

THE EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL LANGUAGE IN THE DIGITAL AGE. LINGUISTIC TENDENCIES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LEGITIMACY OF POWER

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Abstract. *This study examines the evolution of political discourse in digital environments, focusing on the strategies through which political actors articulate power relations and legitimacy. Guided by theoretical and qualitative approaches, including critical discourse analysis and cognitive linguistics, the research investigates four interrelated dimensions of digital political communication: lexical networks and semantic polarization, pronominal usage and the formation of in-group versus out-group identities, metaphorical strategies and the amplification of emotional appeal, and moral binaries and the simplification of political discourse. Findings indicate that digital platforms facilitate rapid dissemination of messages and also amplify ideological polarization and emotional engagement, creating iterative cycles that support group cohesion and marginalize dissenting voices. Metaphors, pronouns, moral framing and selective lexical choices function as powerful tools for persuasion, structuring both cognition and affect, and influencing public perception in ways that sustain political authority and social hierarchies. By integrating classical and contemporary scholarship, this study highlights the complex interplay between language, technology and political power in the digital age, demonstrating that online discourse is highly dynamic and, at the same time, deeply influential in presenting public opinion and political identities.*

Keywords: *digital political discourse, critical discourse analysis, lexical polarization, pronominal strategies, metaphor and emotion, moral binaries*

INTRODUCTION

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has profoundly altered the landscape of political discourse in the digital age when political language is no longer confined to institutional settings or mediated exclusively through traditional channels such as television and print media. In this context, it flows across decentralized, interactive platforms that enable immediate dissemination and reinterpretation, and these transformations have altered both the form and style of political communication and its audiences and effects.

Within this evolving communicative environment, political actors increasingly adapt their linguistic strategies to the affordances of digital media, emotional resonance and rhetorical polarization having become notable features of contemporary political language, privileging immediacy over deliberation. At the same time, the rise of algorithmically curated content and participatory communication has contributed to the proliferation of competing discourses, challenging the stability of meaning and the

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authority of traditional political discourse. These developments call for a renewed analytical focus on the linguistic mechanisms through which political realities are constructed and contested.

From the perspective of political science, such linguistic transformations are closely linked to broader questions of power and legitimacy and political language plays here a central role in legitimizing authority and creating public perceptions of governance. In digital contexts the processes through which legitimacy is established and maintained become increasingly complex, as political messages are subject to rapid flow, reinterpretation, but also contestation by diverse audiences. Consequently, the relationship between discourse and legitimacy requires careful re-examination in light of these structural changes.

This article aims to explore the evolution of political language in the digital age by examining the key linguistic transformations that characterize contemporary political discourse and their implications for the legitimacy of power. Drawing on insights from discourse analysis and political communication studies, the paper investigates the way in which digital environments influence rhetorical strategies and discursive practices, influencing the construction of authority. It also seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how language functions as both an instrument of political influence and a site of ongoing negotiation over legitimacy in modern democratic societies.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a theoretical and qualitative approach to examine the evolution of political language in the digital age, but the research also relies on an extensive review of scholarly literature from political science, discourse analysis and communication studies, including both classical theorists and contemporary analyses of digital media. Foundational works on political rhetoric and discourse construction have been consulted to establish the conceptual framework for the analysis. Building on this theoretical foundation, the study conducts a critical analysis of political discourse in digital contexts, focusing on the ways in which language constructs and negotiates power and legitimacy. The analysis is structured around four interrelated dimensions: lexical networks and semantic polarization, pronominal usage and the formation of in-group versus out-group identities, metaphorical strategies and the amplification of emotional appeal and moral binaries and the simplification of political discourse. By combining theoretical consultation with targeted discourse analysis, this methodology facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the linguistic transformations that characterize contemporary political communication. It situates the analysis firmly within the digital age, acknowledging both the structural affordances of online platforms and the evolving strategies of political actors to influence audience perception and maintain legitimacy.

LITERATURE REVIEW OF THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL STUDIES ON POLITICAL DISCOURSE IN DIGITAL ENVIRONMENTS

The study of political discourse in digital environments has attracted increasing scholarly attention, reflecting the transformative impact of online platforms on political communication and public engagement. Foundational research in political science and communication studies has explored the ways in which digital media rethink persuasion and the construction of political authority. The pace of these changes has precipitated much speculation about political change and transformation, from visions of direct democracy and erosion of processes of representation and institutional deliberation

because of new technology to enhancement or degradation of the “public sphere” and the state of citizens’ civic engagement (Bimber, 2003). Another theorist is Benjamin Barber, who in *Strong Democracy* advocates the use of information and communication technologies for enhancing citizen engagement with democratic affairs: “Technology and communications, to which I pointed twenty years ago as crucial conditioners of democratic innovation, have also continued to evolve and now present not just striking opportunities for but troublesome challenges to participatory democracy” (Barber, 1984). The phrase used by R.K. Nielsen “slaves to the algorithm” is used broadly in discussions about digital media to transmit a critical concern that content creators and even institutions become subordinated to the automated decision-making processes of digital platforms, in ways that build what information is seen and engaged with, without transparency or user control. While this exact phrase isn’t a formal technical concept in Nielsen’s work, the idea resonates with themes in his research on digital platforms and political communication (Nielsen, 2022). Papacharissi argues that digital platforms allowed locally organized groups to coordinate actions, share information and connect with a global network, creating a transnational culture of activism, protest and creative expression: “Importantly, however, locally organized assemblies used online means to organize, mobilize, and connect nationally and globally; Internet Relay Chat (IRC) Facebook, Twitter, blogs, websites and Meetup were among the technologies and platforms used prominently to coordinate events and disseminate information. Communities and organizations expressing support plugged into these channels, contributing diverse multimedia content that further enabled a global culture of protest, art and expression” (Papacharissi, 2015).

We cannot fail to notice the change in the perspective in which things are presented: each state can decide its level of European integration, respectively the areas of cooperation or the objectives it aspires to in its relationship with the EU (Brie, 2025). In the digital age, this dynamic is further intensified by the evolving landscape of political communication, where messages about integration, cooperation, national interest or participation to electoral campaigns are disseminated instantly across platforms.

Some research highlights the constructive role that social media can play in political communication. For example, Carvalho (2007) examines how ideological influences create media portrayals of social and political issues, revealing the plurality of perspectives and discourses that coexist within public communication. In addition, Pennycook et al. (2019) demonstrate that encouraging users to focus on accuracy can help curb the dissemination of false information online, suggesting that targeted interventions may reduce the spread of misinformation in digital environments.

Complementing these perspectives, critical discourse analysis provides tools to examine how language constructs power, ideology and identity, offering insights into the mechanisms behind polarization and legitimacy: “Discourse is not only a reflection of social reality, but also a means by which social reality is constructed and contested, making it a key site for the exercise of power and the negotiation of identities” (Fairclough, 2010). Ruth Wodak is concerned with the micro-politics of right-wing populist parties how they actually produce and reproduce their ideologies and exclusionary agenda in every day politics, in the all types of media, in campaigning, in posters, slogans and speeches. He is concerned with how they succeed or fail in sustaining their electoral success (Wodak, 2015). In the same context, in 2005, Ernesto Laclau published his work titled *On Populist Reason*, which is central to understanding his contributions to political theory, particularly in relation to discourse theory and

populism. Laclau emphasizes that discourse is fundamental in the construction of political identities. He argues that political identities are not pre-existing but are formed through discursive practices that represent and articulate demand and discontent. For Laclau, the role of language and symbols in constructing political legitimacy is central (Laclau, 2005).

Empirical studies focusing on digital platforms have highlighted specific strategies used by political leaders, including lexical choices, pronoun use, metaphorical framing and moral dichotomies or binaries, which collectively influence audience way of thinking and emotional engagement: "Persuasion exists at the heart of political rhetoric, which appeals to political authority and context to influence listeners by addressing their assumptions and beliefs" (Khashan, 2025). Puri (2023) demonstrates that social media platforms both democratize political communication and amplify polarization and emotional engagement, thereby significantly influencing how political messages are constructed and received. Nandini Puri demonstrates that social media platforms both democratize political communication and amplify polarization and emotional engagement, thereby significantly influencing how political messages are constructed and received: "A more complex forms of decentralized activism, movements that function without centralized leadership, is made possible by such emerging technologies. Traditional activism involved a leader, and a hierarchical setup with different level of organizers and decision makers" (Puri, 2023). The content creators can promote absolutely anything online, and no one can hold them accountable for what they say or verify what they do. Influencers have been accused by authorities of participating in social media electoral campaigns that artificially inflated candidates online visibility (Ungur-Brehoi, 2025). Sven Engesser et.al. examine in their research the role of social media within the hybrid media system, analyzing how political actors across multiple national contexts (Austria, Switzerland, Italy and the United Kingdom) utilize platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, renamed X to transmit populist messages.

Drawing on existing literature, five main dimensions of populism are identified: the emphasis on popular sovereignty, the advocacy for "the people," the critique of political elites, the exclusion of perceived out-groups and the invocation of a shared "heartland." Through authors' qualitative textual analysis, the findings indicate that political discourse on social media is expressed in a fragmented manner, with its elements appearing across different countries, political parties, and levels of political authority (Engesser et al., 2017).

Finally, context-specific research illustrates how these theoretical and methodological insights apply across different national and cultural settings, revealing the nuanced ways in which digital discourse constructs political discourses and social identities. Building on the theoretical and empirical perspectives outlined above, the findings of Cotoc and Radu (2022) provide a context-specific illustration of the way in which these discursive mechanisms operate in practice within digital environments. While scholars such as Fairclough, Wodak and Laclau emphasize the role of discourse in constructing power and collective identities, and more recent studies (Puri, 2023; Engesser et al., 2017; Khashan, 2022) that highlight the impact of digital platforms on polarization and fragmented political communication, Cotoc and Radu demonstrate how these dynamics materialize during crisis situations, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Their analysis of pandemic-related digital discourse reveals the coexistence of competing speeches ranging from fear-driven and emotionally charged messages to rational, science-oriented perspectives, which reflect the complexity of the socio-political context.

The COVID-19 pandemic took many governments by surprise and forced them to make decisions that have been neglected during the time regarding the communication in urgent situations (Buda, 2023). Moreover, the rapid, “snowball-like” expansion and subsequent dissipation of these discourses illustrate the volatile and ephemeral nature of communication in digital spaces, reinforcing the idea that online discourse is both highly dynamic and deeply influential in shaping public perception and collective responses (Cotoc & Radu, 2021).

Together, these studies provide a rich foundation for analyzing the evolution of political language in digital contexts, bridging theory and practice to illuminate the dynamics of power and legitimacy in contemporary political communication.

DISCURSIVE STRATEGIES IN DIGITAL POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

The analysis of political discourse in the digital age reveals a complex interplay of linguistic strategies that influence public perception, reinforce ideological positions, influence political identities and contribute to the construction of political legitimacy. Media literacy and safety refer to the ability of users to critically and safely engage with new media, recognize manipulation, misinformation and harmful content, and understand the psychological and social impact of digital media (Ungur-Brehoi, 2025). In the context of the theoretical framework outlined above, this case study examines contemporary digital political communication through four interrelated dimensions: lexical networks and semantic polarization, pronominal usage and the formation of in-group versus out-group identities, metaphorical strategies and the amplification of emotional appeal and moral binaries and the simplification of political discourse. These dimensions provide a comprehensive lens through which to understand the manner in which politicians adapt their language to the affordances of digital platforms.

Lexical networks and semantic polarization

One of the most visible features of digital political discourse is the strategic use of lexical networks that reinforce semantic polarization. Political leaders select and repeat specific keywords and expressions that gather around ideologically charged meanings, such as “democracy”, “freedom”, “security”, “stability” or “reform”. These terms are paired with contrasting lexical items such as: “threat”, “corruption”, “crisis”, “chaos”, “failure”, “elite” or “propaganda”, in order to construct opposing semantic fields that frame political reality in binary terms. For instance, expressions like “defending freedom” or “protecting national security” are frequently juxtaposed with phrases such as “corrupt elites,” “dangerous outsiders” or “systemic failure,” thereby reinforcing a polarized interpretation of politicians and events.

These lexical choices are rarely neutral and contribute to the construction of polarized semantic fields that divide political reality into opposing camps. In digital environments, the rapid circulation and repetition of such terms, amplified by hashtags (e.g., #freedom, #crisis, #TakeBackControl, #StopCorruption) and algorithm-driven visibility, significantly intensify their impact, creating echo chambers in which particular interpretations become dominant and where these lexical networks are continuously reproduced and rarely challenged.

As users engage with like-minded content, the repeated exposure to the same semantic associations consolidates particular interpretations of reality, while marginalizing alternative perspectives. In this context, language functions not only as a

descriptive tool but also as a powerful mechanism for structuring political perception, guiding interpretation and consolidating ideological boundaries. Consequently, lexical networks play a central role in the construction and maintenance of polarization in contemporary digital political discourse.

Pronominal usage and the identity of in-group versus out-group identities

An early and influential contribution to this field is the study by Brown and Gilman (1960), which examines how pronouns derived from the Latin *tu* and *vos* in different European languages function to express speakers' relative positioning, thereby reflecting and constructing relations of hierarchy and solidarity. Building on this foundation, later research has demonstrated that pronoun use systematically encodes social relationships, capturing distinctions related to formality, status, power, class and gender (Levinson, 1983; Mühlhäusler & Harré, 1990). In this way, such social orientations build and constrain the way in which speakers use pronouns in interaction.

Pronominal strategies are instrumental in defining collective identities, within political discourse. The use of pronouns such as "we", "us" and "our" serves to create an inclusive in-group, associated with legitimacy and shared values. Conversely, pronouns like "they" and "them" are used to designate out-groups, frequently portrayed as threats or sources of instability. In digital political communication, these distinctions are amplified by the interactive nature of platforms, where audiences are invited to identify with particular groups and participate in the reinforcement of these divisions. This discursive construction of "us versus them" aligns with broader processes of identity formation and political mobilization, contributing to heightened polarization and emotional investment among users.

By repeatedly invoking in-group and out-group distinctions, politicians solidify boundaries that may otherwise remain fluid or contested. At the same time, more and more "border" cleavages are emerging within European societies. These boundaries are most often symbolic and ideological. The process of European construction was accompanied by a certain blurring of the national identity, particularly in terms of the expression of nationalist-extremist movements (Brie, 2025). This process is particularly evident in moments of crisis or uncertainty, when appeals to collective identity become more distinctive and persuasive. Moreover, the strategic deployment of pronouns operates alongside other discursive elements, such as metaphors and rhetorical expressions, which further reinforce group differentiation. For instance, positive attributes are frequently attached to the in-group, while negative characteristics are projected onto the out-group, thereby legitimizing certain political positions and delegitimizing others.

And it is obvious that the modern world offers human beings a lot of different contradictory moral values and orientations, which creates a fertile ground for political communication in electoral campaigns to construct discourses and mobilize voters through emotionally resonant messages (Fer, 2025). The political environment is shaped by a long disturbance of distrust in most parties and institutions and a polarised society and media rewards anti-establishment mobilisers. social media campaigning and influencer networks rethink electoral competitions, particularly when institutional trust is already deemed fragile (Hoza, 2026). In online environments, these mechanisms are intensified through practices such as commenting and algorithmic amplification. As users engage with and circulate content that identifies with their perceived in-group, echo chambers can emerge, limiting exposure to alternative perspectives. Consequently,

pronominal strategies become embedded within broader communicative patterns that sustain ideological alignment and deepen social and political divides. The analysis of pronoun usage in political discourse reveals the way in which seemingly simple linguistic features can carry significant ideological weight, functioning as powerful tools in the construction and maintenance of collective identities.

Metaphorical strategies and the amplification of emotional appeal

Metaphorical conceptualization represents another priority dimension of digital political discourse, enabling political actors to simplify complex issues and evoke strong emotional responses. Metaphors such as “war”, “battle”, “fight” and “invasion” are used to describe political challenges, transforming abstract or multifaceted situations into more accessible and emotionally charged narratives. In the digital context, where attention is limited and competition for visibility is intense, such metaphorical constructions are particularly effective in capturing audience engagement. They show how issues are understood and also influence how they are felt, contributing to the emotional intensification of political communication. Consequently, metaphorical language becomes a powerful tool for persuasion, capable of mobilizing support and reinforcing ideological positions.

This perspective is strongly supported by work in Cognitive Linguistics, particularly the influential theory of conceptual metaphor developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980). They argue that metaphors are not only stylistic devices, but fundamental mechanisms through which individuals understand abstract concepts in terms of more concrete experiences. In political discourse, this means that metaphorical conceptualization structures not only how issues are communicated, but how they are cognitively processed by audiences. Building on this foundation, George Lakoff (1996, 2004) further demonstrates in what way political ideologies are grounded in competing metaphorical frameworks, such as the well-known “nation as family” model, which creates attitudes toward authority and social policy. Similarly, Paul Chilton (2004) emphasizes the role of metaphor in constructing political realities, arguing that spatial and force-based metaphors such as those related to conflict or movement are central to how political leaders present both allies and adversaries.

Research within critical discourse analysis (CDA), mainly by Teun A. van Dijk and Norman Fairclough, further highlights in what way metaphorical strategies contribute to the reproduction of power relations and ideological dominance. From this perspective, metaphors such as “war” or “invasion” are not neutral descriptors, but discursive tools that legitimize exclusionary practices and heighten perceptions of threat. More recent studies focusing on digital communication, such as those by Zoltán Kövecses, underline the emotional dimension of metaphor use, showing the way through which culturally embedded metaphorical patterns intensify affective responses and facilitate rapid interpretation in fast-paced online environments. In social media contexts, these metaphorical constructions are easily replicated and disseminated, contributing to what some scholars describe as the “viralization” of emotionally charged discourses.

Taken together, this body of research demonstrates that metaphorical strategies do more than enhance rhetorical appeal: they actively build political cognition and amplify emotional engagement. In digital political discourse, their persuasive power is magnified by the speed and participatory nature of online platforms, making them an important mechanism in the formation and polarization of public opinion.

Moral binaries and the simplification of political discourse

Finally, the construction of moral binaries plays a main role in simplifying political discourse in digital environments. Political leaders frame issues in terms of clear-cut oppositions, which is good versus bad, right versus wrong, honest versus corrupt, thereby reducing complex realities to easily digestible speeches. This simplification facilitates rapid communication and enhances message clarity, which are essential in fast-paced digital platforms. However, it also limits nuanced debate and encourages the adoption of rigid, polarized viewpoints. By appealing to moral judgments, such discourse reinforces group cohesion while delegitimizing opposing perspectives, ultimately presenting the way through which political legitimacy is perceived.

Scholars such as George Lakoff, mentioned in the previous sections too, argue that moral framing is a main mechanism through which political ideologies are thought. By mapping issues onto intuitive moral schemas, leaders make abstract or contested issues emotionally and cognitively accessible to audiences. Similarly, Jonathan Haidt (2012) outlines the role of moral intuitions in political reasoning, highlighting how appeals to fundamental moral dichotomies, care versus harm, fairness versus cheating, loyalty versus betrayal, activate strong affective responses and shape judgments.

Research in critical discourse analysis demonstrates that such binary constructions are not neutral but serve to legitimize certain actors while delegitimizing others. Teun A. van Dijk (1998) shows that moral polarization in discourse strengthens in-group cohesion and fosters ideological conformity, particularly in contexts where media and digital platforms amplify selective narratives. Likewise, Norman Fairclough (2003) highlights the way through which the simplification of complex issues into moral opposites contributes to the perpetuation of power relations and propels public perceptions of legitimacy.

In digital political communication, moral binaries are amplified by the participatory nature of online platforms. Users consume content and also actively contribute to and disseminate it, supporting polarized perspectives and heightening emotional investment. This interaction creates feedback loops that amplify moral judgments, making sophisticated debate less likely and entrenching ideological divisions, and in this sense, the moralization of political discourse operates as both a cognitive and social mechanism; it simplifies understanding and sustains collective identity while marginalizing dissenting voices.

CONCLUSIONS

Taken together, these four dimensions illustrate the way through which digital political discourse is strategically constituted to influence both cognition and emotion. The interplay between lexical choices, identity construction, metaphorical framing and moral simplification reveals a discursive environment that is highly dynamic and emotionally charged. In the digital age, political language not only reflects social realities but actively participates in their construction, presenting the ways in which power and collective identities are negotiated in contemporary political life.

Moral binaries condense multifaceted realities into clear-cut oppositions, making political messages more accessible but simultaneously limiting sophisticated debate and encouraging polarized viewpoints. In digital environments, the participatory nature of social media amplifies these effects. Users consume content, while also interacting with it through commenting and circulating messages, which reinforces ideological

alignment, strengthens emotional investment and magnifies the visibility of particular discourses.

This case study demonstrates that digital political discourse is not a reflection of pre-existing social and political structures, but it is also an active force that constructs and legitimizes power relations and collective identities. Understanding these discursive strategies is essential for comprehending in what manner political legitimacy is communicated and how polarization and affective engagement are intensified in contemporary online political life.

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