CONSTRUCTING VICTIMS AND VILLAINS: IDEOLOGICAL POLARIZATION IN TRUMP'S SPEECH ON CHARLIE KIRK

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Abstract

Political speeches constitute collective perception through event framing, identity construction, and emotional mobilization and, hence, are of the utmost importance for understanding the way language supports power and ideology. Drawing on the methodological apparatus of Critical Discourse Analysis, the current study integrates Fairclough's three-dimensional model with Van Dijk's ideological square. It analyzes how "victims" and "villains" are discursively constructed and what ideological functions these constructions serve in Trump's speech after the assassination of the conservative activist Charlie Kirk. The study analyzes the official transcript of the speech. The results indicate that Trump constructs the victim, Kirk, with the help of sacralized and heroic frames that scale up individual loss into national trauma, while simultaneously extending the category of victims to "all Americans." On the other side, villains are constructed by dehumanization and causal attribution: blame is attributed to the radical left, media, and related institutions, widening the circle of blame. Such representations realize important ideological functions: first, they reinforce polarization by means of strong moral binaries; second, they turn personal tragedy into political mobilization. Furthermore, positioning Trump as a protector figure creates emotional resonance, thereby firmly strengthening audience loyalty. This paper shows that the speech works not only as a form of eulogy but also as a persuasive strategy in solidifying identity boundaries and political support. The findings add to the scholarship of political communication and CDA, having implications for teaching persuasive discourse in business and organizational contexts.

Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis, ideological polarization, victim-villain construction, Donald Trump.

INTRODUCTION

Political speeches work as a powerful means of framing public events and creating collective understandings (Caiani, 2023). Besides their immediate political contexts, they reveal how language can shape thought, emotion, and action. This attracts the interest not just of political science but also of scholars of communication and discourse (Hulst et al., 2025). Over the last decade, partisan polarization has deepened in the United States (Shor & McCarty, 2022). For the study of language and communication, these speeches are important examples of how rhetorical choices, word selection, framing, and emotional appeal build audience perception and identity (Flusberg et al., 2024). They do more than convey sadness; they attribute causes, assign blame, and mobilize audiences toward action. This communicative strategy is well known within political, business, and social leadership contexts (Wawrzynski, 2022).

Following the assassination of a conservative activist, Charlie Kirk, at a college campus in Utah, Donald Trump delivered a speech in which grief, outrage, and moral condemnation

were intertwined. Wrapped in the mantle of a eulogy, the speech also sought to position Kirk within a moral and political struggle. Trump positioned him as a heroic patriot and a martyr while blaming "radical left" actors and media for his death. The personal tragedy was thereby turned into a symbolic ideological combat. Such strategies of representation are in tune with previous research in political communication that indicated how leaders construct binary oppositions – for instance, heroes versus enemies – to identify moral hierarchies and cement loyalty (Hronesova & Kreiss, 2024; Kravchenko et al., 2020; Kristianto & Wahyuni, 2022).

This paper utilizes Critical Discourse Analysis to explore how Trump's speech constructs "victims" and "villains" and how those representations work ideologically to deepen polarization. CDA provides a useful framework for examining these dynamics since it looks at how discourse reproduces ideology and power relation (Fairclough, 2012). Within CDA, language is not just descriptive but also creates realities that influence how the audience thinks, feels, and acts. This makes CDA relevant for English and communication lecturers interested in how public language practices affect decision-making, group identity, and perception in both political and corporate settings.

Previous research on Trump's rhetoric has unraveled some repeated features including nationalism, emotional polarization, and moral divisions (Hidalgo-Tenorio & Miguel-Angel, 2020; Kelly, 2020; Woods et al., 2024). With the exception of a very few pieces of research, little work has been done on Trump's memorial speeches-specifically, those after acts of violence or tragedy-as specific tools of ideological construction. While these speeches are instilled with loads of sympathy, most of these speeches reframe incidents for strengthening existing political gaps.

This study addresses that research gap by focusing on Trump's speech after the death of Charlie Kirk. The objective of this paper is to answer the following:

1. How are "victims" represented in the speech?
2. How are "villains" represented in the speech?
3. What ideological functions do these representations serve?

In this way, the article contributes to the scholars on political communication and critical discourse analysis, and it offers useful insights for teaching communication in business and economics contexts. Understanding how influential figures like Trump frame events can help students and future leaders recognize the persuasive power of language in shaping public opinion and organizational narrative and use it ethically.

METHOD

The study employs a qualitative research design, adopting Critical Discourse Analysis as the primary analytical method. CDA is appropriate for investigating how discourses reflect, constitute, and substantiate ideologies and power relations by means of language (Mogashoa, 2014). It enables an in-depth interpretation of how language use and rhetorical structures are at the service of ideological ends, especially in political communication (Durmaz & Yogun, 2022).

The analysis is informed by two complementary frameworks: Fairclough's three-dimensional model and Van Dijk's ideological square. Fairclough's model provides a systematic approach to analyzing discourse on three levels: 1) textual analysis, being the linguistic features of the text; 2) discursive practice, concerning the production and interpretation of the text; and 3) social practice, encompassing the broader sociopolitical contexts that provide meaning to the text (Fairclough, 2012). On the other hand, Van Dijk's ideological square provides a series of means through which polarization is developed within the structure of language itself; it underlines four main ideological strategies: 1) the emphasis on positive in-group features, 2) the focus on negative out-group features, 3) mitigation of in-group weaknesses, and 4) mitigation of out-group strengths (Dijk, 1998). Merging these two

frameworks will permit an analysis of Trump's speech from both structural and ideological perspectives (Shabbush, 2025).

The primary data for this research consist of a transcript of Donald Trump's speech delivered after the assassination of Charlie Kirk at a university campus in Utah. This speech was chosen because it combines mourning and commemoration with political mobilization, hence serving as an analytically enriching example of ideological discourse. Despite comprising only one speech, the discursive density and socio-political impact of this particular case justified its choice as a case study (Trump, 2025). In order to contextualize and elaborate on such an analysis, this research also used secondary sources of previous speeches by Trump after similar politically motivated acts of violence. The transcript was accessed through reputable online sources that archive U.S. political speeches and was verified through media coverage (Fitzgerald, 2024; Trump, 2019).

Data analysis is based on Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model, combined with Van Dijk's ideological square; it was carried out in the following stages: Textual Analysis, Discursive Practice, and Social Practice.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results of the Critical Discourse Analysis of Donald Trump's speech after the assassination of Charlie Kirk. The findings are organized into three subsections corresponding to the three objectives of the present study, namely, (1) representation of "victims," (2) representation of "villains," and (3) ideological functions of these representations. Further, each subsection integrates textual, discursive, and social analyses while drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Fairclough's and Van Dijk's.

Constructing the "Victims"

Throughout the speech, Trump develops "victims" through sacralized, heroic, and collective identity frames. This representation is mainly built on linguistic intensification, positive attribution, and emotional rhetoric. Such discursive constructions again correspond to Van Dijk's (1998) strategy of highlighting in-group virtues, where "our people" are morally uplifted to reinforce solidarity and legitimacy.

Trump consistently portrays Kirk as an iconic figure of the nation, not an individual victim of murder. For example, he describes Kirk as "a patriot who devoted his life to the cause of liberty, democracy, justice" and as "a martyr for truth and freedom." Both attribute heroic and transcendent qualities of Kirk. Such decisions operate at Fairclough's textual level to transform the victim into a symbolic representation of collective morality.

Such "heroification" is in tune with previous research, demonstrating that political leaders construct moral hierarchies by endowing target individuals with exceptional virtues (Hronesova & Kreiss, 2024). The iteration of superlative structures ("better than anybody ever," "never been anyone so respected") further amplifies Kirk's symbolic value. This technique, from the communication perspective, echoes the corporate crisis messaging in which an organization would promote internal heroes or victims to build brand loyalty and internal cohesion, and this insight applies particularly to teaching context in business communication.

Trump expands the victim frame beyond Kirk: "This is a dark moment for America; the monster who attacked him was attacking our whole country." Such discursive moves shift the narrative from one of individual loss to one of national trauma. This fully agrees with Flusberg et al. (2024) observation that political actors often nationalize grief to produce shared emotional identities.

With this expansion of the category of victim, Trump constructs the nation in general and his supporters in particular as a collective body under threat. This is a characteristic of

typical populist rhetoric: the people are under threat, and the leader poses himself as their protector.

Constructing the "Villains"

The second aim is to explore how Trump orients to antagonistic actors. In this regard, throughout his speech, Trump villainizes through dehumanization, moral condemnation, and diffuse blame attribution. The strategies are in line with the negative side of Van Dijk's ideological square by emphasizing an out-group's vices.

The most salient villain category is the "radical left." Trump assigns them direct causal blame, saying their rhetoric is "directly responsible for the terrorism we're seeing." Trump constructs a casual chain where verbal criticism by the left leads to physical violence. This is a classic causality frame that is commonly used in crisis rhetoric in order to create coherence and mobilize anger.

Lexical choices like "hateful," "despicable," "monsters," "vicious," "terrorism" dehumanize political opponents. These intensifiers function discursively to characterize the out-group as existential threats. Compared with Trump's Texas and Ohio speeches, which framed villains as "twisted monsters" or "racist hate," the Charlie Kirk speech extends culpability from individual shooters to entire ideological groups.

Trump also ascribes villainy to more diffuse entities: "the media," "organizations that fund it," and "those who go after our judges and law enforcement officials." This kind of diffuse construction of villainy follows strategies identified by Kravchenko et al. (2020), in which the circle of blame is extended with the purpose of building an image of pervasive threat. Notably, such a rhetorical move enables Trump to position numerous institutions as morally corrupted and further mistrust in perceived "establishment" systems. From a business and economic communication perspective, this parallels competitive framing in the corporate narratives, whereby organizations frame external threats – competitors, regulators, economic forces – to justify strategic action or to solidify internal support.

Ideological Functions of Victim-Villain Construction

The third reveals how these representations fulfill wider ideological purposes. This covers Fairclough's social practice aspect, placing textual strategies into perspective in the U.S. polarization of sociopolitical context.

This speech establishes a clear moral dichotomy: in-group (patriots): moral, faithful, courageous, logical, peaceful vs. out-group (radical left): hateful, corrupt, responsible for terrorism. Such a binary constitutes a classic populist ideological structure; it divides society into morally pure people and morally corrupt elites or opponents (Woods et al., 2024). Trump's words "a monster who attacked him was attacking our whole country" equated violence against one individual to be equal to violence against the nation; the sentiment of collective victimhood was thus amplified.

At the same time, even though written as a eulogy, the speech he gives eschews mourning in favor of mobilization. The phrase "My administration will find each and every one of those who contributed to this atrocity" intermingles grief with political promise. The latter chimes with Wawrzynski's (2022) argument that leaders often seize tragedy as an opportunity for mobilizing group identity toward future action. On the discursive practice level, the speech recontextualizes Kirk's death into a call to action within a commitment by Americans to values for which Kirk has lived and died. This is how in political speeches the emotional narratives are turned into ideological reinforcement.

Trump creates himself as the protector of the victimized nation. He repeatedly uses assertive modality: "My administration will find …, "and "we will ensure his legacy will live on." This is consistent with the protector frame-a leadership communication strategy wherein the speaker promises safety and order in response to crisis (Hidalgo-Tenorio & Miguel-Angel,

2020). The protector frame also crystallizes the leadership image of Trump by combining his personal survival – as in some other speeches, namely the marathon RNC speech – with national survival, a symbolic parallel presents in the literature on populist communication.

Finally, the interplay of grief, fear, and patriotic devotion heightens emotional engagement. These emotional appeals help in reinforcing the group boundary since emotional activation increases partisan identity salience (Flusberg et al., 2024). The final blessing, "May God bless his memory … and may God bless the United States of America," forms a ceremonial, almost liturgical ending, emphasizing the sacredness of the in-group identity. This provides a clear example for business and economics students of how emotional and symbolic language shape organizational culture, employee loyalty, and stakeholder perception, using an ethical approach that underlines the importance of understanding persuasive discourse.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to political communication and discourse analysis research by highlighting the ways in which memorial style speeches are able to merge feelings of sympathy with increased polarization. From an educational perspective, especially within business and economics studies, these findings provide evidence that students should learn to identify strategies of persuasive language use within public communication. In fact, the very same rhetorical mechanisms found in this speech play out within corporate messaging and crisis communication as well as leadership discourses, through which emotional framing and strategic positioning come to contour stakeholder perception and organizational identity.

This study can be developed in a few ways. First, comparison studies that involve a broader corpus of memorial speeches by different political figures or across countries will enable scholars to check whether the victim-villain structure identified here is particular to Trump or representative of contemporary populist rhetoric in general. Quantitative linguistic tools like corpus-based frequency analysis and sentiment analysis also complement CDA by measuring discursive patterns on a scale. Finally, an interdisciplinary perspective from psychology, communication, and leadership studies might yield greater insight into how emotionally charged rhetoric shapes audience loyalty and decision making – an issue increasingly relevant in political and business contexts alike.

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