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Insinuation in Political Speeches: A Pragmatic Analysis

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Abstract: This paper examines the use of insinuation in American political rhetoric through selected speeches by Donald Trump and Barack Obama. Insinuation is treated as a rhetorical strategy through which speakers suggest ideas indirectly rather than state them explicitly, thereby influencing public perception and socio-political narratives. The study focuses on the meanings, characteristics, and functions of insinuation, particularly its role in helping speakers avoid direct responsibility for their claims and transfer the task of interpretation to the audience. It also explores the difficulty of classifying insinuation as a linguistic and pragmatic phenomenon and clarifies the distinction between insinuation and innuendo. Using a qualitative eclectic approach, the analysis draws on Speech Act Theory and Politeness Theory to examine the pragmatic strategies and communicative functions of insinuation in the selected political speeches.

Keywords: Insinuation, Pragmatics, Political Discourse, Speech Act Theory, Politeness

1. Introduction

One of the traits that makes political speech distinctive is its artful use of insinuation. Insinuation is an act in which you imply something without formally saying it. The very choice of words has a significant effect on the image and behaviour people have toward themes, others in our environment, and socio-political narratives are constructed. The focus of this paper is how the impressions of two specific individuals, Barack Obama and Donald Trump, are able to convey clues about their approach and philosophies. Insinuation, also known as innuendo, has been defined since then as “a non-overt intentional negative ascription, whether true or false, usually in the form of an implicature, which is understood as a charge or accusation against what is, for the most part, a non-present party” (Bell, 1997, 36). To address the topic of insinuation, it becomes necessary to situate the socio-political environment within which these statements emerge. While the language used by Obama and Trump not only serves to highlight their particular speaking styles, it also sheds light on the changes taking place in American society during their respective periods of presidential rule. This paper thus intends to use an analysis of the language used in these statements to bring out its various facets. The context is important, as the insinuation has special significance because of the indirect nature of the allegations it contains. Implicit meaning is still regarded as the product of an analytical process that must signal “symbol of something different” in a speaker's verbal production in order to convey what they intend (Papi, 2010, p. 191). The paper aims at pinpointing the functions that insinuation plays in the political discourse of Barack Obama and Donald Trump.

2. Insinuation: Definitions and Nature

Insinuation is defined as a communicative act with a communicative goal which consists of an implied assumption deliberately involving a negative value-judgment of the relevant referent, fact or effect on the hearer (Vincent and Castelfranchi, 1981, p. 760; Meibauer, 2019, p. 194). Insinuations are discrete and deliberate statements suggesting something, whether true or false. Insinuations often manifest as accusations or complaints directed at something not readily visible into which a third element makes its entry. When deciding to convey a message with insinuation, the concern is parallel; what is the benefit from expressing it through implication of meaning instead of clarifying it? In other words, insinuation serves two purposes: avoiding any penalties the speaker may incur for the message if directly spoken, and putting to test whether subtly hinted claims can shift due diligence onto their target. As a result, the receiver eventually comes to believe something else about the target regardless of whether or not the claim is factual (Bell, 1997, p. 36).

Insinuation's content is neither linguistically coded or formed in isolation. Both classical and current theories of the phenomenon acknowledge its underlying pragmatic nature. Despite extensive studies on the semantic and pragmatic interface, there is still no consensus on the specific nature of the content insinuation and the many interpretations it entails (Oswald, 2022).

2.1 The Pragmatics of Insinuation

It is challenging to comprehend Austin's (1962, p. 75) intended meaning when he proposes that insinuating "appears to entail a certain convention", particularly because it does not pass his test of conventionality: it cannot be made plain by being preceded by an explicit performative. Nevertheless, Austin (1962) proposes that various phenomena such as demonstrating, suggesting, implying, and hinting, despite their inherent differences, often use the same or comparable linguistic techniques. According to Searle (1969), the act of creating an innuendo does not meet the criteria for being considered a kind of speech. Searle primarily equates a speech act with an illocutionary act, but he does recognize Austin's (1969) additional categorization of perlocutionary activities .

Searle (1965: 259) contends that when a speaker engages in an illocutionary act, they intend to communicate a certain meaning to the audience. If the speaker is speaking literally, they hold the belief that adhering to the norms governing their language will enable them to accurately convey their intended message. Consider a case where insinuation is not classified as an illocutionary or any other kind of speech act. Insinuation, as described by Bach and Harnish (1979), is a kind of covert collateral act that falls under the category of non-communicative linguistic actions within the wider framework of speech acts. However, failing to recognize the complexity of human communication leads to a misunderstanding of insinuation as being secretive and inexpressive. The distinction between speech actions and "non-communicative acts" is a subject of disagreement, even among supporters of speech act theory. So, according to Searle (1979), hinting cannot be counted as a speech act, whereas, according to Holdcroft (1978), Wierzbicka (1987), and Tsohatzidis (1989), it can.

Concerning the interchangeability of the two terms, namely, insinuation and innuendo, although the terms are somewhat synonymous, pragmatics indicates that there is a slight difference. Both of them are implications that necessitate a target, and both manifest as an undesired assertion regarding some aspect of the target. The distinction lies in the intended recipient of the comment and the authority that determines the undesirability of the accusation. Moreover, Fraser (2001) states the following about the distinction between the two,

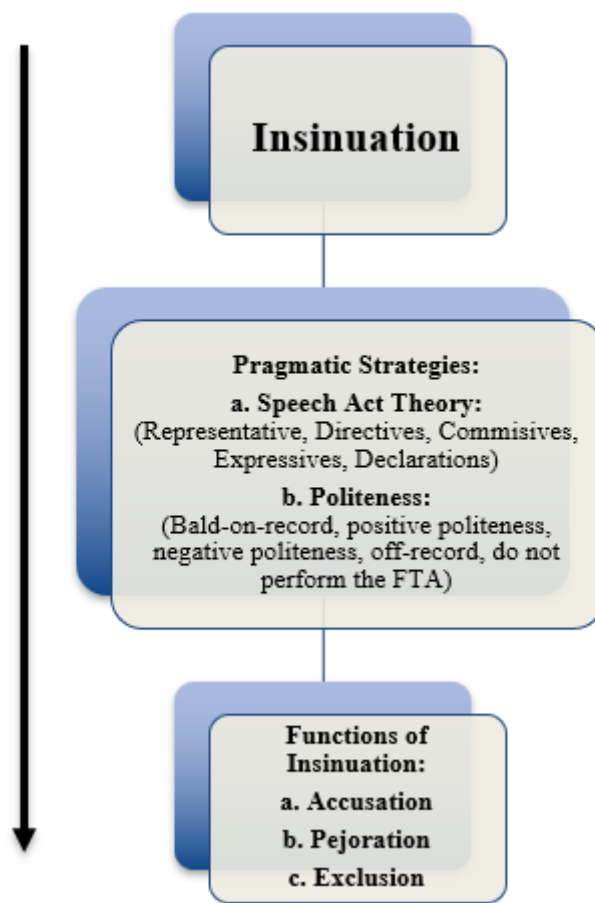


Figure 1. The Eclectic Model for Analysing Insinuation

Whereas an insinuation can be directed either to the target, the audience—or to both, an innuendo is directed only to an audience. An innuendo is a special type of insinuation in which the implied message is intended for the audience, and it does not matter if the target is even aware of the comment. (p. 331)

3. Methodology

The paper adopts a qualitative pragmatic approach for the analysis of insinuation in political speech. An eclectic model is designed for the study, which is based on the operational definition of insinuation by Bell (1997), as well as Speech Act Theory by Searle (1969) and Politeness Theory by Brown and Levinson (1987) (see Fig. 1). This paper adopts the following procedures:

1. Political speeches are collected from videos available in YouTube.
2. The speeches are transcribed, and relevant excerpts where insinuation is involved were selected.
3. Each excerpt is examined to determine the specific act of insinuation based on Bell's (1997) description of insinuation.
4. Utterances are analysed considering the Speech Act Theory introduced by Searle (1969) to find the speech act performed.
5. Politeness Theory by Brown and Levinson (1987) is applied in order to establish what strategy is used.

6. The communicative function of each insinuation done (accusation, pejoration, exclusion) is pinpointed.

Insinuation has been classically defined as “a non-overt intentional negative ascription, whether true or false, usually in the form of an implicature, which is understood as a charge or accusation against what is, for the most part, a non-present party” (Bell, 1997, p. 36). The pragmatic strategies are mainly Searle's Speech Acts 1976 and Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory. Searle's categorization includes representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. Brown and Levinson's (1987) five strategies for doing face-threatening acts (henceforth, FTA) are examined: Bald-on-record without redress, on-record with positive politeness redress, on-record with negative politeness redress, off-record, and do not perform the FTA.

4. Data Collection and Analysis

This section is devoted to the analysis of insinuations in two selected political speeches that are extracted from YouTube. The first one shows Obama in 2016, during an appearance on Jimmy Kimmel's talk show, replying to a tweet posted by Trump on Twitter. The second one shows Trump in July 2023, mentioning the incident of finding cocaine in the White House as well as indirectly accusing Joe Biden (see Appendix for links of YouTube videos). Barack Obama and Donald Trump are selected owing to their strong influence on contemporary American politics and their different styles. In particular, Barack Obama is known for his indirect style of political communication. On the contrary, Donald Trump is a provocative person with a confrontational style. Analysis of the speeches of these two political figures can help compare the use of insinuation in different styles of communication in one political and cultural environment. The selection of the texts is based on the presence of evident examples of insinuation. Interpretation of these two cases is of a qualitative nature. The videos of the speeches are taken from YouTube.

The following criteria are used for selecting the data:

- presence of at least one specific case of political insinuation in the discourse;
- targeting a political opponent or some public figure using indirect accusation;
- authenticity and public availability of the audiovisual recording of the discourse;
- availability of necessary contextual information for pragmatic analysis; and
- natural rather than fictional political discourse.

In a pragmatic qualitative research approach, selective case studies are often used in order to conduct a deep analysis of language features. Therefore, the purpose of the current investigation is not to generalize the results for any political discourse, but rather to show how insinuation works in real political discourse.

Text:(1)

“At least I will go down as a president”

[context]: During a television appearance on Jimmy Kimmel Live! in 2016, Obama was invited to comment on a tweet from Trump calling Obama the worst president in the history of the United States. This indirect form of criticism was used to counter Trump's statement in an effective way. (see appendix for YouTube link of the full video).

a. Insinuation

The insinuation is embodied in the phrase "At least I will go down as a president." At first glance, the message appears to be that of a literal statement made by Obama concerning the fact that his legacy will be that of a president. However, the underlying meaning goes deeper than the words used. Through stressing the word "at least," Obama implies that Trump might not become president. Instead of saying that he failed politically, Obama allows the audience to draw such conclusions on their own and thus fits into the idea of insinuation developed by Bell (1997) and defined as indirect negative attributions aimed at another person.

b. Speech Act

According to Searle's Speech Act Theory, this utterance conveys a representative speech act because Obama expresses his belief about future events. Though formally represented as a declaration, it has an element of criticism of Trump, which becomes obvious when interpreting the utterance and understanding what it really means. Hence, a representative act has two functions: conveying information and criticizing.

c. Politeness

From the perspective of Brown and Levinson (1987), the speaker uses off-record politeness strategies. Namely, he does not say that Trump will not become president; he makes the criticism implied. Thus, he can soften the face-threatening act and let the audience interpret the meaning behind his words.

d. Function

The main function of the insinuation is pejoration. Obama discredits Trump politically without making any personal attacks. This way, the utterance demeans the public image of the person who becomes the target for this kind of rhetorical technique.

Text:(2)

“Whatever happened to the cocaine they found in the White House?”

[context]: While making a campaign speech in 2023, Trump alluded to cocaine being found in the White House. He chose not to make a direct statement accusing President Biden or his family members but instead formulated the question for the listeners to make the connection themselves (see appendix for YouTube link of the full video).

a. Insinuation

The insinuation in the sentence takes the form of the rhetorical question: "Whatever happened to the cocaine they found in the White House?" Even though the purpose of this utterance may appear to be seeking information, the actual communicative goal of this question is different. Instead, it invites the listeners to draw the conclusion about the fact that the case was intentionally covered up or that some people connected to the White House had certain powers. Thus, Trump uses an indirect way to communicate the insinuated information to the listener since he does not name any person who may be accused of anything. The implied meaning of the utterance is based on the listeners' prior knowledge about the event, and it fits the definition of insinuation offered by Bell (1997).

b. Speech Act

In terms of Speech Act Theory, the speech act performed by Trump is a representative. Although it has the interrogative syntactic structure, the pragmatics of the utterance shows Trump's conviction about the suspicious nature of the situation. Therefore, Trump uses the indirect speech act, which allows him to present a suspicion in the form of a rhetorical question.

c. Politeness

In accordance with Brown and Levinson (1987), the politeness strategy used in the given example is off-record. Unlike addressing the hearer directly in the case of accusations, Trump uses the indirectness that helps to reduce the face-threatening potential of the speech act and increase its persuasiveness.

d. Function

The main function of this particular insinuation is that of accusation. It indirectly persuades the audience to consider the association of the White House with misconduct without providing any evidence or specifying an addressee. As a result, the reputation of the opponent is negatively affected without putting the speaker's face at risk.

Text (3):

“Now, I know that he’s taken some flak lately, but no one is prouder to put this birth certificate matter to rest than The Donald ...”

[context]: While addressing the White House Correspondents' Dinner in 2011, Obama provided an ironic response to Trump's constant promotion of the "birther" myth. Using satire and irony, Obama implied questioning Trump's wisdom and priorities. (see appendix for YouTube link of the full video).

a. Insinuation

The insinuation comes in the context of the statement made by Obama, "Finally, I think we can say that Donald can get back to focusing on the issues that really matter." On the face of it, the statement may seem like praise for Trump and his preoccupation with important national issues. However, in reality, it implies the contrary, i.e., that Trump has already wasted a lot of time dealing with unfounded conspiracy theories instead of concentrating on actual politics. In other words, Obama does not call Trump irresponsible or unserious but gives people the opportunity to make this conclusion on their own using irony. In that sense, the utterance is a negative evaluation, which is consistent with Bell's (1997) definition of insinuation.

b. Speech Act

The utterance works as a representative since Obama makes an evaluation of Trump's actions in the form of an observation. Though said with humor, the statement actually means that Obama believes Trump's political priorities were misguided. Hence, the representative serves the purpose of both informing and evaluating, since the latter takes place via pragmatic implications.

c. Politeness

Obama uses the off-record politeness strategy, as he criticizes the person indirectly through irony. Instead of saying that Trump was diverting people's attention from actual politics by engaging them in conspiracies, Obama chooses to say it in a way that could seem complimentary to Trump. People should be able to understand the irony and draw conclusions about what Obama wanted to convey by comparing the literal meaning and implied one.

d. Function

The main function of the insinuation is pejoration since Obama tries to undermine the reputation of the opponent, describing him as a man busy with trivial and unfounded issues. The indirectness of the statement adds rhetorical effectiveness to it, as people will have to come to the right conclusions independently.

Text (4):

“Some people think purposely. I don’t. I think it was incompetence, but some people think purposely...”

[context]: While participating in a town hall interview on the television show hosted by Sean Hannity in Davenport, Iowa, in December 5, 2023, Trump spoke about the economic record of his presidency before the COVID-19 outbreak. Accusing incompetent management for the emergence of the virus, Trump also mentioned the theory supported by some people regarding deliberate creation of the pandemic (see appendix for YouTube link of the full video).

a. Insinuation

Insinuation is achieved via the sentence, "Some people think purposely, I don’t. I think it was incompetence, but some people think purposely..." On a literal level, the speaker denies the notion that the virus was made purposefully by saying, "I don’t." He, however, introduces the second viewpoint, which he attributes to unnamed people. Such rhetoric does not shift the focus of the accusation to the speaker while making it available for the audience. People are thus tempted to believe that there was an intention behind the outbreak of the pandemic when the country experienced times of prosperity. Instead of openly stating the idea, the speaker lets people draw this conclusion themselves. Thus, this example fits into the definition of insinuation proposed by Bell (1997).

b. Speech Act

From the perspective of Speech Act theory, the speech act here is a representative. The speaker apparently expresses the competing views about the causes of the pandemic and does not present any definitive facts. However, by choosing and repeating the claim that "some people think purposely," the speaker makes clear that it is necessary to pay attention to this particular explanation of events. The representative speech act, therefore, goes beyond expressing other people's opinions and introduces another one without fully confirming its truthfulness.

c. Politeness

According to Brown and Levinson (1987), the utterance is an example of an off-record politeness strategy. The speaker does not accuse anybody, be it an individual, an organization, or a government agency, of having created the virus on purpose. Instead, the accusation is introduced indirectly as it is attributed to unnamed people. It means that the face-threatening character of this speech act is minimized by an indirect formulation. As the accusation remains indirect, the speaker can plausibly claim non-responsibility for it. At the same time, listeners can conclude independently of the speaker's will.

d. Function

The main function of the insinuation is accusation. Despite the explicit denial of the idea that the virus was made purposely, the further mention of what "some people think" implies that there was

an intentional wrongdoer behind the virus. By formulating the insinuation in such a way, the speaker increases the number of possible interpretations and avoids specifying the target of the accusation. Therefore, the insinuation raises suspicion among the audience members without imposing full responsibility on the speaker.

Summary:

Comparing all four texts reveals that both Obama and Trump employ the strategy of insinuation in an off-record way more often than accusation. However, there is one difference between them in terms of pragmatic functions. Obama uses insinuation mostly for the purpose of criticism of his opponents as a means of irony and satire. On the contrary, Trump employs insinuation more often for the purpose of accusations, where the audience is left to conclude on their own whether there is any wrongdoing or concealment.

5. Findings

Within the limits of the selected data and based on the analysis, the following results are drawn:

1. **Insinuation in Political Discourse:** Obama's and Trump's speeches are examples of how insinuation works in political speech. Due to its indirect nature, implication is crucial for conveying significance and meaning.
2. **Definition and Characteristics of Insinuation:** The results show that insinuation can take the form of true or false statements and has a tendency to subtly frame complaints or accusations.
3. **Challenges in Understanding Implications:** The study mentions that it can be a challenge to identify the type of insinuation used, taking speech act theory into account.
4. **Innuendo vs. Insinuation:** Despite being used synonymously most of the time, this study shows that there is a slight pragmatic difference between 'insinuation' and 'innuendo'. An innuendo, a specific variety of insinuation that was exclusively aimed at an audience is something worth noting as it adds a layer to our understanding of indirect communication.
5. **An eclectic model from Brown and Levinson (1987) Politeness Theory to Searle (1969) Speech Acts analysis should be undertaken.** The model provides a comprehensive framework to analyse pragmatic strategies and their respective purposes.
6. **Political Speech Data Analysis:** The analysis section looks into specific instances of insinuations from Trump and Obama. The results show the particular types of roles performed by insinuation in political rhetoric, including pejoration and accusation.
7. **Pragmatic Strategies and Functions:** Insinuations are performed through the use of off-record politeness strategies. As such, speakers are able to make negative statements without being committed to them and thus allow themselves to evade responsibility for their claims. The use of implicature leads to making the audience realize the message, thus making the statement more persuasive and allowing the speaker to disclaim. Despite the fact that Obama and Trump use the same politeness strategy, their pragmatic functions differ greatly. For Obama, insinuations serve the function of pejoration, while for Trump, it is accusation. That means that whereas Obama's insinuations undermine the opponent's reputation through irony and indirect evaluations, those of Trump aim at creating an impression of misdeeds without actually accusing anyone.

6. Conclusions

The primary research goal of this work lies in shedding light on the concept of insinuation in political discourse and analysing the speeches by Barack Obama and Donald Trump. It is also necessary to define the essence of the notion, its key features, the difficulties of analysing insinuations, and the importance of this notion for the development of political discourse in general. These research goals are based on the assumption that insinuation in political discourse makes it possible to identify peculiarities of political communication and the means of implicit and indirect information transfer.

Insinuation is a certain communicative process designed to create a negative evaluation of an object implicitly. Two major purposes can be found in this linguistic process: the speaker tries to avoid possible responsibility for the utterance made and make an implication without giving any proof of it. As a result, this responsibility is successfully transferred onto the shoulders of those people who receive this information.

The differences between innuendo and insinuation show that there is a slight difference in the pragmatic nature of both terms. An eclectic approach to insinuation analysis, incorporating Speech Act Theory (according to Searle (1969)) and Politeness Theory (based on the ideas of Brown and Levinson (1987)), provides a robust framework for studying this topic.

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Appendix

Text (1) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mdMUcMndZWg>

Text (2) <https://www.youtube.com/shorts/KAcnrLzDVtM>

Text (3) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n9mzJhvc-8E&t=6s>

Text (4) <https://vimeo.com/954325501>