

DEICTIC DIMINISHMENT: THE STRATEGIC USE OF PRONOMINAL REFERENCE IN POLITICAL OTHERING (ON THE EXAMPLE OF 2024 US PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE BETWEEN REPUBLICAN NOMINEE DONALD TRUMP AND DEMOCRATIC NOMINEE KAMALA HARRIS)

Kostanian Z.

*Ph.D., Associate Professor, Chair of Media Linguistics, Faculty of Journalism,
Lomonosov Moscow State University, Moscow, Russia
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21982215>*

Abstract

This article identifies and critically analyzes a specific discursive strategy – deictic diminishment – employed by political figures to undermine their opponents through derogatory framing, demonization, stigmatization, and political othering. This strategy strips opponents of institutional legitimacy and social recognition, while simultaneously shaping the audience's mental models of them in negative terms.

To support this view, the author has studied the debate between Republican nominee Donald Trump and Democratic nominee Kamala Harris during the 2024 U.S. presidential election. While extensive scholarly work has catalogued Donald Trump's overtly insulting and pejorative language toward opponents, a systematic examination of his shift from formal address to bare pronouns, particularly "she" for Kamala Harris, remains absent. Drawing on insights from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), sociolinguistics, and cognitive linguistics, this study argues that such linguistic practice constitutes a strategic act of "deictic diminishment", demonstrating how the grammatical omission of a proper name, replaced by a personal pronoun, functions as a powerful instrument of political discourse.

The methodological framework combines Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse and Teun A. van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach, enabling deictic devices to be analyzed not merely as linguistic units but also as instruments involved in the reproduction of power relations, ideological assumptions, and practices of political exclusion.

The results prove that Trump's linguistic strategy reduces Kamala Harris to a depersonalized adversary, incapable, unworthy and unfit to run for presidency. By analyzing key speech acts from the 2024 campaign, this article fills a critical gap in the literature on political communication, demonstrating how deixis can be weaponized not only to build in-group solidarity but also to enact strategic exclusion and dehumanization in contemporary electoral politics.

Keywords: deictic diminishment, political othering, social deixis, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), pronominal reference, 2024 US presidential debates.

1. Introduction

The 2024 U.S. presidential election between Republican nominee Donald Trump and Democratic nominee Kamala Harris [1] has generated a significant corpus of academic inquiry. Research has effectively mapped their rhetorical strategies, framing Trump's approach as 'impact leadership' characterized by simplicity, crisis-framing, and emotional resonance, while defining Harris's as "visionary progressivism" emphasizing inclusivity and systemic reform [11]. Comparative discourse analyses have dissected their debate performances, noting distinct patterns in lexical choice, emotional appeal, and the use of conceptual metaphors for image formation. A consistent thread in this scholarship is the recognition of Trump's reliance on personal insults and derogatory language, a well-documented feature of his political style aimed at illegitimizing opponents [2]; [24]. Attacks on Harris have ranged from questioning her mental acuity and racial identity to employing gendered and bigoted tropes.

However, while scholars have meticulously analyzed Trump's overtly pejorative language and metaphorical framing, there has been no focused academic study devoted to his systematic derogation and diminishment of his political adversaries through the strategic use – and omission – of deictic reference. To describe this subtle yet effective pragmatic strategy, we propose the concept of "deictic diminishment", which

we define as an intentional substitution of an opponent's formal name and title with bare, dismissive, and often contextually and emotionally loaded pronouns.

A semantic and pragmatic analysis of the September 2024 Trump-Harris debate notes a striking asymmetry of power: "Trump not mentioning Harris by name, while Harris [referred] to Trump frequently." [14]. This fleeting observation points toward a deeper discursive phenomenon yet to be theorized. This article argues that this omission is not accidental but instrumental. It functions as a violation of social deixis norms, which govern the use of linguistic markers to acknowledge social status and respect. By denying Harris the basic linguistic marker of her office and identity, the strategy seeks to strip her of institutional authority and reduce her from a titled official to a depersonalized, generic opponent.

2. Theoretical background

As its central theoretical framework, this study primarily draws upon *social deixis*, which constitutes a fundamental dimension of linguistic pragmatics, encompassing expressions such as pronouns, titles, and honorifics that explicitly encode the social relationships between interlocutors. As Van Dijk [20] theorizes, social deixis operates at a critical socio-cognitive interface, where linguistic structures are inextricably linked to societal hierarchies through shared knowledge, atti-

tudes, and ideologies. Within the strategic realm of political discourse, social deixis assumes a particularly potent role as an instrument for constructing authority, fostering solidarity, and demarcating opposition. According to Levinson [13], deictic expressions like “we”, “our”, and “they” serve as primary linguistic tools in political communication, inherently relying on contextual information for their full pragmatic force. Through the deliberate manipulation of such forms, politicians can construct collective identities and divisions. A salient example is found in Donald Trump’s rhetorical strategy, whereby he uses an inclusive “we/us” against an exclusive (oppositional) “they/them”, a maneuver designed to consolidate in-group solidarity while systematically marginalizing out-groups.

Van Dijk [21] elucidates that social deixis frequently grammaticalizes *asymmetries of power*, which is most transparent in languages possessing a T-V distinction (e.g., *tu* vs. *vous* in French, *мы-Вы* in Russian), where the choice of address form directly indexes social hierarchy and dominance in relations. In such systems, a speaker of higher social status, age, or power may employ the informal T-form toward a subordinate addressee, while receiving the formal V-form in return. As Wierzbicka [25] notes, these pragmatic choices of address are deeply tied to cultural scripts of distance, respect, and the linguistic manifestation of social power. Although English lacks a morphologically marked T-V dichotomy, power asymmetry is nonetheless pragmatically encoded through other deictic means. As Levinson notes, fine-grained distinctions in relative rank are often conveyed through the strategic selection of pronoun forms, vocatives, and titles. Indeed, within political discourse, personal pronouns (I/me, we/us, they/them) function as markers of in-group/out-group boundaries, signaling inclusion or exclusion, asserting institutional authority, and enacting processes of othering and hierarchical positioning.

Levinson [13, pp. 62-68] categorizes these pronouns under *person deixis*, which serves to predicate the roles of participants in a speech event and is grammatically reflected in the categories of first, second, and third person. This theoretical perspective is reinforced by subsequent analyses, such as those by Burling and Ingram [13, p. 69], who affirm the intrinsically deictic nature of pronominal systems. They define the latter through a framework of participant inclusion and exclusion: first person marks speaker inclusion (+S); second person marks addressee inclusion (+A); and third person marks the exclusion of both speaker and addressee (–S, –A). It is through this very mechanism of inclusion and exclusion that pronouns become central in constructing a political identity and demarcating social groups.

Building upon this theoretical foundation, the strategic deployment of person deixis can be understood as a core linguistic mechanism for enacting *political othering* described by Powell and Menendian [16, pp. 14-40]. This discursive and ideological process presents individuals or groups as fundamentally alien and oppositional to a dominant ‘in-group’ identity, drawing rigid symbolic boundaries between a legitimate ‘us’ and a

threatening ‘them’. The deictic choices outlined previously – specifically, the exclusive use of ‘we’ and the distancing ‘they’ – operationalize this binary. Elena Shegal [17] characterizes this phenomenon as the semiotic construction of the ‘political enemy’, a discursive strategy where linguistic distancing is used to strip political adversaries of institutional legitimacy.

The process of othering involves establishing a hierarchy that positions the self or in-group as superior. As noted above, the moral superiority claimed by the in-group legitimizes varying degrees of derogation toward the out-group, ranging from dislike and disrespect to outright hostility. By linguistically excluding the out-group from the deictic center (the –S, –A status of the third person), the discourse can facilitate their dehumanization, effectively redrawing the boundaries of the moral community to exclude them [12, pp. 252-264; 15, pp. 303-318].

The cumulative effect of this linguistically-mediated othering in political discourse is the intensification of *affective polarization* [3] – a state characterized not just by ideological disagreement but by profound animosity and distrust between partisan groups. When deictic strategies consistently frame political opponents as a distant, excluded, and morally inferior “them”, they foster the social distance, perceived moral superiority, and political intolerance that erode democratic norms. Thus, the micro-level linguistic choices surrounding pronouns and address forms are not merely reflective of social relations; they are active, constitutive tools in macro-level processes that threaten democratic resilience and social cohesion.

This practice aligns with, yet critically extends, established frameworks in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): Van Dijk’s model of the “ideological square” emphasizes “Our good things” and “Their bad things” while de-emphasizing the opposite [14, p. 75]. Deictic diminishment operationalizes this at the grammatical level: the opponent is not merely described negatively; they are first denied the symbolic capital of their name, making subsequent negative predication more easily naturalized. Similarly, Fairclough’s three-dimensional model of CDA, which connects textual features to discursive and social practices, provides a robust framework for understanding this tactic not as a stylistic quirk but as an exercise of power that shapes social relations and political cognition.

This intimate connection between micro-level textual manipulation and macro-level social control reflects the foundational ethos of the field. One of the central aims of CDA is to grasp, uncover, and identify ways of overcoming the abuse of power [7], [19]. Drawing on the work of Foucault [8], [9], [10], CDA scholars consider power relations to be discursive. In order to point out how the social abuse of power is discursively manifested, Fairclough suggests exploring the text’s nature, how it is embedded in discursive processes, and analysing discursive and social change on the basis of the text [4], [5], [6].

3. Material and methods

The primary data for this study consist of the official transcript of the first presidential debate between Democratic nominee Kamala Harris and Republican

nominee Donald Trump, held on September 10, 2024. The debate was hosted by ABC News and moderated by “World News Tonight” anchor David Muir and ABC News Live “Prime” anchor Linsey Davis [1]. This single pivotal script provides a dense corpus for a pragmatic investigation of diminishment strategies in political discourse.

To investigate the strategic mechanism of “deictic diminishment” as a form of political othering, this study employs a qualitative and quantitative discourse analysis situated within CDA, focusing on theoretical concepts: 1) Norman Fairclough’s three-dimensional framework, which views discourse simultaneously as text, discursive practice and socio-cultural practice [4], [5], [6]; and Teun A. van Dijk’s “ideological square” and socio-cognitive analysis, which connects micro-level textual structures to macro-level social power and ideological reproduction [22], [23]. This integrated framework enables the study to move beyond descriptive linguistics to critically examine how micro-linguistic choices in deixis enact macro-social processes of power, marginalization, and ideological contest.

The analysis unfolds through two integrated phases designed to move systematically from a close reading of the text to a broader ideological interpretation. The initial textual examination involves a detailed profiling of pronominal use, quantifying the frequency and context of third-person references like “she” and “her”, while also noting their strategic omissions. It further examines the evaluative lexis chosen to characterize Harris and her policies, and analyzes the rhetorical devices that frame these references. The consistent use of bare pronouns is examined as a mechanism of negative other-presentation, where the omission of formal title subtly erodes Harris’s institutional standing while amplifying her negative personal and political image. Ultimately, this systematic substitution is interpreted as a violation of norms in social deixis, constituting what we term deictic diminishment: a grammatical strategy to strip an opponent of authority, reduce their social persona, and facilitate their political delegitimization.

4. Textual analysis

4.1. Pragmatic Asymmetry: Deictic Diminishment versus Formal Nominal Recognition

The textual analysis reveals a fundamental and strategic asymmetry in how the candidates established reference to one another during the televised debate. Donald Trump’s linguistic choices are characterized by a consistent pattern of indirect reference and deictic diminishment. Throughout the debate, not once does he use Harris’s proper name (*Kamala Harris*) or her official title (*Vice President*). Instead, his references are exclusively pronominal, relying solely on the third-person pronouns “she” and “her”. This pattern is established from the very outset, when Trump references Harris as a detached third party:

(1) *I have no sales tax. That’s an incorrect statement. **She** knows that.*

In the examples below, Trump persistently continues referencing Harris as ‘she’ and ‘her’.

(2) ***She** copied Biden’s plan. And it’s like four sentences, like run-Spot-run. Four sentences that are*

*just oh, we’ll try and lower taxes. **She** doesn’t have a plan. Take a look at **her** plan. **She** doesn’t have a plan.*

(3) *I don’t say **her** because **she** has no policy. Everything that **she** believed three years ago and four years ago is out the window.*

(4) ***She** made a mistake.*

(5) *And you know what? I’ll give you a little secret. He (Viktor Orban) hates **her**. He can’t stand **her**.*

Trump’s systematic omission of his opponent’s name and title in examples (1-5) constitutes a marked violation of all sociolinguistic norms of political discourse. This deliberate strategy denies the referent social and political recognition, effectively reducing Kamala Harris to a depersonalized adversary. The contrastive nature of this tactic is underscored by Trump addressing other figures by their names within the same debate, for example Joe Biden. As is seen from the example (6), (7), (8) below, Trump refers to President Biden by name while maintaining the pronominal “she” for Harris:

(6) *These are the people that **she** and **Biden** let into our country.*

(7) *And that’s the kind of talent we have with **her**. **She**’s worse than **Biden**.*

(8) ***She** copied **Biden**’s plan.*

The deliberate contrast between naming Biden and pronominalizing Harris illustrates a strategy of selective recognition. On a pragmatic level, this pattern constructs a hierarchy of opposition, an asymmetry of power, framing Harris as unworthy, while recognizing Biden as a worthier opponent (*She’s worse than Biden*).

This pattern of diminishment is further amplified by the semantic content attached to the pronoun “she”, which Trump consistently embeds within assertions of Harris’ incompetence and lack of autonomy:

(9) *They gave **her** that to say.*

(10) *People don’t go to **her** rallies. There’s no reason to go. And the people that do go, **she**’s busing them in and paying them to be there.*

(11) *But if **she** ever got elected, **she**’d change it. And it will be the end of our country.*

(12) *...**she** has destroyed our country with policy that’s insane*

The above examples openly question Harris’s authority, intellect, and independent agency. In example (9), Trump’s assertion implies that Kamala Harris is incapable of formulating her own position: her speech was scripted by an unspecified “they” (a thinly-veiled reference to Democrats). Furthermore, the deliberate vagueness of “that” dismisses the substantive content of her notes, portraying Harris not as an equal actor but as a mere conduit for others’ ideas.

In an act of pejorative generalization (example (10)), Trump talks of Harris as an unpopular politician who has no followers; as a fraudster who boosts her rally figures by ‘busing people to the rallies’. Examples (11) and (12) are a vivid illustration of the strategy of ‘negative othering’: The out-group pronoun “she” is linguistically contrasted to the in-group pronoun “our” (*our country*), framing Harris’s potential presidency as an external threat to the nation.

Kamala Harris, in sharp contrast with Trump, consistently uses formal nominal reference to her opponent throughout the debate. She respectfully addresses Trump by his full name, “Donald Trump”, never resorting to the surname alone (*Trump*). As an alternative, she uses a formal titular reference “former president”:

(13) *Well, I would love to. Let's talk about what **Donald Trump** left us. **Donald Trump** left us the worst unemployment since the Great Depression. **Donald Trump** left us the worst public health epidemic in a century. **Donald Trump** left us the worst attack on our democracy since the Civil War. And what we have done is clean up **Donald Trump's** mess.*

(14) *What you're going to hear tonight is a detailed and dangerous plan called Project 2025 that the **former president** intends on implementing if he were elected again.*

(15) *The United States Supreme Court recently ruled that **the former president** would essentially be immune from any misconduct if he were to enter the white house again. Understand what it would mean if **Donald Trump** were back in the white house with no guardrails.*

As is seen in example (13), Kamala Harris mentions Trump's full name 5 times in succession, practically in each sentence of the passage, not once replacing it with a pronoun - what would be a grammatically correct and logically appropriate anaphorical reference. We can assume that Harris's deliberate avoidance of pronominal reference is not occasional, but rather a marked choice, with tangible pragmatic implications: Each repetition of her opponent's full name helps foster in the audience's minds that Donald Trump is the worst possible political actor, the one responsible for the “worst unemployment, worst public health and the worst attack on democracy” and therefore is the worst choice as future president.

4.2. Quantifying Asymmetry: Pronominal Erasure versus Nominal Recognition

Our quantitative analysis shows that in the aforementioned 2024 debate, Kamala Harris references Donald Trump by his name 37 times, while Trump makes 0 nominal references of Harris.

Figure 1 below presents the number of references of the political opponents during the debate:

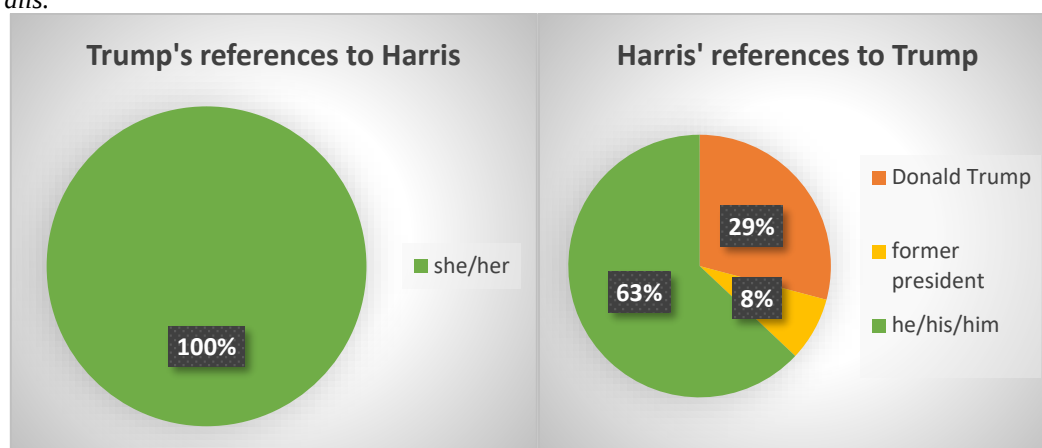


Figure 1: The number of references to political opponents across all responses.

Noteworthy, when considering how often each candidate referred to their opponent, we took into account not only personal names, but also other possible addresses, for example titles (“Vice-President” for Kamala Harris or “former President” for Donald Trump) or their mentions as nominees of Democratic and Republican respectively.

On the grammatical level, the above chart (a) demonstrates the use of zero anaphora (or indirect pronominal reference) as an instrument of constructing negative other-presentation. In linguistics, this phenomenon is also known as *pragmatics of absence*, the act of omission, which is not merely a lack of information but a strategic, discursive choice that carries significant functional weight in social interaction. In this particular case, zero anaphora is a direct application of social deixis to enforce the pragmatic functions of demeaning, presupposition, and negative framing of the opponent in a political discourse.

4.3. Deictic Diminishment as Gendered and Racialized Erasure

The linguistic tactic of erasing “Kamala Harris” in favor of “she” can meanwhile be viewed as an intentional act of gender and racial discrimination. This tactic aligns with a well-documented history in which Trump disproportionately targets women, particularly political opponents and critical journalists. *Washington Informer* quotes Elisa Lees Muñoz, Executive Director of the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF), as saying, “Trump focuses on insulting women more than men... They are insults that we consider to be gender-based.” Another quote goes: “Since his (Trump's) appearance in Chicago, he has publicly called Vice President Harris an expletive on a golf course, as well as “stupid” and a “loser”.

The data we collected suggest that Trump's omission of Kamala Harris's name and the repeated use of the pronoun “she” reduces her to a generic, gendered category, implying she is less able, less worthy, less potent than a male politician would be. The discriminatory nature of this strategy is highlighted through direct contrast: During the same debate, Trump readily uses the proper names of male figures: moderator David

Muir (examples (16), (17), (18)) and, as we have already mentioned earlier, President Joe Biden (examples (19), (20), (21)):

(16) *What's, when are they going to be prosecuted -- when are these people from countries all over the world, not just South America, they're coming in from all over the world, David, all over the world.*

(17) *But when are those, David, when are those people going to be prosecuted? When are the people that burned down Minneapolis going to be prosecuted or in Seattle?*

(18) *We have a nation that is dying, David.*

(19) *These are the people that she and Biden let into our country.*

(20) *By the way, Joe Biden was found essentially guilty on the documents case.*

(21) *I ended the Nord Stream 2 pipeline and Biden put it back on day one but he ended the XL pipeline.*

This juxtaposition confirms that the omission applied specifically to Kamala Harris was not a general discursive habit but a targeted pragmatic act. By systematically withholding the respectful acknowledgment granted to male peers, Trump enacted a clear power differential, presenting Harris's identity as subordinate, diminished, unimportant.

Furthermore, for a Black woman like Kamala Harris, this gendered diminishment is inextricably interwoven with racial prejudice. The pronoun "she" in this context becomes a linguistic container for layered stereotypes, questioning the authority and intellect of Black women. As argued in a *Washington Informer* editorial, "Intelligent, strong Black women will always be a threat to Donald J. Trump." His verbal attacks on Kamala Harris's intelligence and his dismissive comments on her racial identity demonstrate how deictic diminishment serves as a component of a broader strategy to undermine her legitimacy. The exchange between moderator David Muir and former President Donald Trump over Kamala Harris's racial identity presented in example (22) is a vivid illustration of racialized rhetoric.

(22) DAVID MUIR: *I want to move on now to race and politics in this country. Mr. President, you recently said of Vice President Harris, "I didn't know she was Black until a number of years ago when she happened to turn Black, and now she wants to be known as Black." I want to ask a bigger-picture question here tonight. Why do you believe it's appropriate to weigh in on the racial identity of your opponent?*

(23) FORMER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: *I don't. And I don't care. I don't care what she is. I don't care. You make a big deal out of something. I couldn't care less. Whatever she wants to be is okay with me.*

Trump's claim that Harris "happened to turn Black" in example (23) frames Harris as someone manipulating her identity for gain, thereby questioning her

sincerity and integrity. Furthermore, Trump's follow-up dismissal ("I don't care" and "I couldn't care less") emphasizes how little she means to him. The final line of the tirade, "Whatever she wants to be is okay with me", sounds quite patronizing, as if Trump grants Harris a permission to be who she wants, even more stressing his superiority over her.

4.4. From Individual "she" to Collective Diminishment "they"

Remarkably, Trump's strategic diminishment extends beyond an individual opponent to encompass an entire political affiliation through a rigid pronominal binary of "I" versus "they". This framework subsumes other binary pairs, such as "I/she" and "we/they", where the singular feminine pronoun "she" is semantically inflated to stand metonymically for the collective "they" – that is, the Democratic Party.

A clear example of such diminishment is found in Trump's discourse on economic policy. His statement begins with a direct, personalized attack: "She knows that," but then strategically shifts to 'they', as shown in example (24):

24. *I took in billions and billions of dollars, as you know, from China. In fact, they never took the tariff off because it was so much money, they can't. It would totally destroy everything that they've set out to do. They've taken in billions of dollars from China and other places. They've left the tariffs on. When I had it, I had tariffs and yet I had no inflation.*

This shift is not arbitrary but is the logical endpoint of deictic diminishment: the metonymic inflation of singular feminine "she" into plural anonymous "they". The negative associations attached to "she" (incompetence, destructive policy, illegitimacy) are seamlessly transferred onto the plural pronoun 'they', an ambiguous referent for Biden's administration, the Democratic Party, the "system". This strategy denies the opposition formal recognition and aggregates them into a singular, shadowy antagonist. The binary of the assertive, agential "I" ("I took," "I had") versus "they/them" reinforces the contrast between a strong effective leader and his ineffective opponents. Consequently, the political contest is discursively reshaped from a debate between platforms into a personal struggle, demonstrating how deictic diminishment enacts politics of polarization, where dehumanization begins with the simple act of refusing to name.

5. Discussion

On the pragmatic level, our examples show that the consistent use of the pronoun "she" in place of Kamala Harris's name establishes a diminishing deictic frame, which is strengthened through the employment of four discursive strategies: Othering, Labelling, Diminishing, and Demonizing, aimed at presenting Harris's persona as alien, ideologically rigid, insignificant, and existentially threatening. The following table delineates these core strategies, providing examples from the debate transcript and analyzing their specific purpose within the framework of deictic diminishment.

Table 1:

Four discursive strategies of diminishment used by Trump		
Strategy	Examples from Trump's discourse	Purpose
1. Othering	• <i>I rebuilt our entire military. She gave a lot of it away to the Taliban. She gave it to Afghanistan.</i> • <i>This is the one that weaponized. Not me. She weaponized.</i>	to construct a fundamental, moral opposition between the patriotic and effective "I" and a dangerous or traitorous "she". This places the opponent outside the community of shared national values and interests.
2. Labelling	• <i>She's a Marxist. Everybody knows she's a Marxist.</i> • <i>She was the border czar.</i> • <i>She was a horrible negotiator.</i>	to fix the opponent's identity with a single, reductive, and pejorative term.
3. Diminishing	• <i>They gave her that to say</i> • <i>So it doesn't matter what she says about going to Congress.</i> • <i>And I don't care. I don't care what she is. I don't care.</i>	to rhetorically negate the opponent's authority, arguments, and significance. By declaring their speech irrelevant or their identity meaningless, the speaker performs an act of discursive erasure.
4. Demonizing:	• <i>If she's president, I believe that Israel will not exist within two years from now.</i> • <i>Now she wants to do transgender operations on illegal aliens that are in prison.</i>	to escalate the critique to existential threat. This strategy portrays the opponent not merely as wrong, but as an agent of apocalyptic destruction and moral depravity,

These four macro-strategies mentioned above do not exist in a rhetorical vacuum; they are operationalized through identifiable stylistic devices. The follow-

ing analysis examines the key rhetorical devices, including refrain, contrast, and hyperbole, which serve to systematically deny, diminish, and depersonalize Kamala Harris.

Table 2:

The Execution of Diminishment Through Rhetorical Devices		
Stylistic Device / Rhetorical Strategy	Examples from Trump's Discourse	Commentary on Function within Deictic Diminishment
Refrain/ Anaphora	• <i>And just to finish off, <u>she</u> doesn't have a plan. <u>She</u> copied Biden's plan. And it's like four sentences, like run-Spot-run. Four sentences that are just oh, we'll try and lower taxes. <u>She</u> doesn't have a plan. Take a look at her plan. <u>She</u> doesn't have a plan.</i> • <i><u>She's</u> been against it for 12 years. Uh, defend the police. <u>She's</u> been against that forever. <u>She</u> gave all that stuff up, very wrongly, very horribly.</i>	The pronominal subject "she" functions as a grammatical refrain, transforming the pronoun from a simple referent into a rhythmic instrument of negation. Each repetition reinforces the opponent's identity as lacking, hateful, deceitful, and her actions as incompetent, ineffective and destructive for the country.
Parallel structures/Repetition	• <i><u>She went out</u> – <u>she went out</u> in Minnesota and wanted to let criminals that killed people, that burned down Minneapolis, <u>she went out</u> and raised money to get them out of jail. <u>She did things</u> that nobody would ever think of.</i> • <i>Now <u>she wants</u> to do transgender operations on illegal aliens that are in prison. This is a radical left liberal that would do this. <u>She wants</u> to confiscate your guns and she will never allow fracking in Pennsylvania</i>	Parallelism/repetition introduces structural uniformity to listing diverse accusations, making them sound even more dangerous and threatening. The rhythmic repetition of "she"-clauses creates a hypnotic cadence that is both memorable and rhetorically persuasive.
Gradation/ Amplification	• <i>She's not going to get the vote. She can't get the vote. She won't even come close to it.</i>	Grammatically, gradation moves from simple assertion ("she's not") to categorical impossibility ("she can't") to hyperbolic failure ("won't even come close").

	• <i>She's destroying this country. And if she becomes president, this country doesn't have a chance of success. Not only success. We'll end up being Venezuela on steroids.</i> • <i>She's worse than Biden. In my opinion, I think he's the worst president in the history of our country. She goes down as the worst vice president in the history of our country.</i>	Semantically, gradation amplifies from criticism of her actions ("destroying this country") to a larger scale of disaster ("this country doesn't have a chance of success") to a devastating culmination ("We'll end up being Venezuela on steroids."). Put in the order from comparative to superlative degree, the adjectives intensify the emotional impact of the warning, especially in the last sentence, with the extension 'in the history of our country'.
Hyperbole	• <i>She got zero votes. And when she ran, she was the first one to leave because she failed. And now she's running. I don't understand it but I'm okay with it – because I think we're going to do pretty well.</i> • <i>If she's president, I believe that Israel will not exist within two years from now.</i>	The use of hyperbole reduces a complex political career to an absolute zero, completely erasing the opponent's political legitimacy. This extreme simplification makes the argument memorable and easy to grasp. This sentence uses hyperbole to frame the election as an existential crisis, shifting the debate from a discussion of specific policies to a terrifying, life-or-death scenario.
Contrast	• <i>I rebuilt our entire military. She gave a lot of it away to the Taliban. She gave it to Afghanistan.</i> • <i>I had no inflation, virtually no inflation, they had the highest inflation, perhaps in the history of our country</i>	This persistent pattern of binary contrasts (I/she, I/they, we/they) frames the audience's choice as an irreconcilable conflict between success and failure, strength and weakness, poverty and wellness.
Metaphors	• <i>She was the border czar. Remember that. She was the border czar. She doesn't want to be called the border czar because she's embarrassed by the border.</i>	The metaphor "czar" serves to alienate Harris, presenting her as an autocratic, un-American ruler, building an association with Russian czars. The metaphor functions as a tool of political alienation.
Questions	• <i>Why hasn't she done it? She's been there for 3 1/2 years. They've had 3 1/2 years to fix the border.... Why hasn't she done it?</i>	A rhetorical question of this kind is meant to plant an accusation as if it were an obvious fact. By repeatedly asking why "she" has not acted, the speaker frames the opponent as fundamentally incapable and negligent, fostering the audience's negativity towards the opponent.

The empirical findings compiled in Tables 1 and 2 demonstrate that "deictic diminishment" operates as a highly systematic, interconnected discursive system rather than a series of arbitrary personal slights. This phenomenon illustrates what Fairclough [5], [6] describes as the direct link between micro-textual features and macro-social practices. By replacing socially sanctioned nominal references (*Kamala Harris; The Vice President*) with the bare third-person singular pronoun she, the speaker establishes a restrictive deictic frame. This frame serves as the pragmatic foundation for four distinct macro-strategies: Othering, Labelling, Diminishing, and Demonizing.

This strategic orchestration relies heavily on anaphora, refrains, and parallel syntax to initiate the macro-strategy of *Othering*. In the context of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Othering serves to construct a rigid ideological divide between a self-legitimated in-group and a marginalized out-group. In the analyzed text, the pronoun "she" is stripped of its neutral indexical function and transformed into a rhythmic instrument of negation. When different socio-political accusations are embedded within parallel clauses, they

flatten the opponent's multifaceted political identity into a monolithic source of threat.

Following this initial pronominal baseline, the discourse employs the macro-strategy of *Labelling* to represent the opponent's identity within pejorative categories (e.g., *Marxist, horrible negotiator*). This strategy aligns with van Dijk's [22] "ideological square", which emphasizes the out-group's negative properties while erasing their positive attributes. The use of the "border czar" metaphor illustrates the interplay between micro-semantics and macro-ideology; by leveraging the autocratic associations of the term, the text superimposes a framework of un-American authoritarianism onto the bare pronoun. This works in tandem with binary syntactic contrasts, structurally positioning a capable, active first-person pronoun (*I rebuilt, I had no inflation*) against an inept, destructive third-person pronoun (*She gave away; They had the highest inflation*). This clear division pushes the opponent completely out of the deictic center of authority.

The macro-strategy of *Diminishing* then uses this structural marginalization to erase the opponent's au-

thority, rendering her speech irrelevant (*It doesn't matter what she says*), which is sustained through two linguistic maneuvers: rhetorical questions and grammatical gradation. Targeted rhetorical questions like *Why hasn't she done it?* sound like obvious facts, framing the opponent as fundamentally incapable. At the same time, syntactic gradation scales her political potential down from a simple negative assertion (*She's not going to get the vote*) to an absolute modal impossibility (*She can't*), systematically reducing her perceived political efficacy.

Finally, the discourse culminates in the macro-strategy of *Demonizing*, turning standard political contexts into an existential and apocalyptic crisis. This shift is executed through semantic amplification and hyperbole. The text scales its critique from localized policy failure (*destroying this country*) to systemic, civilizational collapse (*Venezuela on steroids; Israel will not exist*). This extreme exaggeration works because the opponent's individual identity has already been minimized by withholding her name. It allows the speaker to use the pronoun *she* as an empty placeholder for absolute catastrophe and moral failure.

In summary, the interaction between the macro-strategies in Table 1 and the stylistic devices in Table 2 demonstrates that deictic diminishment operates as an integrated system. What might have seemed as an initial grammatical slight – the refusal of nominal and titular recognition – is systematically amplified through repetition, binary contrasts, and hyperbole. The result shows how basic grammatical choices can be weaponized to achieve institutional erasure, deepen polarization, and reinforce political divisions.

6. Conclusion

Our analysis of the 2024 Trump-Harris debate reveals the following key findings. First, deictic diminishment represents a form of symbolic violence that targets the opponent's social persona and institutional standing. By denying onomastic recognition, it seeks to undo the individual's legitimacy before engaging with their policies.

Second, when directed at a pioneering female candidate of color, this strategy intersects with enduring patterns of gendered disrespect, leveraging stereotypes to question competence and authenticity. It thus functions as a reactionary linguistic practice, attempting to reinscribe traditional hierarchies challenged by Harris's identity.

Finally, and most broadly, the practice contributes to the degradation of democratic discourse. It models a form of engagement that replaces the recognition of a legitimate adversary – a cornerstone of agonistic democracy – with a rhetoric of erasure and existential threat, thereby fueling the affective polarization that destabilizes pluralistic societies.

Furthermore, this study delineates the specific pragmatic-semantic load borne by the diminished pronoun. The pronominal reference “*she*” became a semantically enriched node, consistently embedded in contexts of negation, incompetence, and threat through the intertwined strategies of Othering, Labelling, Diminishing, and Demonizing. Thus, the pronoun was transformed from a neutral grammatical placeholder

into a carrier of fixed negative meaning. Every new instance of “*she*” served to strengthen a pre-existing negative perception. This shifted the discursive effort away from refuting Harris's substantive arguments and reinforced a damaging associative link – a key mechanism of political persuasion.

The analysis also elucidates the rhetorical-grammatical synergy essential to the strategy's efficacy. Deictic diminishment provided the foundational linguistic structure upon which rhetorical devices – such as refrain-like repetition, contrastive parallelism, and hyperbolic gradation – built their persuasive force. The insistent repetition of “*she*” functioned as a cognitive anchor, ensuring that a multitude of negative predicates were consistently attributed to a single, depersonalized agent.

This study opens several avenues for further scholarly inquiry. Future research should employ experimental methods to test the cognitive and attitudinal effects of deictic diminishment versus formal address on voter perceptions and biases. Investigating audience reception and resistance – how different voter segments interpret or reject such diminishment would provide a more complete picture of the pragmatic efficacy and limits of deictic diminishment.

References:

1. ABC News. 2024. Harris-Trump presidential debate full transcript. ABC11 Raleigh-Durham, 11 September 2024. <https://abc11.com/feature/kamala-harris-donald-trump-presidential-debate-full-transcript-abc-news/15287730>
2. BBC. 2024. What insults tell us about the Trump-Harris election fight. *BBC News*, 21 September 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx20np62x88o> (accessed 24 March 2026).
3. Erdoğan, Emre & Pinar Uyan-Semerici. 2025. *Frontiers in Political Science* 7. Article 1553889. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpos.2025.1553889> (accessed 12 December 2025).
4. Fairclough, Norman. 1992. *Discourse and social change*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
5. Fairclough, Norman. 1995. *Critical discourse analysis: The critical study of language*. London: Longman.
6. Fairclough, Norman. 2001. *Language and power* (2nd ed.). London: Pearson Education.
7. Fairclough, Norman, Jane Mulderrig & Ruth Wodak. 2011. Critical discourse analysis. In Teun A. van Dijk (ed.), *Discourse studies: A multidisciplinary introduction* (2nd ed.), 357–378. London: Sage.
8. Foucault, Michel. 1971. Orders of discourse (L'ordre du discours). *Social Science Information* 10 (2). 7–30.
9. Foucault, Michel. 1972. *The archaeology of knowledge*. London: Tavistock Publications.
10. Foucault, Michel. 2001. *Power: The essential works of Foucault, 1954–1984* (Vol. 3). James D. Faubion (ed.). New York: The New Press.
11. Hamed, Dalia M. & Naif Alqurashi. 2025. Impact vs. vision: A critical discourse analysis of Trump and Harris' leadership rhetoric in the 2024 presidential election. *Frontiers in Communication* 10.

- Article 1541513. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2025.1541513>
12. Haslam, Nick. 2006. Dehumanization: An integrative review. *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 10 (3). 252–264.
 13. Levinson, Stephen C. 1983. *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
 14. Linkevičiūtė, Vilma. 2025. Shaping the political image: Kamala Harris's case. *Journalism and Media* 6 (2). Article 75. <https://doi.org/10.3390/journalmedia6020075>
 15. Opatow, Susan, Janet Gerson & Sarah Woodside. 2005. From moral exclusion to moral inclusion: Theory for teaching peace. *Theory Into Practice* 44. 303–318. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15430421tip4404_4
 16. Powell, John A. & Stephen Menendian. 2016. The problem of othering: Towards inclusiveness and belonging. *Othering & Belonging* 1. 14–40.
 17. Sheigal, Elena I. 2004. *Semiotika politicheskogo diskursa* [Semiotics of Political Discourse]. Moscow: Gnosis.
 18. The Guardian. 2024. Republican attacks on Kamala Harris to get 'as ugly and bigoted as they can'. *The Guardian*, 25 July 2024. <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/article/2024/jul/25/kamala-harris-trump-republicans-attacks> (accessed 3 February 2026)
 19. van Dijk, Teun A. 2001. Critical discourse analysis. In Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen & Heidi E. Hamilton (eds.), *The handbook of discourse analysis*, 352–371. Malden, Oxford: Blackwell.
 20. van Dijk, Teun A. 2014. Discourse, cognition, society. In Christopher Hart & Piotr Cap (eds.), *Contemporary Critical Discourse Studies*, 121–146. London: Bloomsbury.
 21. van Dijk, Teun A. 2018. Socio-cognitive discourse studies. In John Flowerdew & John E. Richardson (eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Critical Discourse Studies*, 26–43. London: Routledge.
 22. van Dijk, Teun A. 1998. *Ideology: A multidisciplinary approach*. London: Sage.
 23. van Dijk, Teun A. 2006. Discourse, context and cognition. *Discourse Studies* 8 (1). 159–177. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461445606059565>
 24. Wicke, Philipp & Marianna M. Bolognesi. 2025. Red and blue language: Word choices in the Trump and Harris 2024 presidential debate. *PLoS ONE* 20 (6). Article e0324715. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0324715>
 25. Wierzbicka, Anna. 2016. Making sense of terms of address in European languages through the Natural Semantic Metalanguage (NSM). *Intercultural Pragmatics* 13 (4). 499–527. <https://doi.org/10.1515/ip-2016-0022>