

**BMC Research Journal**

**ISSN:** 2795- 1731,

Peer-reviewed Multidisciplinary

Open Access Journal

Indexed in Journal



**Birendra Bidhya Mandir Campus**

Tikapur, Kailali, Nepal

Url: [www.birendracampus.edu.np](http://www.birendracampus.edu.np)

Research Article

## **Bluntness in Popular Culture: The Trump Era's Ascent**

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Published by: Research Management Cell, BMC, Tikapur, Kailali, Nepal

Publication: June 2025, Volume: 4, BMC Research Journal

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DOI: 10.3126/bmcrcj.v4i1.80065

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### **Abstract**

This research examines the mainstream media to illustrate their substantial influence in elevating Donald Trump as a presidential candidate during the 2016 US election. His confrontations with rival parties, distinctive rhetoric, and choice of language garnered significant attention. His language, reactions, and remarks regarding Hillary Clinton, media representatives, and women reflect fundamentalist ideologies that are pertinent to critical discourse analysis, emphasizing the role of discourse as a form of social interaction. Halliday's Language as Social Semiotics, Michel Foucault's concept of the Technology of Self, Karl Marx's Dialectical Materialism as analytical frameworks to justify the argument. This study employs these critical discourses as a theoretical framework to analyze Donald Trump's auditory, visual, printed, and multimodal communication. The main media purposively sampled for analysis are the BBC, CNN, The New York Times, The Guardian, and Fox News. Consequently, he emerged victorious in the election, serving as the President

of the United States from 2017 to 2021. To analyze the argument that these selected media outlets framed Trump as a central figure during the 2016 election in America. The findings indicate that blunt media discourse contributed to maintaining his image as a national business magnate, amplified by prominent media outlets. Ultimately, the paper highlights how Trump's statements and media responses generated compelling news coverage, significantly contributing to his global recognition.

**Keywords:** Ideology, multimodality, social interaction, speech, Trump

## **Introduction**

Incorporating multimedia has been instrumental in advancing Trump's agenda and ideology during his campaign. The use of provocative language and derogatory rhetoric has created a unique style of election campaigning. Multimedia has played a critical role in conveying his objectives. The concept of multimodality refers to a mode of communication that encompasses both verbal and visual elements. In contemporary society, multimodality is crucial in effectively transmitting messages related to various topics to the audience. Adami (2016) states, "As a phenomenon of communication, multimodality defines the combination of different semiotic resources, or modes, in text and communicative events, such as still and moving images, speech, writing, layout, gestures and or proxemics." (p.451). The statement illustrates that multimodality integrates both verbal and non-verbal communicative messages that are disseminated through various media. Its audiences are larger, and its capacity for spreading news and events is significantly broader.

A speech can be linked to an individual's belief system. How it is delivered unveils the speaker's perceptions and thoughts, as well as the principles they uphold. Kamsinah (2018) argue that ideology reflects power and authority. He asserts that "ideology serves the interests of certain groups with social power, ensuring that events, practices, and behaviors come to be regarded as legitimate and commonsense." (Mayr, 2008, p.11). This implies that ideology shapes an individual's actions and legitimizes their beliefs in the eyes of the public. In the case of Donald Trump, his ultra-nationalist ideology, it resonates with traditional American citizens, leading them to align with his perspectives. Trump (2017) asserts, "A Nation without a border is not a nation" (00.00-00.26/0.42). This statement encapsulates his ideology, which seeks to challenge the idea that America serves as a melting pot for individuals who appreciate and uphold its diversity. The border states of America are voicing significant opposition to immigration.

How one speaks and selects words can foster equilibrium and social cohesion within a community; conversely, the choice of language and style of diction can incite social discord and violence. Eisler (2022) points out that "Donald Trump's presidency was marked by an extraordinary set of violations of the expectations of presidential conduct" (p.4). Trump's use of 'extraordinary' to characterize his statements underscores the significant impact his language has on society, leading to instability. Such a dismissive use of language also implies a lack of awareness on his part regarding the presidential code of conduct that ought to be adhered to during and following the election. Such actions exemplify the influence of language in shaping power dynamics.

The remarks made by Trump have resulted in a hierarchical power dynamic among the bilateral countries. This situation fosters prejudice and biased viewpoints regarding international relations, which holds preconceived notions. Ivana and Suprayogi (2020) articulate that there are "hopes for Iran to become a peaceful country" (p.3). This conveys both fascist and anti-fascist sentiments to foreign nations. The term 'hope' implies a connection to terrorism, suggesting that Iran is currently not a peaceful nation. Furthermore, 'peaceful' indicates that Iran must develop a strategic plan to cultivate a peaceful image in the eyes of the United States.

An inauguration signifies the beginning of a new chapter. The inaugural address is associated with initiating any new venture, particularly emphasizing presidency's responsibilities. The initial speech provides the populace hope, a renewed outlook, and a framework for leaders to establish a trustworthy connection with the public. Balogun and Murana (2018) observe that "The inaugural speech of the 45th president of the United States of America, President Donald Trump, consists of ninety-five sentences that are predominantly simple in structure" (p.5). This indicates that the address is lengthy in nature rather than concise. Consequently, the audience's enthusiasm was lessened due to the extended duration of the speech. Furthermore, using specialized terminology creates a barrier in the reciprocal relationship between the leader and the public.

The inauguration aimed to cultivate a spirit of unity rather than provoke animosity and disinterest among the citizens. In contrast, Trump's campaign strategies exemplified a form of narcissism characterized by arrogance, self-adulation, and presumptuousness. This perspective positions him as a demagogic figure. Elkon, Nacos, and Shapiro (2020) articulate that "demagoguery may be described as the process whereby skilled speakers and writers seek to influence public opinion by employing the traditional tools of rhetoric with complete indifference to truth" (p.2). This indicates that the capacity to sway the audience is central to

their approach. Such rhetoric often obscures the truth. They employed all available tactics to seize public attention, promoting their divisive agenda and reversals. A situation may arise where individuals are compelled to disregard factual information due to its growing influence on their lives. Nevertheless, this paper concentrates on the speeches delivered by Trump during his presidency and examines how the media reinforced his prevailing influence within mass culture. Consequently, the findings of this paper underscore the media's vital role and its relationship to the sociopolitical landscape of American society.

## **Methodology**

This paper is structured on the qualitative research design prevalent in the disciplines of Social Sciences and English Studies. Based on the interpretative paradigm, it pools its secondary sources from media outlets like BBC, CNN, The New York Times, The Guardian, and Fox News to discuss its role in the presidential election of America in 2016. To analyze how these corporate media used a wide range of auditory and visual elements to elevate Donald Trump's prominence as a presidential candidate, three specific analytical tools have been used, viz, Michel Foucault's concept of the Technology of Self, Karl Marx's Dialectical Materialism, and M.A.K. Halliday's Language as Social Semiotics. Based on these three concepts, different units of analysis such as words, phrases, sentences, and the like have been coded and examined. Overall, this paper is archival in its research orientation.

## **Results and Discussion**

### ***Bluntness in Popular Culture: Critical Discourse Analysis of Trump's Speech***

Trump's address exemplifies the dehumanizing trend he exhibits towards certain ethnic communities. The choice of the term 'terrorist' serves as a means of attack against specific groups. The concept of terrorism refers to unlawful and unjust acts of violence, which may be orchestrated by influential individuals to advance their political objectives or by individuals expressing their frustrations. Crenshaw (1981) notes that "Terrorism occurs both in the context of violent resistance to the state as well as in the service of state interests." This suggests that when citizens or groups within a state face particular grievance, they may resort to terrorism as a perceived solution rather than rejecting violence. Furthermore, terrorism casts a negative light on the state apparatus, its leaders, and their operational methods. Trump's statement, "Antifa is a Terrorist Organization, stay out of Washington. Law enforcement is watching you very closely!" (January 06, 2021), illustrates his ability to express himself freely, unfiltered, as the leader of the nation. The phrase "Law enforcement is

watching you" conveys a sense of authority that can be invoked when necessary. At the same time, the label 'terrorist organization' suggests that the group in question is creating an unjust situation. How he employs language effectively evokes a sense of threat and fear among the populace. Furthermore, while engaging with the text 'Antifa', he articulated his concepts through multimodal techniques. His utilization of Twitter as a medium for disseminating his thoughts illustrates his adeptness at leveraging technology to connect with a broader audience, solicit feedback, enhance his public profile, and demonstrate his influence through media channels. Consequently, one method of establishing an individual's brand and power relations with others is through media engagement. Foucault (1988) posits that "technologies of production, which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things" (p.11). In contemporary society, technology serves as a vehicle for content creation that is accessible to the public, and it empowers individuals to assert their authority. Ultimately, this type of performance can manipulate the audience. Similarly, Trump's tweets exemplified content production transformed through his social account and the misuse of his power, resulting in inhumane treatment towards specific groups.

Objectivism encompasses factual arguments and strategies designed to capture the attention of readers or audiences. To be objective is to adhere to truth rather than mere appeal. Objectively presenting data instills a sense of legitimacy and validity among the public. The accurate representation of truth is essential for conveying genuine information. In contemporary society, such truths are often disseminated through technological platforms, particularly social media. The influence and manipulation exerted by individuals and their productions contribute to the establishment of accurate knowledge. Foucault (1988) posits that "technologies of power, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectifying of the subject." (p.11) The power that individuals possess manage, and express, reflecting their ideologies, is shaped by multimodal communication. When individuals share, view, and comment on these topics, they align with their interests. For instance, Donald Trump stated on his Twitter account, "The number of cases and deaths of the China Virus is far exaggerated in the United States" (January 03 2021). The phrase 'China Virus' conveys a sense of power imposition and influence over the public. It also indicates that the individual is sufficiently authoritative to assert his views through media channels that amplify his perspective. The truth is often distorted to align with his interests on the same platform. The fact that such a statement garnered 100K likes, 20.5K shares, and 9.6K comments illustrates that once it circulated through the media, it gained significant traction in public awareness, becoming recognized as a critical national and global

issue warranting careful consideration. Individuals are compelled to engage with these topics as the media presents them as highly relevant.

Assertiveness can be understood as a commitment to loyalty towards others. Such behavior aims to communicate openly with individuals, even if it may lead to emotional discomfort. In contemporary society, both individuals and technology have emerged as powerful influences. Humanity appears to be adopting a more directive approach while becoming less discerning. Nevertheless, the media also harbors a subtle objective of conveying the truth. In some instances, even factual information can have negative consequences. An example of assertiveness that disregards the feelings of others is Donald Trump's (2020) remark, "Well! They are losing their life every day in the world and maybe that is a question you should ask China. Do not ask me. Ask China, Okay?" (00.00-0.31). Prioritizing elite interests places these individuals in the spotlight while enhancing the media's power. Noam Chomsky argues that mass media is dominated by elite groups, serving their specific agendas. This oversight represents a domain of their authority. Additionally, Chomsky (2008) contends that "take a look, the way media operates, the way the public relations industry operates. The extensive thinking that has been going on for a long, long period, about the necessity to marginalize and control the public in a democratic society" (00.00-3.20). In a democratic society, it is a prevalent practice to highlight the media's role in shaping public perception. A 'democratic society' is characterized by the freedom to exist, make choices, and sustain itself according to its own values. In such a society, everyone can think and live as they choose.

The interests of the elite group are often prioritized bringing these elites into the public spotlight enhancing the influence of the media. Noam Chomsky argues that this elite group largely governs the mass media serving their specific agenda. This oversight represents a domain of power for them. Additionally, Chomsky points out that one should examine the operations of the media and the public relations industry, highlighting the long-standing efforts to marginalize and control the public within a democratic framework. In democratic societies, the media's role in shaping public opinion is frequently emphasized. A 'democratic society' is characterized by the freedom of individuals to live, make decisions, and govern themselves according to their preferences. In such societies, everyone is free to think and live as they choose.

The expression "marginalize and control the public control" suggests that the media manipulates the general populace. Nevertheless, individuals push the media's narratives and highlights to the margins. Thought control involves the exercise of authority, the application

of critical thinking, and the cultivation of a tendency to accept the media's production and glorification. In the third presidential debate of 2016, Donald Trump (2016) claimed, "She is the one and Obama who caused the violence. They paid them 15000 \$..." (00.00-29.12), which illustrates his assertion that Obama and Clinton conspired to undermine his candidacy. This statement serves as an indictment against both Clinton and Obama. Additionally, he stated, "ISIS is honoring President Obama. He is the founder of ISIS. He founded ISIS and I would say the co-founder is the crooked Hillary Clinton." (00.59-1.28). The audience's enthusiastic response after his remarks indicates their agreement with the accusations presented by the media. Thus, this exemplifies an act of cognitive control within a democratic framework.

Realities and facts constitute elements of truth. Any audience can be led to perceive that truth varies in its degree of accuracy when it is communicated through media channels. This process transforms narratives into expansive grand narratives. Moreover, such grand narratives facilitate the demystification of reality. Consequently, truth resembles subjective certainty, as it can be shaped by the messenger. The increasing prevalence of falsehoods being accepted as truth symbolizes wealth's influence. Karl Marx posits that the "study of economic phenomena...rests on the dialectical movement of categories," illustrating how economic analysis reflects the nature of capital, including its form, use value, and exchange value. For instance, money per capita is tangible, as it can be physically perceived. In contrast, concepts such as wealth, poverty, economic progress, and improvement are inherently abstract. Individuals possess varying definitions of progression and enhancement, which can reveal differences in their levels of understanding and acquisition. Thus, truth is subjective and open to diverse interpretations based on individual perspectives. This variability indicates that truth can be contextual. Similarly, when capital increases and reaches significant levels, it may also become a source of contention, money's influence is pronounced and pervasive.

Propaganda gains significant traction when financial resources begin to influence discourse. During the election, Donald Trump's financial backing has clearly articulated his agenda to the public. His regard for women appears to be minimal. A female reporter from Fox News confronted him, stating, "You have referred to women you dislike as fat pigs, dogs, slob, and disgusting animals. Your Twitter account" (00:00:47-1:47) illustrates his perspective on women, which seems rooted in the belief that men can assert dominance over women, a notion bolstered by his economic achievements. The terms 'fat,' 'pig,' and 'disgusting' serve to objectify women, reducing them to commercialized entities.

Consequently, the prevailing male chauvinism and economic power contribute to the commodification of women. Similarly, the refusal to address such allegations and the silence on the matter reflect the influence of capitalism. The Fox News reporter reiterated the statement to highlight the issue, while the audience responded with applause and noise, suggesting their alignment with his controversial viewpoint. The media has extensively circulated images and narratives to capture public attention and engagement. This intense media involvement often disseminates unnecessary, unwanted, and exaggerated information. The media's focus on Trump's discourse has been more pronounced than warranted.

Propaganda plays a crucial role in shaping narratives and attracting media attention. It serves as a mechanism for content creation. Noam Chomsky (2023) elucidates "A propaganda model focuses on this inequality of wealth and power and its multilevel effects on mass-media interests and choices. It traces the routes by which money and power can filter out the news fit to print, marginalize dissent, and allow the government and dominant private interests to get their messages across to the public" (p.61). Media outlets possess the autonomy to generate information, articulate their viewpoints, and actively promote their interests. During Trump's presidency, the media adopted two distinct roles: either producing unfiltered content or granting authority to figures like Trump, thereby enabling their dominance. The Fox News Channel's headline, "TRUMP TOPS 2020 MOST ADMIRER MAN SURVEY" (00:03:05.54) exemplifies the elevation of Trump as a remarkable president, despite his speeches addressing controversial subjects. A female presenter noted that he managed one of the most robust economies during the COVID-19 pandemic, facilitated illegal immigration from Mexico, brought commercial transactions to Washington D.C., and achieved peace in the Middle East within a single term. Such statements, disseminated by the media for public consumption, generate new content that is shared across social media platforms like Twitter to elicit admiration and highlight accomplishments. Speech is a medium of realization, identification, and expression that has a wider range of sociocultural implications.

Communication encompasses speech, which involves both a sender and a recipient. The message conveyed by the sender is interpreted within a social context, functioning as a form of social semiotics. M.A.K. Halliday posits that language is inherently social and semiotic, emphasizing the need to view it as a system that evolves through interactions and exchanges among community members, thereby fostering relationships and social existence. Halliday's theory of social semiotics, or "semiosis," refers to the process of creating and interpreting meaning (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004, p.5). There exists a connection



between language, meaning, word selection, and the application of words. Language use traverses both parties' social and cultural intersections revealing the speaker's ideology. Furthermore, Halliday has introduced three concepts regarding the meta-functions of language, one of which is the ideational meta-function that facilitates the exchange of information among community members. According to Halliday's perspective, this concept is associated with the field that demonstrates how language represents reality. He argues that language is a creator, influencer, and reflector within a dialectical relationship with social structure. Consequently, experiences, opinions, backgrounds, and cultures invariably shape the world and its content, rendering them non-objective. Numerous instances illustrate this dynamic, as seen in the approaches taken by figures such as Trump. He asserts (2020) "Barack Obama was displaced from the top position, and President Trump secured the title of the Year's Most Admired Man. Trump ranks first, while Obama is second" (6:14 pm, December 30, 2020). This line of reasoning reflects his ambition and reveals his disparaging speech patterns, indicative of narcissistic tendencies and an effort to establish a hierarchy among others. The act of dehumanization is evident in his expressions and posts. The emphasis on individuality is highlighted by his frequent use of "I" and "MY." His extensive tweets serve as a platform to rally the public and society around his agenda, thereby creating social semiotics shaped by both the senders' and audiences' experiences, backgrounds, knowledge, and interpretative processes. Consequently, the directness fostered through multimodality ultimately disrupts society's political, social, and cultural dimensions that underpinned the construction of the Trump Empire.

## **Conclusion**

Discourse encompasses both spoken and written forms of communication or debate. The spoken aspect of discourse involves the oral and written structures through which texts are produced. Discourse manifests in everyday life to achieve its intended objectives. In contemporary society, multimodality broadly encompasses various texts and forms of communication, including verbal and non-verbal elements. The effectiveness of communication relies heavily on the use of language. Language serves as the medium for conveying, delivering, and receiving information, as well as for sharing ideas and values, while also reflecting the sociocultural context of a community. Furthermore, the choice of language, including tone, word selection, and diction, reveals individual's ideology, background, experiences, and perspectives within any society. Gentle language signifies humility and kindness, whereas harsh language indicates a fragmented and distorted

experience that an individual may have endured. Donald Trump is a notably blunt figure in the socio-political landscape of America. His provocative demeanor was often extreme and abrasive, particularly during debates with Hillary Clinton, interviews with reporters, and press conferences. His performative style contributed to a hyperreality, making it difficult for the American populace to differentiate between actual reality and a simulated one. Consequently, he secured victory in the 2016 election and assumed the presidency of the United States. His frequent use of derogatory terms such as "terrorist" and "crooked" illustrates a style of speech that fosters division within American society, creating rifts between various groups, including White and Black, affluent and impoverished, and the privileged and the underprivileged. The repercussions of his rhetoric highlight the existing power imbalances related to economic status, gender, race, ethnicity, caste, creed, and sexual orientation. Consequently, he established his empire independently, leveraging his wealth, status, and communication strategies. Furthermore, his manner of expression often conveys negative connotations, fostering animosity and reinforcing preconceived notions that incite many of the dogmatic ultra-nationalist perspectives in America. His delivery is subjective and excessively personal, while his agenda appears overly objective, inflexible, and straightforward. He perceives himself as genuine and honest, rather than embodying dehumanizing traits. The confidence he has developed in being assertive, even when distorting the truth, stems from the influence and power of his capital. Much of his rhetoric suggests that it is his financial resources rather than his intellect or personal insights. The criticisms directed at Obama and the allegations made against him by others represent a form of propaganda that has persisted since he first gained public attention. Every action and moment in the spotlight have been captured, disseminated, and amplified by news outlets and social media platforms such as Twitter and YouTube. Consequently, despite being controversial, intolerable, and often nonsensical, he has garnered popularity through mainstream media. In his narrative, the media plays an excessively prominent role in amplifying his statements and controversies, making it impossible to disregard him. The inability to overlook him and the lack of alternatives exemplify Trump's influence within the socio-political and cultural landscape of America, and on a global scale.

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