



THE COMPARISON OF FIGURATIVE LANGUAGE USED IN DONALD TRUMP'S 2016 AND 2024 PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze and compare the use of figurative language in Donald Trump's 2016 and 2024 presidential debates. Figurative language plays an essential role in shaping meaning, creating emphasis, and enhancing persuasion in political communication. Using Perrine's (1977) theory of figurative language, this research identifies and categorizes eleven types of figurative expressions: hyperbole, irony, understatement, apostrophe, synecdoche, metonymy, paradox, symbolism, simile, metaphor, and personification. The study adopts a descriptive analysis method, using the official debate transcripts from both election periods as the primary data sources. The findings reveal that Trump employed nine types of figurative language in the 2016 debates—dominated by hyperbole, personification, and metaphor—while in the 2024 debates, he used only seven types, with a significant increase in hyperbolic expressions. The absence of certain figurative types, such as synecdoche and paradox, suggests that Trump favors direct, emphatic, and emotionally charged language over abstract or subtle forms. Comparatively, his 2024 debates show a higher reliance on exaggeration and symbolic simplification, reflecting a shift toward a more sensational and emotionally driven rhetorical style. Overall, this study concludes that Trump's use of figurative language demonstrates a consistent preference for vivid, persuasive, and accessible speech designed to appeal to public emotion and reinforce his populist image. The results contribute to the field of linguistics by providing insight into how figurative language functions as a rhetorical device in political debates.

Key words: Figurative Language, Presidential Debates, Donald Trump

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A. INTRODUCTION

Language is a powerful tool used to communicate ideas, influence audiences, and construct meaning in political contexts. In linguistics, language is understood not only as a system of grammatical rules but also as a vehicle for meaning-making and interpretation. The study of meaning itself is addressed within semantics, which examines how linguistic expressions convey ideas, concepts, and evaluations (Kreidler, 1998). Meaning in language is not always literal; speakers often rely on figurative expressions to communicate ideas more effectively, particularly in persuasive contexts.

Figurative language refers to the use of non-literal expressions that go beyond their direct meaning to create emphasis, imagery, or emotional impact. Perrine (1977) argues that figurative language enriches expression by adding depth, intensity, and imaginative power to communication.

Politicians frequently employ figurative language to emphasize arguments, highlight issues, and create emotional resonance with the public. Figurative language is essential in expressing non-literal meanings that intensify messages, simplify complex topics, and shape public perception (Dancygier & Sweetser, 2014). It plays a strategic role in political communication, especially in presidential debates where candidates aim to distinguish themselves through persuasive rhetoric (Chilton, 2004).

The use of figurative language has been widely examined in various contexts such as newspapers (Abdullah & Zahid, 2024), songs (Fitria, 2018), novels (Harun et al., 2020), Translation (Fachrezi & Ardi, 2025) and political speeches (Juanda et al., 2023). These studies consistently highlight the role of figurative language in shaping interpretation, emotional engagement, and audience response. However, despite the extensive attention given to literary and media texts, figurative language in political debates—particularly American presidential debates—has received comparatively limited scholarly attention. Holbrook, (1999) notes that debates contribute to political learning by helping voters evaluate candidates beyond policy content alone. As debates are widely broadcast and closely scrutinized by the public and media, the linguistic choices made by candidates become crucial elements of political persuasion.

Donald Trump stands out as a particularly distinctive political figure in terms of language use. His public communication style is frequently described as direct, confrontational, and emotionally charged, characterized by frequent exaggeration, vivid imagery, and evaluative language (Breuninger, 2018).

Although several studies have examined figurative language in political speeches and debates, few have conducted a comparative analysis of the same political figure across different election periods. This gap is particularly evident in studies of Trump's rhetoric, which often focus on a single election or event. Therefore, this study aims to analyze and compare the figurative language used by Donald Trump in the 2016 and 2024

United States presidential debates. Using Perrine's (1977) theory of figurative language, this research identifies the types of figurative expressions employed and examines how their use differs across the two debates. By focusing exclusively on figurative language rather than broader political discourse, this study contributes specifically to linguistic and semantic research and provides a foundation for future studies on political language use.

B. RESEARCH METHOD

This research was conducted using descriptive analysis approach. The descriptive method is used to systematically present and interpret the data as they naturally appear in the debate transcripts, without manipulating any variables. The data that were used for this research was taken from the transcript of the 2016 and 2024 US presidential debates. The data are being obtained from <https://politico.com> for 2016 debates and from <https://edition.cnn.com> for 2024 debates.

The data collection procedures included: (1) downloading the official debate transcripts, (2) reading the transcripts entirely, (3) highlighting Trump's utterances and separating them from the original text, (4) identifying figurative language expressions, and (5) categorizing each figurative expression based on Perrine's (1977) eleven types used in this study: hyperbole, irony, understatement, apostrophe, synecdoche, metonymy, paradox, symbolism, simile, metaphor, and personification.

Data were analyzed using a descriptive analysis approach. Each figurative expression was examined in its immediate context, classified according to the theoretical framework, and interpreted based on how it contributed to Trump's rhetorical meaning. Tables were used to summarize the frequency of each figurative type in both debates.

C. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Research Finding

After analyzing the figurative language in both Donald Trump's 2016 and 2024 presidential debates with Perrine, (1977) theory, researcher found that there are 9 types of figurative languages used by Donald Trump in his 2016 debates and also 7 types of figurative languages used by Donald Trump in his 2024 debates. The table below shows the detail of figurative language found in each debates.

No.	Figurative Language	Total	Percentage
1.	Hyperbole	27	54.00%
2.	Irony	3	6.00%
3.	Understatement	1	2.00%
4.	Apostrophe	1	2.00%
5.	Synecdoche	0	0.00%
6.	Metonymy	3	6.00%
7.	Symbol	1	2.00%
8.	Paradox	0	0.00%
9.	Simile	2	4.00%
10.	Metaphor	5	10.00%
11.	Personification	7	14.00%
	TOTAL	50	100%

Table.1 Figurative Language in 2016 debates

No.	Figurative Language	Total	Percentage
1.	Hyperbole	83	84.69%
2.	Irony	3	3.06%
3.	Understatement	0	0.00%
4.	Apostrophe	0	0.00%
5.	Synecdoche	0	0.00%
6.	Metonymy	2	2.04%
7.	Symbol	2	2.04%
8.	Paradox	0	0.00%
9.	Simile	1	1.02%
10.	Metaphor	2	2.04%
11.	Personification	5	5.10%
	TOTAL	98	100%

Table.2 Figurative Language in 2024 debates

Analysis of figurative language on 2016 and 2024 debates

1. Hyperbole

Hyperbole can be defined as an extreme use of exaggeration to make a point or conveying the truth. In 2016 debates there are 27 instances found and 83 instances in 2024 debates. The example of hyperbole can be seen in the following datum:

Datum 47: "But she's spent hundreds of millions of dollars on negative ads on me..."

The datum above is a hyperbole to emphasize the vast financial resources spent on negative advertising.

2. Irony

Irony can be defined as a contrast between what is expected and what actually happens. In 2016 debates there are 3 instances found and 3 instances in 2024 debates. The example of hyperbole can be seen in the following datum:

Datum 94: "Every time that Zelenskyy comes to this country, he walks away with \$60 billion. He's the greatest salesman ever."

The datum above is hyperbole because the context of Zelenskyy "walking away with \$60 billion" every time he visits implies a criticism that he is too effective at securing funds from the U.S., rather than genuine admiration for his salesmanship.

3. Understatement

Understatement can be defined as saying less than one means, may exist in what one says or merely in how one says it. In 2016 debates there are 1 instances found and 0 instances of understatement in 2024 debates. The example of understatement can be seen in the following datum:

Datum 7: "My father gave me a very small loan in 1975, and I built it into a company that's worth many, many billions of dollars..."

The sentence above is understatement because describing the initial loan as "very small" is not particularly true, as Trump's father Fred Trump actually lent him at least \$60.7 million, or \$140 million in today's dollars. (Breuninger, 2018)

4. Apostrophe

Apostrophe can be defined as a figure of speech that consists of addressing someone absent or dead or something nonhuman as if that person. In 2016 debates there are 1 instances found and 0 instances of apostrophe in 2024 debates. The example of apostrophe can be seen in the following datum:

Datum 15: "I don't think General Douglas MacArthur would like that too much."

The sentence above is apostrophe because Trump using a famous deceased military general to dramatically emphasize the perceived foolishness or ineffectiveness of revealing military strategy publicly.

5. Metonymy

Metonymy can be defined as a type of figurative language where one word replaced by another that is closely related or similar word. In 2016 debates there are 3 instances found and 2 instances in 2024 debates. The example of metonymy can be seen in the following datum:

Datum 49: "...you know, they got Madison Avenue into a room..."

The sentence above is metonymy because "Madison Avenue" refers specifically to the agencies and methodology of advertising (Mayer, 1991), as many prominent advertising firms historically had offices on this street in New York City.

6. Symbol

Symbol can be defined as a figure of speech where an image, object, idea or symbol is used to represent something other than its literal meaning. In 2016 debates there are 1 instances found and 2 instances in 2024 debates. The example of symbol can be seen in the following datum:

Datum 59: "We were ready to start using the liquid gold right under our feet, the oil and gas right under our feet."

The sentence above is symbol because "Liquid gold" functions as a symbol for the preciousness and economic power derived from oil and gas resources.

7. Simile

Simile can be defined as a figure of speech used to compare two things using the words "like," "as," or "than.". In 2016 debates there are 2 instances found and 1 instances in 2024 debates. The example of simile can be seen in the following datum:

Datum 24: "Our airports are like from a third world country."

The sentence above is simile because This is a direct comparison using "like" to state that the condition of U.S. airports is similar to those found in a "third world country,"

8. Metaphor

Metaphor can be defined as a figure of speech that compare two different things without simile words. In 2016 debates there are 5 instances found and 2 instances in 2024 debates. The example of metaphor can be seen in the following datum:

Datum 9: "Our country's in deep trouble."

The sentence above is metaphor because it compares the country's condition to a person who is physically deep in danger or difficulty.

9. Personification

Personification can be defined as a figure of speech in which something not human is given human characteristics. In 2016 debates there are 7 instances found and 5 instances in 2024 debates. The example of personification can be seen in the following datum:

Datum 2: "Our jobs are fleeing the country. They're going to Mexico. They're going to many other countries."

The sentence above is personification Trump attributes human actions, such as fleeing or relocating, to *jobs*, which are abstract economic entities and cannot literally move on their own.

2. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that Donald Trump consistently employed figurative language as a central rhetorical strategy in both the 2016 and 2024 presidential debates. However, the distribution, frequency, and intensity of figurative language varied significantly across the two periods, reflecting changes in Trump's rhetorical tendencies and the broader political context. The 2016 debates featured a broader range of figurative types, suggesting a more diverse approach to constructing meaning through non-literal language. Trump's use of metaphor, personification, symbolism, and metonymy in 2016 contributed to vivid comparisons, emotional framing, and accessible imagery, which helped him communicate complex political issues in a simplified and memorable way. The presence of apostrophe and understatement in 2016—though limited—also demonstrates a wider stylistic repertoire.

In contrast, the 2024 debates showed a marked shift toward intensification rather than diversification, as evidenced by the dramatic rise in hyperbolic expressions. Hyperbole became overwhelmingly dominant, increasing from twenty-seven instances in 2016 to eighty-three in 2024. This sharp escalation suggests that Trump relied more heavily on exaggeration to amplify urgency, heighten perceived threats, and reinforce evaluative judgments about

political opponents or national conditions. The decrease in figurative variety—reflected in the absence of apostrophe, understatement, synecdoche, and paradox—indicates a narrowing of rhetorical strategy toward more forceful, emotionally charged, and repetitive forms of expression.

This pattern aligns with existing descriptions of Trump's communication style, which emphasize simplicity, boldness, and emotional resonance. His preference for hyperbole and direct figurative framing allows him to appeal to intuition and emotion rather than complex reasoning. The continued presence of metaphor and personification in both debate periods further reinforces this approach. Through metaphors, Trump framed the nation as an entity under threat ("in a big, fat, ugly bubble") and political opponents as sources of danger or chaos. Personification enabled him to humanize abstract concepts such as the economy, the country, or public policies, making them appear vulnerable or mistreated ("our jobs are fleeing the country," "the United States is no longer respected").

Moreover, the shift observed in the 2024 debates may reflect changes in Trump's political positioning, audience expectations, and campaign dynamics. As political polarization intensified in the United States, Trump's rhetorical strategy appeared to favor stronger emotional appeals, more dramatic portrayals of national decline, and sharper contrasts between himself and his opponents. This aligns with broader patterns in contemporary political communication, where sensationalized language increasingly dominates public discourse.

Overall, the comparison between the two debate periods highlights both continuity and evolution in Trump's use of figurative language. While the fundamental reliance on vivid descriptive techniques remained consistent, the heightened use of hyperbole in 2024 illustrates a deliberate shift toward a more dramatic and confrontational rhetorical style. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of how figurative language functions in political debates and how political figures adapt their rhetorical strategies over time to influence audiences and respond to changing political climates.

D. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

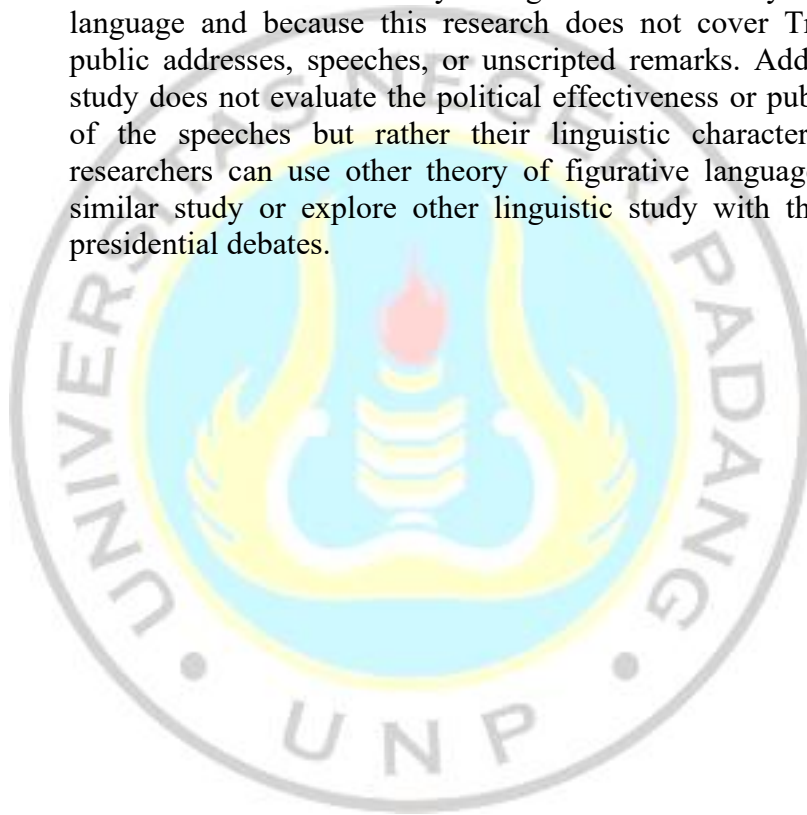
1. Conclusion

The finding showed that there are 9 types of figurative language by Trump in his 2016 debates. Based on the data, hyperbole is the most used figurative language used with 27 instances found. Followed by 7 instances of personification, 5 metaphor, 3 irony and metonymy, 2 simile, and 1 understatement, apostrophe, and symbol. The researcher did not find any instances of synecdoche and paradox

The finding in 2024 debates showed that hyperbole is also the most used figurative language with 83 instances used. Followed by 5 personification, 3 irony, 2 metaphor, metonymy and symbol, and 1 simile. In 2024 debates, researcher did not find any use of understatement, apostrophe, synecdoche, and paradox.

2. Suggestions

Based on the results of this research, the researcher can suggest future researcher to conduct more research on other presidential debates of other countries with this research as the base of their study. Because this research only using Perrine's theory of figurative language and because this research does not cover Trump's other public addresses, speeches, or unscripted remarks. Additionally, the study does not evaluate the political effectiveness or public reception of the speeches but rather their linguistic characteristics. Other researchers can use other theory of figurative language to conduct similar study or explore other linguistic study with the context of presidential debates.



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