

FaR 2021**International Forum “Freedom and responsibility in pivotal times”****JUSTIFICATION AND EXCUSES TACTICS IN PRESIDENTIAL
DEBATES**

Daria S. Grigorazh (a), Marina I. Dmitrieva (b), Tatiana Yu. Kolosova (c)*,
Natalia V. Korobova (d), Olga A. Ukhanova (e)

*Corresponding author

- (a) Linguistics University of Nizhny Novgorod, 28a, Kovalikhinskaya str., Nizhny Novgorod, 603006, Russia,
dariagrigorazh@gmail.com
- (b) Linguistics University of Nizhny Novgorod, 23-53, Nevzorovyh str., Nizhny Novgorod, 603024, Russia,
super.marinad8@yandex.ru
- (c) Linguistics University of Nizhny Novgorod, 25-270, Vedenyapina str., Nizhny Novgorod, 603147, Russia,
anital15@mail.ru
- (d) Linguistics University of Nizhny Novgorod, 2-72, Lubyanskaya str., Nizhny Novgorod, 603047, Russia,
nataliekorobova2017@inbox.ru
- (e) Linguistics University of Nizhny Novgorod, 11-75, Yaroshenko str., Nizhny Novgorod, 603035, Russia,
raspisanieFAYa@yandex.ru

Abstract

The article is devoted to the study of such self-presentation tactics as excuses and justification in the framework of political discourse. Dealing with the concepts of ‘communicative image’, ‘communicative strategies and tactics’ as well as ‘self-presentation’, it makes use of a two-component model of self-presentation considering the employment of tactics of a defensive type in the most recent US presidential election final debates between D. Trump and J. Biden, where current issues of national importance such as problems of cultural identity and the immigration crisis were raised making the two political opponents comment on them, admitting or rejecting their responsibility. Research material is represented by the transcript of the presidential candidates’ speeches. The study provides a detailed linguistic analysis, evaluates the defensive tactics the politicians have to resort to and come to the conclusion that the communicative tactics of excuse are characteristic of today's political debates and largely prevail over justification due to the fact that the latter involves giving reasons and accepting responsibility while the tactics of excuses enable the speaker to deny it. The authors make inference that as a result, less harm is done to the political reputation but quite an ambiguous image may be nevertheless created.

2357-1330 © 2022 Published by European Publisher.

Keywords: Political image, self-presentation tactics, excuse, justification



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 Unported License, permitting all non-commercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

1. Introduction

Mechanisms of speech influence in a political discourse have been actively studied within the framework of pragmatic linguistics. Of great interest are communicative strategies implemented by politicians during public speeches. They are a set of pre-planned speech actions, including certain tactics aimed at achieving a communicative goal in the process of communication. The strategy of self-presentation turns out to be the most frequent speech strategy employed in a political discourse.

Self-presentation is synonymous with such a concept as impression management. The terms could be used interchangeably due to the fact that the same tactics are involved in forming both impression management and self-presentation (Leary & Kowalski, 1990).

Self-presentation is undoubtedly crucial. When sensitive social issues are inevitably raised, politicians have to deal with them masterfully employing tactics that allow one to form the right political image, save face, sustain self-esteem (Schlenker & Weigold, 1992) as well as gain an advantage over their political rivals.

2. Problem Statement

It is worth noting that there is no unambiguous interpretation of the concept of self-presentation in the political discourse. However, we can cite the definition of the so-called political presentation, formulated by Mishchuk et al. (2020), where self-presentation is understood as “the process of performing a social role, about which the subject has certain ideas. The politician (with the help of consultants) chooses images for his self-presentation based on the existing ideas about them and with a mandatory orientation to the parameters of the rhetorical situation, including the specifics of the audience. The goal of political self-presentation is to create a positive image of your country (and yourself as its representative) for the audience to get a concrete result” (p. 454). The idea of self-presentation as not creating but choosing a certain image is also shared by Mikhailova (2005).

According to Goffman (1984), when appearing in front of other people who he is interested in (the target audience, viewers), a person must mobilize his activity in order to make the right, or favourable, impression. The following goals are pursued:

- to cause the desired reaction;
- to appear “the same person”;
- to meet the expectations of the audience from a representative of this group;
- to perform the social role;
- because otherwise he risks being misunderstood, which will change the situation as a whole;
- to come to “understanding” and thus achieve his goals.

Speech strategies are characterized by a certain set of speech tactics. Klyuev (2002) defines communicative tactics as “a set of practical moves in the real process of speech interaction” (p. 19). Speech strategies and tactics are related as a genus and a species, since the above-mentioned strategy involves the use of appropriate means for its implementation. A communicative strategy determines the general direction of the dialogue, while a communicative tactics is a means of implementing a particular strategy at a certain stage of the development of a speech situation.

Language in a political discourse is considered as an instrument of influence and manipulation and political figures, therefore, should use its impressive power for image building. In this regard, several communicative functions of the image could be distinguished.

First, the image brings the most preferred qualities in such an environment and characteristics to the forefront, which makes a favourable impression on the audience. Furthermore, the audience perceives key information which creates a figure of a responsible, reliable and competent leader. Thus, the image serves a tool to simplify the perception of the message about politicians. The third function is to create a unique image of a politician, which requires taking into account many factors, such as social demand and audience expectations. "Filling" the image with the characteristics of a political leader convinces the audience to choose this particular candidate (Romanova, 2009). Thus, self-presentation strategies can serve as a tool for building the desired communicative image.

The works conducted by many researchers (Baumeister & Steinhilber, 1984; Festinger, 1999; Jones & Pittman, 1982) were devoted to the creation of theoretical approaches to the study of self-presentation. One of the most voluminous and logical concepts was a two-component model of self-presentation (Lee et al., 1999) based on the division of the given strategy into 12 assertive and defensive tactics.

Assertive self-presentation includes seven tactics, such as ingratiation, intimidation, supplication, entitlement, enhancement, blasting, exemplification. Correspondingly, the defensive type of self-presentation implements five: disclaimer, self-handicapping, apology, excuse and justification.

3. Research Questions

When planning a speech, the choice of communicative tactics depends on several criteria, to be more specific, general knowledge about the communicative situation (whether a particular speech act is appropriate), knowledge about the corresponding speech act (whether the act is stereotypical, whether it has a precedent), information about the interlocutor (as a person, as a partner, etc.).

Considering the strategies of self-presentation on the material of political rhetoric, it is clear that the competent construction of the image of a politician as one of the decisive factors of their stay in power largely depends on the communicative image since it is a long-term communicative role of a person (Sternin, 2001).

Regardless of the fact that the topic of self-presentation is actively explored in the political discourse, some tactics are used more often than others and it seems fair to identify them. It is regular practice for politicians to resort to defensive tactics when trying to disown negative actions related to the nation, identity and other problems that people experience. It is obvious that a clear communication of information on these issues can be achieved through the use of tactics of justification and excuse. In this connection a few questions may arise. How common are defensive types of self-presentation in political rhetoric? What purposes does the choice of justification and excuse tactics as a part of image building processes during election campaigns pursue? Through what linguistic means do they realise themselves?

4. Purpose of the Study

The study focuses on the 2020 United States presidential debates between Joe Biden and Donald Trump which were conducted in six directions that are a priority for the country's future. It is obvious that the politicians should have taken into account the expectations of potential voters when forming and presenting their position on the most discussed and controversial topics. It is believed that the ability of politicians to convince the audience of their non-involvement and express solidarity with voters in the sore subjects can serve as a means both to create a desired speech image and have an emotional influence on viewers.

In this regard, not only does it seem logical to analyse the usage of self-presentation speech tactics on the material of the section 'On immigration' as one of the most burning issues for American public crucial for the success or failure of presidential nominees, but also to identify such defensive self-presentation tactics as excuses regarded as verbal statements denying responsibility for negative events (Tedeschi & Lindskold, 1976) and justifications providing overriding reasons for negative behavior as justified but accepting responsibility for it (Scott & Lyman, 1968), consider how they work and what effect are likely to produce on the audience.

5. Research Methods

To achieve the goal mentioned above the methods of continuous sampling, quantitative, stylistic analysis and the descriptive method are implemented that allow analyzing the context in which the given tactics are used, the linguistic means they employ and the communicative effect the speakers strive for.

6. Findings

Defensive self-presentation tactics involve the speaker's desire to avoid producing a negative impression, improve an unfavourable situation and allow one to exercise caution when giving opinion on difficult issues. It is obvious that excuse and justification cannot be used too often in presidential debates. Even providing a convincing explanation, a communicant admits their fault to some extent, thus the speaker is portrayed having been involved in a negative act. On the other hand, taking responsibility may create an image of a conscientious and honest politician able to admit his guilt. Thus, it becomes a matter of admitting or rejecting responsibility. The urgent issue of the immigration crisis clearly demands answers and the way the candidates deal with it is regarded as a litmus test.

The study of the final presidential election debates 2020 between the two main candidates J. Biden and D Trump demonstrates their ample use of the tactics under consideration. One may observe the tactics of justification in the following example:

“Because we made a mistake. It took too long to get it right. Too long to get it right. I'll be President of the United States, not Vice President of the United States. And the fact is, and I've made it very clear, within 100 days, I'm going to send to the United States Congress a pathway to citizenship for over 11 million undocumented people. And all those so-called Dreamers, those DACA kids, they're going to be legally certified again, to be able to stay in this country, and put on a path to citizenship. The idea is that

they are being sent home by this guy, and they want to go to a country they've never seen before. I can imagine you're five years old, your parents are taking you across the Rio Grande River and it's and it's illegal. You say 'Oh, no, Mom, leave me here. I'm not gonna go with you.' They've been here. Many of them are model citizens. 20,000 are first responders out there taking care of people during this crisis. We owe them. We owe them" (Joe Biden) (Debate transcript: Trump, Biden final presidential debate moderated by Kristen Welker, 2020).

Thereby, the politician does not aim at trying to convince the audience of his innocence, nor does he take full responsibility for the deed as he was not the President at that moment ("I'll be President of the United States, not Vice President of the United States"). From the stylistic point of view, it is of almost equal importance to note that the speaker uses a repetition ("too long to get it right", "we owe them") to add an emphatic overtone to the text. He also promises improvements and describes the situation that immigrants often face in order to demonstrate awareness of the problem.

The sequence of tactics used in the utterance could strengthen the perception of the message as well. In the example above justification is followed by blasting ("The idea that they are being sent home by this guy, and they want to do, that is they go to a country they've never seen before"), a behaviour intended to produce or communicate negative evaluations of another person or groups with which the actor is merely associated (Cialdini & Richardson, 1980). In this statement the communicant attempts to shift the voters' attention from the situation which could possibly affect his reputation to the figure of his political opponent. Thus, the opponent is marked for having been involved in the action which has a much worse impact on the country than the speaker himself has ever had.

On the contrary, excuses are intended to clear one's reputation and provide a proper explanation of a negative situation:

"Children are brought here by coyotes and lots of bad people, cartels, and they're brought here and it's easy to use them to get into our country. We now have a stronger border than we've ever had. We're over 400 miles of brand new wall, you see the numbers, and we let people in, but they have to come in legally" (Debate transcript: Trump, Biden final presidential debate moderated by Kristen Welker, 2020)

In this example the communicant considers an outer danger as a deterrent which prevents the politician from doing a socially acceptable action. Consequently, he implies that the questionable deed turns out to have reasonable grounds that cannot go to waste regarding the perception of a politician by voters.

Besides, the tactics is preceded by the tactics of entitlement ("We now have a stronger border than we've ever had"). It is evident that the usage of ingratiation in this case should strengthen the intended impression.

Sometimes the audience may face a dry short explanation. It is evident that such a response should be given in addition only when politicians have already proved their right. Despite the fact that the message hardly contains any information that could serve to protect the politician's reputation, it could be used to make a point and sum up what has been said before.

"I know the law. What he's telling you is simply not true" (Joe Biden) (Debate transcript: Trump, Biden final presidential debate moderated by Kristen Welker, 2020).

“Let me say this. They worked it out, we brought reporters and everything. They are so well taken care of. They're in facilities that were so clean” (Donald Trump) (Debate transcript: Trump, Biden final presidential debate moderated by Kristen Welker, 2020).

Not only do politicians tend to engage in self-presentation, but also to expose the audience to the comparison dealing with the image of the opponents. Thus, of great importance is the need to provide an example on how both politicians approach the same state of affairs. Consequently, it seems logical that short, succinct (“They did it”, “We changed it”) statements, including an immediate comparison, are sure to convey the message most effectively, since the viewer will be presented with key information about a “good” self-representative and a “bad” political opponent.

Apart from this, the idea to address the moderator of the debate personally leads to conducting a discussion in a less tense manner and taking the edge off:

“Kristen, they did it, we changed the policy. They did it. We changed it. They set up the cages. They -- who built the cages?” (Donald Trump). (Debate transcript: Trump, Biden final presidential debate moderated by Kristen Welker, 2020)

It becomes clear from the example cited below that a reference to the well-being of the country when trying to justify one’s deeds might prove beneficial. The communicant implies that during his time in power as a vice-president the audience could hardly imagine undergoing such a problem concerning immigration. Thus, the country’s future is now associated with the politician’s personality and skills:

“The catch and release, you know what he's talking about there? If in fact, you had a family, came across, they're arrested. They, in fact, were given a date to show up for their hearing. They were released. And guess what, they showed up for the hearing. This is the first President in the history of the United States of America that anybody seeking asylum has to do it in another country. That's never happened before. That's never happened before in our country. You come to the United States and you make your case. That's how you seek asylum, based on the following premise, why I deserve it under American law. They're sitting in squalor on the other side of the river” (Joe Biden) (Debate transcript: Trump, Biden final presidential debate moderated by Kristen Welker, 2020).

Alternatively, using a third-party threat within the tactics contributes to getting rid of liability since the driving force is viewed as an obstacle from the outside and the politician is only trying to adapt the law to the situation. Thus, the politician portrays cartels, coyotes and murderers as something that made him do this:

“Yes, we're working on a very -- we're trying very hard. But a lot of these kids come up without the parents, they come over through cartels and the coyotes and through gangs” (Donald Trump) (Debate transcript: Trump, Biden final presidential debate moderated by Kristen Welker, 2020).

Additionally, stylistic devices are used to convey the author’s attitude and strengthen an emotional impact, which, however, could make the statement humorous. For instance, back-gradation is observed in the statement:

*“A **murderer** would come in, a **rapist** would come in, a **very bad person** would come in – we would take their name, we have to release them into our country. And then you say they come back. Less than 1% of the people come back”.*

Expressive means and stylistic devices are used to intensify the emotional influence on the audience and make a politician’s speech more vivid or colloquial. They can emphasize the speaker's attitude to the

problem and more significantly express excuse and justification alongside their emotional involvement, transferring sympathy, disagreement, gratitude, amazement, etc. over to the listeners.

Considering the images of politicians through the concept of communication strategies and tactics, we can say that the speech images of Donald Trump and Joe Biden may seem similar, given the quantitative display of the tactics used by them. However, justification and excuse were both used by Joe Biden, which represents him as a politician able to analyse and admit mistakes, as well as work to correct these mistakes. It is worth noting that the tactic was executed correctly, since the politician not only did not plead guilty to failure, but was also able to contribute to his own self-presentation. As for Donald Trump, the politician tended to use only excuses, which makes his communicative image less diverse in terms of speech strategies. On the contrary, excessive resort to excuses is likely to cause a negative perception, since it is impossible to deny involvement in absolutely every case in which a politician was noticed. It can lead to the fact that the communicant will be perceived as lying, hypocritical and not trustworthy.

7. Conclusion

The study of the 2020 presidential debates speeches allows one to claim that excuses are actively employed in political discourse for self-presentation purposes. As for justification, this tactic is quite rarely used which can be attributed to the risk of being associated with taking responsibility for a mistake and creating the unfavourable situation. The quantitative ratio of the compared tactics is shown in Figure 01:

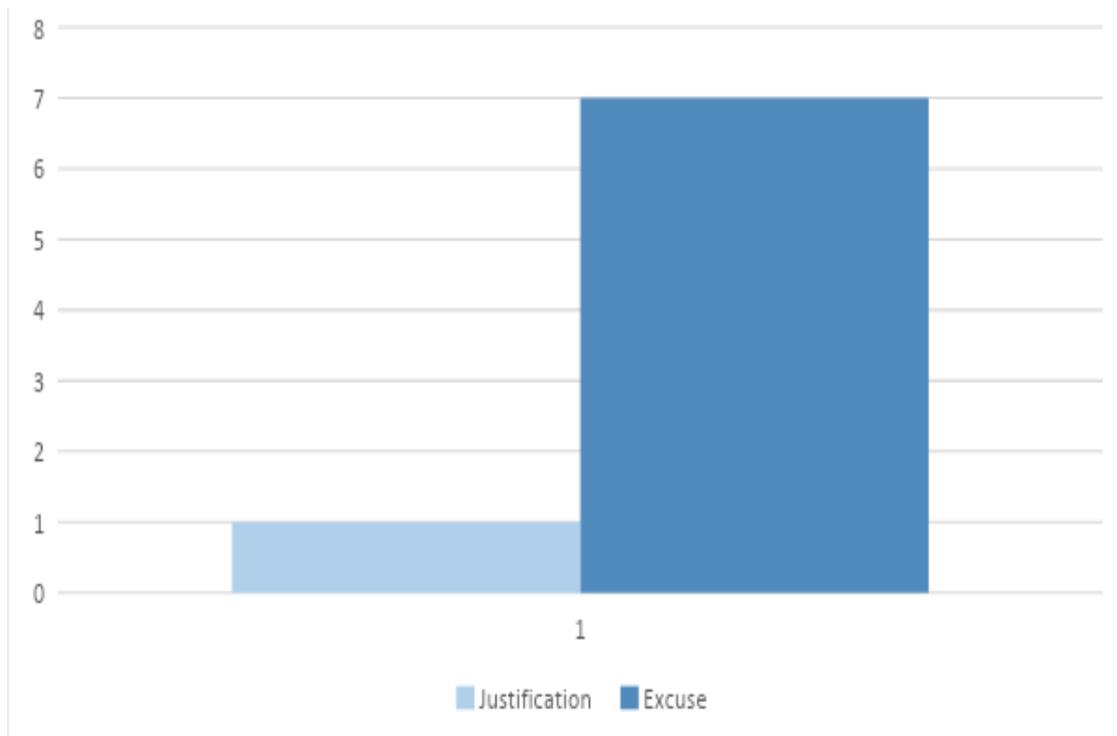


Figure 1. The quantitative ratio of the compared tactics used in the section “On Immigration”

It follows that the tactics of excuse prevails over that of justification and is used 7 times more often. Therefore, it can be concluded that justification may not be characteristic of the genre of political debate, since it may directly contradict the very essence of self-presentation in the framework of a discussion, where it is unacceptable to present oneself as involved in a negative act.

The analysis of the selected tactics reflects the idea that they are often used by politicians whenever they have to clarify controversial points that can potentially harm their reputation. As a result, it allows one to create the image of a statesman who does not hide questionable actions, as well as a political figure who is deeply concerned with the problems of the nation through emotional colouring of their speech.

The use of the above-mentioned tactics in matters concerning the current problems of the nation is especially relevant. Nowadays an unquenchable attention is paid to the problems of national identity, self-determination, and, accordingly, the problems of immigration come to the fore and consequently need to be discussed on the highest political levels. In this regard, politicians should express their position on these issues more clearly, which can be achieved through the use of these tactics.

In conclusion, it seems necessary to say that the tactics of self-presentation in political discourse including the defensive ones work effectively enough to present the speaker in the intended communicative image to pursue the desired political goals and deserve further consideration at all levels of linguistic analysis.

References

- Baumeister, R. F., & Steinhilber, A. (1984). Paradoxical effects of supportive audiences on performance under pressure: The home field disadvantage in sport championships. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 47, 85–93.
- Debate transcript: Trump, Biden final presidential debate moderated by Kristen Welker. (2020, October 23). *USA Today*. <https://www.usatoday.com/>
- Festinger, L. (1999). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Uventa.
- Goffman, E. (1984). The Presentation of Self to Others. *Modern Foreign Social Psychology*, 188–197.
- Jones, E. E., & Pittman, T. S. (1982). Toward a general theory of strategic self-presentation. In: J. Suls (Ed.). *Psychological perspectives on the self*, 1 (pp. 231–262). Erlbaum.
- Klyuev, E. V. (2002). *Speech Communication*. Ripol Classic.
- Leary, M. R., & Kowalski, R. M. (1990). Impression management: A literature review and two-component model. *Psychological Bulletin*, 107, 34–47.
- Lee, S. -J., Quigley, B. M., Nesler, M. S., Corbett, A. B., & Tedeschi, J. T. (1999). Development of a self-presentation tactics scale. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 26, 701–722.
- Mikhailova, E. V. (2005). *Techniques of self-presentation in public speech*. [Doct. Dissertation] LUNN.
- Mishchuk, O. N., Vasiliev, L. G., & Belova, E. V. (2020). On Treating Self-Presentation in Political Discourse. *Bulletin UdSU*, 454, 454–460. <https://doi.org/10.35634/2412-9534-2020-30-3-454-460>
- Romanova, T. V. (2009). Communicative image and speech portrait of a modern politician. *Politicheskaya lingvistika*, 1(27), 109–117.
- Schlenker, B. R., & Weigold, M. F. (1992). Interpersonal processes involving impression regulation and management. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 43, 133–168.
- Scott, M. R., & Lyman, S. M. (1968). *Accounts American Sociological Review*, 33, 46–62.
- Sternin, I. A. (2001). *Introduction to Speech Effect*. Poligraf.
- Tedeschi, J. T., & Lindskold, S. (1976). *Social psychology: Interdependence, interaction, and influence*. Wiley.