

## IDEOLOGY AND IDENTITY: OPERATING TOGETHER

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**ABSTRACT:** *Ideology and identity are inevitably ubiquitous in most discourse types. This mere pervasiveness, more precisely in political discourse, is presumably sufficient to generate much debate as to whether ideology and identity find their locus in context or in other constructs. In view of this, this paper's main focus is manifold. It attempts to study Biden's discourse (selected tweets) within a critical discourse analysis framework while deploying a qualitative method of analysis. Approaching this discourse genre from the latter perspective aims at identifying how both concepts interact to generate a better understanding of discourse. To dismantle the way meaning is construed, some discourse strategies (van Dijk, 2004) like the presentation of the 'self' and the 'other' are to be studied within context. Results show that Biden's discourse is ideological and thus mirrors common identity goals. Moreover, positive self-presentation has been dominant in a daunting situation where most messages were purposefully rallying for all Americans.*

**KEYWORDS:** identity, ideology, self-presentation, discourse, messages.

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## INTRODUCTION

Despite the methodological dissimilarities and the analytical lenses utilized in the study of identity, language remains a propitious ground which lumps together a variety of strategies and tools to communicate peculiar views and attitudes towards the world in connection to identity, among other things. One has to acknowledge that despite the fact that they are ubiquitous in most discourse types, some of these strategies are perhaps more common with a one political leader than another. For instance, the US President, Joe Biden, has approached political discourse differently given the repercussions of his predecessor's discourse, Donald Trump. To pay lip service to voters and supporters, due status has been accorded to language and the choice of diction in an attempt to garner more support to perpetuate a sound position as a leader.

Despite the thorny issues, he has conspicuously acknowledged and defended a pluralist society to deescalate the tension, at odds with Trump. However, the issue of identity has not been de-emphasized. It, for instance, has been visible in discourse; more precisely tweets as a new discourse genre. Meanwhile, the link between identity and ideology does not seem to be much studied in the bulk of the literature.

Based on the latter premise, these two elements are not independent from context and other discourse strategies. van Dijk's strategies of discourse (2004) provide many relevant tools which might efficiently serve the analysis of discourse. The link between identity and ideology is going to be unveiled through this research though at the surface level both concepts look like independent. Thus, both concepts coalesce to meet the same ends; identity construction and reconstruction through ideological drives.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Identity

There is a vast literature on identity in general and social identity in particular. For instance, Social Theory has been one of the major approaches in European social psychology of the last decade (van Dijk, 2010, p. 30). From the perspective of discourse studies, identity has been paid extensive attention (Schiffring & Bamberg, 2006). However, the missing element in discourse studies work remains the social and psychological tradition.

The study of text and talk, in connection to identity for van Dijk, is socio-cognitive in nature. In his approach, for instance, social identities are assumed to be distributed forms of “social cognition shared by various types of social collectivities and reproduced by discourse and interaction”. This is among the reasons that made this research build a link between identity as a social construct and language and context (van Dijk, 2010). The latter link seems to be interesting given its fruitfulness and added value to the field of discourse analysis in general. Different but complementary views have identified identity. Gilroy, for instance, (1997, p. 301-302) links identity to belonging. Additionally, identity is assumed to help us understand the fateful formation of the pronoun ‘we’ and to reckon with the patterns of inclusion and exclusion. And thus, this might sound troublesome as the formation of ‘we’ presupposes the exclusion of ‘they’. An interesting view about identity assumes that identity relates to how we think about ourselves and people and what we imagine people think about us. It is also the fact of being able to ‘fix’ or ‘figure out’ who we are (Kidd & Teagle, 2012, p. 7).

One more interesting view of identity associates it with the idea of comparison between persons and things whereby the verb ‘to identify’ seems to be a necessary accompaniment of identity. It is worth mentioning that Hegel (1807, cited in Benwell and Stokoe, 2006) identifies identity as inter-subjective rather than merely subjective. He hypothesizes that some external factors intervene such as the social world in shaping consciousness and this means that consciousness requires an imagination or submission to an ‘other’. As such, recognition as a process is likely to be crucial to identity. Based on the latter identification, the ‘self’ is defined by virtue of its membership of, or identification with a particular group or groups.

Nevertheless, Mc Allister and Wilmsen (1996) assume that in politics, which is the domain of enquiry of this study, collective self-identifications simply legitimize the conditions of inequality. In establishing the link between society and discourse, Laclau and Mouffe (1985, Benwell and Stokoe, 2006, p. 29) argue that the social space is a whole that has to be treated as discursive in nature. As perceivable, individuals who constitute the community, the ‘self’, the ‘other’ and language (discourse) are crucial and common elements which define identity.

van Dijk delineates some properties of social identity. These are defined for human collectivities of different types such as social categories, groups, communities like those defined in terms of gender, age, ethnicity, class, origin, language, ideology, shared goals or interests. Though relatively permanent collectivities, they may change but they are seldom construed, confirmed and even used overnight. Social identities are shared by members and are social constructs, a form of cognition and social representation and they are, then, assumed to be cognitive in the sense that they are defined for the minds and brains of members of the same

epistemic community. Socially shared representations may be of different types like knowledge, attitudes, emotions, ideologies, etc (van Dijk, 2010, p 34).

Some key properties of social identity may be summarized as follows:

- Individuals can develop complex social identities and these may be hierarchically ordered.
- Social practices of actors can be organized and accomplished by identity.
- Discourse is one of the manifestations of social identities. And thus, members of the same community may acquire, challenge, reproduce and express social identity (van Dijk, 2010, p. 30-31).
- Expressions, application and uses of social identities may be manifested in the uses of “US” and “THEM” (2010, p. 35).
- Social identities are representations of “OUR” group community (time, setting, goals, roles, etc).

Mental models, as van Dijk assumes, (2010, p. 36-37) construed by participants about situations are labeled context models and these control discourse properties such as style, lexicon, syntax, etc to make discourse appropriate. What is peculiar about mental models is that they control discourse production and comprehension. Since identity relates to collectivity, a logical link is likely to be delineated as they both seem to interact in both ‘text’ and ‘talk’.

### **Ideology**

Political discourse constitutes a ground where ideologies are rife. This domain is part and parcel of society. Political discourse, based on this premise, is not a genre but a class of genres defined by a social domain, that of politics (parliamentary debates, speeches by politician, party programs, etc) (van Dijk, 1998, 1995). van Dijk defines ideologies as systems of beliefs shared by members of the same social group such as knowledge and attitudes and as the basis of social representation (1998). These beliefs are called social representations. Groups, then, share consensual and shared knowledge called common ground. Some values are selected and therefore organized as ideologies like freedom, justice and equality (van Dijk, 1995, p. 209). Extensive research, to better understand ideology, have been published. These definitions of ideology as van Dijk contends are all misguided (vagueness) (1995, p. 244). Based on the latter claim, he gives a summary of ideologies as being cognitive although they are obviously social or political to groups. They involve beliefs, thoughts, judgments, etc, which implies that they are belief systems. The author assumes that “the fact that we define ideologies in cognitive term does not mean that they are individual cognitions” (van Dijk, 1995, p. 244). Ideologies are also claimed to be social in the sense that dominant groups have the dominant ideologies. One more peculiarity of ideologies is that they are socio-cognitive acting at the interface between the cognitive and the social and they are shared by the group (1995, p. 244).

Although in traditional approaches (Eagleton, 1991, Larrain, 1979, Mannheim, 1936 cited in van Dijk) have defined ideologies in terms of truth and falsity, van Dijk argues that ideologies are not true or false (van Dijk, 1995, p. 245). They may have various degrees of complexity. As for contextual manifestations, they are variable as they seem confused and vague even contradictory and incoherent (van Dijk, 1995, p. 246). One more aspect of ideology relates to the fact that they are abstract and general. The concept of ideology embraces some particular

elements which Rejai (1997, p. 4) summarizes as follows. They are cognitive, and have effects on emotions and feelings, plans, programs and social base. These dimensions are acknowledged by van Dijk (1998, 1995).

Ideologies are further identified as general opinions whose main task is to organize social group attitudes. These consist of “schematically organized general opinions about relevant social issues, such as abortion, nuclear position, etc.” What is also peculiar about ideologies is that they influence knowledge and beliefs through language users (van Dijk, 1996, p.138). These models and cognitions, in turn control discourse. They also show a polarized structure between US and THEM.

Additionally, ideologies are not only related to power, dominance and struggle. van Dijk, in this regard, assumes that “we also have professional ideologies, institutional ideologies, and ideologies of many other groups in society (van Dijk, 1996, p.139). Nevertheless, ideology is not to be identified with dominant groups because even dominated groups may have ideologies of resistance. Interestingly, Billig (1991, p. 2) considers the subject of ideology a rhetorical being who thinks and argues with ideology.

### **Ideology, identity and political discourse**

Ideology makes an integral part of political discourse. For instance, studying the first presupposes the second. Since ideologies are to control discourse and social practices as van Dijk assumes (2003, p. 4) this becomes feasible and applicable in particular situations, events, etc. Indeed, political discourse may express individual and group ideologies. This means, among other things, that representation presupposes a cognitive interface that mirrors personal beliefs, opinions or experiences. The latter view has been profoundly advocated by Johnson-laird (1983), van Dik and Kintsh (1983) and Oostendrop and Goldman (1999).

De Fina, et al argue that as a collective social construct, language is seen as reflecting, conveying and even constructing identities. Although scholars agree as the author claims that language both reflects and creates identities, “the stress is usually placed on the other”. Identity is not in the mind it finds its locus, however, in social interaction (de Fina, A. E., Schifffrin, D. E., & Bamberg, M. E. (2006). p.1). This view, though coincides with van Dijk’s social dimension, is dissimilar to his conception of the cognitive interface; which De Fina seems to ignore.

Without the use of language politics does not exist (Chilton, 2004, p. 6). She goes further in her claim to assume that “it is also arguably the case that the need for language (or for the cultural elaboration of the language instinct) arose from socialization of humans involving the formation of coalitions, the signaling of group boundaries, and all that these developments imply, including the emergence of what is called reciprocal altruism”.

Fairclough observes that political discourse is argumentative in his attempt to integrate critical discourse-analytical concepts with the analytical framework of argumentation theory. This is based on the view that in the domain of politics risk and uncertainty are central. Understanding the argumentative nature is essential in political discourse as it allow the analyst to comprehend the strategies (Fairclough & I, Fairclough, 2013, p. 17-18).

The study of political discourse draws on different analytical methods. Wilson argues that this discourse type is manipulative since politicians hide the truth and the horror (Wilson, 2003, p. 399). In relating political discourse to ideology the author observes that some concepts in political discourse are represented and interpreted depending on ideological frameworks because language and thought are inextricably linked as claimed by the relativist perspective. And thus, to make the world believe you, you need to be manipulative (Wilson, 2003, p. 400-401). The 'self' and the 'other' as noticeable do not logically seem to be independent from the constructs of ideology, identity and politics. And thus, it might be assumed that they seem to operate together.

## METHODOLOGY

This section accounts for the corpus selected for investigation and describes the method of analysis.

### Corpus and selection criteria

In this small-scale research The US President's tweets (Joe Biden) have been retrieved from the following address: <https://twitter.com/joe Biden> (June, 2021). As a new genre tweeter is gaining momentum in recent years. Twitter platform has millions users and thus followers worldwide. This mere fact makes politicians, in this case Joe Biden, (who does not tweet a lot, unlike his predecessor Donald Trump) communicate messages and share ideologies as well as construct and/or re-construct identity.

Twitter constitutes a propitious ground where beliefs, attitudes and future agenda might appear and thrive which perhaps makes the researcher's errand easier by recourse to analytic tools selected.

## RESEARCH METHODS

To meet the objectives of the current research, a qualitative avenue is applied within a critical discourse analysis framework. This choice has been motivated by a number of arguments. Indeed, Strauss & Corbin (1998, p. 10-11) assume that, "by the term "qualitative research" we mean any type of research that produces findings not arrived at by statistical procedures or other means of quantification". Additionally, Trumbull (in Taylor, 2005, p. 101) views that qualitative research methods are "attempts to interpret and make sense of things in their natural settings". Arguably, the latter method seems to satisfy the requirements of this current research and this is going to be demonstrated in the next section.

## VAN DIJK'S THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

van Dijk's discourse strategies and ideological structures are going to be implemented in this paper. In what follows an ideological square is presented by the author (2004):

- **Emphasize OUR good things**
- **Emphasize THEIR bad things**
- **De-emphasize OUR bad things**
- **De-emphasize THEIR good things**



Other ideological discourse strategies are introduced by van Dijk (2004) these correspond to other ideological discourse structures not only as polarized relationship between ideological groups. These consist in twenty seven strategies. By recourse to some selected ones, the analysis will be carried out. It was decided that in this small-scale research, it is not possible to invest them all. The ideological structures include actor description, example and illustration, national self-glorification and positive self-presentation.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

In this section van Dijk's theoretical framework is going to be applied on Biden's tweets. Starting with the first ideological and discourse strategy deployed by the US President manifested in *actor description*, the following tweets might be a case in point:

*Great news folks: We hit record high health care enrollment. 31 million people now have coverage through the affordable Care Act. Couldn't think of a better person to celebrate this milestone with than President Obama. So, I gave him a call.*

The US President in the above tweet (June, 2021) announces an achievement regarding the COVID-19 conundrum. Inside the whole array of negative emotions, he spreads hope and celebrates the enrollment in health care and gives a shred of evidence (31 million people). To adapt to the grapple of the shifting needs of the future, the President overtly glorifies the importance of the Care Act. Inclusive 'we' for the Democrats blatantly excludes Republicans and thus represents Democrats agenda positively reflecting affinities among governors and the people. In doing so, Biden's discourse seems to be nationalistic, inclusive, rallying and most of all alleviating from previous tension (before he was elected president).

Meanwhile, Obama has been thought of as the right person with whom the 'milestone' has to be celebrated, which is not ideology free. The former president Trump has been back-grounded although, during his presidency, he has proposed many solutions to fight the pandemic. Foregrounding Democrats and de-emphasizing Republicans' 'good things' is not subtle for followers and/or readers. This ideology-laden strategy lends itself to identity to appear. Navigating through discourse implications, the latter argument can be evidenced by the fact that both identity and ideology are inextricably linked since Democrats are fore-grounded, positively represented and identity appears in solving common issues to preserve the community and stabilize Americans in general to, by the end, stabilize the economy.

Common interests are, then, visible in discourse. Saving lives and the value of life in addition to the right to have a health care system is advocated. Given the previous claims, these can be claimed to be reflections of thoughts and belief systems which are cognitive in nature and relate to society and shared goals. As such, the underlying assumptions best justify the interaction between both identity and ideology.

Zooming on the next discourse strategy manifested in *example and/or illustration*, the following tweet gives an account to that:

*Today, we passed a grim milestone: 600.000 lives lost from COVID-19.*

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*Unemployment claims are down 50% and 64% of adults are vaccinated since I took office. That's progress.*

As discernible in the above two tweets, the President provides robust evidence in connection to three main elements: lost lives and unemployment. It is true that the number of deaths provided is huge, but it is also clear and known that this number reflects deaths since the pandemic has started. In the second tweet, there is evidence showing that unemployment has decreased and more than half adults are vaccinated starting from the date he took office. The evidence provided seems to provoke interest and admiration as it has two facets. On the one hand it arouses fear (number of lost lives), on the other hand it glorifies achievements of the president. The play on emotions, thus, seems to add authenticity and credibility to discourse to meet persuasive ends.

Celebrating achieving is not ideology free as remarkable. It is, actually, a celebration of a whole political agenda and vision regarding many overarching issues. Through the lenses of ideology and identity, and while operating together, the latter notions can help interpret discourse. Hence, ideology and identity coalesce to bring to the fore latent and concealed attitudes, systems of beliefs, in addition to common and shared viewpoints within the same community, in this case, the American community.

*National self-glorification and positive self-presentation* are among the strategies that support the analysis of discourse to fully solve meaning and message intricacies.

*This bipartisan agreement represents the largest investment in public transit in American history. The largest investment in rail since the creation of Amtrak. It will deliver high speed internet to every American home and replace 100% of our nation's lead pipes.*

*Today, we've passed 300 million shots in 150 days.*

*When I took office, our nation was in crisis. Today, the virus is in retreat and our economy has smashed previous records for job growth.*

As it appears in the above tweets, no equivocation has been noticeable. The clarity of the messages is significant in many respects. In fact, the US President utilizes the superlative form, for example (the largest is used twice) to lamp together his achievement in connection to the internet in the country, which would be much appreciated among the community in all age groups. Moreover, the use of the first person singular pronoun (I) and the first plural pronoun (we) are to emphasize his 'positive action' and 'good things'. Comparing his governance with his predecessor's is observable in the last tweet when he mentioned the state of disarray he found the country in. Negative other-presentation is, then, discernible to on the one hand emphasize the 'other's' negative action and foreground his present and future action.

Within the same line, some interesting circumstances have been back-grounded wittingly. One of the contextual cues and events has been ignored to place full responsibility of the former President. Hence, the COVID-19 surge in 2020 in addition to its quick spread and the state of research at its initial steps, Trump is not logically fully blamed. However, Biden does not cease the opportunity to place full responsibility on him and on Republicans as they were to be blamed for repercussions of this crisis basically on the economy.

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*Vagueness* is one more discourse strategy utilized to communicate information with the masses. The tweet below is a case in point:

*3 million jobs since we took office.*

*In the competition for the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the future will be built right here in America.*

Although the two tweets communicate two different messages, they remain vague and lack precision. Taking the example of the first tweet, the huge number of jobs announced does not seem to be detailed at least in connection to fields and regions, in addition to age groups as well as private and/or public sectors. Amidst the crisis the USA is facing, Biden shares information that, though positive, seems to have populist dimensions. Discourse, as such, indexes much vagueness. Admittedly, a whole topic, like the one of employment is mentioned vaguely to, perhaps, establish rest and withhold the terrific consequences of the pandemic in the case of the above tweet.

These discourse and ideological strategies are multi-layered as they do not seem to be confined to one particular theme or end. Indeed, ideology and identity matters are endemic in discourse and once they interact they serve as stabilizing strategies especially in the case of crises. It has been traced that most issues reverberate through tweets (the pandemic, unemployment) and thus to adapt to the perils of the current state in the USA, the US President glorifies his achievements, represents himself and his fellow Democrats positively, foregrounds some issues, backgrounds others and emphasizes his good things while de-emphasizing the ‘other’s’ good things (Trump’s rule) and the handling of COVID-19 issues.

The most robust evidence in the randomly selected tweets of June, 2021 is Biden’s total back-grounding of his predecessor’s achievements. With the synergy of the various strategies utilized, Biden has appeared in the image of the savior who made leaps to the detriment of Americans. He, manipulatively, through positive self-presentation lumped together a positive view of the future and spread bright attitudes together with genuine encouragements to Americans to fight the pandemic. At odds with his predecessor, Donald Trump, he attacked no institutions and individuals, nor did he use victimization as a strategy.

As a matter of fact, identity and ideology interact and do not seem to be separable in political discourse. As such, identity is part and parcel of ideology as both relate to communities and derive their essence from groups. It should be admitted that without groups and communities both concepts lose validity and effectiveness. The bulk of research that studied ideology has studied it separately from identity. While Purvis and Hunt (1993) use discourse and ideology, ideology and discourse interchangeably, Althusser (2020) studied political ideas and how they dominate society and are therefore ideological. Interestingly, Eagleton (2014) studied the evolution of the concept of ideology without linking it to identity.

Some other research have linked identity and ideology to language learning (De Costa, 2016). While one more research by Sharkey (2008) has studied the process of Arabization and spread of Arab identity among immigrants linking it to ethnicity and race. However, the link between both concepts to political discourse, more precisely tweets as a new genre has been almost



absent. The affinities and convergence between identity and ideology have not been demonstrated efficiently in the bulk of the literature.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has studied some randomly selected tweets of the US President Joe Biden (June, 2021). It has invested some discourse and ideological strategies in the analysis. And thus filled the gap in the literature by both claiming the existence of a link and interaction between identity and ideology. Other discourse tools might be relevant in the study of the same discourse genre manifested in metaphor, hyperbole, consensus, etc. By recourse to other theoretical frameworks like Fairclough's framework (1989) discourse can be studied utilizing different linguistic tools.

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