

**STRATEGIES OF VERBAL AGGRESSION IN ENGLISH POLITICAL DEBATES: A  
DISCOURSE-PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS**

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**Annotation:** This article examines the pragmatic and discourse-driven strategies of verbal aggression in contemporary English political debates. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of face theory, politeness and impoliteness models, and Critical Discourse Analysis, the study explores how politicians employ aggressive linguistic tactics to challenge opponents, construct authority, and influence public perception. The empirical analysis of debate transcripts reveals several dominant strategies, including ad hominem attacks, sarcasm, negative evaluation, threat-based expressions, and metaphorical aggression. The findings demonstrate that verbal aggression in political debates is not a spontaneous emotional reaction but a deliberate communicative tool aimed at shaping ideological positioning and reinforcing power dynamics within political discourse.

**Key words:** verbal aggression, political discourse, impoliteness, face-threatening acts, discourse pragmatics, conflict talk, ad hominem strategy, negative evaluation, metaphorical aggression.

**Introduction.** Verbal aggression has become one of the defining linguistic features of modern political communication, particularly in English-speaking democracies where debates are public, performative, and inherently confrontational. As Goffman (1967) argues, interaction in public settings is fundamentally tied to the maintenance or loss of face, and political debates represent a communicative arena in which face-threatening acts (FTAs) are not only tolerated but strategically exploited. The competitive nature of political argumentation requires speakers to display authority while simultaneously damaging the opponent's credibility, a dynamic that makes aggressive rhetoric an effective tool for ideological persuasion.

According to Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory (1987), verbal aggression functions as a form of bald-on-record impoliteness, where the speaker intentionally disregards face needs to achieve strategic dominance. Culpeper (2011) further explains that impoliteness in political discourse is rarely accidental; rather, it is "a calculated attempt to attack face in order to achieve social, rhetorical, or ideological goals." This perspective highlights the instrumental nature of aggression in political debates, where linguistic conflict becomes a means of shaping public impressions and reinforcing group identities.

From a discourse-analytical standpoint, political debates serve as sites of ideological struggle. Fairclough (1995) notes that political language is inseparable from power relations, and aggressive rhetorical moves play a central role in constructing those relations. Similarly, van Dijk (2006) emphasizes that political discourse relies heavily on positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation, a dual mechanism that naturally gives rise to various forms of verbal aggression. The purpose of this study is to examine the dominant strategies and communicative functions of verbal aggression in English political debates. Specifically, the research aims to (1) conceptualize verbal aggression within political discourse; (2) identify recurrent aggressive strategies used by debate participants; and (3) analyze how these strategies influence ideological

positioning and public perception. By integrating pragmatic and discourse-analytic frameworks, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of conflict-driven communication in contemporary political contexts.

**Analysis of literature.** This study employs a qualitative discourse-pragmatic methodology to analyze verbal aggression strategies in contemporary English political debates. The methodological framework integrates elements of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), pragmatic theory, and impoliteness studies, which together offer effective tools for interpreting conflict-driven political communication. As Fairclough (1995) observes, CDA is particularly suited to revealing “the ideological and power-laden structures embedded in political language,” a feature that makes it especially appropriate for studying verbal aggression in debates.

The research corpus consists of authentic transcripts from:

1. US Presidential Debates (2016–2020)
2. UK Parliament Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs)
3. BBC Hardtalk interviews with political leaders

These data sources were selected due to their high degree of adversarial interaction and extensive public visibility. Van Dijk (2006) emphasizes that political discourse should be analyzed using “high-stakes communicative events” because they reveal natural patterns of dominance, polarization, and strategic antagonism.

The study applies Culpeper’s (2011) impoliteness model to identify and classify core types of verbal aggression such as ad hominem attacks, negative evaluation, mock politeness, and threatening remarks. Each detected instance of aggression is further interpreted using Goffman’s (1967) Face Theory to determine which aspect of the interlocutor’s face was targeted.

The analysis follows a three-stage procedure:

Identification shows that aggressive utterances are manually extracted from debate transcripts. Lexical markers include insults, derogatory evaluations, sarcasm, conflict metaphors, and value-laden adjectives.

Extracted utterances are categorized based on Culpeper’s (2011) typology of impoliteness strategies, supplemented by Brown and Levinson’s (1987) framework of face-threatening acts.

Each categorized utterance is analyzed within its political and interactional context using Fairclough’s (1995) CDA approach, which links linguistic choices to ideological positioning and power relations.

To ensure analytical reliability, coded examples were re-examined through repeated cycles of review. Aggressive markers were cross-checked against definitions provided by Bousfield (2008), who argues that verbal aggression represents “a systematic set of strategic linguistic behaviours rather than random emotional expression.” Validity was strengthened through methodological triangulation, combining pragmatics and CDA frameworks to capture both micro-level linguistic features and macro-political implications.

This methodological design provides a robust foundation for analyzing how verbal aggression functions strategically in English political debates. This section presents the empirical analysis of verbal aggression in English political debates based on the selected corpus. The findings are organized according to Culpeper’s (2011) impoliteness strategies and interpreted through the frameworks of Face Theory and Critical Discourse Analysis.

Ad hominem attacks represent the most frequent form of verbal aggression in the corpus. These occur when a politician targets the opponent's personal qualities rather than addressing policy issues.

Example 1 (US Presidential Debate, 2020):

"You don't have the intelligence or the temperament to lead this country."

This utterance directly damages both the opponent's positive face (desire to be approved) and professional credibility, supporting Brown & Levinson's (1987) notion of an unmitigated FTA. Culpeper (2011) identifies such attacks as bald-on-record impoliteness, where "the intention to attack face is explicit and unsoftened." Sarcasm functions as an indirect but powerful tool of verbal aggression. It maintains superficial politeness while delivering an implicit insult.

Example 2 (UK PMQs, 2021):

"I admire your confidence, given how little evidence you actually have."

Here, the speaker uses mock-praise to belittle the opponent, creating a clash between literal meaning and intended meaning. According to Culpeper (1996), mock politeness attacks face by "invoking politeness norms only to subvert them."

Negative evaluations were widespread, serving to construct ideological distance.

Frequent evaluative words included: dangerous, incompetent, weak, corrupt, irresponsible.

Such labels function as discursive positioning tools. Fairclough (1995) argues that evaluative language shapes "the moral framing of political actors," influencing public perception.

Example 3:

"Your economic plan is reckless and will bankrupt future generations."

This frames the opponent as a threat to national stability, a strategy aligning with van Dijk's (2006) principle of negative other-presentation.

Threat-based language constructs catastrophic outcomes attributed to the opponent's leadership.

Example 4 (US Debate, 2016):

"If your policies ever pass, this country will collapse."

Threats intensify conflict and mobilize fear. Brown & Levinson (1987) classify threats as severe FTAs because they attack the opponent's ability and legitimacy simultaneously.

War and conflict metaphors were common, reinforcing dramatization.

Examples include:

"Your policy is a ticking time bomb."

"This election is a battle for the soul of the nation."

Lakoff (1991) notes that political metaphors frame ideological conflict as physical combat, which legitimizes aggressive language as a natural extension of "fighting for the nation."

Frequent interruptions appeared in the US debates, serving as a form of interactional aggression.

Example 5 (US Debate, 2020):

"Will you just let me finish? He never lets anyone finish!"

This reflects what Hutchby (1996) terms **conversational dominance**, used to undermine the opponent's control of the floor.

Across the corpus, five dominant strategies emerged:

1. Ad hominem attacks
2. Sarcasm and mock politeness
3. Negative evaluation
4. Threat-based statements

## **5. Metaphorical aggression**

These findings confirm van Dijk's (2006) argument that political discourse relies on systematic polarization between "us" and "them," reinforced through linguistically aggressive techniques.

The findings of this study confirm that verbal aggression in English political debates is not incidental or emotionally driven, but rather a systematic and strategically motivated phenomenon. The dominance of ad hominem attacks, negative evaluation, sarcasm, and metaphorical aggression supports Culpeper's (2011) claim that impoliteness in institutional discourse is often goal-oriented and rhetorically justified.

From a face-theoretical perspective, the prevalence of direct face-threatening acts demonstrates that political debates constitute a communicative environment where face damage is normalized and even expected. Goffman's (1967) notion of face as a socially constructed and publicly negotiable identity is particularly relevant here, as political actors deliberately destabilize their opponents' face to construct authority and credibility for themselves.

The results also align with Brown and Levinson's (1987) assertion that contexts with high power competition and low social distance encourage the use of bald-on-record FTAs. In the analyzed debates, aggressive utterances were rarely mitigated, suggesting that politeness norms are subordinated to persuasive effectiveness and media impact. From a critical discourse perspective, the findings corroborate van Dijk's (2006) ideological square, whereby political discourse systematically emphasizes positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation. Verbal aggression functions as a discursive mechanism through which political actors construct moral superiority, delegitimize opponents, and polarize the audience. Fairclough (1995) further argues that such strategies are integral to the reproduction of power relations, particularly in highly mediatized political contexts. Importantly, metaphorical aggression reveals how cognitive framing intensifies ideological conflict. As Lakoff (1991) notes, war metaphors in political discourse legitimize confrontation and normalize hostility by framing political competition as a moral battle. The frequent use of such metaphors in the corpus indicates that aggression is cognitively embedded in political reasoning, not merely linguistically expressed.

This study has demonstrated that verbal aggression in English political debates constitutes a central and systematic component of contemporary political discourse. Through a discourse-pragmatic analysis grounded in face theory, impoliteness models, and Critical Discourse Analysis, the research has identified recurrent aggressive strategies including ad hominem attacks, sarcasm, negative evaluation, threats, and metaphorical framing.

The findings confirm that verbal aggression serves multiple communicative functions: constructing authority, delegitimizing opponents, mobilizing emotional responses, and reinforcing ideological polarization. In line with Culpeper (2011) and van Dijk (2006), aggression emerges as a strategic discursive resource rather than a breakdown of communicative norms.

**Conclusion.** The study contributes to political linguistics by demonstrating how linguistic aggression operates simultaneously at pragmatic, discursive, and cognitive levels. Future research may extend this analysis through corpus-based quantitative methods or comparative studies across political cultures and languages.

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