



## Dynamism and participant identification in the discursive construction of the American nation

Dinamismo e identificación de participantes en la construcción discursiva de la nación estadounidense<sup>1</sup>

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Artículo recibido el / *Article received*: 2022-12-27

Artículo aceptado el / *Article accepted*: 2024-01-04

**ABSTRACT:** This article analyzes the linguistic choices used in political discourse to represent social actors and their role in the construction of national storylines. We focus on Donald Trump's and Joseph Biden's inaugural speeches as a critical exploratory context. The analytical approach involves contrasting their choices for assigning dynamism to social actors through transitivity roles and for identifying participants through direct, indirect, and pronominal strategies. Our findings show that Trump assigns Actor + Goal roles that construe citizens as agents impinging on material reality, while Biden assigns to them Actor – Goal roles that represent citizens as participants in happenings. Trump's identification of participants shows a higher proportion of indirect strategies linked with possessive qualification, whereas Biden stands out for his frequent use of singular first person. The

<sup>1</sup> This work was supported by Grant 2022-016 issued by Vicerrectoría de Investigación, Creación e Innovación at Universidad del Norte, Colombia.

findings suggest connections between the strategies identified and the construction of national identities and storylines, both permeated by political leaders' ideological orientations.

*Keywords:* dynamism, inaugural address, nation, participant identification.

**RESUMEN:** Este artículo analiza las elecciones lingüísticas mediante las cuales los actores sociales son representados en el discurso político y el papel de estas en la construcción de narrativas nacionales. La investigación se centra en los discursos de investidura de Donald Trump y Joseph Biden como contexto exploratorio crítico. El enfoque analítico se basa en el contraste de sus elecciones lingüísticas para asignar dinamismo mediante roles de transitividad y para identificar participantes mediante estrategias directas, indirectas y pronominales. Los resultados indican que Trump asigna roles de Actor con Objetivo que interpretan a la ciudadanía como agentes que influyen en la realidad, mientras que Biden asigna roles de Actor sin Objetivo que representan a los ciudadanos como participantes de eventos no causados. En la identificación de participantes, Trump destaca por el uso de estrategias indirectas ligadas a la cualificación posesiva y Biden, por el uso frecuente de la primera persona singular. Los resultados sugieren que las estrategias identificadas resuenan con la construcción de narrativas e identidades nacionales, ambas permeadas por las orientaciones ideológicas de los líderes políticos.

*Palabras clave:* actores sociales, dinamismo, identificación de participantes, nación.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The nation has been widely understood as a social construct founded on the imagined affiliation of human groups to a shared cultural heritage, a common history, a common territory, or belongingness to other sociohistorical identities (Auerbach, 2013; Kolakowski, 2003; Smith, 1986). Modern nation states conflated nations with sovereign entities by instituting national identities that privileged dominant social classes and undermined the cultural heritage of minority groups (Hobsbawm, 1992). Since the late 20th century, political actors have been challenged to sustain these institutionalized national discourses due to the rise of alternative discourses that have weakened the traditional unifying force of national constructs (Colomer, 2007). These discourses include multiculturalism, national pluralism, cosmopolitanism, globalization, and transnationalism (Somek, 2020). A recent counter-response to these alternative discourses in Western democracies has been the rise of discourses revindicating race, nationalism, religious morality, and inequality as essential features of the national construct (Bonikowski & Gidron, 2016; Demata, 2022). In the United States, this historical development is most clearly represented by Donald Trump's 2017-2020 presidency, characterized by populist nationalism, and by Joseph Biden's appeal for the return of the traditionally pluralist national order (Liu & Lei, 2018; Szabó, 2022).

Discourse analytic research has studied the way linguistic choices in political speech genres represent social actors in connection with various political ideologies (Blas

Arroyo, 2010; Chilton, 2003; van Leeuwen, 2008; Wilson, 1990). The focus has lied on political leaders' use of language to represent ethnic minorities, immigrants, political opponents, and other social groups (Councilor, 2017; Holland & Fermor, 2021; KhosraviNik, 2010; Musolff, 2023; Panaitiu, 2020; Wodak & Matouschek, 1993; Wodak, 2021). Although these studies have illuminated recurrent discursive strategies in political speech, more research of a contrastive nature is needed to understand how politicians' representation of citizens contributes to creating emerging discourses of the nation in contemporary democracies experiencing a resurgence in nationalism and populism.

The transition from Trump's to Biden's administration represents a critical context for investigating the discursive construction of the nation through language. Although the construction of national discourses is a multimodal process involving various semiotic systems (van Leeuwen, 2008), language plays a privileged role in producing, advancing, and resisting representations of national subjects and national narratives (De Cillia et al., 1999; Reyes, 2011, 2020). The connection between language and the nation is most patent in sociologically grounded linguistic theories, such as Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), where social order is conceived of as emerging out of the dialectic between meaning and social value (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2006; 2014; Lukin, 2019). Two key notions are of special interest in the study of national discourses: dynamism and participant identification. Dynamism refers to the degree of power allocated to participants as indicated by the type of processes and roles in which they participate (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Hasan, 1985). More 'dynamic' participants are represented as having more agency and as exerting more influence on the social material environment, whereas less dynamic participants are construed in more passive receptive roles (KhosraviNik, 2010; Koller, 2009; García, 2017; García-Jaramillo et al., 2023). Participant identification, in turn, refers to the choice of nouns, adjectives, and other nominal group resources to identify discourse participants. Choices in participant identification allow participants to be specified or generalized, abstracted, quantified, or qualified, with critical implications for their representation as social actors (van Leeuwen, 2008).

This study advances scholarship on the discursive construction of the nation by examining the connection between dynamism and participant identification and the representation of citizens as part of national narratives (De Cillia et al., 1999). Contextualized within the historical conjuncture represented by the transition of power from Trump to Biden, we formulate the following questions:

1. What implications does dynamism in the assignment of transitive roles to citizens have for the discursive construction of the nation?
2. How do political leaders' participant identification choices in referring to citizens create and naturalize discourses of the nation?

This paper is divided into five sections. After this introduction (1), the theoretical framework (2) reviews the concepts of nation and social actor representation and presents prior studies of Biden's and Trump's oral rhetoric. In Methodology (3), we describe the data and approach for the analysis of dynamism and participant identification. In the Findings and Discussion section (4), we present the most salient features of social actor representation in Trump's and Biden's inaugural speeches and discuss the connections with key theoretical notions and implications. We conclude (5) by summarizing our findings and suggesting new venues for related research.

## 2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### 2.1. THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF THE NATION

Social constructionist perspectives define the nation as an imagined community constructed through the discursive legitimation of representations throughout a community's history (Auerbach, 2013; Hobsbawm, 1992; Smith, 1986). In the discursive construction of this community, Kolakowski (2003) recognizes five key attributes. First is the national spirit or *volksgeist*, the perception of a collective national character in which idealized national subjects see themselves as sharing positive and negative traits (Auerbach, 2013; Panaitiu, 2020). The national spirit is bolstered by a sense of historical memory and a nameable beginning, the collective idea of a shared past traceable to foundational events and narratives of victory and struggle (Beynli, 2022). These elements are embodied in the national territory, the space in which the nation is imagined as a bounded entity (Demata, 2022). Based on the notion of a shared character, a common past, and a self-contained territory, the national construct affords a sense of future orientation, the idea that the nation is heading towards a given destination (Szabó, 2022).

National constructs evolve dynamically as communities naturalize, legitimate, and resist their contents in social institutions such as education, the church, the media, and, above all, the State (Demata, 2022; Wodak, 2021). In democratic societies, political leaders bidding for the State's power imbue their proposals with legitimacy by using strategies to reframe one or more elements of the national construct (Wilson, 1990). Among these strategies, de Cillia et al. (1999) include political leaders' construction of the existing national discourse by emphasizing unification and identification with its defining traits. Political discourse may also seek to perpetuate a threatened aspect of national identity or to justify past events in the nation's historical memory. Alternatively, political discourse could orient itself to transforming a well-established aspect of the national construct. These macro-strategies can refer to any of the contents of the national narrative (e.g., seeking to construct the shared past while transforming the shared future) (Kolakowski, 2003).

Political leaders' advance national constructs by representing citizens as social actors, that is, by assigning to them roles and social identities within broader narratives of the nation's past, present, and future (De Cillia et al., 1999; van Leeuwen, 2008). Social identities locate citizens within a spectrum of possibilities for being and within a system of overarching value categories: White/Black/Brown, middle-class/working class, educated/uneducated. Although social identities may be explicitly mentioned on the surface of discourse, contemporary political discourse has tended to avoid explicit racial or class denominations (García-Jaramillo et al., 2023). 'Invoking' (c.f. Martin & White, 2003) these identities through representational choices ('dog whistles') is often the preferred route. For example, rural whites have been indirectly construed as hardworking, family-oriented, and faithful, and thus as performing the actions that mark those values: working the land, raising children, and attending church (Lensmire, 2017).

In constructing the nation, representing 'others' as an out-group is one of the discursive practices used to enhance the cohesiveness of national social identities (Panaitiu, 2020; van Dijk, 1998; Wodak & Matouschek, 1993). Out-group representation delineates the moral boundaries of the inside community in well-marked terms: righteous vs. sinful, hard-working vs. moocher, peace-loving vs. unruly, law-abiding vs. illegal, and

national vs. foreigner (Auerbach, 2013; Hobsbawm, 1992; Smith, 1986). Unlike the representation of in-groups, the representation of out-groups can refer explicitly to their institutions and practices in overt evaluative labels (Koller, 2009; Panaitiu, 2020). This practice has been more frequently documented in nationalist, populist, and far-right/far-left discourse (Schertzer & Woods, 2021).

The creation of a national storyline is a major theme in the representation of citizens in political discourse (De Cillia et al., 1999). Strengthening national ties involves constructing imaginaries of a shared past, with foundational myths, heroes and heroines, past victories and tragedies, and shared customs and rituals (Beyinli, 2022; Demata, 2022). Similarly important in the creation of the national storyline is the framing of a shared future, a set of motives articulating a vision of the nation's destiny. The nation's shared history is a strategic representation constructed and promoted by power-holding groups, where homogeneity and predestination prevail over the complexity of history as a site for contested narratives (Auerbach, 2013). Musolff (2010; 2023) has captured this imagined homogeneity in his study of the metaphor of the *body politic*. The national storyline is maintained by symbolic agents in culture (the schooling system, media, the arts) and it is manipulated strategically by political contestants to attain legitimacy, constituting the basis for argumentation (De Cillia et al., 1999; Koller, 2009).

The situations and conditions idealized in the vision of the nation reflect the values construed as having importance for the citizenry, including wealth, prosperity, equality, peace, and world dominance (Kolakowski, 2003). The vision of a shared future endows political contestants with legitimacy and argumentative power, since they can present themselves as instruments for the envisioned future and their opponents as threats to their achievement (Wilson, 1990). Challenging candidates are likely to construe the incumbent administration as responsible for the loss of a glorious past or as detrimental to the nation's path to glory. Representations are thus dynamic, strategic constructs which political leaders can adjust to bring about specific responses.

## 2.2. DYNAMISM AND PARTICIPANT IDENTIFICATION

Different discourse analytic frameworks recognize the representation of social actors as a central social practice in political discourse (van Leeuwen, 2008; Wodak, 2021). SFL-based discourse analysis considers social actor representation as a dialectic phenomenon in which power relations and social roles are created, maintained, reproduced, and resisted through choices in semiotic systems, chiefly, language (García, 2017; Lukin, 2019). In analyzing social actor representation in political discourse, dynamism and participant identification are significant from a critical discursive standpoint (Darics & Koller, 2019; KhosraviNik, 2010; van Leeuwen, 2008).

Dynamism refers to the assignment of roles to social actors within the ideational meaning potential of transitivity in the clause (Hasan, 1985). Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) distinguish between six types of processes in the system of transitivity (material, relational, mental, verbal, existential, and behavioral). Material processes entail the Actor, the entity construed as bringing about change, and the Goal, the entity construed as affected by the change. Material clauses also allow the specification of an Agent, an entity that causes change to occur, and a Beneficiary on whose behalf the process unfolds. In mental clauses, citizens can be construed as Sensors having consciousness or as

Phenomena of someone else's consciousness. Relational clauses construe citizens as Carriers of possessive, qualitative, or circumstantial attributes. Citizens can also be Existents in existential clauses, Sayers in verbal clauses, or Behavers in behavioral clauses. Studies have found that participants construed as having more dynamism (affecting reality in different ways) are usually endowed with more power to act upon reality than those construed in less dynamic manners, who are usually generalized or construed as recipients of actions (García, 2018; KhosraviNik, 2010; van Leeuwen, 2008).

Participant identification involves a broad range of resources for referring to discourse participants in the nominal group (Darics & Koller, 2019; van Leeuwen, 2008). Social actors may be construed directly through personal names, such as those of historical characters bearing symbolic relevance for the political cause at hand. Another strategy is the use of demonyms (Americans, Germans), geographical metonymies (America, Germany), and allusion to specific social groups (friends, housewives, soldiers) or abstractions and nominalizations that entail people engaging in actions (riots, demonstrations) (Martinez-Lirola, 2022; Wang & Ma, 2021; Wodak, 2021). Political discourse also represents social actors in indirect ways (Koller, 2009; Panaitiu, 2020). One resource commonly thought of as having critical implications is the omission of agency through passive voice (Lingle, 2021). Indirect reference to citizens may be achieved metonymically or meronymically (van Leeuwen, 2008). Metonyms (e.g. *America* for American citizens) have been widely associated with constructive strategies seeking to present citizens as a single unbounded unit. In turn, meronyms (reference to the whole through its parts) construe the material or abstract attributes citizens are held to possess (Councilor, 2017). Political leaders can also choose to qualify citizens by using possessives, epithets, or a combination of them (e.g., my fellow Americans). Qualifications serve to intensify the attitudinal charge of the representation advanced (Wang & Ma, 2021; O'Grady, 2011). Finally, they can use pronouns to construe themselves, citizens, and their party members as part of multi-tiered social structures (Fetzer & Bull, 2012; Kranert, 2017). This broad range of representation resources configures a potential for creating national storylines along ideologically permeated lines.

Considering the lexicogrammatical resources available for representing social actors in the clause and the nominal group, in this paper we focus on exploring the representation of citizens in connection with the construction of national identities in political discourse. The following section briefly describes the rhetorical styles of the political leaders under study.

### 2.3. TRUMP'S AND BIDEN'S SPEECH AND THE NATION

The recent presidential administrations in the United States have drawn abundant research attention due to their disruption of the narratives that cemented the political constitution of the American nation (Hidalgo-Tenorio & Benítez-Castro, 2021; Khan et al., 2021; Reyes, 2020; Wang & Liu, 2018). Trump's rise as a political leader featured overt challenges to the pluralist constitutional order, combined with public displays of racist nativist rhetoric (Haverda & Talley, 2019; Holland & Fermor, 2021). Trump has been largely characterized as a right-wing populist. The rhetorical features reflecting this orientation include self-representation as a charismatic and brave leader fighting against the establishment (Reyes, 2020), the negative framing of the status quo (Liu & Lei, 2018), and a tendency to use fear and emotion as a mobilization strategy. Other studies have

drawn attention to his tendency to promote us vs. them divides based on ethnic and ideological considerations (Khan et al., 2021), and the promotion of strong in-group identities among his followers (Hidalgo-Tenorio & Benitez-Castro, 2021). Although his communicative style has been described as disruptive of established norms in political discourse and diplomacy (Reyes, 2020), studies have shown Trump to strategically manipulate his speech style in accordance with specific purposes and interests (Wang & Liu, 2018).

Compared with the broad range of studies on Donald Trump, studies on Biden's speech are scarce owing to his more recent presidential role. One interesting study is Amaireh (2023), who analyzes a corpus of Biden's speeches using corpus-based methodology. He found that the most salient features of his discourse are the use of pronouns *I* and inclusive *we* to connect with the audience and frequent allusion to positive emotions such as *hope* and *love*. Although at least one study (Xiang, 2022) has compared Trump's and Biden's speeches, no studies thus far have contrasted their use of transitivity and participant identification in connection with the theme of creating national storylines. Our general assumption is that Trump and Biden differ considerably in their linguistic choices and in their strategies for constructing the nation given their marked ideological differences.

### 3. METHODOLOGY

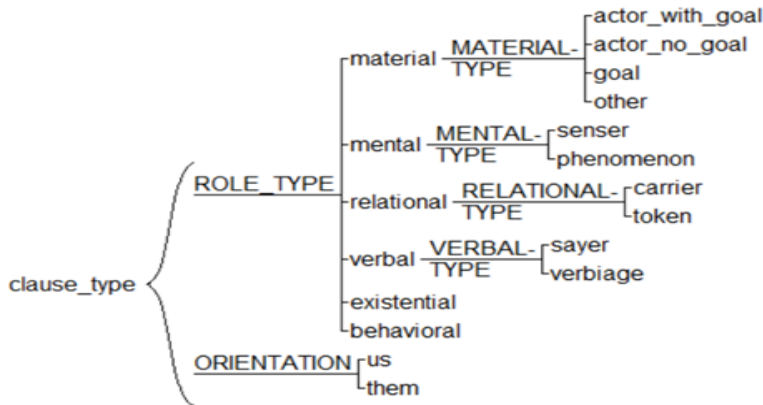
Our study is based on the analysis of Trump's and Biden's inaugural speeches at the beginning of the 2016 and 2021 presidential periods. Table 1 compares the two speeches in terms of length and other descriptive features:

**Table 1. Descriptive features in Trump's and Biden's inaugural speeches**

Inaugural speech	Duration (minutes)	Length (words)	Length (clauses)
Donald Trump 2016	16.10	1,464	104
Joe Biden 2021	21.20	2,350	274

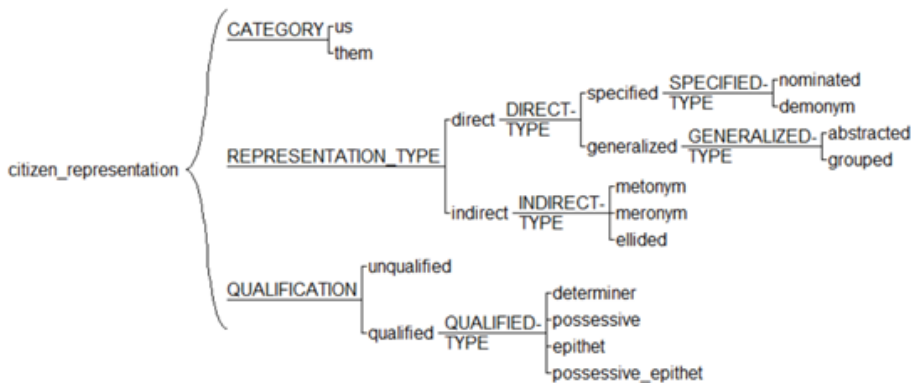
We decided to focus on inaugural speeches due to their symbolic nature as showcases of the vision and philosophy of the new administration (Xiang, 2022). Targeting the notions of dynamism (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2006; Hasan, 1985) and participant identification (Darics & Koller, 2018; van Leeuwen, 2008), the analysis focused on the clause and the nominal group, respectively. For the analysis of dynamism, a couple of research assistants segmented the speeches into clauses and identified the process types, participant roles, and circumstances in them. They used the annotation framework in Figure 1, based on Halliday and Matthiessen (2014). We then gathered to validate the analysis, excluding instances where ambiguity could not be resolved.

**Figure 1. Annotation framework for dynamism based on transitivity categories**



For the analysis of participant identification, the annotation scheme distinguishes options within the nominal group, based on van Leeuwen (2008) (Figure 2). The analysis considered whether citizens featured as part of in-groups or out-groups, the type of representation employed (direct, indirect, or pronominal) and whether qualification of any type was employed. Direct representation is that in which citizens are construed as conscious entities occupying participant roles, whether as concrete named participants, as members of a national class (Americans) or a generalized social group (soldiers), or as abstractions (riots). Indirect representation considers whether citizens are referred to by alluding to a metonymic identity (Washington, America), their possessive attributes (your dreams), or by eliding their identity as participants in passive clauses.

**Figure 2. Annotation scheme for participant identification categories**



After tabulating the findings, we contrasted normalized frequencies in search for salient commonalities and differences. For interpretation, we used De Cillia et al.'s (1999) discursive strategies for the discursive construction of the nation, as discussed in the theoretical framework. We focused on the aspects of the national construct (Kolakowski, 2003) that were most foregrounded by each president-elect (e.g., the national spirit, the common history, the envisioned future, the territory), and on the orientation of their



argumentative strategies to construct, destruct, justify, or dismantle national narratives (De Cillia et al., 1999). We also reflected on the contrast between Trump’s and Biden’s construction of in-group and out-group members in their underlying national narratives.

#### 4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

##### 4.1. DYNAMISM

Table 2 presents the total frequencies and percentages of transitive roles assigned to human participants in Trump’s and Biden’s speeches. Salient differences can mostly be observed in the assignment of Actor, Senser, Carrier, and Attributor roles:

**Table 2. Transitive roles assignment in Trump’s and Biden’s speeches**

Process type	Role assigned to human participants	Trump (104 clauses)		Biden (274 clauses)	
		Count	% of clauses	Count	% of clauses
Material	Actor (+ Goal)	20	29.85	22	20.75
	Actor (– Goal)	4	5.97	17	16.03
	Goal	3	4.47	5	4.71
	Beneficiary	2	2.98	1	0.94
	Initiator	3	4.47	0	0
	Scope	0	1	0	0
Relational attributive	Carrier	15	22.38	15	14.15
	Attributor	5	7.46	0	0
Relational identifying	Token	2	2.98	2	1.88
	Value	0	0	0	0
Mental	Senser	12	17.91	37	34.9
	Phenomenon	0	0	1	0.94
Verbal	Sayer	1	1.49	3	2.83
Existential	Existent	0	0	1	0.94
Behavioral	Behaver	0	0	2	1.88

Regarding material processes, the most frequent role assigned by both presidents is as Actors affecting Goals (Actor + Goal), with Trump making this choice relatively more frequently than Biden (Trump= 29.85%, Biden= 20.75%). Both politicians assign this role to citizens in developing the domain of restoration. In Trump’s case, the emphasis is on reconstructing and retrieving lost possessions (*rebuild, get back, get off, give back, transfer, and restore*). Trump distinctively construes citizens as Actors affecting concrete Goals, such as infrastructure (*roads, highways, bridges*), other social participants (*our people, American workers, American families*) and the nation (*our country*) (example 1):

- (1) We will build new roads and highways and bridges and airports and tunnels and railways all across our wonderful nation (Trump).

Although Trump also represents citizens as retrieving abstract Goals (*power, wealth, jobs, and dreams*), Biden stands out for construing citizens as acting upon abstractions related to social aspirations and values (*work, middle class, racial justice, the truth, our souls, hope, decency*). In contrast with Trump's narrative of material restoration, Biden largely construes restoration in terms of healing and a return to social justice and morality, as shown in example 2:

- (2) We can reward work, || rebuild the middle class, || and make healthcare secure for all. ||| We can deliver racial justice (Biden).

Restoration connects with the construal of the nation's shared vision of the future as driven by an appraisal of the recent and distant past (Kolakowski, 2003). It addresses collective anxieties about the loss or depletion of the American nation's perceived past glories (Colomer, 2007; Szabó, 2022). Although both presidents foreground this theme in their speeches, it is interesting that Trump couches retrieval in material economic terms, while Biden does so largely in terms of social justice. The concreteness of Trump's Goals aligns with his strategy of tapping into narratives of economic decay to stir people's nationalist anti-globalist sentiment (Haverda & Halley, 2019). Concrete material Goals are relatable to a broader political base in that they represent a satisfier to people's immediate wants and necessities. Abstract Goals, more prevalent in Biden's speech, require 'unpacking' because their nature as abstractions or metaphors removes them from everyday experience (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Thus, while restoration assigns citizens a dynamic role, the concreteness of the entities construed as Goals could impinge on the actual dynamism of their representation.

Another realm associated with Actor + Goal role assignment is that of protection. Trump refers exclusively to the protection of borders, construing citizens as defenders of national integrity against foreign action (example 3). Biden, on the other hand, construes himself as the defender who, on behalf of citizens, protects the nation against social participants depicted as internal threats (*those who lie and use violence*) (example 4):

- (3) ||| We've defended other nations' borders || while refusing to defend our own. ||| (Trump)

- (4) || I will defend the Constitution. || I will defend our democracy. || I will defend America. || (Biden)

Trump's and Biden's representation of citizens and of themselves within the realm of protection connects with different dimensions of the national construct. For Trump, protection is about the territory, the bounded space within which citizens imagine the nation as a contained entity (Demata, 2022; Kolakowski, 2003). Construing citizens as Actors in protecting the borders stirs nationalist sentiment by reinforcing the sense of boundedness at risk. Biden's construal of himself as a protector against internal threats connects with the promotion of a democratic national spirit in which citizens respect and cherish the constitutional order.

While Actor + Goal roles are frequent in both speeches, Actor with no Goal roles (– Goal) are almost three times more frequent in Biden's speech. Actor – Goal) roles refer to doings lacking an affected entity (i.e., 'intransitive' clauses) or to happenings

where events are construed as self-initiated (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014, Ch. 5). Trump's assignment of this role type pertains largely to the domain of precarity as part of his narrative of jobs, factories, and wealth disappearing (Example 5). Biden uses Goal-less material clauses to construe movement within a metaphorical space of union within a shared moral ground (Example 6). With Actor – Goal roles, Trump retains the emphasis on retrieving concrete goods, while Biden remains focused on abstract values and goals:

(5) ||| Politicians prospered, || but the jobs left || and the factories closed. |||  
(Trump)

(6) ||| I ask || every American to join me in this cause: || Uniting to fight the common foes we face: Anger, resentment, hatred. Extremism, lawlessness, violence. Disease, joblessness, hopelessness. || (Biden)

The analysis of material clauses in the speeches shows that they can contribute to the national narrative by construing a vision of the nation's desirable future. Political leaders can foreground restoration, protection, precarity, and union to articulate representations of past and future affairs and mobilize citizens towards joint action. The nature of the actions and pursuits construed as worthy of undertaking constitutes an area of differentiation: while Trump construes citizens as engaging in concrete pursuits with him involved as a co-participant, Biden represents citizens as involved in abstract pursuits led by a morally sound leader.

Regarding relational processes, Table 2 shows that Trump assigns citizens a larger percentage of Carrier roles than Biden does (Trump= 22.38%, Biden= 14.5%). Trump's representation of citizens as Carriers promotes their identification with a shared vision by foregrounding their belongingness to his political movement (example 7). The centrality of attribution in Trump's discourse is also evident in his assignment of Attributor roles to citizens in clauses invoking the theme of "making America 'great' again". Biden, in contrast, assigns Carrier roles to emphasize citizens' moral qualities and commitment to the joint cause of restoring America's righteous path (example 8). Biden does not construe citizens as Attributors, unlike Trump, in keeping with the trend of representing citizens less agentively:

(7) ||We are one nation || We share one heart, one home, and one glorious destiny.  
|| (Trump)

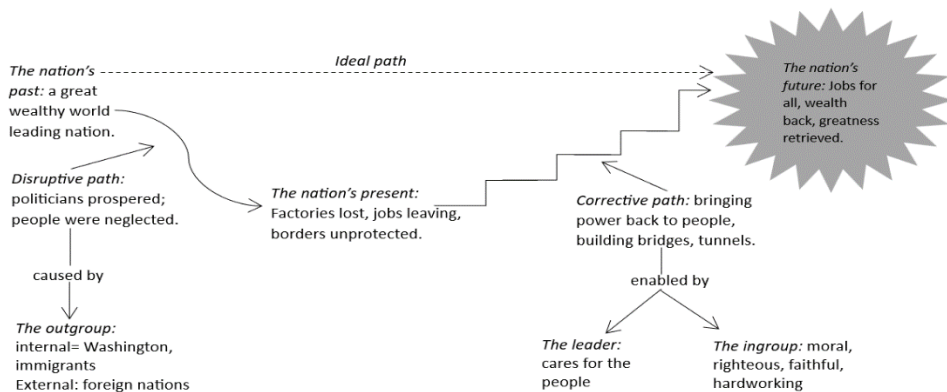
(8) America has to be better than this. America is better than this. Don't tell me things can't change. (Biden)

Mental clauses in Trump's and Biden's speeches differ in the type of experiential domain focused. Both leaders utilize mental clauses denoting endurance (*overcome, endure, face, meet, resolve*), motivation (*seek, move, need, reject*), and perception of others (*view, hear*). Biden, who assigns a larger percentage of Senser roles (34.9 vs. 17.91), foregrounds citizens disposition to endure undesirable phenomena through union and faith (*challenges, crises, racism, inequity, pandemic, virus*). Unlike Trump, Biden construes himself as Senser in mental cognitive clauses which present him as an empathetic leader (examples 9 and 10). Trump's mental clauses emphasize shared motivation through volitive mental clauses (*we seek, we need*), as part of his discursive strategy of presenting himself as a member of the dissatisfied masses (example 11):

- (9) I know the forces that divide us are deep and they are real. But I also know they are not new. (Biden)
- (10) ||| I understand || that many Americans view the future with some fear and trepidation. ||| I understand || they worry about their jobs, about taking care of their families, about what comes next. || I get it. || (Biden)
- (11) || We will confront hardships||. ||| We will face challenges, || but we will get the job done. ||| (Trump)

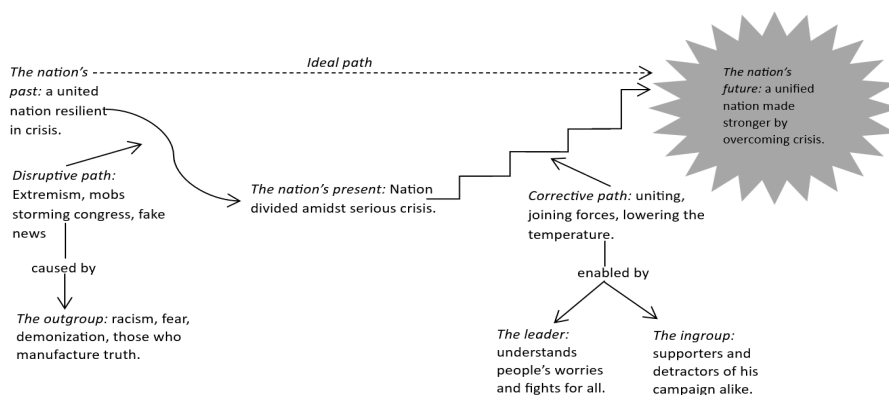
Regarding the creation of national narratives (de Cilia et al., 1999), there are salient differences between Trump’s and Biden’s usage of process types to assign dynamism to social participants. Trump’s national narrative creates a path between a past of greatness and glory, coherent with American exceptionalism, and an envisioned future depicting similar virtues. This exceptional path is thwarted by the outgroup, which includes internal outsiders (foreigners, the political establishment, gangs) and outsiders external to the nation (foreign nations). Internal outsiders are construed dynamically in material clauses involving dispossession of wealth (*ripped, distributed, reap the benefits*), and in relational clauses construing dynamic possession (*flourished, prospered*). External outsiders are construed less dynamically as Goals that have been *protected* and *subsidized* and as Carriers who have been *enriched*. The outgroup’s actions are represented as creating a problematic present, construed through Goal-less material processes referring to the loss of jobs and closing of factories and through mental and relational clauses representing struggling families who have *borne the cost* and been left with *little to celebrate*. These families are part of the ingroup, which also includes *Americans, the people, mothers, and children*, collectively construed as *righteous* people with *courage and goodness of will*. To redress this problematic present, Trump proposes a corrective path to bring America back to greatness, which involves the righteous ingroup and himself as the courageous devoted leader. The centerpiece of the proposal involves assigning a dynamic role to citizens by *giving power back* to the people and engaging in various material roles as builders and retrievers of wealth. Figure 3 schematically represents this national narrative:

**Figure 3. Schematic representation of Trump's national narrative**



With a similar narrative structure, Biden, as portrayed in Figure 4, represents the nation’s past through allusions to founding fathers’ struggle for uniting the nation and to Americans’ overcoming of previous crises through union. His vision of the future includes a nation whose citizens have overcome difficulties and become stronger by uniting and leaving polarization aside. The present conjuncture he depicts as one of deep division caused by political extremism and misinformation amidst a global pandemic. To solve the conjuncture and reach the envisioned future, Biden insists that Americans need to unite, join forces, and embrace their differences. This corrective path requires an ingroup that includes people of various political, ethnic, and religious denominations, irrespective of their role as supporters or detractors of Biden's presidency. These citizens participate mainly in material processes lacking a Goal, thus less dynamically than Trump’s. Biden construes himself as an understanding and competent leader who knows what people have experienced and is ready to fight for them. The core of this self-representation strategy is achieved through mental processes related to endurance and material processes related to protection:

**Figure 4. Schematic representation of Biden’s national narrative**



Our findings from the analysis of transitivity suggest a connection between dynamism and politicians’ ideological orientations. The connection is most patent in Trump’s case given his association with populism (Hidalgo-Tenorio & Benítez-Castro, 2021). While his tendencies to create us vs. them divides and to paint a precarious view of the present are well documented (Khan et al., 2021; Liu & Lei, 2018), this analysis shows that a key linguistic strategy he deploys to this aim consists of assigning and withholding dynamism to participants. Concretely, the more dynamic roles assigned to citizens are instrumental in representing a purported retrieval of power back to people’s hands. Populist leaders excel at construing themselves as outsiders to the political system and as champions of the popular will, seeking to conflate their views with people’s postures (Bonikowski & Gidron, 2016; Reyes, 2020). Trump does not promote a ‘dismantling’ strategy (de Cillia et al., 1999) to identity construction (e.g., he does not break away from the central theme of American exceptionalism). Instead, his transitivity choices capitalize on popular anxiety regarding the imagined demise of American exceptionalism by construing the promise of a highly dynamic citizen who acts on the

material world. In Biden's case, the theme of keeping America *united* becomes salient. Biden's strategy is also constructive in de Cillia et al.'s (1999) terms, in that it builds upon the constitutional national order to regain unity and peaceful collaboration. This narrative calls for thoughtful national subjects engaged in mental processes but with lesser agency in bringing about material change.

#### 4.2. PARTICIPANT IDENTIFICATION

Table 3 shows normalized frequencies of nominal group choices for representing citizens in Trump's and Biden's inaugural speeches.

**Table 3. Participant identification in Biden and Trump's speeches**

Participant identification	Trump		Biden	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
<b>Us</b>	159	85.03	274	87.8
<b>Them</b>	27	14.4	38	12.1
<b>Direct:</b>	60	31.9	101	32.3
<i>Nominated</i>	5	2.6	12	3.8
<i>Demonym</i>	3	1.6	10	3.2
<i>Abstracted</i>	18	9.6	45	14.4
<i>Grouped</i>	34	18.1	34	10.9
<b>Indirect:</b>	62	33	54	17.1
<i>Metonym</i>	14	7.4	18	5.7
<i>Meronym</i>	42	22.4	29	9.2
<i>Ellided</i>	6	3.2	7	2.2
<b>Pronominal:</b>	62	37.3	154	55
<i>I</i>	2	1.2	37	13.2
<i>You</i>	9	5.4	13	4.6
<i>We (inclusive)</i>	51	30.7	102	36.5
<i>We (exclusive)</i>	0	0	2	0.7
<b>Qualification:</b>	65	34.6	42	13.3
<i>Determiner</i>	4	2.1	14	4.4
<i>Possessive</i>	47	25.1	21	6.7
<i>Epithet</i>	14	7.4	7	2.2

Regarding ingroup and outgroup identification, one striking finding is that Trump and Biden devote an almost equal frequency of instances for each group. This

commonality seems at odds with the recognition of Trump's more divisive communicative style (Haverda & Halley, 2019; Khan et al., 2021). Despite this quantitative similarity, there are qualitative contrasts regarding what Trump and Biden classify as insiders and outsiders. As shown in Figures 3 and 4, while Trump distinguishes between a righteous hardworking ingroup and an outgroup of selfish politicians and foreign nations, Biden's ingroup includes all Americans irrespective of their political creed and excludes a minority he describes as extremists who polarize and lie.

Concerning the type of representation, some similarities and contrasts are evident in the strategies that Trump and Biden use to refer to each subgroup. Both Trump and Biden use an approximately similar share of direct strategies, that is, those involved in referring to social actors as clause participants. Within this strategy type, they both prefer to generalize about social actors using abstraction and grouping. Trump has a slight tendency to prefer grouping, especially in connection with ingroup members, whom he refers to collectively as *the people, our people, patriots, righteous public*, etc (Example 12). Trump and Biden both prefer abstractions to refer to outgroup members, with Biden slightly outnumbering Trump in this regard. Trump's abstractions referring to outgroup members include *the establishment, crime, terrorism, and empty talk*. Biden uses a wider array of abstractions to this aim: *political extremism, white supremacy, domestic terrorism, anger*, etc (Example 13):

(12) Washington flourished, but the people did not share in its wealth. (Trump)

(13) And now, a rise in political extremism, white supremacy, domestic terrorism that *we* must confront, and *we* will defeat. (Biden)

Indirect strategies show a clear quantitative contrast. Trump far outnumbers Biden's use of indirect allusions to social actors, especially those relying on meronymic reference (reference to components or possessive attributes). Meronyms are salient in his identification of ingroup members and they serve to connect them with his vision of the national future (*our dream, our success, our wealth*), to reinforce territorial boundedness (*our wonderful nation, our borders, our companies, our products*), and to extol the national character (*our way of life, your courage, your loyalty*) (Example 14). Trump's distinctive preference for indirect identification through meronyms is reflected in his more frequent usage of possessive qualification, with *our* being the dominant choice. Less centrally, Trump uses epithets to express affective and moral stances towards insiders (*righteous public, the civilized world, struggling families, forgotten men and women*) and towards out-group members (*radical Islamic terrorism, foreign industry*). In Biden's speech, meronymic reference and possession are not only less frequent, but also appear to tribute differently to his national storyline. They are mostly devoted to alluding to the national past (*our history, our alliances, our forebearers*) and to emphasize his call for union within a polarizing conjuncture (*our hearts, our era, our sights, our democracy*) (Example 15):

(14) We will bring back our jobs. We will bring back our borders, and we will bring back our dreams. (Trump)

(15) That is what we owe our forebearers, one another, and generations to follow. So with purpose and resolve, we turn to the tasks of our time. (Biden)

One aspect in which Biden stands out is in his use of *I*, which substantially surpasses Trump's (Trump= 1.2%, Biden= 13.2%). This finding links with that regarding Biden's self-representation as an understanding leader engaged as a participant in mental processes (*I know, I believe, I understand, I get it*). He also uses the singular first person to represent himself as a participant in verbal processes referring to proposals to the citizenry (*I ask, I guarantee, I pledge*) (Example 16). While the use of *you* and exclusive *we* is relatively infrequent, inclusive *we* (*I + you*) remains the most salient pronominal choice for both candidates:

- (16) I know speaking of unity can sound to some like a foolish fantasy. I know the forces that divide us are deep and they are real. But I also know they are not new. (Biden)

Our analysis indicates commonalities that are probably explained by the register features of inaugural speeches and differences that suggest ideological resonances. The commonalities include preference for direct strategies, differential identification of ingroup and outgroup through grouping and abstraction, and predominance of inclusive *we*. These traits shared by politicians with starkly different ideologies suggest convergence around expected features of inaugural speeches as a public register. Unlike electoral campaign speeches, which entail substantial othering of the outgroup, inaugural speeches tend to focus on unity around the president-elect's national project (Xiang, 2022). Despite this trend, Trump's inaugural speech differs in that it focuses on highlighting the ingroup's moral superiority and unifying them as an ideologically distinct population. This strong differentiation of the ingroup may relate to his documented tendency to build strong in-group identities among his followers (Hidalgo-Tenorio & Benitez-Castro, 2021). Another similarity refers to the use of direct strategies for grouping insiders and abstracting outsiders. Its implication is that, across political colors, the creation of a national storyline (at least in the US context) may rely on making insiders more concrete and real while depicting outsiders in more diffuse terms. Van Leeuwen (2008: 36) has claimed that generalization through abstraction serves to construe social actors "as distant 'others' rather than as people with whom 'we' have to deal in our everyday lives". While abstraction is part of the repertoire for othering the outgroup, politicians associated with populist discourses, Trump included, often use explicit grouping to promote xenophobic and racist representations (i.e., García-Jaramillo et al., 2023; Schertzer & Woods, 2020). Trump's use of abstraction to represent outsiders in his inaugural speech thus appears to be a sign of relative moderation and of his ability to play different discursive cards depending on the context (or the register) (Wang & Liu, 2018).

Regarding contrasts, Trump stands out for his use of meronymy, possessive qualification, and epithets as indirect strategies for referring to ingroup members, while Biden relies considerably on self-mention connected with mental and verbal processes. These distinctive traits may bear ideological significance. Van Leeuwen (2008, p. 39) classifies possessive qualification as a strategy to create stable enduring associations between social groups and specific representations. Trump uses possessive qualification to associate insiders with his view of territory, the national character, and the national destiny, three key elements of the national construct in Kolakowski's (2003) account. Such emphatic association appears to support his nationalist political project by delineating key elements of his narrative and linking them with a special brand of morally superior citizen, the *good righteous* people. In turn, Biden's use of self-mention with *I* as



participant in mental and verbal processes denotes self-identification as a responsive leader (Fetzer & Bull, 2012) and has been associated with the discourse of recent social democratic politicians (Kranert, 2017) and with the increasing centrality of the president's persona in party politics in western democracies (Poguntke & Webb, 2005).

## 5. CONCLUSION

Through a contrastive methodology, this study has examined the role of dynamism and participant identification as discursive variables centrally involved in construing national narratives and identities. We have shown that the assignment of transitive roles to social actors construes national storylines (de Cillia et al., 1999), narratives of the nation's past, present, and future strategically advanced for political purposes. How dynamic (or passive) the social actors' roles are appears to relate to leaders' political and ideological orientations. Trump, widely recognized as a populist leader (Haverda & Halley, 2019; Hidalgo-Tenorio & Benítez-Castro, 2022; Reyes, 2020), construes a highly dynamic citizen empowered in the quest to restore power and make the nation 'great again'. His narrative thus revolves around the retrieval of American exceptionalism amidst the nostalgia and anxiety of the righteous good people that Washington and foreign nations have taken advantage of. Biden, more linked with constitutional democracy, predicates his storyline around the recovery of union amidst difficult times, construing citizens less dynamically as Actors acting on abstract Goals or with no Goals, and as Sensors participating in processes of mental endurance.

Regarding participant identification, our analysis has shown that direct, indirect, and pronominal choices can work to delineate in-groups, outgroups, and politicians' identities as leaders. The grouping of insiders and abstraction of outsiders emerged as a pattern common across political colors, although further research is needed to ascertain whether the same occurs in other forms of political speech. Beyond these commonalities, certain features emerged as distinctive ideological indicators. Trump's use of meronyms, possessive identification, and epithets supports his nationalist ideology by creating a clear outline of his idealized citizens and their role in his national storyline. Biden's frequent use of first person connects with his presentation as a responsive leader within Western democracy's increasing emphasis on the presidential persona.

Although previous research has studied the representation of social actors in political discourse (Councilor, 2017; Holland & Fermor, 2021; KhosraviNik, 2010; Musolff, 2023; Panaitiu, 2020; Wodak & Matouschek, 1993; Wodak, 2021), our study has contributed to illuminating the role of social actor representation choices in creating influential discourses of the nation. We have shown, for example, that high dynamism does not necessarily connect with more empowering representations of citizens, as generally assumed, but it can also resonate with populist narratives that tap into citizens' material needs. Our detailed analysis has also delineated specific relationships between ingroup and outgroup representation and distinct forms of participant identification. More broadly, we have contributed to providing linguistic substantiation to claims concerning the recent political transition in the United States, which is relevant for the understanding of (anti)democratic drifts in Western democracies. While further inquiry is needed regarding other equally powerful forms of national construction, such as metaphor (Musolff, 2010, 2023), we hope to have presented a sound theoretical and empirical basis for further studies of dynamism and participant identification in other national contexts equally influenced by rising antidemocratic discourses.

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