



Tendency on power dynamics and social Identity through negative sentiment utterances

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates how political candidates of differing social status pragmatically employ sentiment in formal debate discourse, focusing on the 2024 U.S. Presidential Debate between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris. Political debates are rich in rhetorical strategies where sentiment influences persuasion and public perception, yet the pragmatic dimension of sentiment remains underexplored. To address this gap, the research integrates computational sentiment analysis with speech act classification to uncover how language choices fulfill rhetorical intentions. Using a mixed-method approach, VADER sentiment analysis was combined with manual categorization of speech acts based on Searle's taxonomy. Debate transcripts were analyzed to quantify sentiment polarity and identify corresponding pragmatic functions. Results indicate that both candidates strategically used assertive, expressive, and commissive acts imbued with contrasting emotional tones. Trump frequently employed hyperbolic and affect-laden expressions to assert dominance and provoke response, whereas Harris relied on structured critique and historical references to convey accountability and moral authority. Sentiment functioned as a pragmatic resource for negotiating credibility, reinforcing social identity, and managing power relations. These findings highlight sentiment's dual role as an emotional and rhetorical mechanism in high-stakes political communication. This study contributes to pragmatic and political discourse studies by demonstrating how negative sentiment utterances are systematically embedded within assertive, expressive, and commissive speech acts to negotiate power dynamics and construct social identity in formal political debates, while empirically extending speech act theory through the integration of computational sentiment analysis and qualitative pragmatic interpretation.

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1. Introduction

Political debates play an important role in shaping public opinion and influencing election outcomes. As structured interactions, these debates serve as platforms where candidates articulate their visions, defend policies, and establish credibility with voters. Within this framework, language use functions not only as a means of conveying information but also as a strategic tool for achieving pragmatic goals. The pragmatic dimension of political discourse involves deliberate linguistic choices to persuade, challenge, and position oneself advantageously within the debate setting.



Although sentiment in political discourse has been widely examined, much of the existing literature emphasizes its emotional or psychological impact rather than its pragmatic function. In political communication, sentiment is not merely expressive, it operates as a rhetorical device to construct authority, appeal to certain voter groups, or undermine opponents. Studies have demonstrated that linguistic choices, including sentiment-laden vocabulary, are often influenced by social variables such as status and identity (Heller et al., 2024; Lukianenko, 2024). Moreover, speakers of higher social standing tend to employ distinct rhetorical styles and lexical preferences to accomplish communicative objectives (Dragojevic, 2017; Hymes, 2009; Selting, 2009; Turner & Lin, 2024). However, little is known about how individuals from different social strata pragmatically use sentiment as a rhetorical strategy in structured political debates (Aliwie, 2025; Bareis & Katzenbach, 2022; C. Ilie, 2018).

The relationship between social status and language use has been a longstanding focus in sociolinguistics, with recent studies emphasizing how linguistic variations both reflect and reinforce social hierarchies. Research shows that individuals of higher social class tend to adopt more formal and prestigious linguistic norms, while those from lower strata often employ vernacular or informal registers. For example, Arifin (2023) found that characters in *Little Women* (2019) displayed speech patterns consistent with their social positions, highlighting how language constructs social identity. Similarly, Wang et al. (2023) argued that language not only mirrors social differences but also actively shapes them. Sodah (2019) observed that individuals with higher status were more likely to adopt prestigious linguistic features, whereas those from lower ranks maintained traditional speech forms. Complementing this, Riemland (2024) discussed how socioeconomic status influences linguistic variation, showing that language operates as a means of sustaining social order.

Language in political contexts functions as a persuasive instrument that constructs both political identity and voter perception. Emotive rhetoric such as metaphors, pronouns, and repetition creates affective connections between speaker and audience (Rahmani & Saeed, 2024). Wolfram (2023) emphasized that linguistic variation serves as a marker of social stratification, reinforcing the social boundaries embedded in discourse. Woods et al. (2024) revealed that in the 2020 U.S. presidential election, negative rhetoric was employed to shape political identity and delegitimize opponents. Biden's inclusive civic nationalism contrasted sharply with Trump's exclusionary ethnic nationalism, illustrating how negative sentiment can reinforce polarization. Sofian (2021) similarly showed that Biden's assertive acts established legitimacy through narratives of unity and progress, while negative sentiment often realized through expressive or directive acts consolidated in-group solidarity at the expense of out-groups.

Negative sentiment has historically played a significant role in shaping political identity. Trump's 2016 campaign discourse, for instance, utilized consistent negative narratives to evoke fear and division, fostering an "us versus them" mentality (Bartscherer, 2021). In more recent contexts, negative sentiment in online debates continues to amplify polarization and erode institutional trust (Pradipta et al., 2023). Kampf (2021) further noted that political condemnation acts requests to denounce or affirm reinforce social identities and group loyalty. Similarly, Lugtigheid et al. (2025) demonstrated that right-wing politicians in the Netherlands employed emotional victimization narratives to strengthen internal solidarity and assert dominance through negative framing.

Sentiment, therefore, functions as a central mechanism in political communication, shaping persuasion, mobilization, and public engagement. Advances in computational linguistics have enabled sentiment analysis to uncover emotional tones in political discourse (Matalon et al., 2021).

Emotional rhetoric, whether positive or negative, has been found to enhance message virality and influence public perception (Kaimaki et al., 2025; Pivecka et al., 2022; Shah et al., 2024). Furthermore, sentiment on social media can influence crisis communication and shape public narratives (Fitch & Motion, 2020). In the Indonesian context, Liu et al. (2023) revealed that negative sentiment surrounding election transparency reflected broader public distrust, while Anwar et al. (2024) showed that linguistic manipulation of sentiment acts as a form of power negotiation in both U.S. and Indonesian elections.

However, existing studies have not sufficiently examined how sentiment interacts with social identity and power relations in real-time political debate discourse. Much remains unclear about how speakers from differing social statuses deploy sentiment pragmatically to assert authority or challenge opponents.

Therefore, this research aims to analyze how political candidates of different social standings pragmatically use sentiment-laden utterances to perform power negotiation during the 2024 U.S. Presidential Debate between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions: How do candidates employ sentiment within distinct speech act categories to achieve pragmatic goals? and in what ways does social status influence the pragmatic deployment of sentiment in debate discourse?

By addressing these questions, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how sentiment operates not only as an emotional resource but as a strategic linguistic tool for constructing authority, negotiating social relations, and shaping political identity in contemporary discourse. Based on the theoretical foundation of speech act theory Searle et al. (1980) and sociolinguistic perspectives on power (Rahmani & Saeed, 2024; Wolfram, 2023), this study conceptualizes the interaction among sentiment, speech acts, social identity, and power negotiation in political debates. Fig. 1 illustrates the conceptual framework that guides this research.

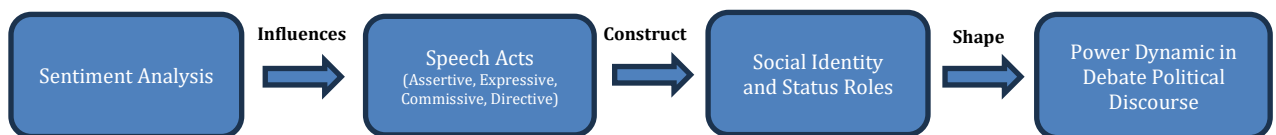


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework illustrating

2. Method

This research employed a mixed-methods design combining quantitative and qualitative approaches to examine how political candidates pragmatically use sentiment in formal debate discourse. The qualitative component focused on the pragmatic functions of language, particularly how sentiment is expressed through speech acts. This aligns with Zamihu (2024) framework, which utilized content and thematic analysis to investigate rhetorical strategies in political debates.

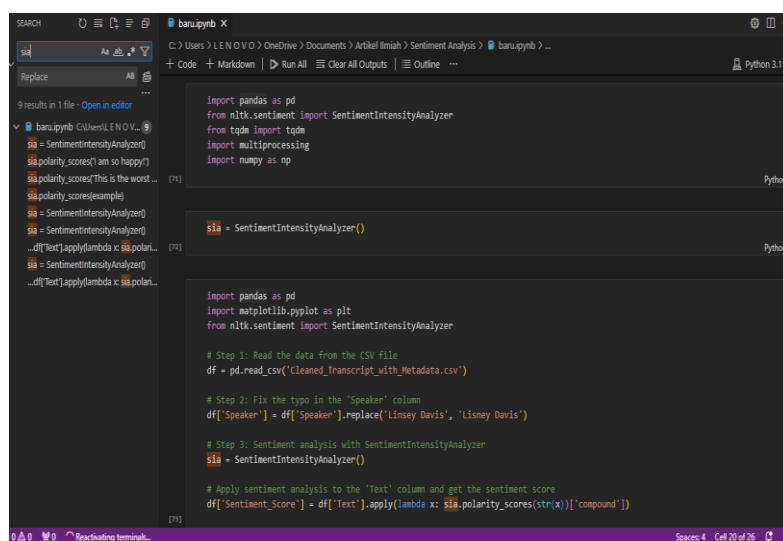
The quantitative component applied computational sentiment analysis to measure emotional polarity and lexical variation between candidates of differing social statuses. By integrating discourse-level interpretation with statistical modelling, this approach enhanced analytical depth through triangulation (Saputra & Tur, 2025). The combination of computational and pragmatic analysis allowed for a comprehensive understanding of both the rhetorical structure and sentiment-driven power dynamics within the debate.

As seen in Table 1, the dataset consists of official transcripts from the 2024 U.S. Presidential Debate between Donald J. Trump and Kamala D. Harris, sourced from the ABC News archives to ensure data authenticity and accuracy. Transcripts were chosen based on criteria that they:

Represent a formal, nationally broadcasted debate between two presidential candidates. Include verbatim transcriptions preserving speaker identity, sequence, and contextual information such as turn-taking and response length. The 2024 debate was specifically selected due to its high political polarization and the stark contrast in candidate identity representations, making it a particularly relevant case for examining sentiment-driven power negotiation in political discourse. This debate exemplifies how language is strategically employed to construct authority, assert social positioning, and influence public perception.

As seen in Fig. 2, data analysis combined computational linguistics with pragmatic theory to examine sentiment distribution, communicative intent, and lexical variation. Three analytical components were employed: sentiment analysis, pragmatic analysis, and lexical variation analysis. Sentiment polarity was identified using VADER (Valence Aware Dictionary and sEntiment Reasoner), a lexicon-based tool optimized for social and political discourse. Each utterance was categorized as positive, negative, or neutral. Prior to analysis, the text underwent light preprocessing (tokenization and stop-word removal) to enhance classification precision.

Findings from other studies were consulted for comparison. For instance, Prayogi & Fahadayna (2024) applied Naïve Bayes classification to 8,429 tweets during the 2019 Indonesian presidential campaign, revealing the dominance of negative sentiment tied to polarization and identity politics. This comparison underscores the prevalence of emotionally charged and divisive narratives across political contexts. The pragmatic dimension employed Searle et al. (1980) speech act taxonomy such as assertive, directive, commissive, expressive, and declarative to identify communicative intent. Annotation was conducted manually by multiple trained coders, and inter-rater reliability was calculated to ensure classification consistency. As highlighted by Tur et al. (2023) and Hagemann & Abramova (2023), commissive and expressive acts play a central role in constructing political identity, reflecting emotional appeal and strategic persuasion in power-oriented discourse.



The screenshot shows a Jupyter Notebook interface with a dark theme. The left sidebar displays a file explorer with a folder named 'baruipynb' containing a file 'baruipynb'. The main area shows a Python script for sentiment analysis using VADER. The code includes imports for pandas, nltk, and VADER's SentimentIntensityAnalyzer. It defines a function to analyze sentiment scores and applies it to a dataset. The output shows sentiment scores for various text samples, such as 'I am so happy!' and 'This is the worst...'. The bottom status bar indicates 'Spans: 4 Cell 20 of 26'.

```

import pandas as pd
from nltk.sentiment import SentimentIntensityAnalyzer
from tqdm import tqdm
import multiprocessing
import numpy as np

sia = SentimentIntensityAnalyzer()

import pandas as pd
import matplotlib.pyplot as plt
from nltk.sentiment import SentimentIntensityAnalyzer

# Step 1: Read the data from the CSV file
df = pd.read_csv('Cleaned_Transcript_with_Metadata.csv')

# Step 2: Fix the type in the 'Speaker' column
df['Speaker'] = df['Speaker'].replace('Linsey Davis', 'Linsey Davis')

# Step 3: Sentiment analysis with SentimentIntensityAnalyzer
sia = SentimentIntensityAnalyzer()

# Apply sentiment analysis to the 'Text' column and get the sentiment score
df['Sentiment_Score'] = df['Text'].apply(lambda x: sia.polarity_scores(str(x))['compound'])

```

Fig. 2. Sentiment Analysis Tool: VADER, an optimized lexicon-based sentiment scoring system.

To ensure methodological rigor, this study applied several validation techniques. One of them is inter-rater reliability, where several linguistic experts independently annotate speech acts to ensure consistency and accuracy in the analysis. This process helps minimize subjectivity and increases the reliability of linguistic categorization (Sabrina & Tur, 2025).

In addition to expert annotations, cross-validation was performed by comparing the results of the computational sentiment analysis with human annotations. This approach ensures that the

computational model aligns with the human interpretation of sentiment, thereby increasing the robustness of the findings (Tur et al., 2024). Furthermore, statistical significance testing was conducted through correlation analysis to validate hypotheses regarding sentiment expression and social status (Nurazizah et al., 2024). By integrating linguistic analysis, sentiment computation tools, and statistical validation, this research provides a more comprehensive understanding of how sentiment and social factors shape political communication Sabrina and (Tur et al., 2023).

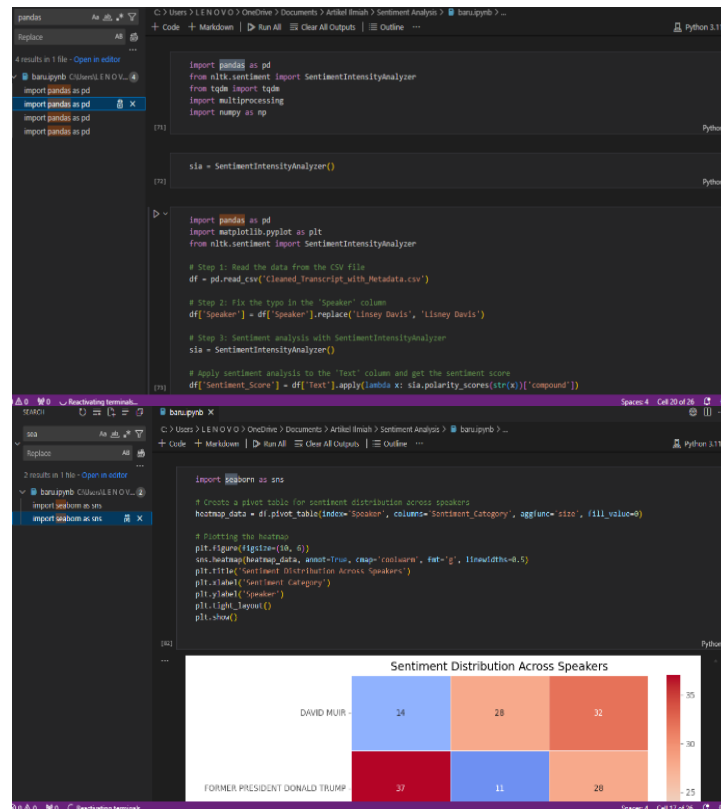


Fig. 3. Statistical Tools: Python-based data analysis using Pandas and Seaborn for visualization.

As seen in Fig.3, all data used in this research were drawn from publicly available and officially published debate transcripts. No personal or private information was accessed or analyzed. Ethical standards for academic integrity and responsible data handling were observed throughout the study.

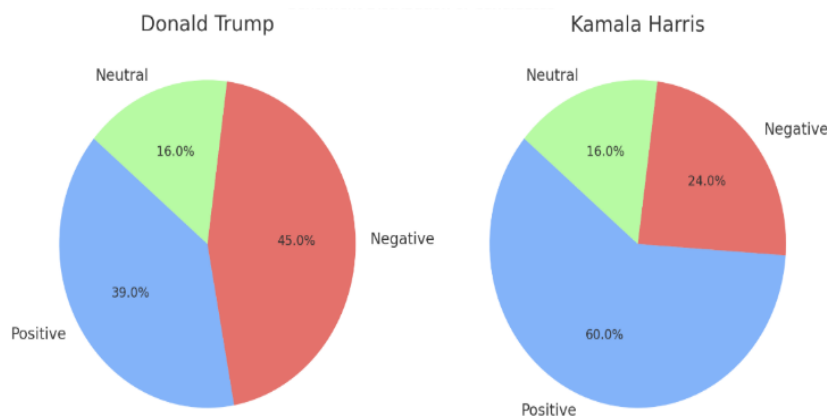


Fig. 4. Sentiment distribution

As seen in Fig. 4, Donald Trump uses negative sentiment more often (45%) than Kamala Harris (24%) while Harris uses more positive sentiment (60%) than Trump (39%). Meanwhile, the percentage of neutral sentiment between Trump and Harris is the same (16%). Negatives are more likely to come up in discussions about the economy, immigration and foreign policy. Trump often uses harsh rhetoric on immigration and national security policy, while Harris has sharply criticized Trump's leadership on the economy and foreign policy in Table 2.

Table 1. Sentiment Distribution in Key Debate Topics

Topic	Sentiment	Candidates	Debate Statement
Economy	Negative	Donald Trump	Look, we've had a terrible economy because inflation has -- which is really known as a country buster. It breaks up countries. We have inflation like very few people have ever seen before. Probably the worst in our nation's history. (-0.87).
Economy	Negative	Kamala Harris	"Donald Trump left us the worst unemployment since the Great Depression. Donald Trump left us the worst public health epidemic in a century. Donald Trump left us the worst attack on our democracy since the Civil War." (-0.94).
Immigration	Negative	Kamala Harris	"Donald Trump got on the phone, called up some folks in Congress, and said kill the [border security] bill. And you know why? Because he preferred to run on a problem instead of fixing a problem." (-0.95).
Immigration	Negative	Donald Trump	As far as rallies are concerned, as far -- the reason they go is they like what I say. They want to bring our country back. They want to make America great again. It's a very simple phrase. Make America great again. She's destroying this country. And if she becomes president, this country doesn't have a chance of success. Not only success. We'll end up being Venezuela on steroids."(0.29).
Foreign Policy	Negative	Donald Trump	"She hates Israel. If she's president, I believe that Israel will not exist within two years from now." (-0.99).
Foreign Policy	Negative	Kamala Harris	"It is well known that he admires dictators, wants to be a dictator on day one according to himself. It is well known that he said of Putin that he can do whatever the hell he wants." (-0.94)

3. Result and Discussion

Economy

Trump: "First of all, I have no sales tax. That's an incorrect statement. She knows that. We're doing tariffs on other countries. Other countries are going to finally, after 75 years, pay us back for all that we've done for the world. And the tariff will be substantial in some cases. I took in billions and billions of dollars, as you know, from China. In fact, they never took the tariff off because it was so much money, they can't. It would totally destroy everything that they've set out to do. They've

taken in billions of dollars from China and other places. They've left the tariffs on. When I had it, I had tariffs and yet I had no inflation. Look, we've had a terrible economy because inflation has -- which is really known as a country buster. It breaks up countries. We have inflation like very few people have ever seen before. Probably the worst in our nation's history. We were at 21. But that's being generous because many things are 50, 60, 70, and 80 higher than they were just a few years ago. This has been a disaster for people, for the middle class, but for every class. On top of that, we have millions of people pouring into our country from prisons and jails, from mental institutions and insane asylums. And they're coming in and they're taking jobs that are occupied right now by African Americans and Hispanics and also unions. Unions are going to be affected very soon. And you see what's happening. You see what's happening with towns throughout the United States. You look at Springfield, Ohio. You look at Aurora in Colorado. They are taking over the towns. They're taking over buildings. They're going in violently. These are the people that she and Biden let into our country. And they're destroying our country. They're dangerous. They're at the highest level of criminality. And we have to get them out. We have to get them out fast. I created one of the greatest economies in the history of our country. I'll do it again and even better."

Trump's statements on economic performance reveal a dominant use of assertive, expressive, and commissive speech acts. He asserts economic success and blames the current administration for inflation ("We have inflation like very few people have ever seen before"), positioning his own leadership as economically superior. This assertive act reflects what [Searle et al. \(1980\)](#) terms an attempt to "describe the world according to one's belief," though Trump's claims often blur the line between factuality and persuasion. His emotionally charged phrases ("millions of people pouring into our country from prisons and jails") demonstrate expressive acts, constructing a moral panic that frames immigration as an economic and social threat. These hyperbolic portrayals align with previous findings by [Chilton \(2004\)](#) and [Fetzer & Bull \(2012\)](#), who observed that political leaders often manipulate fear-based rhetoric to strengthen dominance narratives. Trump's commissive statements ("I'll do it again and even better") reinforce a self-image of capability and renewal, resonating with populist discourse strategies that merge affect and authority.

Harris: "Well, I would love to. Let's talk about what Donald Trump left us. Donald Trump left us the worst unemployment since the Great Depression. Donald Trump left us the worst public health epidemic in a century. Donald Trump left us the worst attack on our democracy since the Civil War. And what we have done is clean up Donald Trump's mess. What we have done and what I intend to do is built on what we know are the aspirations and the hopes of the American people. But I'm going to tell you all, in this debate tonight, you're going to hear from the same old, tired playbook, a bunch of lies, grievances and name-calling. What you're going to hear tonight is a detailed and dangerous plan called Project 2025 that the former president intends on implementing if he were elected again. I believe very strongly that the American people want a president who understands the importance of bringing us together knowing we have so much more in common than what separates us. And I pledge to you to be a president for all Americans."

In contrast, Harris's economic discourse employs a more structured, assertive tone grounded in factual comparison and historical reference. Her repetition ("Donald Trump left us the worst unemployment since the Great Depression...") underscores accountability and aligns with institutional credibility rather than populist affect. This strategy suggests what [Holmes \(2006\)](#) calls a "collaborative pragmatic style," often associated with female political leadership, one emphasizing responsibility and moral legitimacy. While Trump's sentiment is emotionally driven and antagonistic, Harris's sentiment appears evaluative and policy-oriented, reflecting pragmatic competence and leadership ethos. This contrast suggests that sentiment is mediated by social status

and gendered communication norms, consistent with prior studies on gender and political pragmatics (Beard, 2000; Lazar, 2005).

Immigration

Harris: "So I'm the only person on this stage who has prosecuted transnational criminal organizations for the trafficking of guns, drugs, and human beings. And let me say that the United States Congress, including some of the most conservative members of the United States Senate, came up with a border security bill which I supported. And that bill would have put 1,500 more border agents on the border to help those folks who are working there right now over time trying to do their job. It would have allowed us to stem the flow of fentanyl coming into the United States. I know there are so many families watching tonight who have been personally affected by the surge of fentanyl in our country. That bill would have put more resources to allow us to prosecute transnational criminal organizations for trafficking in guns, drugs and human beings. But you know what happened to that bill? Donald Trump got on the phone, called up some folks in Congress, and said kill the bill. And you know why? Because he preferred to run on a problem instead of fixing a problem. And understand, this comes at a time where the people of our country actually need a leader who engages in solutions, who actually addresses the problems at hand. But what we have in the former president is someone who would prefer to run on a problem instead of fixing a problem. And I'll tell you something, he's going to talk about immigration a lot tonight even when it's not the subject that is being raised. And I'm going to actually do something really unusual and I'm going to invite you to attend one of Donald Trump's rallies because it's a really interesting thing to watch. You will see during the course of his rallies he talks about fictional characters like Hannibal Lecter. He will talk about windmills cause cancer. And what you will also notice is that people start leaving his rallies early out of exhaustion and boredom. And I will tell you the one thing you will not hear him talk about is you. You will not hear him talk about your needs, your dreams, and your, your desires. And I'll tell you, I believe you deserve a president who actually puts you first. And I pledge to you that I will."

Harris's statements in the immigration debate largely employ assertive and expressive acts to highlight her professional credibility and criticize Trump's leadership. Her declaration ("I'm the only person on this stage who has prosecuted transnational criminal organizations") functions as an assertive act asserting institutional legitimacy. Her sarcastic comments ("He talks about fictional characters like Hannibal Lecter") reflect expressive disapproval a rhetorical move that softens confrontation through humor while maintaining critical tone. Such discursive strategies align with Fairclough (2013) framework of evaluative discourse, where speakers use irony and emotional restraint to negotiate power in a public arena. The closing commissive act ("I pledge to you that I will put you first") suggests that Harris frames commitment through empathy, constructing an inclusive ethos rather than dominance.

After expressing assertive and expressive speech acts, here Harris ends his debate sentence with a commissive speech act which aims to indicate Harris' commitment to put the people's interests above all else.

Trump: "First let me respond as to the rallies. She said people start leaving. People don't go to her rallies. There's no reason to go. And the people that do go, she's busing them in and paying them to be there. And then showing them in a different light. So, she can't talk about that. People don't leave my rallies. We have the biggest rallies, the most incredible rallies in the history of politics. That's because people want to take their country back. Our country is being lost. We're a failing nation. And it happened three and a half years ago. And what, what's going on here, you're going to

end up in World War 3, just to go into another subject. What they have done to our country by allowing these millions and millions of people to come into our country. And look at what's happening to the towns all over the United States. And a lot of towns don't want to talk -- not going to be Aurora or Springfield. A lot of towns don't want to talk about it because they're so embarrassed by it. In Springfield, they're eating the dogs. The people that came in. They're eating the cats. They're eating -- they're eating the pets of the people that live there. And this is what's happening in our country. And it's a shame. As far as rallies are concerned, as far -- the reason they go is they like what I say. They want to bring our country back. They want to make America great again. It's a very simple phrase. Make America great again. She's destroying this country. And if she becomes president, this country doesn't have a chance of success. Not only success. We'll end up being Venezuela on steroids."

Conversely, Trump's immigration rhetoric centers on assertive-expressive overlap. His unverified claims ("In Springfield, they're eating the dogs...") convey hyperbolic realism designed to evoke moral outrage and fear. This rhetorical pattern parallels [Wodak's \(2015\)](#) findings on right-wing populist discourse, where emotional exaggeration and fear appeal function as pragmatic tools for legitimizing exclusionary narratives. Trump's framing of immigration thus appears to blend expressive anger with assertive certainty a form of emotional persuasion that contrasts with Harris's rationalized empathy. This difference suggests how status, ideology, and identity influence pragmatic deployment of sentiment.

Foreign Policy

Trump: "If I were president, it would have never started. If I were president Russia would have never, ever -- I know Putin very well. He would have never -- and there was no threat of it either, by the way, for four years. Have gone into Ukraine and killed millions of people when you add it up. Far worse than people understand what's going on over there. But when she mentions about Israel all of a sudden -- she hates Israel. She wouldn't even meet with Netanyahu when he went to Congress to make a very important speech. She refused to be there because she was at a sorority party of hers. She wanted to go to the sorority party. She hates Israel. If she's president, I believe that Israel will not exist within two years from now. And I've been pretty good at predictions. And I hope I'm wrong about that one. She hates Israel. At the same time in her own way, she hates the Arab population because the whole place is going to get blown up, Arabs, Jewish people, Israel. Israel will be gone. It would have never happened. Iran was breaking under Donald Trump. Now Iran has 300 billion because they took off all the sanctions that I had. Iran had no money for Hamas or Hezbollah or any of the 28 different spheres of terror. And they are spheres of terror. Horrible terror. They had no money. It was a big story, and you know it. You covered it. Very well, actually. They had no money for terror. They were broke. Now they're a rich nation. And now what they're doing is spreading that money around. Look at what's happening with the Houthis and Yemen. Look at what's going on in the Middle East. This would have never happened. I will get that settled and fast. And I'll get the war with Ukraine and Russia ended. If I'm President-Elect, I'll get it done before even becoming president."

Trump: "And that's the kind of talent we have with her. She's worse than Biden. In my opinion, I think he's the worst president in the history of our country. She goes down as the worst vice president in the history of our country. But let me tell you something. She is a horrible negotiator. They sent her in to negotiate. As soon as they left Putin did the invasion."

In the foreign policy segment, Trump's statements combine assertive and commissive acts that foreground personal authority and global control. His claim, "If I were president, Russia would have

never started [the war],” appears as an assertive act projecting hypothetical certainty. This aligns with Van Dijk (1993) argument that ideological discourse often relies on epistemic authority, where the speaker’s belief substitutes for empirical evidence. Trump’s emotionally charged accusations (“She hates Israel...”) demonstrate expressive condemnation and negative other-presentation, constructing a moral binary that amplifies his own leadership strength. His commissive promises (“I will get that settled and fast”) further appeal to public trust through performative certainty, reinforcing leadership ethos via verbal commitment.

Harris: “That’s absolutely not true. I have my entire career and life supported Israel and the Israeli people. He knows that. He’s trying to again divide and distract from the reality, which is it is very well known that Donald Trump is weak and wrong on national security and foreign policy. It is well known that he admires dictators, wants to be a dictator on day one according to himself. It is well known that he said of Putin that he can do whatever the hell he wants and go into Ukraine. It is well known when that he said when Russia went into Ukraine it was brilliant. It is well known he exchanged love letters with Kim Jong un. And it is absolutely well known that these dictators and autocrats are rooting for you to be president again because they’re so clear, they can manipulate you with flattery and favors. And that is why so many military leaders who you have worked with have told me you are a disgrace. That is why we understand that we have to have a president who is not consistently weak and wrong on national security including the importance of upholding and respecting in highest regard our military.”

Harris’s rebuttals reveal assertive and expressive acts rooted in institutional rationality. Her phrases (“It is well known that Donald Trump is weak and wrong on national security”) suggest pragmatic restraint supported by factual reasoning. This reflects what Lakoff (2001) identifies as a maternal political frame language that appeals to collective protection and ethical responsibility rather than aggression. Harris’s emotional condemnation (“You are a disgrace”) constitutes expressive disapproval that humanizes her stance while maintaining authority. The contrast indicates that Trump’s negative sentiment is populist and fear-based, while Harris’s is principled and corrective, illustrating how sentiment pragmatically indexes social status, gender identity, and power position.

Cross-Sectional Interpretation

Across the three themes, sentiment appears to function as both emotive stance and rhetorical strategy. Trump’s discourse is characterized by high emotional valence and hyperbolic assertiveness, which likely indicates a populist style seeking solidarity through fear and dominance. Harris’s speech, by contrast, appears to integrate evaluative sentiment with institutional ethos, reflecting an inclusive, policy-grounded pragmatic orientation. This dichotomy supports the theoretical claim that sentiment, as a pragmatic device, mediates power relations and social positioning (Culpeper & Hardaker, 2017; Searle et al., 1980).

The findings suggest that sentiment-laden speech acts in political debates are not merely emotional displays but strategic linguistic instruments used to construct credibility, identity, and authority. Such patterns align with prior computational-pragmatic studies that highlight the rhetorical utility of sentiment in political discourse (N. Ilie, 2018; S. Ilie & Rose, 2018; Mohammad & Turney, 2013). As seen in Table 2, the synthesis of the findings across themes reveals how each speech act type corresponds to a pragmatic sentiment function. This mapping contributes to a clearer understanding of how sentiment operates as a pragmatic resource in political discourse.

Table 2. Summary of Speech Acts and Sentiment Functions in the 2024 U.S. Presidential Debate

Type of Speech Act	Sentiment Function
Assertive	Convey factual claims or beliefs to establish authority and control public perception.
Expressive	Reveal emotional stance, often through hyperbole or sarcasm, to elicit audience empathy or fear.
Commissive	Demonstrate commitment to future actions, reinforcing leadership credibility and trust.
Directive	Imply persuasion and instruction, guiding the audience toward ideological alignment.

4. Conclusion

This study demonstrates that sentiment in political debates functions not merely as an emotional expression, but as a pragmatic mechanism for persuasion, credibility building, and strategic positioning. Donald Trump's discourse reveals a preference for negative and emotionally charged language to frame crises and assert dominance, primarily through assertive and expressive acts marked by hyperbole and affective intensity. In contrast, Kamala Harris combines assertive and commissive acts to foreground accountability and leadership through structured critique and historically grounded appeals. The strategic manipulation of sentiment by both candidates reflects not only their individual rhetorical styles but also their socio-political identities within the debate context. The interplay between sentiment, speech acts, and social status underscores the complex ways in which language constructs authority and negotiates power in political communication. Empirically, this research extends the scope of speech act theory into the computational domain by integrating sentiment analysis with pragmatic interpretation. Theoretically, it contributes to the growing body of work on rhetorical pragmatics by showing how sentiment operates as both a semantic resource and a social index mediating between emotional stance and ideological positioning. This hybrid analytical framework can enrich future inquiries in linguistic politeness, stance-taking, and political discourse studies. Practically, the findings provide insight for political communication strategists and debate analysts, highlighting how emotion-infused pragmatics can shape public perception and frame candidate credibility. Understanding these patterns may also support media literacy initiatives, helping audiences discern rhetorical manipulation in high-stakes discourse.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, this study focuses on a single debate event between two candidates, which constrains the generalizability of its findings. Expanding the corpus to include multiple debates or cross-cultural political contexts would provide a broader understanding of sentiment-pragmatic interaction. Second, the VADER sentiment tool, while effective for polarity detection, may not fully capture nuanced irony, sarcasm, or culturally embedded expressions of affect. Incorporating deep learning-based sentiment models or contextual embedding techniques could enhance analytic precision. Future research may also explore sentiment-pragmatic relationships across social media discourse, where audience engagement and immediacy further shape political language. Such extensions would deepen the empirical and theoretical understanding of how sentiment functions dynamically in multimodal and digital political communication.

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