Research Paper

Gendered Language and Power Dynamics in White House Press Briefings: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Deictic Expressions, Modal Verbs, and Relational Language

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Abstract
This article performs a CDA on White House press briefings and is especial in its focus on how gendered language impacts relations of power. Adopting a mixed-method approach, this study will examine linguistic strategies and deictic expressions used by male and female spokespersons articulating ideologies and constructing authority. The latter is based on Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model, whereby text analysis is involved, together with discourse practices and social context in explaining how language reflects and constructs political realities. The research questions were as follows: (1) How are deictic expressions used by spokesmen and spokeswomen in the White House press briefings? (2) What is the inter-relationship between power and language through the usage of modal verbs, and is there a gender-based difference herein? (3) How do women spokespersons, through language, claim ideologies and power? It is a contribution to applied linguistics and presents evidence of subtle linguistic mechanisms that shape public perception of gendered language in political discourse.
Keywords: Critical Discourse Analysis; Deictic expressions; Gendered language; Modal verbs; Political discourse; White House press briefings

زبان جنسیت محور و پویایی‌های قدرت در جلسات توجیهی کاخ سفید: تحلیل گفتمان انتقادی عبارات اشاره‌ای، افعال وجهی و زبان ارتباطی
این مقاله به تحلیل گفتمان انتقادی (CDA) جلسات توجیهی کاخ سفید می‌پردازد و تمرکز ویژه‌ای بر نحوه تأثیر زبان جنسیت محور بر روابط قدرت دارد. این مطالعه با اتخاذ یک رویکرد ترکیبی به بررسی استراتژی‌های زبانی و عبارات اشاره‌ای استفاده شده توسط سخنگویان مرد و زن می‌پردازد که ایدئولوژی‌ها را بیان کرده و اقتدار را شکل می‌دهند. چارچوب تحلیلی مورد استفاده، مدل سه‌بعدی تحلیل گفتمان انتقادی فیرکلاف است که تحلیل متن را همراه با شیوه‌های گفتمانی و بستر اجتماعی برای تبیین نحوه بازتاب و ساخت واقعیت‌های سیاسی از طریق زبان در بر می‌گیرد. سوالات تحقیق به شرح زیر بود: (1) عبارات اشاره‌ای چگونه توسط سخنگویان مرد و زن در جلسات توجیهی کاخ سفید به کار می‌رود؟ (2) چه رابطه‌ای بین قدرت و زبان از طریق استفاده از افعال وجهی وجود دارد و آیا تفاوتی بر اساس جنسیت در این زمینه مشاهده می‌شود؟ (3) سخنگویان زن چگونه از طریق زبان ایدئولوژی‌ها و قدرت را ادعا می‌کنند؟ این مطالعه به زبان‌شناسی کاربردی کمک می‌کند و شواهدی از مکانیسم‌های زبانی ظریفی ارائه می‌دهد که در شکل‌گیری درک عمومی از زبان جنسیت‌محور در گفتمان سیاسی نقش دارند.
واژگان کلیدی: تحلیل گفتمان انتقادی، زبان جنسیت‌محور، جلسات توجیهی کاخ سفید، عبارات اشاره‌ای، افعال وجهی، گفتمان سیاسی

Introduction

Language is a crucial factor in the creation and propagation of ideologies, the formation of public opinion, and the projection of authority in political discourse. The White House briefings are arguably one of the major forums where spokespersons put forth the position of the administration on any given issue of the day. These briefings reflect the power structures and sociopolitical dynamics inherent in government institutions through the linguistic choices of spokespersons.

In more ways than one, it has been argued that political discourse indeed serves as a powerful tool in creating ideologies and public perceptions. The use of language in any political setting is rarely neutral; rather, it is imbued with rhetorical strategies, lexical choices, and discursive practices that establish authority, construct identities, and frame issues. More precisely, critical discourse analysis of political language will enable one to unpack in what way such discursive practices reflect and reproduce the social structure and power relations. With this in mind, gendered discourse in political communication has become a scholarly concern, where research is carried out on how male and female political personae use language to stake claims to power and express ideologies. However, few studies have looked at the gendered rhetoric of press secretaries in high-pressure political briefings where spokespeople serve as a key representative of the administration's perspectives. This paper will fill this gap in scholarship by analyzing White House press briefings in order to see how gender influences the linguistic choices made and, consequently, the construction of authority and ideology.

The Problem

Despite extensive research into gendered language use across various political and social contexts, the specific dynamics of language within political press briefings—particularly regarding gender differences—have not been fully explored. White House press briefings provide a unique platform where spokespersons' language choices are not only reflective of personal style but are also influenced by the administration's agenda, the media's expectations, and public scrutiny. This study seeks to address the problem of how gender may shape the linguistic strategies employed by spokespersons, focusing on deictic expressions, modal verbs, and lexical choices that convey authority, assert ideologies, and influence public perception. By examining these linguistic choices, this research aims to provide insights into the subtle ways gendered language can impact the communicative dynamics of White House press briefings.

Objectives of the Study

The objectives of this study are as follows:

To analyze the use of deictic expressions by male and female spokespersons in White House press briefings and determine if there are notable gender-based differences.

To examine the relationship between power and language through the use of modal verbs in White House press briefings, investigating whether gender influences the choice and function of these modal verbs.

To explore how female spokespersons use language to convey their ideologies and establish authority in the context of high-stakes political communication.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The study seeks to address the following research questions and hypotheses:

RQ1. How do spokesmen and spokeswomen use deictic words or expressions in White House press briefings?

RQ2. What is the relationship between power and language through the use of modal verbs in White House press briefings? Are there gender-based differences in the use of modal verbs?

RQ3. How do female spokespersons use language to shape their ideologies or assert their authority?

Based on the research questions, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1. Spokesmen and spokeswomen will demonstrate distinct patterns in their use of deictic expressions in White House press briefings.

H2. The use of modal verbs in press briefings will exhibit a significant relationship between language and power, with gender-based differences anticipated in the choice and function of these modal verbs.

H3. Female spokespersons will employ specific linguistic strategies to assert ideologies and authority, reflecting a distinctive approach to language that may differ from that of male spokespersons.

Significance of the Study

This is indeed an important study in critical discourse analysis, applied linguistics, and sociolinguistics. The present research on how language works within this prominent political setting contributes to our knowledge of how gendered language operates as a tool for establishing authority and as a sculptor of ideologies.

These findings carry real-world implications for media training and political communication, mostly for press secretaries and spokespersons representing powerful government institutions. Moreover, given its focus on gender differences in using deictic expressions, modal verbs, and lexical choice, this study provides insights valuable for educators and trainers interested in improving communicative strategies used by spokespersons. It will also contribute to discussions of more general issues of gender equity in political communication and to the expanding body of literature on gendered discourse in political settings by highlighting the places where language and gender meet in the public sphere.

Review of Literature

The literature on gendered discourse, political communication, and critical discourse analysis constitutes a rich basis for understanding the dynamics of language use in politically charged environments. Indeed, much of the research done in the past has focused on the juncture of language, gender, and power regarding political discourse, in particular on how male and female politicians make use of language to project authority, propagate ideologies, and sway public perception. Moreover, CDA provides a very robust framework for analyzing linguistic choices through which social and political realities are constructed in discourse.

Theoretical Background

The framework followed in this research to analyze language in political contexts was largely a borrowing from the critical discourse analysis advanced especially by Fairclough (1992). Fairclough's three-dimensional model of CDA, when applied in text analysis, discourse practice, and sociocultural practice, is very wide and represents aptly the ways through which language reflects and constructs social power and ideological structures.

According to Fairclough, discourse is not just a way of communication but a social practice that simultaneously reflects and shapes social realities; this would, therefore, enable researchers to discover hidden power relations and ideologies embedded in the language.

Most closely following Fairclough's approach, Van Dijk (1997) focuses on the role of language in creating social identity and maintaining power relations within his work on discourse and ideology. According to Van Dijk, discourse is not just a reflection of social ideologies; it actively reproduces them through framing the issues in certain ways and leading the audience toward particular interpretations. This paper follows both Fairclough and Van Dijk's views in exploring the ways in which spokespersons use language in press briefings in order to project authority and advocate ideological standpoints.

Empirical Background

Empirical studies of gendered language in political discourse show some striking patterns in how men and women, through different uses of language, establish authority and communicate ideologies. Political speeches, debates, and press conferences of numerous studies analyzed reported female politicians using inclusive language more frequently (e.g., pronouns fostering a sense of community: "we" or "us"), while male politicians tend to use assertive language to sound certain and in command (Walsh, 2001; Lazar, 2005). This linguistic difference is part of wider social norms about gender and power, whereby women might use more cooperative language in order to negotiate through male-dominated structures (Lakoff, 2004).

Research on press briefings and spokesperson language, especially in the White House, has been distinctly less voluminous. However, previous research has observed that the words chosen by spokespersons tend to serve the representation of views of an administration while accomplishing the function of media relations management. In this vein, for example, spokespersons use deictic expressions, like "here" and "now," which foreground immediacy, while modal verbs like "must" and "should" convey authority or obligation (Cap, 2013).

Gap in the Literature

Several previous studies have examined gendered language in speeches and debates, but few works concentrate on how press secretaries negotiate gendered expectations and utilize language to claim authority. This study tries to bridge these gaps by offering a nuanced analysis of linguistic choices made by both the male and female White House press secretaries with a view to investigating ways in which gender influences language and power dynamics within the context of political press briefings.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employs a critical discourse analysis (CDA) approach, integrating both qualitative and quantitative analyses to examine the gendered language used by spokespersons in White House press briefings. Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model provides the theoretical and analytical framework for the study, allowing for a comprehensive exploration of the linguistic elements that contribute to power dynamics and ideological constructions.

Corpus of the Study

The corpus consists of transcripts from White House press briefings, with statements made by selected male and female spokespersons to analyze potential gendered language differences. The press briefings were sourced from the official White House website, with the corpus covering a representative sample of briefings over several months.

Model of the Study

This study applies Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model, which includes:

Text Analysis: Focuses on linguistic elements such as deictic expressions, modal verbs, and lexical choices.

Discursive Practice: Examines how language use in press briefings serves to reinforce or challenge power dynamics.

Sociocultural Practice: Analyzes the broader social and ideological implications of gendered language in a political context.

Data Collection Procedures

Transcripts were systematically collected from the White House archives, ensuring representation across both male and female spokespersons. Only official statements by press secretaries were included to maintain consistency. All transcripts were formatted and coded according to gender, topic, and context to support a structured analysis.

Data Analysis Procedures

The data was analyzed using a mixed-method approach:

Qualitative Analysis: A CDA was conducted on linguistic features such as deictic expressions, modal verbs, and specific lexical items to uncover patterns related to gender and authority.

Quantitative Analysis: Statistical methods, including frequency counts and chi-square tests, were used to compare the prevalence of linguistic features across male and female spokespersons, enhancing the reliability of the qualitative findings.

Results

The following presents the results for each research question, supported by tables displaying frequency and statistical analyses. Each table includes an interpretation to highlight key findings and their implications regarding gendered language use among White House spokespersons.

Statistical Results of the First Research Question

Research Question 1: *How do spokesmen and spokeswomen use deictic words or expressions in White House press briefings?*

Table 1 below shows the frequency and distribution of deictic expressions (e.g., "here," "now," "we," "they") used by male and female spokespersons in selected White House press briefings. Deictic expressions are categorized based on their function in creating immediacy or fostering inclusivity.

Table 1
Frequency of Deictic Expressions by Gender

Deictic Expression	Function	Male Spokespersons (N = 50)	Female Spokespersons (N = 50)	p-value
Here	Immediacy	150	80	<0.01
Now	Immediacy	132	92	<0.05
We	Inclusivity	98	152	<0.01
They	Distancing	112	95	>0.05

The data indicate significant differences between male and female spokespersons in their use of deictic expressions. Male spokespersons used "here" and "now" at significantly higher rates (p < 0.01 and p < 0.05, respectively), suggesting a tendency to create a sense of immediacy and control over the discourse. Conversely, female spokespersons used "we" more frequently (p < 0.01), indicating an approach that emphasizes inclusivity. The use of "they" showed no statistically significant difference, suggesting that both male and female spokespersons similarly use distancing language when referring to external groups. These patterns align with previous studies suggesting that men in political discourse may emphasize authority through immediacy, while women may favor inclusive language to establish rapport.

Statistical Results of the Second Research Question

Research Question 2: *What is the relationship between power and language through the use of modal verbs in White House press briefings? Are there gender-based differences in the use of modal verbs?*

Table 2 compares the frequency and type of modal verbs (e.g., "must," "should," "might," "could") used by male and female spokespersons. Modal verbs are grouped by their function: strong modality (e.g., "must") indicating authority and weak modality (e.g., "might") indicating possibility.

|**Table 2**
Frequency of Modal Verbs by Gender

Modal Verb	Function	Male Spokespersons (N = 50)	Female Spokespersons (N = 50)	p-value
Must	Strong (Authority)	115	67	<0.01
Should	Medium (Advisory)	95	110	>0.05
Might	Weak (Possibility)	52	88	<0.05
Could	Weak (Possibility)	60	92	<0.05

Table 2 highlights significant gender-based differences in modal verb usage. Male spokespersons used strong modals, such as "must," more frequently (p < 0.01), reflecting a language style that conveys authority and directive force. Female spokespersons, however, were more likely to use weak modals like "might" and "could" (p < 0.05), indicating a preference for

language that allows for flexibility and possibility. The use of "should" was not significantly different across genders, suggesting a common advisory tone among both male and female spokespersons. This aligns with previous findings suggesting that women in leadership roles may employ softer language to navigate authority, especially in traditionally masculine settings.

Statistical Results of the Third Research Question

Research Question 3: *How do female spokespersons use language to shape their ideologies or assert their authority?*

Table 3 details the usage of relational language elements, including empathetic language and social value expressions, to determine if female spokespersons employ these strategies more frequently than male counterparts.

Table 3
Frequency of Relational Language Elements by Gender

Relational Language Element	Function	Male Spokespersons (N = 50)	Female Spokespersons (N = 50)	p-value
Empathy expressions (e.g., "I understand")	Relational positioning	45	122	<0.01
Social values (e.g., "community," "inclusivity")	Ideological alignment	55	130	<0.01
Declarative statements (e.g., "we will")	Assertion of authority	150	98	<0.05

The data indicate that female spokespersons use significantly more relational language than their male counterparts, particularly with empathy expressions and social value terms (p < 0.01 for both categories). This finding suggests that female spokespersons may prioritize relational positioning and alignment with social ideologies, potentially to navigate and assert authority in high-stakes settings. Male spokespersons, on the other hand, utilized more declarative statements (p < 0.05), reflecting an assertive stance that underscores certainty and control. This pattern is consistent with previous literature, where women in political roles are often found to employ relational language as a means to foster rapport and underscore their alignment with socially valued principles.

Discussion

This section provides a broad interpretation of results for each research hypothesis in line with findings from the latest literature on gendered language use, political discourse, and critical discourse analysis (CDA). The discussion is organized according to each hypothesis in order to shed light on broader implications that emerge from the findings of the present study.

Discussion Related to the First Research Hypothesis

Hypothesis 1: *Male and female spokespersons will differ in their patterns of using deictic expressions in White House press briefings.*

The findings reveal notable differences in deictic expression use, where male spokespersons frequently use terms like "here" and "now," creating a sense of immediacy and authority, while female spokespersons prefer inclusive expressions like "we." This aligns with studies indicating that men often use language to assert control and immediacy in high-pressure settings, leveraging

"here" and "now" to bring a sense of urgency and reinforce their directive role (Lakoff, 2004). In contrast, women's use of "we" indicates a relational approach to leadership and is consistent with prior research showing that women use more inclusive language as a way of creating a sense of unity and shared purpose (Walsh, 2001; Lazar, 2005).

This difference flags a significant juncture between gender and communicative strategy. Female spokespersons apparently emphasize connection and inclusiveness, which might indicate an adjustment to the traditionally male-dominated field of political communication, where rapport and the construction of solidarity could work as a passport to go past authority. These findings are consistent with the perspective that female spokespersons adapt linguistic strategies enabling relational positioning, which may facilitate their communication of authority in conjunction with meeting the social expectations of what it means to be feminine within the context of public discourse. This multidimensional approach is consonant with Fairclough's CDA model, which postulates those linguistic choices both mirror and challenge prevailing sociocultural practices and power structures (Fairclough, 1992).

Discussion Related to the Second Research Hypothesis
Hypothesis 2: The use of modal verbs in press briefings is going to indicate a significant relation with language and power; gender-based differences are expected in the choice and function of modal verbs.

An analysis of the use of modal verbs showed clear gender distinctions among spokespersons: the males more frequently used strong modals, such as "must," carrying authority; female spokespersons often used weaker modals, such as "might" and "could," which allow an air of openness and possibility.

This finding agrees with Cap (2013) and Lazar (2005), who show that men in political discourse may resort to authoritative language in an attempt at asserting their control, while women use softer language in navigating the power structures, which most often work in favor of male-dominated norms of communication.

On the other hand, it is consonant with the findings of Lazar (2005) and Lakoff (2004), whereby weaker modals might be chosen by women in order to render their speech less assertive and make themselves more approachable and friendly. This approach will enable the female spokesperson to maintain authority while avoiding potential resistance against overtly authoritative language in a gendered context. These findings are hence in line with the CDA view, according to which language use in political contexts is strongly interwoven with social expectations and power relations, reflecting and reproducing existing gender norms (Van Dijk, 1997).

Discussion Related to the Third Research Hypothesis
Hypothesis 3: It is expected that female spokespersons will use certain linguistic strategies to assert ideologies and authority, reflecting a language approach that is unique and possibly different from that of male spokespersons.

The results show that female speakers used more relational language elements, such as expressions of empathy and references to social values, than male speakers. This trend is in line with the hypothesis that women in political contexts use language instrumentally to claim power in ways that are more ideologically congruent and socially empathetic.

For instance, the too-common reference by female spokespersons to empathy expressions like "I understand" shows an approach personal in nature and therefore positions them as empathetic and sharing the same social values. By contrast, male speakers made more use of declaratives, which accords with prior studies indicating that men tend to privilege assertions of certainty and

authority in public speech (Walsh, 2001). This adaptive strategy is in line with Fairclough's view of language as a tool not only for communication but also for the construction and reproduction of social identities and ideologies. These findings, in general, indicate how gendered language use in political discourse is not an expression of individual preference but rather something strongly influenced by societal norms and institutional expectations. The female spokespersons' emphasis on empathy and inclusiveness in their language points toward a purposeful alignment with relational values, which is a strategy that allows them to get across authority without coming into conflict with gendered expectations.

This dynamic underlies CDA's assumption that language is a means of power negotiation in which linguistic choices are reflective and transformative instruments in social practices (Fairclough, 1992; Van Dijk, 1997).

Conclusion

This is one of the most detailed analyses of gendered language use in White House press briefings, and the findings are reflective of how linguistic choices are involved with power dynamics and gender norms in political discourse. In this way, the study reveals through CDA how male and female spokespersons negotiate authority and ideologies through different linguistic strategies.

There is evidence that male speakers appear to favor words representing immediacy and authority, with the use of strong modals and deictic expressions of control and directness, while female speakers seem to use more inclusive and empathizing language, relational with social values to explicate more connection by the softer modal.

These findings suggest an element of adaptability on the part of female spokespersons in balancing relational language and authority. The strategy adopted would reflect general socialization into greater society, where language becomes a tool for the feminine leadership to wield power yet appear to conform to all social expectations.

Such gendered differences in language use, therefore, strengthen the case made by CDA that language is both an instrument and a product of social relations, where linguistic choices made by the speakers are an expression of power to maintain or contest conventional gender norms in political rhetoric.

Implications of the Study

Pedagogical Implications

The study has very important implications for communication training in both political and public relations fields, with regard to knowledge of dynamics of gendered language. The current findings can be used by educators and trainers to help guide future spokespersons in effective communication strategies that identify and capitalize on the strengths of gendered languages— those that result in styles that are inclusive and flexible, leaving spokespeople with the ability to balance authority and friendliness.

Practical Implications

Such research flags, therefore, the importance of strategic language choice for media, public relations, and political communication practitioners. This knowledge may, for example, guide a spokesperson into a communicative approach that brings his or her message into alignment with role and audience expectation through subtleties of gendered language use. Findings like these may also inspire institutions to adopt practices of more inclusive language, showing sensitivity toward how language can represent and create authority in many ways.

This study was limited to White House press briefings by selected spokespersons and may limit generalizability to other political contexts or spokespeople with different backgrounds. Further, the present analysis focused on specific linguistic features: deictic expressions, modal verbs, and relational language. Other potentially important features—such as rhetorical style and tone—were not explored in this study. Thus, future studies should concentrate on these other dimensions to better understand the gendered language used in political talk.
Limitations of the Research

The study was intentionally limited to official statements by spokespersons in the high-stakes political context of White House press briefings. The focus was selected to offer a uniform context for the analysis of gendered language use in a formal political setting. Other utterances by other political figures, non-formal discourse, and communication outside the White House environment were excluded in order to maintain analytical clarity and focus.

Suggestions for Future Research

Future research could build on this article by examining gendered language in other political forums, such as in legislative debates, campaign speeches, or other press briefings from government institutions around the world. Other future research might examine how gender interacts with other sociocultural variables—for example, ethnicity or social class—to further our understanding of how language functions in different political and cultural contexts.

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