

Original Paper

A Discourse-Historical Analysis of the Immigration Topic in Trump's Campaign Rally Speeches

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Abstract

This paper employs a discourse-historical analysis method to examine Trump's speech discourse during his campaign rallies, with a focus on exploring his discourse strategies on the topic of immigration and their socio-cultural origins. The study reveals that Trump constructs an immigration discourse framework centered around law, national security, and economic interests through naming strategies, predicative strategies, and perspectivization strategies in his speeches. He emphasizes the threat posed by illegal immigrants to employment and security, utilizing direct and indirect quotations to enhance the authority and emotional impact of his discourse. The research presented in this paper not only uncovers the ideological foundation of Trump's immigration policies but also provides a new perspective for understanding the interactive relationship between political discourse and socio-historical context.

Keywords

DHA, immigration discourse, Trump's campaign rally speeches

1. Introduction

The immigration issue in the United States has always been a major concern for the US government. Throughout its history, US immigration policy has undergone cyclical shifts from openness to restriction, reflecting the social, economic, and political needs of different periods. As a political discourse, immigration discourse has a certain constructive effect on real society and plays a crucial role in the government's political implementation (Wu & Niu, 2018, p. 48). Trump has consistently made immigration policy a core issue in his campaign strategy. Discourse historical analysis, a major school of critical discourse analysis, focuses on the political sphere, emphasizing the sociohistorical context of political discourse and tracing the diachronic evolution of discursive events (Yang & Fu, 2018, p. 78). It aims to reveal the ideology underlying linguistic structure and provides a theoretical

framework for political discourse analysis. This paper uses Trump's campaign rally speeches as research material and establishes a target corpus. Using discourse historical analysis, this paper analyzes the speech corpus using a target corpus to explore the immigration policy and sociocultural causes of Trump's discourse.

The discourse history analysis method was proposed by Ruth Wodak and her team. The discourse history analysis method emphasizes placing discourse within a historical dimension to examine discourse strategy research. There are five common discourse strategies in discourse construction, namely the naming strategy, the predicate strategy, the argumentation strategy, the perspective strategy and the reinforcement and weakening strategy (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). There have been a large number of articles at home and abroad that use DHA for discourse analysis. For instance, Liang et al. (2024) adopted the discourse-historical analysis method to study the discourse strategies for the identity construction of left-behind children in China as reported in China Daily. Overall, discourse analysis research based on DHA is extensive and in-depth.

This article explores the strategies used by Trump in his campaign rally speeches to construct the topic of immigration, analyzes the relationship between immigration discourse and social history, and has certain research value.

2. Method

2.1 Research Design

This study employs the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) to investigate how Donald Trump constructs the topic of immigration in his campaign rally speeches. The research is divided into three stages: corpus compilation, analytical procedure, and socio-historical contextualization. The corpus-driven stage combines quantitative keyword extraction with qualitative close reading; the analytical procedure applies DHA's naming, predication, and perspectivization strategies; the socio-historical stage links linguistic patterns to contemporary U.S. economic anxieties, cultural identity debates, and partisan polarization. The overarching goal is to uncover the ideological underpinnings of Trump's immigration discourse and to demonstrate how these linguistic choices resonate with specific socio-historical conditions between 2021 and 2024.

2.2 Corpus Compilation and Processing

A self-built corpus of 85 campaign rally speeches delivered by Donald Trump between 5 January 2021 and 5 November 2024 was compiled. The raw texts (423,712 tokens after cleaning) were downloaded from the U.S. Presidential Program archive and deduplicated semi-automatically; irrelevant passages (e.g., opening music transcripts) were removed manually. The corpus was POS-tagged and lemmatized in KH Coder 3; a reference corpus of 2.1 million words of U.S. political speeches (2016–2020) served for key-key-word extraction (log-likelihood ≥ 15.13 , $p < 0.001$). High-frequency lexical items were then concordanced to recover cotextual units (sentence to paragraph level) for subsequent discourse-strategy analysis.

speech; ② Analyze the discourse strategies of immigrant language texts at the micro level; ③ How to interpret and attribute the analysis results at the micro level in the social context. 4.1 Topic Analysis Based on the analytical dimension of the discourse-historical analysis method, this paper first determines the sub-thematic words related to the immigration topic in Trump's campaign rally speeches. This section uses the web-like collinear language function of the corpus.

4.1 Topic Analysis

Based on the analytical dimension of the discourse-historical analysis method, this paper first determines the sub-thematic words related to the immigration topic in Trump's campaign rally speeches. This section uses the web-like collinear language function of the corpus Through classification, Trump emphasized law, national security and economic interests. The sub-themes related to immigration in Trump's campaign rally speech include law and policy, security issues, and employment and the economy, etc. As shown in Example 1, Trump indicated that the influx of illegal immigrants has taken away the jobs of local residents. He proposed to vigorously restrict and prevent illegal immigrants to ensure the employment of the American people.

[1]People that have worked there, and worked there well for years, are now being told they no longer have a job because they have illegal immigrants coming in and taking their job.

4.2 Strategy Analysis

This section explores how the three discourse strategies of naming, description and perspectionalization have influenced Trump's construction of the "immigration" topic in his campaign speeches.

4.2.1 Naming Strategy

This study uses the KWIC index to analyze the key words in the context. It is found that the words "barrier", "border" and "immigrant" have a relatively high correlation in the corpus. When Trump talks about immigration issues, he often uses the above words for substitution. Meanwhile, Trump used naming strategies to construct both domestic and foreign groups. In his campaign rally speech, he grouped the US government and the American people into an inner group, enhancing the general public's identification with the US government. But in his speech, Trump used "illegal immigrants", "murder" and "convict" to refer to immigrants, excluding immigrant groups from members of the inner group.

4.2.2 Describe the Strategy

The descriptive strategy refers to the language approach that endows social actors, objects, phenomena, events and processes with characteristics and attributes. The top 10 high-frequency verbs and adjectives around the topic of immigration were screened using the corpus, as shown in Table 1.

As shown in Table 1, the frequency of deported and accused around the immigration vocabulary indicates that trump 's immigration policy will intensify the deportation of immigrants. As in example [2], Trump also referred to immigrants as rapists, considering them a threat to national security and social order. Immigrants also took away job opportunities from Americans and increased the burden on social welfare, etc.

[2] In August, Texas Police arrested a serial illegal immigrant rapist who had been deported five times.

4.2.3 Perspective Strategy

A common language tool in the perspective strategy is to quote others' remarks during the process of discourse construction to express one's views on things.

[3] Rachel was brutally raped and murdered by an illegal alien who was let into the United States by the ridiculous open borders policy of Kamala.

In Example [3], Trump directly quoted the story of Patty, the family member of the victim. Such direct citation could evoke the audience's sympathy and draw their attention to immigration policies.

4.3 Analysis of Social and Cultural Causes

Discourse emerges from historical contexts; without historical contexts as a reference, true interpretation cannot be achieved. A critical science must pay attention to the historical background of language and social communication (Xin, 2005, p. 3).

For a long time, the Republican Party and the Democratic Party have had obvious differences in their positions on the topic of immigration. The Republican Party usually advocates strengthening border security and restricting illegal immigration. The Democratic Party usually supports more lenient immigration policies and advocates providing more protection and opportunities for illegal immigrants. The formation of the immigrant discourse in Trump's campaign rally speeches was influenced by multiple social and cultural factors. One of them is the widespread economic competition and employment pressure in American society. Many Americans are worried that illegal immigrants will take away their job opportunities. Trump, by emphasizing the threat of immigration to employment, echoed this social anxiety and fear, thereby gaining the support of some voters.

Secondly, cultural identity and nationalism. In Trump's remarks on immigration, there is a reflection of some Americans' yearning for cultural homogeneity and their rejection of cultural diversity. They are worried that the influx of a large number of immigrants will change the traditional culture and values of the United States, thereby threatening their own cultural identity.

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