

# TRUST CONSTRUCTION IN DISCOURSE: AN ENUNCIATIVE PERSPECTIVE OF BIDEN'S VICTORY SPEECH

**YAO Grégoire Anahet**

*Université Alassane Ouattara*

*ivanovitch.yao@gmail.com*

## **Abstract**

*Argument is considered as the soul of politics. What political leaders do most is to persuade their likes of the rightness of their policies even though they sometimes vary in the way they are effective. This paper analyzes trust construction in the victory speech of Joe Biden. It highlights the way he wants people to give credit to his mandate and see him as an approachable leader. The work is grounded in Emile Benveniste's Enunciation theory which focuses on the speaker's activity within discourse. Relying on content analysis, the investigation shows that president Biden appears as an approachable politician via trust orchestrated by self-reference in the expression of challenges, newness and prestige, and language of proximity.*

**Keywords:** *Approachable, credit, enunciation, leader, trust*

## **Résumé**

*L'argument est considéré comme l'âme de la politique. Ce que font le plus les dirigeants politiques, c'est persuader leurs semblables de l'exactitude de leurs plans politiques quand bien même qu'ils varient souvent selon la manière d'être exécutée. Cet article vise à analyser la conception de la confiance dans le discours de victoire de Joe Biden en mettant en exergue la façon dont il veut que le peuple accorde du crédit à son mandat et le voit comme un leader approachable. Ce travail se fonde sur la théorie de l'Énonciation de Emile Benveniste qui s'appesantit sur l'activité de l'orateur dans le discours. S'appuyant sur l'analyse du contenu, l'investigation montre que le président Biden s'illustre comme un politicien approachable via la confiance orchestrée par l'autoréférence dans l'expression des challenges, des innovations et prestiges, et le langage de la proximité.*

**Mots-clés :** *Approachable, confiance, crédit, dirigeant, énonciation*

## Introduction

No trust, no way to lead, unless in a totalitarian society. Confidence is therefore the bedrock of all political discourse. In other terms, the search for trust from people is the first concern of any politician. In the same line of thought, discourse is far from being a neutral representation of the world; it is rather to characterize events in the way that fits discourse tenants' ideologies. That is why M. Butt and *al.* (2004: 288) claim “the very use of language is ideological”. In this way, the linguistic choices made by politicians are purported to produce either positive or negative effects on the audience since language is not only used to figure reality, but also to defend that reality, against anyone whose conception might threaten the one of the speakers.

Politics is seen as a struggle to gain and preserve power (Beard, 2000). Gaining or preserving power is worthwhile if it is linked to trust, considered as a relationship that discards any idea of doubt or deception. Trust involves sacrifice and also translates a great effort from the parties that are bound. The president-elect is aware of some realities related to deception and disenchantment. So he tried to establish a strong relationship between his people and him since they have been deceived at least once by his forerunners. Deception is somehow something common in politics and it mars the reputation of political orators anyhow. In this circumstance, what to do? Sealing confidence is then crucial for Biden so as to have the entire support of his collaborators and the people in general. Trust from the population gives him the possibility of being the president of all Americans as he wishes. It also gives him an impetus to rule the United States of America properly.

The work is in the field of political discourse Analysis and it analyses the construction of trust showing that the quest for confidence encapsulated in Biden's speech is a revealing cue for enticing people to give credit to his mandate and see him as an approachable leader. To reach that goal, these questions arise: What are the linguistic features of trust in discourse? What relational values do these features have? Do these features make president-elect Biden worthy to be qualified as an approachable leader?

Relying on Enunciation theory, the theory of the speaking subject, the paper is made of three parts. The first part focuses on self-reference in the expression of challenges and commitment, the second one displays newness and prestige in Biden's policy, and the last one sees about language of proximity.

## **I. Self-reference in the Expression of Challenges and Commitment**

In discourse, self-reference refers to any linguistic item that is associated with the person who is expressing ideas. It is most often used to convey what is good for the subject. Thus, when delivering speeches, politicians to present positive aspects of themselves and negative aspects of their opponents (Allen, 2007). It is obvious that political language is the twin sister of propaganda, expounded as a set of ideas or ideologies that are purported to influence and lead people. One way to make ideologies accepted by others is to resort to personal pronouns. They are various forms of address used to refer to a speaker, audience or opponent. In Biden's victory speech, self-reference encompasses both, the first singular person pronoun and the first plural person pronoun.

### ***I-1- First Singular Person Pronoun***

“I is a term of self-reference and not a substitute for a noun or a name as it is the case with the third person pronoun” according to Comrie (1981: 64). Thus, the pronoun “I” is used to refer to the one who speaks and implies at the same time an utterance on behalf of “I” in which “I” can only speak about himself (Benveniste, 1971). It also reflects the pure and intrinsic identity of the orator without any possibility of escape. In the same perspective, for Yao (2020: 95), “the personal pronoun ‘I’ and its variants (my, me, myself, mine) triggers the notion of subjectivity and the testimony of self”.

This testimony of self manifested by that pronoun gives voice to president Joe Biden in order to triumph over some resistance and have everyone on his side. The fact of ruling the country is dependent on the quality of the relationship the leader entertains with his people.

Appearing as a leader who is next to his countrymen, and who inspires trust, complete commitment through challenges is certainly a way to seduce and coordinate views. The following lines elucidate this point.

- (1) “**I** pledge to be a president who seeks not to divide, but to unify; who does not see red and blue states but, a United States.” (Biden, 2020)
- (2) “**I** sought this office to restore the soul of America, rebuild the backbone of the nation — the middle class, to make America respected around the world again, and to unite us here at home.” (Biden, 2020)

The two occurrences shelter the will of the speaker to overcome challenges that face the United States of America for years. They reveal that there is something wrong that must be eradicated or solved. It is therefore a must for the leader to rescue the country. President Biden appears as the remedy to the sad moments that undermine the country. The voice of the leader is manifested by the first singular person “I” to show the great challenge he wants to surmount. The use of “I” translates his total commitment and responsibility toward people.

In (1), by “I pledge”, the politician is reassuring his people to be a president who favors unity and fairness. The content of this assertion lets grasp that some of his predecessors were not working to unify Americans but, rather to divide them. It is an implicit manner to invite people to remember some disillusion and see the president-elect as a man of peace who is able to manifest the credo of all citizens, which is, peace for all and freedom of speech. Besides, Biden is escaping from the presidents who are self-centered and who always makes distinctions between people. For him, United States must prevail over any sort of clans or affiliations. His involvement teaches the fact that he seems to have learnt from the mistakes of his predecessors. The power of that pronoun makes the political orator appear as the witness and guarantor of the security and welfare of his country since his interest is merged with the one of the land. This commitment gives the impression that he is really different from his forerunner and deserves trust.

In occurrence (2), the determination of the leader is orchestrated by the “I” plus “sought”, the past form of the verb “seek”, so as to show his thirst to manifest the gesture that saves. This reveals that the thirst that has been quenched by the accession to power leads to the brighter days for the nation. Saying “I sought this office to restore the soul of America”, Joe Biden is drawing the attention of people to realize that there is something that matters. This thing is that America suffers from many vices that tarnish its image. From this sentence, he implicitly blames some leaders for the mistakes they have made in order to be seen as the man who has the current solution. This akin to say the restoration of the country will come true by his force and abnegation.

The project that consists in rebuilding of the backbone of the nation, making that nation respected all over the world and uniting people, is to highlight the great challenges that must be overcome. He is somehow enticing people not to ignore the issue but also to believe him and adhere his vision. The pronominal choice he made is persuasive and strategic since politicians tend to “manipulate pronouns to develop and indicate their ideological positions on specific issues” (Wilson, 1990: 46). With the use of the first singular pronoun, president Biden establishes a relationship of confidence in which the hearers play a huge role. In the same perspective, his way of sealing trust makes him appear as a superman capable of realizing the dream of all Americans dispersing any doubt. Another excerpt about strong commitment and challenge is presented.

- (3) “**I** will spare no effort — or commitment — to turn this pandemic around. **I** ran as a proud Democrat. **I** will now be an American president. **I** will work as hard for those who didn’t vote for me as (for) those who did.” (Biden, 2020)

In extract (3), the president, by the means of “I”, on the one hand is seen as a person who is able to mobilize efforts and commitment without any reserve to sweep out the common enemy of human beings, COVID-19, that is ravaging the United States. This commitment is to reassure his men and women that their lives are a priority. He is therefore ready to do what might be impossible for them so as to guarantee the quality of their health. This highlights that health

or life is something valuable to his eye. Biden's will and authority encapsulated in the pronoun "I" triggers a feeling of satisfaction and confidence in the hearers. On the other hand, the American politician embodies moral value showing that he is far from being a clan leader or leader of his party. He rather claims himself to be the president of all Americans favoring equity, democracy and peace. This act is a manipulative strategy purported to accredit his mandate and also sow the seed of trust between the Americans and him.

### ***I-2- First Plural Person Pronoun***

The first personal pronoun "we" and its variants (us, our and ourselves) are also considered as markers that signal the presence of the orator within discourse. They are used to merge politician's voice with the one of people. "We/us" construction is opposed to "they/them". The use of "we" involving "I" plus "you" is strategically used by Biden for benefiting from the confidence of people.

- (4) "The refusal of Democrats and Republicans to cooperate with one another is not due to some mysterious force beyond our control. It's a decision. It's a choice **we** make. And if **we** can decide not to cooperate, then **we** can decide to cooperate. And I believe that this is part of the mandate from the American people. They want **us** to cooperate." (Biden, 2020)
- (5) "**We** have the opportunity to defeat despair and to build a nation of prosperity and purpose. **We** can do it. I know we can." (Biden, 2020)

In these excerpts, the American president is inviting people, chiefly the members of the political parties to set aside any kind of dissent. It is a real call for unity for the sole interest of the country. For him, cooperation is not something extraordinary; it is rather a matter of choice as in "if **we** can decide not to cooperate, then **we** can decide to cooperate". By the use of the first plural personal pronoun "we", the leader manifests his strong desire to constitute a single unit that governs for the welfare of each American citizen. In other words, this call is to show that he, as the head of the state, is ready to reach out the others for a frank collaboration. "We" imposes a psychological pressure on the addressees that compels them to adhere the ideology of the

speaker. Implying the others by the association of “I” plus “you” that equals to “we”, is an influential technique that aims at coordinating opinions and showing to the eyes of everyone his genuine sense of collaboration. In the same context, “the way in which the pronouns are actually used in context can show the kind of social and political relationship between addressers and addressees” (Inigo-Mora, 2004: 28)

Furthermore, in (5), the president is revealing that the power of the mass and also the power that lies in the unity of actions. “We can do it” illustrates that it is a matter of will and determination. By the way, Biden is not only seeking for alignment but also to appear as an approachable leader worthy to be trusted. The use of “we” binds people avoiding any kind of detachment between the speaking subject and hearers. It is also meant to create a group that privileges a connection that splinters any barrier that exists between people and the American politician. In other words, this destruction of obstruction between the parties testifies his humbleness and openness as far as State affairs are concerned. The pronominal choices of the politician have been used strategically for persuasive ends. That is why Toh (2021:92) asserts “personal pronouns are not always used innocently”. This position is strengthened by “to achieve a politician intention, pronouns are not used as mere words, they are rather means of persuasion and manipulation” (Toh, 2019: 22).

## **II. Newness and Prestige in Biden’s Policy**

Newness and prestige are of a great importance for the founding of the American leader’s policy. These two aspects are among the characteristics that legitimate his mandate. In politics, people are always looking for what is new. In other words, they expect something different from what is usually seen.

Political speeches are most often designed for a heterogeneous audience made of different conceptions. The heterogeneous public is split into three parts that are adherents, opposition force, and skeptic people. The first group involves those who adhere to the ideologies no matter the promises, commitments and risks that they could face. Then, the opposition refers to people whose objective is to be contrary to the

ruling party without paying attention to the quality of the politician's development agenda. The last category shelters the ones who are stuck to the speech to get the content of the message and see whether they can give credence to the leader or not. From this perspective, the addresser manages to coordinate the views of the opposition and gain the allegiance of the skeptic ones. Therefore, the mission of the president-elect is not something else than using words, through a political language, to impact on his recipients so as to make them align. Prestige and newness are expressed via adjectives and superlative.

### ***II-1- Adjectives in the Construction of Confidence.***

Adjectives are used to qualify nouns. They also describe nouns and the quality attributed to them. Their uses in this context are far from being minor. From this standpoint, Mills (2000:91) posits “words are rarely neutral in their impact [...] words often carry emotional meaning that extends beyond their dictionary definitional.” The adjectives used by the president do not only play grammatical roles but also persuasive ones. This point is shown in the subsequent extract.

- (6) “And I will be honored to be serving with a ***fantastic*** vice president — Kamala Harris — who will make history as the ***first*** woman, ***first Black*** woman, ***first*** woman of South Asian descent, and ***first*** daughter of immigrants ever elected to national office in this country” (Biden, 2020)

The adjectives “fantastic”, “first” and “black” are righteously used to highlight the good will of Joe Biden to promote gender and equality among people. This makes him different from other racist leaders. From this, one can learn that he is really struggling for the rehabilitation of people no matter their origin, religion, gender, and social status. Moreover, the fact that her vice president is a descent of immigrants does not prevent him from collaborating with her. This illustrates that, as the chief of the State, the origin, gender or social status of a person is not an impediment to the realization Americans' common goal that is to make America strong. Thus, according to him, what must prevail over any kind of debate is the interest of the nation.

Using these adjectives in discourse is a boasting strategy that gives the impression that he is really the one who fits the country for a



sustainable development. It is also a discourse tactic that refers to prestige. The repetition of “first” is to insist on the fact what happens has never existed before in the whole history of America. Newness and prestige aim to impregnate in people’s mind that, things have henceforth changed under his mandate. He is implicitly convincing his people to trust him. By the use of “fantastic” and “first”, he qualifies his choices as the ones that are not common, they are rather amazing. This is to leaves the impression that the spirit of good change is in him; that is the reason why, he is able of realizing great things. The adjectives are manipulated to entice people to give credit to his ruling period while implicitly convincing his people to trust him.

### ***II-2- Superlative as a Discourse Strategy***

Superlative is a form that belongs to comparison. In politics, it is used to evaluate a situation or an aspect in the view of showing the distinction that exists. The difference from that comparison is purported to convey a particular intention. The idea of newness and prestige embedded in comparison is apparent in what follows:

- (7) “We have won with ***the most votes*** ever cast for a presidential ticket in the history of this nation — 74 million.” (Biden, 2020)
- (8) “And to all those who supported us: I am proud of the campaign we built and ran. I am proud of the coalition we put together, ***the broadest*** and ***most diverse*** in history.” (Biden, 2020)

President Biden is talking about his pride for the achievement during his political campaign. He is really satisfied of the coalition that leads him to victory. By the way, he boasts himself to be the one who realizes things that have never existed in the history of America. Accordingly, it means that no president succeeded in doing what he has done. This success is considered as a great prestige that makes him appear as a good and approachable leader worthy to be trusted. This comparison, by the means of the superlative forms such as “the broadest” and “most diverse”, is to draw the attention of the recipients about the noteworthy difference in terms of leadership or management. In utterance (7), “the most votes” is to emphasize and recall his brilliant election that has never occurred in that nation. The intention behind

the use of superlative is to show that currently, nothing can be compared with that achievement. This way of expressing himself is to teach that unity makes strong. It akin to reassure his fellow citizens that he is far from being a self-centered ruler but, an individual who is able to associate the others. In the same perspective, he is subtly stifling any doubt that could subsists in people.

The ability of the politician to accomplish what seems to be impossible lies in his will to favor collegial actions. It is a strategy that compels anyone to line up according to his ideologies since he is seen as a great leader capable to do what must be done to the interest of all Americans. The newness brought in the history of American people triggers the curiosity to know more about him wanting to discover all the innovations from his policy. He also appears as a precious stone that needs to be carefully and jealously kept otherwise America would sink in the same debacles or mistakes. In addition to the linguistic cues that show the particularity of the president-elect, language of proximity is dealt with to strengthen his quality to be approachable so as to gain allegiance from the population.

### III. Language of Proximity

Proximity is expounded as the fact of being nearer. In other words, it is to be next to something or people. This section sees about the way language is manipulated by the speaker to give the impression that he is closer to his people. For the American president, as the campaigns and elections are over, it time to give chance to real and indefectible unity that will make the nation greater. Therefore, there are no more parties and groups; what prevails over all these, is rather America. This ideology is elucidated in these lines.

- (9) “It’s time *to put away* the harsh rhetoric, *to lower* the temperature, *to see* each other again, *to listen* to each other again, *to make* progress. We must stop treating our opponents as our enemy. We are *not* enemies. We are Americans.”  
(Biden, 2020)

The president-elect invites all people living in the United Nations of America to be one in a single family headed by him. He

makes use of the infinitive forms of verbs so as to get his audience to forget the failure of their candidate and abandon any rebellion or resistance mentality. These action verbs are welcome in the sense that they are used to trigger actions in response to what is uttered. The progressive use of the five verbs is not fortuitous. Leaving aside rude way of speaking (*to put away* the harsh rhetoric) is the first thing to do for reaching cohesion. Then, the next thing is to reduce the temperature so as to give chance to dialogue (*to see* each other again, *to listen* to each other again). Finally, development (*to make* progress) is possible only if the previous aspects come true. The repetitive use of infinitives that shows the eagerness of the Biden to work with everyone is a call for wakefulness to avoid being an impediment to the development of America. This positive rhetoric exemplifies his thirst of peace and unity that have never existed in that land. This language of proximity also points out that he is an approachable leader seeking for bringing people together.

The second and the third sentences of that extract highlight the fact that he does not treat someone else as enemy. Thus, the word “enemy” is not part of him or his vision of politics. For him, the best way of dealing with politics is to avoid considering the others as enemies; hence his words “we are *not* enemies. We are Americans”. The negation mark “not” is to reveal the distance of the utterer vis à vis the word “enemies”. Afterward, “not enemies” has merely been substituted by “Americans”. This amounts to state that there is no place in Joe Biden’s heart for hatred; he sees his likes as his fellows, and not as enemies. He is presented as a man of peace whose first interests are the nation and the rehabilitation of his fellow-citizens at any level.

The leader is considered as a philanthropist who appears quite different from his predecessors. He seems to be an angel sent to change the history of his people. His language, showing his proximity and openness, aims at reinforcing the seed of confidence. His way of conceiving politics from the newness perspective is a great step for convincing his countrymen and women about the credibility of his mandate.

## Conclusion

The analysis of Joe Biden's victory speech, inscribed in the field of political discourse, is in line with the idea that political language is held to benefit from the sympathy of an audience. This is possible thanks to the strategic use of language. Trust construction is characterized by linguistic features such as: personal pronouns, adjectives, superlatives, infinitives, and negation. These linguistic items have allowed to corroborate the hypothesis that the quest for trust encapsulated in Biden's speech, is a revealing cue to give credence to the president's mandate making him appear as an approachable leader. Relying on Emile Benveniste's Enunciation, the gist of the study is attained.

The theory being focused on the traces left by the speaker discloses that the president-elect deserves trust from his people. Self-reference, translating subjectivity, has played a vital role in revealing the personality of the American president. It has been used to prove his determination to restore the United States of America. The moral values taking into account peace and equity through subjectivity, gives chance to the leader to be appreciated. His uses of the personal pronouns (I and we) are to sow the seed of trust in order to be seen as the long-awaited person for the real and positive change that will contribute to the welfare of each American citizen.

The adjectives and superlative forms have strategically been used to appear different from any other leader. This difference is characterized by newness and prestige for the sake of gaining people's confidence. The ability of the politician to realize what has never been done in the history of his nation lies in newness and prestige. This particularity is to reassure his audience inviting them to revoke any mentality that opposes his policy.

Infinitives and negation which make up language of proximity have shown the quality of the president to be an approachable president whose aim is to unite people so as to work with them. Trust is something valuable that is never sold or bought on market. It is rather deserved by a reliable individual. Trust is most often sealed through what is said; obviously, the thing that is uttered is from

discourse. The investigation allows to assert that the credibility of Joe Biden's mandate lies in the trust construction within his victory speech.

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