together with cooperation with Congress, were popular among the first presidents and began to lose their effect with Franklin Delano Roosevelt (Ericson 1997: 730). On average, presidents address seven of the themes, with a range from two (Abraham Lincoln's second) to eleven (Thomas Jefferson's first, John Quincy Adams and Martin Van Buren) (Ericson 1997: 730).

State of the Union addresses, on the other hand, are delivered annually and focus on more topical political issues. These speeches also share fewer similarities than the Inaugural addresses and have undergone many changes over the years. At first, they were meant to serve only as a form of communication between the President and Congress. In 1923, Calvin Coolidge was the first to use a radio to broadcast the address. In 1934, Franklin Delano Roosevelt officially made the speech a permanent fixture of presidential duties and set the standard for its yearly delivery. In 1945, the address became known as the State of the Union address and in 1947, Harry S. Truman's speech was the first to be televised. Lyndon B. Johnson brought in the last change in 1965, shifting the address from midday to evening to attract a larger television audience (Teten 2003: 337-338). The data from Teten's study suggest that there may be three observable eras in the evolution of the State of the Union

address: the founding (1790-1825), the modern (starting from 1913), and the traditional (1825-1913). Throughout the years, the length of speeches has significantly decreased, even though the founding-era addresses were even shorter because they were intended only as a quick overview of policies to the Congress (Teten 2003: 343).

When the Inaugural addresses are celebratory and outline the plans the presidents have for their time in office, the State of the Union addresses surround policy developments and achievements. Scholars highlight that recurring themes, such as the economy, national security, and social welfare, are strategically selected to support presidential policy goals. For instance, Wood (2004) demonstrates that presidents frame economic problems in ways that justify their preferred solutions, while Schonhardt-Bailey (2012) shows how Reagan emphasised free-market principles to reinforce his ideological stance.

Thus, the State of the Union addresses focus more on policy issues, recurring problems and challenges presidents face as leaders. The presidents emphasise economic problems to align with the nation and, through an emotional tone, show they are on the same side with the people. In contrast, the Inaugural addresses express gratitude and hope for the upcoming four years. They are celebratory and focus on themes of what the new president can achieve together with the nation. It may be easier to find similar themes in the Inaugurals because newly appointed presidents share similar goals. The State of the Union should address existing problems, and these vary depending on the presidency.

1.3 Academic Research on Trump's and Biden's Rhetoric

Donald Trump's character and use of language have stood out among other presidents. He has built a reputation for giving simple, repetitive, and unstructured speeches to appeal to his supporters, projecting an image of himself as a common person, not a member of the elite. Linguistic analyses note that his discourse often features limited vocabulary, short syntactic

structures, and frequent repetition of key phrases, contributing to a conversational and improvisational tone (Wang and Liu 2018: 299-300). While critics interpret this as evidence of incoherence or lack of analytical depth, other scholars argue that this apparent spontaneity can be strategically effective, enabling Trump to connect with audiences through accessibility and emotional resonance. His rhetoric frequently prioritises thematic concentration over logical progression, repeatedly returning to core issues such as immigration, economic decline, and national identity, which reinforces message retention despite a seemingly chaotic delivery (Wang and Liu 2018: 301-302).

A defining feature of Trump's rhetoric is its populist, provocative structure, which helps contrast the "people" with various enemies. Scholars highlight his frequent use of scapegoating and exclusionary language, targeting political opponents, mainstream media, and minority groups, thereby reinforcing an "us versus them" narrative (Nacos et al 2020: 2-3). This binary framing is central to his persuasive strategy, as it mobilises emotional responses such as fear, resentment, and solidarity. At the same time, his rhetoric often invokes a nostalgic vision of the United States, most notably through the slogan "Make America Great Again", which deliberately avoids physical evidence while evoking a shared but imagined past (Hull 2020: 12-13). This allows the audience to project their own grievances into the message and feel seen and heard by the leaders. Furthermore, his speeches frequently emphasise crisis and national decline, portraying the United States as threatened both economically and culturally, thereby legitimising strong leadership and intervention (Mustafa 2023: 1).

Religion is one of the most significant yet instrumental themes in Trump's rhetoric and often seems to have been designed for his Evangelical Christian voter base. In the 2016 elections, Donald Trump won thanks to 81% of Evangelical Christians voting for him, even though he is the least Christian President in the US (Ericksen 2019: 242). Although Trump

rarely engages in sustained theological argumentation, he strategically integrates religious symbolism and ideology to construct moral authority and advocate for his policy decisions. For example, his use of biblical quotations frames him as accountable primarily to divine authority rather than political tradition (Mustafa 2023). Beyond formal speeches, symbolic acts, such as his widely publicised display of a Bible outside St. John’s Church in 2020, demonstrate how religious imagery is mobilised to signal alignment with conservative Christian values (De Bruyn 2025: 86–87). Reactions to such events reveal a divide within Christian communities, yet many Evangelical supporters interpreted these gestures as affirmations of a commitment to restoring moral and social order that they perceive to have been lost.

Joe Biden’s political rhetoric is generally characterised by coherence, inclusivity, and a strong emphasis on unity and collective identity. Amaireh (2023: 731) demonstrates that Biden relies heavily on inclusive pronouns such as “we” and “our” to construct a shared national identity and foster a sense of collective responsibility. This linguistic strategy allows him to position himself not as an outsider challenging the system, but as a representative of the American people working collaboratively toward common goals. Furthermore, Biden frequently employs ethos, pathos, and logos in a balanced manner, combining emotional appeal with logical argumentation such as references to statistics, authoritative figures, and shared values (Amaireh 2023: 733-734). His rhetoric is therefore less spontaneous and more structured than Trump’s, reflecting a traditional presidential communication style grounded in persuasion through reasoned argument and emotional reassurance.

A central theme in Biden’s rhetoric is national unity and democratic restoration, particularly in response to the political polarisation of the Trump era. Analyses of his Inaugural address highlight his consistent use of positive metaphors, hopeful language, and calls for reconciliation, framing the United States as a nation capable of overcoming division

through cooperation (Greve 2021: 3). Unlike Trump's antagonistic "us versus them" framing, Biden explicitly acknowledges disagreement as a legitimate part of democracy while simultaneously emphasising that such differences should not lead to disunion (Mustafa 2023). This rhetorical approach reflects a broader liberal ideological stance, in which political discourse is oriented toward inclusion, dialogue, and compromise rather than conflict. Moreover, Biden's frequent use of repetition and intertextuality, such as references to historical events and shared democratic ideals, reinforces continuity and stability, positioning his presidency as a return to normative political discourse after a period of disruption (Mustafa 2023).

As with Donald Trump and all previous presidents, religion plays a central role in Joe Biden's speeches. However, unlike Trump, Biden incorporates religious references as part of a broader ethical and emotional appeal, often invoking the Bible alongside other authoritative sources to support arguments and reinforce moral values (Amaireh 2023: 734). Rather than using religion to signal alignment with a specific political constituency, such as Evangelical Christians, his rhetoric tends to frame faith in more universal and inclusive terms, emphasising compassion, hope, and collective responsibility. Amaireh (2023: 733) found in her research that Biden frequently tries to stir emotions of hope and love by sharing stories of "hope and change", using phrases, such as "hope and light, goodness and grace", and quoting statements of love. Additionally, his rhetorical orientation extends beyond domestic audiences to the international sphere, where his speeches frequently emphasise multilateralism, cooperation, and the restoration of global alliances, presenting the United States as a reliable and collaborative actor on the world stage (Greve 2021: 2-3). In this sense, Biden's rhetoric not only contrasts with Trump's nationalist discourse but also seeks to reframe American identity in both domestic and global contexts.

Overall, the literature review suggests that rhetoric plays an important role in presidents' political discourse. Certain speeches provide guidelines for structure and themes, such as the State of the Union Address, which usually includes discussions of policy decisions. However, it is each president's decision how to represent these issues, solutions, and their own achievements. It is also important to note how different topics, such as religion, influence their rhetoric. There is extensive research on Donald Trump's language use, highlighting his populist, polarising, and emotional nature. Research on Joe Biden shows a more traditional rhetoric, with a mix of formal and informal language, that focuses on unity. However, there are few studies comparing these two presidents, especially their rhetoric in the Inaugural and State of the Union Addresses. This present study seeks to fill that gap.

2. ANALYSIS

2.1 Corpus Description

This thesis will analyse eight speeches delivered by the two most recent presidents of the United States, Donald Trump and Joe Biden. The two men are of similar age and cultural background. The chosen speeches are the Inaugural Address and the three State of the Union Addresses, for Trump, they will be from his first term, to ensure comparability. I have decided to analyse these specific speeches because they are spoken to the whole nation, are culturally relevant, and contain important political, ideological, and cultural information.

2.2 Methodological Approach

This study employs Norman Fairclough's (1989) three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Fairclough's model offers a systematic and detailed approach to how language operates in relation to power and ideology. His model is divided into three

connected dimensions: textual analysis, discursive practice, and socio-cultural practice. Because the thesis will analyse eight lengthy speeches, it cannot focus on all three dimensions and has chosen to discuss only the first, textual dimension. Fairclough (1989: 110-111) organised the model around ten main questions and some sub-questions, which can be asked of a text. These questions will serve as a framework for analysing the speeches. The questions Fairclough (1989: 110-111) uses for guidance are as follows.

Vocabulary

1. What experiential values do words have?
 - a. What classification schemes are drawn upon?
 - b. Are there words which are ideologically contested?
 - c. Is there rewording or overwording?
 - d. What ideologically significant meaning relations (synonymy, hyponymy, antonymy) are there between words?
2. What relational values do words have?
 - a. Are there euphemistic expressions?
 - b. Are there markedly formal or informal words?
3. What expressive values do words have?
4. What metaphors are used?

Grammar

5. What experiential values do grammatical features have?
 - a. What types of process and participant predominate?
 - b. Is agency unclear?
 - c. Are processes what they seem?
 - d. Are nominalisations used?
 - e. Are sentences active or passive?
 - f. Are sentences positive or negative?
6. What relational values do grammatical features have?
 - a. What modes (declarative, grammatical question, imperative) are used?
 - b. Are there important features of relational modality?
 - c. Are the pronouns *we* and *you* used, and if so, how?
7. What expressive values do grammatical features have?
 - a. Are there important features or expressive modality?
8. How are (simple) sentences linked together?
 - a. What logical connectors are used?
 - b. Are complex sentences characterised by coordination or subordination?
 - c. What means are used for referring inside and outside the text?

Textual structures

9. What interactional conventions are used?
 - a. Are there ways in which one participant controls the turns of others?
10. What larger-scale structure does the text have?

I will focus primarily on the topic of “people,” including ideologies such as religion, due to space limitations in this thesis.

2.3 Donald Trump's Rhetoric in the Inaugural and State of the Union Addresses

Nacos, Shapiro, and Bloch-Elkon (2020) found that Donald Trump uses different classification schemes to create an “us versus them” narrative, pitting the common people against elites, Democrats, and internal and external threats. This narrative is dominant throughout all of his first term's four addresses. However, through analysis, I also noticed several differences between the speeches. I will present how Trump uses the same tactics in certain rhetorical instances. I will also demonstrate how his rhetoric differs in the same addresses and why it is important.

2.3.1 Similarities in Vocabulary Use

According to Fairclough (1989: 112-116), experiential values in vocabulary reflect how language represents the speaker's view of the world. Trump uses classification schemes to show his support of “the people” and his administration, and his distaste towards “the elite”, threats, and outsiders. In his Inaugural Address, he refers to ordinary people as “citizens”, “families”, “workers”, and “men and women”, who can also be grouped under “Americans”. At the same time, the elites are “politicians”, “establishment”, or even “Washington”. In the 2018 and 2019 State of the Union Addresses, he also refers to elites as “leaders”, “Republicans and Democrats”. In the Inaugural Address, Trump mostly focused on the last administration as the main threat and talked little about external factors. In all of his State of the Unions, however, references to foreign and other entities are very frequent, such as “MS-13 gang” (Trump 2018; Trump 2019), “drug traffickers” (Trump 2019), “human traffickers” (Trump 2019), “criminal illegal aliens” (Trump 2019; Trump 2020), “rogue regimes” (Trump 2018), and “terrorist groups” (Trump 2018). It is especially important to note that he uses the same terms (“MS-13 gang”, “criminal illegal aliens”) in multiple of his speeches, showing his continuous negative stance towards them.

Ideological preferences are one of the most important factors in Donald Trump's addresses. One of the main similarities between all of the speeches is the way he refers to terrorists, immigrants or the Islamic regimes. For example, these are the specific instances about the Islamic regime in his four speeches: "radical Islamic terrorism... eradicate completely" (Trump 2017: para 22), "...we would work with our allies to extinguish ISIS from the face of the Earth" (Trump 2018: para 55), "the radical regime in Iran" (Trump 2019: para 81), and "combating radical Islamic terrorism" (Trump 2020: para 81). These ideological repetitions help to stress that the actions against Islamic countries and individuals are directly related to ending terrorism and, through that, the personal safety of the citizens. At the same time, repeating it over the past four years could indicate that his administration is not addressing the problem enough.

Another frequent ideological preference in Trump's speeches is the distaste towards immigrants, or "criminal illegal aliens", as he calls them in two State of the Union Addresses. In his Inaugural Address, he talks little of immigrants, but does state that "We must protect our borders from the ravages of other countries" (Trump 2017: para 17). He instantly frames other nations as destructive threats and continues to do so throughout the next three years. In 2018, he said that "open borders have allowed drugs and gangs to pour into our most vulnerable communities" and also mentioned the MS-13 gang for the first time (Trump 2018: para 33). The year after that, he brought in the term "criminal illegal aliens" and used it three times. He also referred again to the MS-13 gang. "Year after year, countless Americans are murdered by criminal illegal aliens" (Trump 2019: para 32), and "The savage gang, MS-13, now operates in at least 20 different American States" (Trump 2019: para 31) are some of the examples of his emotive ideological language choice towards immigrants. In his last State of the Union, he said, "...a sanctuary for law-abiding Americans, not criminal aliens" (Trump 2020: para 72), indicating that immigrants are still a threat to the country and should be dealt

with immediately. Illegal immigrants are associated with violence and the violence perpetrated by Americans is not mentioned.

Overwording and rewording are other important features in Trump's speeches. He uses overwording closely with his classification schemes, such as referring to "Americans" as "men and women" (Trump 2017), "families" (Trump 2018), "our people" (Trump 2019), and "workers" (Trump 2020). It is also used negatively, as shown before with classification, synonyms or even ideologically contested words. Rewording, however, is often tied to policy emphasis and used to enforce importance and urgency with different decisions. It is more evident in his State of the Union speeches, since the Inaugural Address is mostly celebratory and avoids policy descriptions (Coe and Neumann 2011: 729). In 2018, for example, repetition of phrases such as "we have" and "we will" reinforces accomplishment and future action, while lists, such as "roads, bridges, highways, railways", highlight the scale of proposed reforms (Trump 2018). The same way he shares his achievement in 2020: "Our borders are secure. Our families are flourishing. Our values are renewed. Our pride is restored." (Trump 2020: para 4). This tactic helps Trump create associations between positively connoted notions, such as security and values, thereby presenting himself as the protector of Americans.

For Fairclough (1989: 116-118), relational values in vocabulary concern how language enforces social relationships between the speaker and the audience. Trump's speeches construct a close and direct relationship with "the people", while distancing and delegitimising political elites, internal and external threats, and the Democrats. He achieves this through informal, direct language, which he uses in all of the addresses. The State of the Union speeches do include more formal paragraphs, thanks to their structure as an overview of policies to Congress (Teten 2003). Phrases such as "I will never, ever let you down" (Trump 2017: para 17), "It is terrible" (Trump 2018: para 48), "the hottest economy

anywhere in the world” (Trump 2019: para 12), and “bring billions and billions of dollars into our treasury” (Trump 2020: para 21) create a conversational tone that reduces distance between the president and the public, and indirectly separates people from the supposed elite and their more formal modes of address.

2.3.2 Differences in Vocabulary Use

There are fewer differences than similarities in Donald Trump’s vocabulary use in his four addresses. However, there are a few features worth mentioning and analysing. The use of religious language is quite inconsistent throughout the speeches. In his Inaugural Address, there is only one quote from the Bible: “The Bible tells us, ‘How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity’” (Trump 2017: para 23). He also says the expected sentences at the end of the speech: “Thank you. God bless you, and God bless America. Thank you. God bless America”, which remain the same in every address. However, in 2018, Trump decided to focus more on God and the Bible to possibly prove his alignment with religion. For example, “In America, we know that faith and family, not government and bureaucracy, are the center of American life. The motto is, “In God We Trust.” (Trump 2018: para 17).

Yet, the year after that, religion lost its role in the speech. However, the ideological preference is evident in one policy decision where religious language reappears. “I am asking Congress to pass legislation to prohibit the late-term abortion of children who can feel pain in the mother’s womb,” and “All children - born and unborn - are made in the holy image of God” (Trump 2019: para 64). The most religious out of all the addresses was the 2020 State of the Union, where Trump explicitly talked about prayer and Christians. “In America, we celebrate faith, we cherish religion, we lift our voices in prayer, and we raise our sights to the glory of God” (Trump 2020: para 78), he said after talking about the way the schools are not

allowed to ban public prayer. Although there are instances of religious ideology in all four of his speeches, the topic is inconsistent, and he may not feel the need to align himself with religion as much.

One very important feature in Donald Trump's State of the Union Addresses is the way he includes common people and their stories as examples of achievements or as victims of threats. This personalisation strategy is not evident in the Inaugural Address, where the focus is on celebration rather than achievements or policy changes. In each State of the Union, however, Trump focused on different groups of people. In 2018, he paid special attention to people who helped in different catastrophic events. For instance, "Ashlee was aboard one of the first helicopters on the scene in Houston during the Hurricane Harvey" (Trump 2018: para 4). In 2019, he mentioned stories of Americans who had served in war:

15,000 young American men jumped from the sky, and 60,000 more stormed in from the sea, to save our civilization from tyranny. Here with us tonight are three of those incredible heroes: Private First Class Joseph Reilly, Staff Sergeant Irving Locker, and Sergeant Herman Zeitchik (Trump 2019: para 6).

This also strengthened his view towards certain groups, such as immigrants and terrorists. Lastly, in 2020, he placed greater emphasis on children and their aspirations. One of them was Janiyah Davis, who was given an "opportunity scholarship" to attend a private school (Trump 2020: para 36). Sharing this story publicly might help people believe in a private school system, rather than the public school systems that have been undermined by the administration's decisions.

2.3.3 Grammar

Experiential values of grammatical features in Donald Trump's speeches contribute to how reality is represented, particularly through process types, agency, and voice. All four addresses are dominated by material processes or actions, where the main participants are consistently "we" and "America", positioning the nation as an active agent. In State of the Union Addresses, Trump and his administration are also active agents, but this is more a

function of the nature of the speeches. He constantly uses phrases such as “we will determine” (Trump 2017), “we have created” (Trump 2018), “we will defeat” (Trump 2019), and “we are rebuilding” (Trump 2020). It is especially important that the words “build” and “create” are evident in all the speeches and play a vital role in his representation of his decisions and achievements as positive and generative rather than destructive.

However, agency is not always clear in Trump’s speeches, especially when he wishes to hide real actors. He uses passive voice for these or inanimate agents. For example, in his Inaugural Address, “whether our Government is controlled by the people” (Trump 2017: para 7) shifts focus away from who controls and instead highlights the idea of control itself. He uses many abstract agents to present developments as natural or inevitable, such as “a new tide of optimism was sweeping across our land” (Trump 2018: para 1). He also tends to use passive voice and abstract agents in negative situations, for instance, “Tens of thousands of innocent Americans are killed by lethal drugs...” (Trump 2019: para 31). This sentence brings attention to the Americans affected, not the drugs or law enforcement that should combat drug trafficking.

A clear similarity across all four addresses is Trump's use of the active voice. He rarely uses the passive voice, only when talking about victims or threats, or when he does not want to clarify the agent. However, most of the time, he clearly states what his administration has done or plans to do, focusing on positive actions, while leaving the government’s failures downplayed. The same way Trump tends to avoid nominalisation, preferring clear, direct sentences. Some instances do appear in his 2019 and 2020 State of the Union Addresses, mainly in policy-related expressions, such as “criminal justice reform” (Trump 2019) and “economic success” (Trump 2020), where it abstracts processes and can obscure agency.

Relational values reveal how social relationships are constructed through grammar (Fairclough 1989: 125-128). Trump’s speeches are dominated by declarative sentences,

which present statements as facts and reinforce authority. This helps focus the speeches as monologues and maintains a clear, direct structure. There are also elements of imperative meaning, though not always in grammatical form, as in “Do not allow anyone to tell you that it cannot be done” (Trump 2017: para 26), which directly addresses and instructs the audience, or “let’s come together” (Trump 2018), which encourages cooperation. He also uses the imperative mode when addressing Congress, as is usual in State of the Union Addresses, for instance, “...we must reject the politics of revenge, resistance, and retribution...” (Trump 2019: para 9). However, there are almost no rhetorical questions in Trump’s addresses, since he prefers to advocate for the people and stay true to his achievements.

Modality is used to construct both authority and certainty. Donald Trump’s most frequent modal verbs throughout all the speeches are “must” and “will”. He uses them to express certainty and commitment, such as “we will build” and “we will make America great again” (Trump 2017: para 31). Expressive modality is reinforced through emphatic structures and repetition, such as “our Nation will forever be safe and strong and proud and mighty and free” (Trump 2018: para 73). He also frequently employs strong obligation through modal verbs such as “must”, as in “We must never ignore the vile poison of anti-Semitism...” (Trump 2019: para 83), which presents actions as necessary and positions him as a directive leader addressing both Congress and the public. To show authority, Trump uses “I ask,” especially when addressing Congress: “I ask Congress to support our students...” (Trump 2020: para 40).

2.3.4 Pronouns and Sentence Structure

Pronoun use is an important factor in Donald Trump’s addresses, especially considering his “us versus them” narrative. There are some differences between the Inaugural and the

State of the Union Addresses, mainly with the pronouns “you” and “I”, which come from the nature of these addresses. However, every speech is dominated by the pronoun “we”: approximately 45 times in the Inaugural Address, 150-160 times in 2018, 120-130 times in 2019, and 130-140 times in the 2020 State of the Union Addresses. The pronoun “you” is more dominant in the Inaugural Address than “I”, whereas in the State of the Union Addresses, they have similar numbers. “I” is used only three times in the Inaugural Address, around 40-50 times in 2018, 35-45 times in 2019, and 50-60 times in the 2020 State of the Union Addresses. “You” is used around 20 times in the Inaugural Address, approximately 50-60 times in 2018, 45-55 times in 2019, and 70-80 times in the 2020 State of the Union Addresses. These numbers show that Trump prefers to use the pronoun “we” to demonstrate unity and collectiveness between the people and his administration.

In terms of sentence structure, Trump prefers simple and compound sentences, with fewer complex ones. This helps him maintain a more informal language and emphasise his decisions and opinions. The short structures of simple sentences also make the message more direct, connecting with his “people” narrative. In his Inaugural Address, approximately 30-35 sentences are simple, such as “This is your celebration” (Trump 2017: para 6). In the 2018 and 2020 State of the Union Addresses, around 150-160 sentences are simple, for instance, “This is our new American moment” (Trump 2018: para 16) and “The years of economic decay are over” (Trump 2020: para 2). In the 2019 address, there are around 130-140 simple sentences, such as “The state of our union is strong” (Trump: 2019: para 16).

Compound sentences are also quite frequent in Trump’s speeches, frequently linked by coordinating conjunctions “and” or “but”. In his Inaugural Address, he uses about 25-30 compound sentences, in the 2018 State of the Union Address, approximately 170-180. In 2019, around 140-150 sentences were compound. For example, “We can bridge old divisions, heal old wounds, build new coalitions, forge new solutions, and unlock the extraordinary

promise of America's future” (Trump 2019: para 10). In 2020, around 190-200 sentences were compound. Trump does not tend to use complex sentences, which only appear in more detailed policy explanations, such as “If we hadn’t reversed the failed economic policies..., the world would not now be witnessing this success” (Trump 2020: para 8). There are approximately 70-80 complex sentences in his 2020 State of the Union address, about 50-60 in 2018 and 2019, and only 10-15 in the Inaugural Address.

2.3.5 Textual Structures of the Addresses

In terms of interactional conventions, Trump’s Inaugural and State of the Union Addresses follow a monologic format, where one speaker addresses a passive audience. As is typical for these speeches, there is no opportunity for direct response, meaning that Trump fully controls the discourse. However, he creates an illusion of interaction through direct address and inclusive pronouns, particularly “we” and “you”, which position the audience as participants in a shared national project. In the State of the Union Addresses, he also uses direct references to individuals in the audience, further enhancing the sense of closeness and personalising the speech. However, Trump fully controls the discourse by selecting whom to address and when, maintaining a clear hierarchical structure between speaker and audience.

Regarding the larger-scale structure, there are a few differences between the Inaugural and the State of the Union Addresses. Trump begins his Inaugural Address with acknowledgements and a unifying introduction, then moves into a strong critique of the past, emphasising decline and injustice. This is followed by a turning point, “That all changes...,” after which Trump outlines his vision for the future, centred on nationalism and restoration, such as “America first” (Trump 2017). The speech concludes with a series of short, repetitive, and emotionally charged statements, including “...we will make America great again” (Trump

2017), creating a rhythmic and memorable ending. These short and emotional statements will remain similar in his State of the Union speeches as well.

The State of the Union Addresses are more complex and policy-driven than the Inaugural Address. Trump always begins with unity and national identity, which is followed by a detailed account of achievements, particularly in the economy. For example, every year he recounted how many new jobs they have created, such as “we have created 2.4 million new jobs” (Trump 2018: para 8). The speech then shifts toward policy priorities, especially immigration and national security. He also always talks about foreign policy and national identity before concluding with a return to unity and collective purpose. Overall, the structure combines policy reporting, ideological argument, and emotional storytelling, reinforcing themes of national strength, leadership, and collective identity while focusing on opposing internal and external threats.

2.4 Joe Biden’s Rhetoric in the Inaugural and State of the Union Addresses

Amaireh (2023: 733-734) demonstrates in her study how Joe Biden frequently balances emotional and rational appeals, using structured, policy-oriented language. Unlike Donald Trump, he avoids “us versus them” polarisation and constructs collective agency through the pronoun “we”. I will analyse how Biden uses the language in his speeches and why unity is an important theme throughout his Inaugural and State of the Union Addresses.

2.4.1 Similarities in Vocabulary Use

Similarly to Trump, Biden uses classification schemes to differentiate certain groups of people. However, the reality is constructed around “the American people” as political, economic, and moral agents. There is also a strong focus on collective peoplehood and shared struggle, unifying all Americans. In the Inaugural Address, he stated: “We the People, who

seek a more perfect Union” (Biden 2021: para 4), referring to everybody and not only certain groups. Biden also frames people as “workers”, “families”, and “taxpayers”, using different synonyms and hyponyms to organise his speech.

One similarity in vocabulary across Biden’s addresses is the use of rewording and overwording. In the Inaugural, he mainly uses repetition to emphasise people-centred unity, such as “much to repair, much to restore, much to heal, much to build, and much to gain” (Biden 2021: para 5), which reinforces urgency and collective responsibility. In the State of the Union Addresses, he focuses more on economic urgency, recovery and political cooperation, while still maintaining overall unity. For example, “Jobs are coming back, pride is coming back” (Biden 2023: para 54) emphasises their achievements, while “It’s to fund the police. Fund them. Fund them” (Biden 2022: para 84) shows urgency and the need to act immediately.

When Donald Trump uses emotional, ideologically contested language to express his beliefs, Joe Biden frames his ideological preferences in moral or policy terms. Throughout his addresses, one of the main themes is democracy and the rights to freedom and equality, whether in the United States or elsewhere. In the Inaugural, he states, “We’ve learned again that democracy is precious, democracy is fragile” (Biden 2021: para 2), underscoring its importance. In 2022, he expressed his sympathy for Ukraine by saying, “To our fellow Ukrainian Americans who forged a deep bond that connects our two nations: We stand with you” (Biden 2022: para 23). These same beliefs can be seen toward Americans as well, as in statements such as “we’re building an economy where no one is left behind” (Biden 2023: para 54), which suggests that equality is part of democracy. Some of the ideologies might be more controversial, yet Biden positions them formally alongside democracy, for instance, “Like most Americans, I believe *Roe v. Wade* got it right” (Biden 2024: para 22). The 2024 State of the Union Address contains more ideologically contested phrases than Biden’s earlier

addresses, which may be due to certain policy actions, the ongoing economic crisis, and the approaching elections. Nevertheless, his language remains less emotional and more formal than Trump's was throughout his speeches.

Religion in Biden's speeches plays a consistent but evolving role, primarily supporting the construction of a unified national identity centred on "the people". In his Inaugural Address, he includes the only direct Biblical quotation throughout all of the speeches analysed in this thesis: "As the Bible says, 'Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning'" (Biden 2021: para 27). This helps to provide comfort and emphasise unity during a moment of crisis. In the State of the Union speeches, however, religion becomes less explicit and more embedded within broader moral language, such as dignity, respect, and fairness. While references to God remain in ceremonial closings, Biden increasingly relies on secular expressions of shared values. Overall, religion functions as a unifying and inclusive element rather than a divisive or overtly political tool, reinforcing collective identity without directly shaping policy arguments.

Euphemisms and metaphors play a consistent role in Biden's speeches, particularly in shaping how issues affecting "the people" are presented and understood. In the Inaugural Address, metaphors are especially prominent and serve a unifying and emotional function, for example, "restore the soul of America" and "winter of peril" (Biden 2021: para 4; 5), which frame the nation as an entity with a shared human experience, especially in crisis. The latter is presenting indirect criticism of the previous administration and its policies. Euphemisms are also present but relatively subtle, such as "forces that divide us" (Biden 2021: para 11), which avoids directly naming political actors while still acknowledging conflict. In the 2022 State of the Union, metaphors are more practical and policy-oriented, such as "rebuild America", while euphemistic expressions like "price pressures" soften the impact of economic hardship (Biden 2022). By 2023, metaphors increasingly reflect economic realities,

for instance, “the backbone of America, the middle class” (Biden 2023: para 19), emphasising the central role of common people. In the 2024 State of the Union Address, metaphors, such as the war metaphor in “freedom and democracy are under attack” (Biden 2024: para 4), frame current challenges as urgent and conflict-driven. Euphemisms are used less frequently, with Biden opting for more explicit language when referring to inequality or corporate power. Overall, he consistently uses metaphors to construct a shared narrative about people and strategically uses euphemisms to soften responsibility.

Lastly, Biden’s speeches consistently balance formal and informal language, using this contrast to construct a close yet authoritative relationship with “the people.” In the Inaugural Address, the language is predominantly formal and ceremonial, with phrases such as “a more perfect Union” and “hallowed ground” (Biden 2021: para 4; 3), reflecting the gravity of the occasion and reinforcing institutional authority with language that carries religious connotations. However, even in this context, Biden introduces mild informality, for example, “my friends”, to reduce the distance between himself and the audience. In the 2022 and 2023 State of the Union Addresses, informal expressions are more frequent, such as colloquialisms “folks” and “I get it”, which help present him as relatable and empathetic to everyday experiences (Biden 2022; Biden 2023). By 2024, this blend becomes even more strategic, combining formal political language like “defend democracy” with direct, conversational phrasing, such as “look” or “you know” (Biden 2024). Overall, this shift reflects a move from ceremonial formality to a more conversational, persuasive style, while still maintaining the authority expected of a presidential speaker.

2.4.2 Differences in Vocabulary Use

Across Biden’s four speeches, the experiential values of words show a clear shift from abstract representations of “the people” toward more concrete, socially and economically

grounded portrayals. Although unity is present in all his addresses, Biden categorised certain groups. In the Inaugural Address, people are primarily constructed as a moral and collective entity, as seen in ceremonial phrases borrowed from the historical documents of the country, such as “We the People” and “one Nation under God” (Biden 2021). He tied experiential meaning to shared identity, history, and democratic ideals rather than to material conditions. This reflects the ceremonial nature of the address, which focuses on symbolic renewal rather than specific divisions.

In the State of the Union Addresses, Biden began shifting experiential values and classifications toward a more material, policy-oriented representation of people. In 2022, his vocabulary increasingly reflected the lived experiences of citizens, particularly through references to “working families” and “jobs” (Biden 2022). The people are also positioned there as economic participants and policy beneficiaries. In 2023, he began emphasising economic inequality and social differentiation, using terms such as “people left behind,” “middle class,” and “big corporations” (Biden 2023). People are positioned within a hierarchical structure in which some groups are disadvantaged while others hold power. This also creates an opposition, but one that focuses clearly on economic inequality rather than on general foreign entities, as in Trump’s speeches. This helps with the narrative, where Biden wishes to help the lower classes and stop protecting the upper class. In his last State of the Union, classification and experiential values are strongly politicised and oppositional. Biden clearly distinguishes between groups such as “working people” and “billionaires”, or “the American people” and “extremists” (Biden 2024). The last choice is especially telling, as it, again indirectly, creates a contrast between common Americans and the politically polarising figures in the previous administration. Compared to earlier speeches, where people were primarily unified or economically defined, the 2024 address presents them as participants in a broader political struggle.

2.4.3 Grammar

Grammatically, Joe Biden follows a clear and systematic structure throughout his four addresses. Considering processes and participants, material processes are always dominant, with a few relational or even mental processes in some instances. This helps maintain a strong, action-oriented representation of people. For instance, in 2021, he stated, “...domestic terrorism that we must confront and we will defeat” (Biden 2021: para 6), indicating a forward-moving decision. However, to show abstract motions in a more unified front, he said, “America is rallying the world to meet those challenges...” (Biden 2023: para 181). Although there are changes in each speech, Biden usually shows action-oriented processes, which is typical of these addresses.

Connected to processes, agency is mostly clear and shown through the active voice. Biden shifts between government agencies, structural forces, and the unified “people”. For example, to emphasise his administration's actions, he stated: “...my administration is also eliminating title insurance...” (Biden 2024: para 79). However, when responsibility is shared nationwide, he uses more unified agents, such as “We have to fix it” (Biden 2022: para 52). Passive voice is rarely used, mostly to highlight the victimhood of people, similar to Trump’s use of passive voice. For instance, “...people have been left behind and treated like they're invisible” (Biden 2023: para 52). He strategically avoids assigning blame to show that everybody is equal, but change has to happen.

Unlike Donald Trump, Joe Biden does not refrain from using nominalisation in all four speeches. He turns processes into abstract social concepts, making them seem stable and universal. For instance, in the Inaugural Address, he used words such as “unity,” “division”, and “justice” (Biden 2021). In the State of the Union Addresses, the nominalised words are more policy-oriented, connecting to the topics at hand. For example, “inflation,” “growth,” “investment,” “freedom,” and “rights” are all nouns that have derived from verbs to show that

the policy actions are closely related to these terms. This can also indicate that not everything is action-based, and that decisions need to be thought through before passing bills or acts.

Across Biden's four speeches, declarative sentences are the most common, helping him present statements about "the people" as shared truths and collective realities. For example, in the Inaugural Address, the statement, "We can see each other not as adversaries, but as neighbours," (Biden 2021: para 13) presents unity as achievable rather than merely possible. Similarly, in the State of the Union addresses, declaratives are used to describe the condition of citizens and justify policy, as in "...build the economy from the bottom up and the middle out, not from the top down" (Biden 2022: para 29). Imperatives appear less frequently but play a key role in constructing collective responsibility, often directed at both citizens and political actors. For instance, "Let's begin to listen to one another" (Biden 2021: para 15) and "let's also pass the bipartisan Equality Act" (Biden 2023: para 170) function as calls to action, inviting participation and togetherness while still reinforcing presidential authority. Interrogatives (grammatical questions) are used rarely but strategically to engage the audience and frame shared challenges, such as "Are we going to step up?" (Biden 2021: para 33) or "What freedom else would you take away?" (Biden 2024: para 28). These questions do not seek actual answers but instead guide the audience toward a collective moral stance.

Biden's speeches make extensive use of both relational and expressive modality, particularly when addressing "the people." In terms of relational modality, Biden often softens authority by framing obligations collectively rather than individually. For example, phrases such as "We must reject the culture in which facts themselves are manipulated and even manufactured" (Biden 2021: para 15) and "We must protect access to health care" (Biden 2022: para 93) distribute responsibility across the nation. However, stronger relational authority appears in policy contexts, especially in State of the Union addresses, where

directives such as “Congress must restore the right” (Biden 2023: para 167) or “We need to secure our border” (Biden 2022: para 89) clearly assign responsibility to political actors.

In contrast, expressive modality is reflected in Biden’s frequent use of high-certainty modal verbs such as “will” and “can”. Statements like “We will act to protect our country” (Biden 2023: para 197) and “We can do it together” (Biden 2023: para 208) convey optimism and confidence, presenting future outcomes as both achievable and likely. At times, he also uses stronger commitment markers, such as “I promise you” (Biden 2024: para 31) or “I give you my word” (Biden 2021: para 36), which personalise his authority and reinforce trust with the public. Biden’s modality constructs a balance between shared obligation and strong belief, aligning his leadership with the collective agency and potential of the American people.

2.4.4 Pronouns and Sentence Structure

Pronoun use is central to Joe Biden’s speeches, though it reflects a more consistently inclusive, people-focused narrative rather than a strong “us versus them” contrast. Across all four speeches, the pronoun “we” dominates, reinforcing collective identity and shared responsibility. However, “I” is also fairly frequent to show his own beliefs and desire to fight for the people. In the Inaugural Address, “we” appears approximately 100-110 times, already significantly higher than in Trump’s Inaugural due to both length and Biden’s strong emphasis on unity. This pattern continues in the State of the Union addresses, with “we” occurring roughly 110-120 times in 2022, 140-150 times in 2023, and 115-125 times in 2024, showing a stable reliance on collective framing across contexts. The pronoun “I” is typically used to express personal commitment, make promises, or assume presidential responsibility. It appears around 35-45 times in the Inaugural Address, increasing to approximately 60-70 times in 2022, 100-110 times in 2023, and 110-120 times in 2024, particularly in policy-driven sections. In contrast, “you” remains relatively limited in the Inaugural, used

mainly to address the people, with approximately 10-15 occurrences. In the State of the Union addresses, the pronoun appears more often to address citizens directly, with 40-50 instances in 2022, 70-80 in 2023, and 50-60 in 2024.

In terms of sentence structure, Biden shows a more balanced use of simple, compound, and complex sentences than Trump, reflecting a slightly more formal and explanatory style. His speeches combine clarity with elaboration, often using structure to reinforce unity and shared responsibility. In the Inaugural Address, approximately 70-80 sentences are simple, often used for emphasis and emotional impact, such as “Democracy has prevailed” (Biden 2021: para 2). In the 2022-2024 State of the Union Addresses, simple sentences remain frequent, around 100-110 in 2022 and 2023 and approximately 160-170 in 2024. For example, “We are stronger today” (Biden 2022: para 116), “We're just getting started” (Biden 2023: para 42) or “I will not bow down” (Biden 2024: para 12), maintaining clarity and direct connection with the public.

Compound sentences are also widely used, particularly to build momentum and link ideas about people and shared action. In the Inaugural Address, there are approximately 60-70 compound sentences, while in the State of the Union speeches, this rises to around 100-120 per speech. These are typically connected by coordinating conjunctions such as “and” and “but”, for example: “We have to see each other not as enemies, but as fellow Americans” (Biden 2023: para 221). This structure allows Biden to accumulate ideas and reinforce unity through repetition and parallelism. He also uses more complex sentences, especially when explaining social issues or policies affecting citizens. In the Inaugural Address, there are around 70-80 complex sentences, while in the State of the Union Addresses this increases to approximately 120-140 per speech. These often involve subordination and conditional clauses, such as “If we do that, I guarantee you, we will not fail” (Biden 2021: para 14) or “If Congress passes a national ban, I will veto it” (Biden 2024:

para 190). Overall, Biden uses different sentence structures to sound informal when addressing the people, but formal and authoritative when explaining actions and policies.

2.4.5 Textual Structures of the Addresses

Joe Biden's speeches remain primarily monologic, but they consistently create a strong sense of inclusivity and shared participation. In the Inaugural Address, interaction is simulated through direct address and collective appeals, such as "I ask every American to join me in this cause" (Biden 2021: para 9), which function as invitations rather than commands. Unlike Trump, Biden rarely singles out individuals in the audience; instead, he focuses on broader groups, such as workers, families, and communities, reinforcing equality among citizens rather than highlighting specific figures. In the State of the Union addresses, however, interaction becomes slightly more dynamic through references to real individuals, such as recognising workers, veterans or ordinary citizens affected by policy, even talking of his own father.

Regarding the larger-scale structure, Biden's speeches follow a clear and consistent progression centred on "the people". However, the State of the Union Addresses are more detailed and policy-driven than the Inaugural Address. The Inaugural begins with themes of democracy and unity, moves into a diagnosis of national challenges affecting citizens (pandemic, inequality, division), and then shifts toward a forward-looking vision focused on collective action and healing. In contrast, the State of the Union speeches adopt a more report-and-proposal structure. They typically begin with a statement of national condition and unity, followed by detailed accounts of achievements that impact people (jobs, healthcare, infrastructure), and then transition to future policy proposals. These proposals are often supported by references to ordinary Americans or social groups, grounding policy in lived experience. The speeches conclude with a return to shared values and national identity,

emphasising hope, resilience, and collective progress. In conclusion, Biden’s textual structure consistently reinforces a narrative of challenge, collective effort, and renewal, positioning “the people” as both the subject and the driving force of national development.

CONCLUSION

This thesis examined the rhetoric of Donald Trump and Joe Biden by using the textual level of Norman Fairclough’s three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis model. By analysing vocabulary, grammar, and textual structures, the study demonstrated how both presidents construct relationships with “the people” and use language to represent political reality, authority, and national identity. Although both speakers rely on recurring presidential themes such as unity, democracy, economic prosperity, and patriotism, the analysis revealed significant differences in how these themes are expressed linguistically and ideologically.

According to Nacos et al (2020: 2-3), Trump frequently uses scapegoating and exclusionary language, targeting political opponents and minority groups, to reinforce an “us versus them” narrative. Hull (2020: 12-13) notes that he seeks to create a nostalgic atmosphere through his words and statements. On the other hand, Amaireh (2023: 731) demonstrates that Biden’s rhetoric is more focused on unity and fostering a sense of collective responsibility. He is also said to use a more balanced language, combining emotional appeal with logical argumentation, such as references to statistics, authoritative figures, and shared values.

One of the findings of the present thesis is that Trump’s rhetoric can be characterised by polarisation and populist framing, as shown by Nacos et al (2020: 2-3). Across all four speeches, he repeatedly constructs an “us versus them” narrative in which “the people” are contrasted with elites, immigrants, terrorists, or political opponents. His vocabulary

frequently includes emotionally charged and ideologically contested expressions such as “criminal illegal aliens”, “radical Islamic terrorism”, and “rogue regimes”, which frame outsiders as threats to national security and prosperity. At the same time, Trump presents himself and his administration as protectors of ordinary Americans, using repeated references to “workers”, “families”, and “citizens”. His speeches rely heavily on overwording, repetition, short slogans, and simple sentence structures, resulting in an informal, emotionally direct style. These features support earlier research suggesting that Trump’s rhetoric prioritises emotional resonance and nostalgia over complexity or institutional formality.

In contrast, Biden’s rhetoric is built more consistently around inclusivity, collective responsibility, and democratic unity. Rather than creating strong oppositional categories, Biden tends to frame “the people” as a broad national community connected through shared struggle and shared goals, as also shown by Amaireh (2023: 731). His speeches repeatedly emphasise cooperation, healing, democracy, and equality, using phrases such as “We the People” and “restore the soul of America”. While ideological differences remain, especially in the 2024 State of the Union Address, Biden generally expresses them through policy-oriented and moral language rather than overtly emotional or confrontational phrasing. Compared to Trump, his speeches contain more complex sentences, greater use of nominalisation, and more explanatory structures, creating a more traditional and institutional presidential style.

The comparison between the two presidents also highlights important grammatical differences. Both Trump and Biden predominantly use active voice and material processes, presenting America and its people as active agents capable of action and change. However, Trump’s grammar often reinforces certainty, urgency, and authority through emphatic repetition and strong modality, especially with the modal verbs “will” and “must”. Biden similarly uses modality to express determination, yet his language more frequently distributes

responsibility collectively through inclusive constructions such as “we must” or “we can”. Pronoun use further demonstrates this contrast. Although both presidents rely heavily on the pronoun “we”, Trump often uses it to strengthen nationalistic unity against external or internal enemies. Biden, however, uses it to promote reconciliation and shared responsibility. Biden’s speeches also contain more balanced sentence structures, combining simple, compound, and complex sentences to maintain both accessibility and explanatory depth.

Another significant finding concerns the role of religion and moral language. Both presidents refer to God and religion, reflecting the long-standing importance of religious rhetoric in American political discourse. However, the function of these references differs considerably. Trump’s religious language often appears strategically connected to conservative and Evangelical values, particularly in discussions of abortion, prayer, or national identity. Biden, by contrast, uses religion more consistently as a unifying moral framework centred on compassion, dignity, and hope. His religious references are usually less politically divisive and more integrated into broader themes of collective healing and democratic renewal. That is, they rely on civil religion rather than a specific Christian denomination.

Overall, this thesis demonstrates that presidential rhetoric reflects not only political priorities but also broader ideological approaches to leadership, national identity, and the role of “the people” in American society. Although both presidents employ recurring rhetorical strategies associated with American presidential discourse, their linguistic choices reveal fundamentally different representations of the nation and its citizens. Through Fairclough’s CDA model, it becomes clear that language in presidential speeches is not merely descriptive but actively shapes political meaning, social relationships, and ideological perspectives.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Katarina Zernask

Critical Discourse Analysis of Donald Trump's and Joe Biden's Speeches **Donald Trumpi ja Joe Bideni kõnede kriitiline diskursuse analüüs**

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Annotatsioon:

Bakalaureusetöö eesmärk on uurida Donald Trumpi ja Joe Bideni retoorikat nende ametisse astumise ja iga-aastastes kõnedes. Analüüsiks kasutatakse Norman Fairclough kolmedimensioonilise kriitilise diskursuse analüüsi (*Critical Discourse Analysis*) mudeli tekstilist dimensiooni. Töö keskendub kokku kaheksale kõnele, neli teksti mõlema presidendi esimesest valitsusajast. Töös analüüsitakse, kuidas mõlemad presidendid konstrueerivad “inimeste” mõistet ja kuidas nende retoorikad erinevad sõnavara, grammatika ja teksti struktuuri poolest.

Töö esimeses osas antakse ülevaade varasematest uuringutest Ameerika Ühendriikide presidentide retoorika kohta. Lisaks keskendutakse eraldi religiooni temale, kuna see on muutunud üheks keskseks riigi poliitikat mõjutavaks teguriks. Kirjanduse ülevaates on ka põhjalikum ajalooline ülevaade ja struktuuriline selgitus uuritavate kõnetüüpide kohta. Viimasena tehakse väike kokkuvõtte varasematest akadeemilistest uuringutest Donald Trumpi ja Joe Bideni kohta.

Töö teises osas on lühike ülevaade kasutatud kõnedest ja metoodika kirjeldus. Lahti seletatakse Norman Fairclough kolme-dimensioonilise kriitilise diskursuse analüüsi mudeli tekstiline dimensioon. Kõik kaheksa teksti analüüsitakse eraldi, et leida näiteid sõnavara, grammatika ja tekstilise struktuuri kohta. Töös esitatakse tulemused kahes alapeatükis: Donald Trumpi retoorika ja Joe Bideni retoorika. Mõlemad presidendid kasutavad kõnedes sarnaseid teemasid (ühesus, demokraatia, riigi majandus, patriootlikkus), aga lingvistiliselt ja ideoloogiliselt väljendavad nad end erinevalt. Trumpi retoorika on polariseeriv ja populistlik, kasutades emotsionaalset kõnepruuki ning ideoloogilisi väljendeid. Trump presenteerib ennast ja oma administratsiooni kui kaitsjaid ja kasutab selle kinnistamiseks kõnekeelt, kordusi ja lühilauseid. Teisalt Biden ei vastanda erinevaid pooli ja rõhutab koostööd, tervenemist, demokraatiat ning võrdsust. Kõnedes kasutab ta võrdsel määral ametlikku ja kõnekeelt, keerulisemaid lausestruktuure ja institutsionaalset formaalsust. Kokkuvõttes ei peegelda presidentide retoorika mitte ainult poliitilisi prioriteete, vaid ka ideoloogiaid, rahvuslikku identiteeti ja “inimeste” rolli mõtestamist ühiskonnas.

Märksõnad: Donald Trump, Joe Biden, *Inaugural Address*, *State of the Union Address*, kriitilise diskursuse analüüs, Norman Fairclough

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