IMPLICATURE AND INDIRECT COMMUNICATION IN CONTEMPORARY POLITICAL MESSAGING

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This article delves into the dynamics of political communication, specifically scrutinizing the utilization of implicature and indirect communication by politicians as strategic instruments to influence public perception and shape policy trajectories. It examines how politicians adeptly employ linguistic tools to convey layered messages, navigating the complexities of public discourse while circumventing direct accountability. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks established by H.P. Grice and J.L. Austin, this study illuminates the multifaceted nature of language manipulation in political discourse, highlighting its ramifications for democratic participation and civic discourse. It emphasizes the imperative nature of fostering critical media literacy among citizens to decipher the intricacies inherent in indirect communication, thereby elucidating the fluid interplay between language mechanisms and political landscapes in contemporary society.

Keywords*: implicature, indirect communication, political messaging, linguistic strategies, media literacy, audience perception.*

Introduction

The landscape of political communication is elaborately woven, where the art of conveying messages lies not just in what is said, but often in what is left unsaid. In this complex interplay, the concepts of implicature and indirect communication emerge as pivotal tools for politicians, shaping perceptions, swaying opinions, and guiding policy decisions. Originally conceptualized by philosopher H.P. Grice, implicature refers to the phenomenon where the intended meaning of an utterance extends beyond its literal expression. This implicit dimension of language becomes a strategic instrument in the hands of politicians, allowing them to navigate the multifaceted realm of public communication with subtlety and nuance.

It is always worth and fascinating to study this aspect of political discourse and examine how contemporary politicians employ implicature and indirect communication techniques to achieve various communicative objectives. These objectives range from evading direct accountability and mitigating controversy, to appealing to specific segments of the electorate, or subtly signaling policy shifts. In exploring these linguistic strategies, we should draw upon a rich array of political speeches, social media communications, and public statements, offering a comprehensive analysis of the underlying patterns and functions of indirect language in modern political dialogue.

Such an investigation into the subtleties of political language is not solely academic; it has profound implications for democratic engagement and public discourse. In a world where political messaging increasingly influences public opinion and policy, understanding the nuances of indirect communication becomes crucial. It highlights the need for critical media literacy among the electorate, enabling a more informed and discerning engagement with political rhetoric. By illuminating the intricacies of implicature and indirect communication in political

messaging, one would find it necessary to contribute to a deeper understanding of the dynamic interplay between language and politics in contemporary society.

1. Theoretical Framework

Implicature, as introduced by H.P. Grice, is a fundamental concept in pragmatics, the study of how context contributes to meaning in communication. Grice's theory of conversational implicature hinges on the Cooperative Principle, where he posits that speakers and listeners engage in conversation with the expectation of cooperation to achieve mutual understanding. (Grice, 1975) This principle is underpinned by four maxims: quantity (be as informative as necessary), quality (be truthful), relevance (be relevant), and manner (be clear and orderly). Implicature arises when these maxims are flouted, leading the listener to look for a meaning beyond the literal words spoken.

In political discourse, implicatures are often employed to suggest ideas without explicitly stating them, allowing politicians to convey controversial or nuanced messages while maintaining plausible deniability. This linguistic strategy enables the indirect communication of policies, opinions, or affiliations in a way that is less likely to attract direct criticism or backlash. The study of implicature in political messaging thus provides insights into how politicians craft their language to achieve specific rhetorical and persuasive goals, while navigating the complex socio-political landscape.

Indirect communication encompasses a range of linguistic strategies beyond implicature, such as metaphor, irony, euphemism, and understatement. These tools of language enable speakers to express themselves non-literally, often to convey sensitive or complex messages in a more palatable or politically savvy manner. (Lakoff, 2014) In the political arena, such indirectness is not merely a stylistic choice but a strategic necessity. Politicians frequently resort to these linguistic techniques to address divisive issues, align with or oppose ideological stances, and respond to opponents without direct confrontation.

The use of metaphor, for instance, allows complex policy matters to be conveyed through simpler, more relatable imagery. Euphemisms and understatement, on the other hand, are often employed to soften the impact of policies or actions that might be perceived negatively. This linguistic maneuvering is integral to the crafting of political identities and narratives, allowing politicians to resonate with their audience on an emotional level while maintaining a degree of flexibility and ambiguity in their messaging.

Austin's exploration of how utterances perform actions, beyond merely conveying information, is foundational in understanding these dynamics. (Austin, 1962) His work sheds light on the performative nature of language, where saying something can constitute an action in itself. In political discourse, this translates to the strategic use of language to address divisive issues, align with or oppose ideologies, and respond to opponents without direct confrontation.

By understanding Austin's principles of performative utterances, one gains insight into how political figures use language not just to inform, but to act—whether it's to promise, commit, or even evade. This performative aspect of language is intrinsic to crafting political identities and narratives, allowing politicians to resonate with their audience emotionally while maintaining flexibility and ambiguity in their messaging. Austin's insights are thus crucial for comprehending the nuanced use of language in political contexts. *(Loc. cit.)*

The strategic use of language in political messaging is a deliberate and calculated effort to influence public perception and discourse. Political language is uniquely characterized by its

ambiguity and indirectness, serving as a tool for navigating the multifaceted demands of public life. Politicians must often balance honesty with diplomacy, assertiveness with tact, and clarity with ambiguity. (Sperber, Wilson, 1986)

This linguistic balancing act is evident in the careful construction of political messages, where every word is weighed for its potential impact and interpretive flexibility. The choice to use implicature and indirect language is often driven by the desire to appeal to diverse audiences, each with its own set of values and expectations. In doing so, politicians can signal loyalty to certain groups, articulate policy positions, and respond to criticism, all while maintaining a level of deniability or openness to interpretation.

The study of political messaging and language strategy thus reveals the complexities of democratic communication. It underscores the role of language as both a facilitator of political engagement and a tool for manipulation, highlighting the need for critical analysis and interpretation in the public's engagement with political discourse.

2. Methodology

The data for studying implicature should comprise a diverse range of political communications, including speeches, social media posts, and official public statements from a variety of political figures and contexts. Such sources should be selected based on their relevance to contemporary political discourse and the presence of significant instances of implicature or indirect communication. The time frame for the data collection should focus on recent years, allowing for an analysis that is both current and reflective of contemporary political dynamics.

Speeches provide insights into formal political communication, where language is often meticulously crafted. Social media posts, in contrast, offer a view of more informal, yet strategically significant, political messaging. Public statements, often released in response to specific events or controversies, represent another key medium of political communication. Together, these sources form a comprehensive corpus for analyzing the use and effects of implicature and indirect communication in contemporary politics.

The primary methodological approach for such a study should be discourse analysis, a qualitative method that examines the use of language in context to understand how meaning is constructed and conveyed. Discourse analysis allows for an exploration of the nuances of political language, including how implicature and indirect communication are used to shape public perception and discourse. (Wodak, 2009)

Complementing this, linguistic inquiry provides the tools for a more detailed analysis of the structural aspects of language. This approach involves examining the syntax, semantics, and pragmatics of the political language used, shedding light on how specific linguistic choices contribute to the subtleties of meaning-making in political communication.

Together, discourse analysis and linguistic inquiry enable a comprehensive examination of the strategies and effects of implicature and indirect communication in political messaging. This methodological combination provides a robust framework for understanding the complex interplay between language, power, and politics.

3. Public Statements and the Art of Evasion

Political speeches often serve as fertile ground for the study of implicature, where what is left unsaid can be as significant as what is stated. Through a detailed analysis of various political speeches, we can uncover how politicians employ implicature to subtly address sensitive topics, signal allegiance or dissent, and engage with their audience on a deeper level. For instance, a

politician might criticize a policy indirectly by praising its alternative, thus adhering to Grice's maxim of relevance while simultaneously avoiding a direct confrontation. (Grice, 1975)

An examination of these speeches reveals a pattern of strategic ambiguity, where politicians use implicatures to navigate controversial issues without fully committing to a stance. This tactic not only allows for flexibility in political positioning but also serves as a means to communicate with different segments of the electorate. By implying rather than explicitly stating, politicians can resonate with those who share their viewpoints while maintaining a broader appeal.

Social media platforms have emerged as pivotal arenas for political discourse, offering politicians a direct channel to the public. In this regard the exploration of the use of indirect language on these platforms reveals how politicians employ techniques like metaphor, euphemism, and coded language. These linguistic strategies enable them to appeal to specific demographics, create in-groups and out-groups, and address controversial issues without overt confrontation. (Tannen, 1998)

An analysis here can focus on key examples where politicians have used social media to convey messages that resonate with specific groups while maintaining an overarching ambiguity. This is particularly evident in the use of coded language, where phrases and terms are used that have specific resonance within certain communities, but which may appear innocuous or irrelevant to outsiders. Such tactics not only facilitate targeted communication but also allow politicians to navigate the complex landscape of public opinion with a degree of safety and control.

Public statements by politicians are often meticulously crafted to convey messages in a manner that maintains plausible deniability. These types of analyses can focus on the use of ambiguity, vagueness, and indirectness in public statements, illustrating how politicians use these linguistic tools to evade direct answers, deflect criticism, and navigate politically sensitive issues. (Wodak, 2009)

The study of public statements reveals a consistent pattern of strategic language use. Politicians often resort to vague language and broad generalizations, which allows them to address issues without committing to specific details or positions. This approach not only helps in managing public perception but also provides a safeguard against potential political fallout. By maintaining a level of ambiguity, politicians can adapt their stance as the public or political climate changes, demonstrating the dynamic nature of political discourse.

By analyzing speeches, debates, and advertising strategies from a range of political figures, one can illustrate how candidates use subtextual messages to appeal to voters. For instance, a candidate might imply commitment to a cause or policy without explicitly stating it, thus attracting supporters without alienating other voter groups. This tactic is particularly evident in how candidates address contentious issues such as immigration or healthcare, where direct statements can be polarizing.

The analysis of these campaigns reveals a nuanced use of language, where implicatures and indirect statements allow candidates to navigate the complex landscape of public opinion. These linguistic strategies enable candidates to present themselves as aligned with various groups and ideologies, while maintaining sufficient ambiguity to avoid being pigeonholed or generating significant opposition.

An example of implicature in election campaigns can be seen in Donald Trump's 2016 presidential campaign. Trump promised that Mexico would build and pay for a border wall. However, after his election, he implied a change in this promise by stating, "Obviously...I never meant they're going to write out a check. I said they're going to pay for it. They are. They are

paying for it with the...USMCA (United States Mexico Canada Agreement)."[1] This statement represents a shift from the direct implication that Mexico would directly fund the construction to an indirect claim of reimbursement through a trade agreement.

In times of crisis, such as during pandemics or economic downturns, political leaders face the daunting task of communicating effectively with the public. Leaders often use indirect language to convey assurance, shift blame, or mitigate panic, often without making direct statements of responsibility or failure. For instance, a leader might use metaphorical language to describe the crisis situation, framing it in a way that either downplays the severity or shifts focus away from potential governmental shortcomings.

Two such instances of crisis communication involve the UK's COVID-19 "Eat Out to Help Out" campaign and the 2009 Air Force One photo op incident in the United States. The UK government's "Eat Out to Help Out" campaign in 2020, aimed at supporting businesses after the COVID-19 lockdown, seemed contradictory to its anti-obesity campaign. Prime Minister Boris Johnson communicated about the campaign and later acknowledged its potential role in spreading the virus, suggesting countermeasures like additional restrictions[2]. In 2009, a photo shoot for Air Force One caused panic in New York City as it involved the plane flying low over Manhattan, near the World Trade Center site, without public notice. The Department of Defense took full responsibility for the incident after it triggered distress among New Yorkers[3].

Implicatures can be determined by the meaning of the sentence or the context of the conversation and can be either conventional (in various senses) or non-traditional. Figures of speech such as metaphor and irony serve as familiar examples, as well as free usage and faint praise. Implicature serves a variety of purposes: communication, maintaining good social relationships, misleading without lying, style, and verbal effectiveness. Knowledge of common forms of implicature is acquired along with one's native language. It is also important to note that implicatured evaluative judgments are, of course, conditioned by the presuppositional context, which serves as a foundational element in revealing the author's judgment. To achieve more successful communication and a connecting link between the author and the reader, the interpretation of newspaper material, for instance, is primarily based on the general linguistic background (presupposition) along with specific or detailed information that is filled with implicatured evaluative judgments.

Consider the following example: "Is the Conservative party a sinking ship? Events on Monday suggest so. The captain, Liz Truss, was missing from the deck for much of the afternoon. Her second in command had been thrown overboard last week after a disastrous mini-budget. To right Ms Truss's listing ship of government, the new first mate and chancellor, Jeremy Hunt, dumped the ballast of her tax changes. The policy now is to increase the pay of bankers and see household energy bills rise next April by 75% to an average of £4,400 a year. Coming under fire from Labour, Ms Truss sent out her cabinet colleague Penny Mordaunt, a former Royal Navy reservist, to defend what remains of her programme."[4]

In this example, the author vividly portrays the failure of the leader of the Conservative Party, Miss Truss (presuppositional element), ironically mocking the actions of this political

[1] Trump backtracks further on border-wall promises. https://www.businessinsider.com/trump-mexico-write-check-for-border-wall-2019-1

[2] The UK COVID Eat Out to Help Out Campaign. https://www.determ.com/blog/6-political-pr-examples-of-crisis-management-done-right/

[3] Air Force One Photo Op Panic. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/apr/27/air-force-one-new-york-september-11

[4] The Guardian view on Liz Truss's U-turn: a fading premiership won't be missed. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/oct/17/the-guardian-view-on-liz-trusss-u-turn-a-fading-premiership-wont-be-missed

leader and her colleagues (thrown overboard) and likening her governance to a sinking ship, which semantically conditions the implicatured part of the statement. In this judgment, the author implied the image of Miss Truss and her role in England's politics. Undoubtedly, the author's intention is driven by indignation, dissatisfaction, a critical and negative attitude toward the actions of the current conservative government. Immersed in the storyline of this excerpt, the reader consciously associates the Conservative "sinking" party with a complete failure and also constructs certain assessments and judgments regarding this issue in their mind. Consequently, this information and these facts may push the residents of England toward certain actions: they may vote against this party and might even express some form of protest, especially considering the significant increase in utility prices. Therefore, in this excerpt, the author, using their cognitive potential and possessing specific information (they even know some facts in numbers, which is crucial for specifying information), consciously shapes the political landscape for society.

Conclusion

The exploration of implicature and indirect communication in contemporary political messaging reveals a complex and dynamic landscape of political language. Politicians strategically employ these linguistic tools to address a myriad of communicative objectives, from shaping policy debates to managing public perception. Pursuing similar studies can emphasize the significance of indirect communication in political discourse, highlighting its role in allowing politicians to navigate the delicate balance between clarity and ambiguity.

This linguistic maneuvering, while effective for political purposes, poses challenges for public interpretation and discourse. It emphasizes the importance of critical media literacy among the electorate, enabling citizens to discern the underlying messages in political communication. As political landscapes continue to evolve, so too will the strategies of language use, making ongoing analysis in this field crucial for understanding the dynamics of political discourse and its impact on democratic processes.

Ultimately, these types of studies can contribute to a broader understanding of the strategic use of language in politics. It underscores the need for a vigilant and informed public, capable of critically engaging with political messaging, and highlights the ongoing importance of linguistic analysis in the realm of political communication.

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