# THE LANGUAGE OF FEAR: A CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF TRUMP'S MIGRATION RHETORIC

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**Abstract**
*This research undertakes a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) of Donald J. Trump's rhetoric surrounding migration, with a specific emphasis on his speeches from the 2016 campaign to his latest 2025 rally in Michigan. Utilizing the frameworks developed by Fairclough (1995) and van Dijk (2008), the study explores how Trump's language creates an "us vs. them" dichotomy, portrays immigrants as invaders, and employs methods of dehumanization and fear to attract political backing. Recent speeches indicate a persistent trend of securitization, populist nationalism, and symbolic boundary-making, wherein Trump casts himself as the defender of American identity. Drawing from recent research focused on discourse, including the 2024 studies by Atmawijaya and Stoméus &amp; Salberg, this paper highlights essential discursive strategies such as metaphor, repetition, hyperbole, and pronoun choice as tools for ideological reproduction. The analysis demonstrates that Trump's narrative on migration transcends mere political rhetoric, functioning as a strategic communication mechanism that heightens societal division, frames immigrant communities as existential threats, and rationalizes exclusionary policies. This study addresses a gap in research by integrating CDA scholarship with Trump's 2025 campaign language, illustrating the dynamic character of political discourse in contemporary right-wing populism.*
*Key Words: Migration, CDA, Rhetoric, Fairclough, political discourse*

**Introduction:**
This research rigorously investigates the immigration discourse used by U. S. President Donald J. Trump, concentrating on his address delivered on August 31, 2016, in Arizona and his rally in Michigan in April 2025. Employing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study examines how Trump's phrasing portrays immigrants as dangers, upholds nationalist beliefs, and validates exclusionary measures. The findings indicate a persistent application of fear-based metaphors, binary framing, and dehumanizing terminology that collectively influence public views and immigration policy.

Immigration has been a divisive topic in U. S. politics, frequently becoming a central element in discussions around national identity, safety, and economic viability. Donald Trump's rise in politics was defined by a rigid approach to immigration, marked by language that depicted immigrants as imminent dangers to the American lifestyle. His addresses often utilized metaphors and stories that created a clear distinction between "us" (American citizens) and "them" (immigrants), bolstering nationalist views and rationalizing strict immigration regulations. This research intends to thoroughly examine Trump's rhetoric on migration to reveal the foundational ideologies and communicative tactics that influence public understanding and policy.

## Research Objectives

- To critically analyze the discursive strategies employed by Donald Trump in his immigration-related speeches.
- To investigate how Trump's rhetorical choices—particularly metaphors, binaries, and dehumanizing language—construct immigrants as threats and legitimize exclusionary policies.
- To examine the broader sociopolitical implications of Trump's immigration discourse, including its impact on public perception, media narratives, and immigration policy formulation.

## Literature Review

### 1. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) Frameworks

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) provides a crucial methodology for scrutinizing political language. Fairclough's three-dimensional framework from 1995 highlights the connections among text, discourse practices, and sociocultural practices, offering a thorough approach to evaluating political speeches. Van Dijk's socio-cognitive perspective from 2006 centers on the nexus of discourse, cognition, and society, illustrating how language both embodies and influences social power structures.

### 2. Populism and the 'Us vs. Them' Dichotomy

Trump frequently employs populist techniques, creating a division between the commendable 'us' and the menacing 'them. ' Wodak (2015) addresses how right-wing populist rhetoric leverages this division to encourage nationalist feelings. Demata (2019) assesses Trump's speeches and finds that his language reinforces this duality through imagery, including the metaphor of the "great and beautiful wall. "

### 3. Dehumanization and Metaphorical Language

The dehumanizing terms Trump uses, such as calling immigrants "animals" or referring to immigration as an "infestation," work to justify exclusionary policies. Santa Ana (2002) investigates the role metaphors play in public discourse in dehumanizing Latino immigrants. Haslam (2006) expands on the psychological factors that contribute to dehumanization in political language.

### 4. Social Media and the Amplification of Rhetoric

The rise of social media has enhanced the distribution and influence of political discourse. Kazzaz (2020) analyzes Trump's Twitter strategy, noting how his depiction of Syrian refugees as threats corresponds with the ideological square model. Fulay and Roy (2023) investigate divisive language on online platforms, observing an increase in negativity within political dialogue since 2016.

### 5. Multimodal Discourse and Non-Verbal Communication

In addition to verbal communication, Trump's non-verbal expressions and multimodal strategies are crucial for transmitting his messages. Elsanhoury et al. (2020) perform a multimodal discourse analysis on Trump's speeches during the 2016 election, illustrating how his gestures, tone, and visual components work in tandem with his spoken words to persuade listeners.

### 6. Comparative Analyses with Other Political Figures

Studies that compare Trump with other political figures yield valuable insights into varying rhetorical techniques. Mustafa (2023) compares the inaugural speeches of Trump and Biden using

Fairclough's CDA framework, revealing that Trump's language is marked by repetition and negative phrases that portray a grim national narrative.

## 7. Racialized Border Rhetoric and Identity Politics

Trump's discourse about borders often intersects with race and identity politics. Heuman and González (2018) discuss how Trump Frames Mexican immigrants as dangerous and deviant, reinforcing the ideologies of white nationalism. This racially charged speech contributes to the alienation of immigrant populations.

## 8. Ideological Constructs in Farewell Addresses

Rouabhia and Jomaa (2023) examine Trump's farewell speech, identifying rhetorical tactics such as repetition and hyperbole that bolster American ideals and evoke hope. Their research highlights how the linguistic choices made in political speeches can influence societal perceptions and shape national identity.

## 9. Framing Immigrants as Criminals

Trump's recurrent characterization of immigrants, especially Venezuelans and Congolese, as criminals helps to create a threatening narrative. Even in the face of contradictory evidence, this rhetoric remains prevalent, shaping public opinion and policy. This approach aligns with a broader strategy of defining an 'enemy' to rally supporters.

## 10. Cultural Warfare and Anti-Immigration Policies

Miller's focus on opposing 'woke culture' signifies a transition in the administration's attention from economic factors to cultural matters. This shift encompasses rigorous immigration policies and the depiction of immigrants as dangers to American society, further deepening the divisive narrative.

## 11. Negative Tone in Political Language

Külz et al. (2022) present data showing the escalated negativity in U. S. political discourse, especially since Trump's 2016 campaign. Their study indicates a notable increase in negative emotional language, with Trump playing a prominent role in this development.

## 12. Foreign Policy Rhetoric and Populism

Hall (2021) examines Trump's rhetoric on foreign policy, positing that it generates a constant atmosphere of crisis to galvanize national support. This tactic also applies to discussions surrounding immigration, where threats from outside are highlighted to rationalize strict policies.

## 13. Social Malaise and Immigration Narratives

In the United States and France alike, immigration has emerged as a means to articulate social dissatisfaction and challenge the elite. Populist figures such as Trump exploit misleading narratives about immigrants to stir fear and rage, distracting from deeper systemic problems.

## 14. Framing in Immigration Discourse on Social Media

Mendelsohn et al. (2021) create frameworks to identify themes in immigration-related tweets, illustrating how users' beliefs and geographical locations affect their framing decisions. Their research emphasizes social media's influence on public discussions about immigration.

## 15. Trump's Unique Discourse Style

Zhou et al. (2024) assess the distinctness of Trump's communication, pinpointing his employment of divisive and confrontational language as defining characteristics. Their findings highlight the divergence of Trump's rhetorical approach from conventional presidential communication.

**Research Gap**

Although considerable research has been carried out regarding Trump's migration discourse, there are still several areas that need additional examination:

- ❖ **Longitudinal Studies**: There is a necessity for longitudinal investigations that analyze the evolution of Trump's rhetoric over time, especially in relation to changing political contexts and public sentiment.
- ❖ **Impact on Policy Implementation:** More research is essential to evaluate how Trump's rhetoric translates into definitive immigration policies and the resulting consequences for immigrant populations.
- ❖ **Comparative International Analyses:** Analyzing Trump's rhetoric in comparison to other populist leaders around the world could reveal shared tactics and their effectiveness.
- ❖ **Audience Reception Studies:** Exploring how various demographic groups view and respond to Trump's rhetoric can clarify its persuasive capabilities and social implications.

**Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative methodology utilizing Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate the language and rhetorical strategies in Trump's speeches concerning immigration. The examination is based on Fairclough's three-dimensional model, which takes into account:

**Textual Analysis:** Investigating vocabulary, grammar, coherence, and organization of the text.

**Discursive Practice:** Assessing the creation, distribution, and reception of texts.

**Social Practice:** Analyzing the socio-cultural and political contexts that influence the discourse.

Furthermore, Van Dijk's socio-cognitive approach is applied to comprehend how discourse frameworks mirror and uphold social cognition and ideologies.

**4. Data Sources**

The main data consists of transcripts from Donald Trump's speeches that concentrate on immigration, including:

*Arizona Immigration Speech (August 31, 2016): Detailing his 10-point immigration strategy. (Politico)*

*Michigan Rally Speech (April 2025): Celebrating his 100th day in office during his second term, with a focus on immigration policies. (The Times)*

These speeches have been chosen for their direct focus on immigration and their influence on public discussion.

**Data Analysis**

This segment thoroughly evaluates the selected immigration addresses delivered by Donald Trump, concentrating on the 2016 Arizona immigration address and the 2025 Michigan rally. The examination utilizes Fairclough's three-dimensional framework textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice together with Van Dijk's socio-cognitive perspective, which delves into how discourse not only shapes but also mirrors ideologies, mental frameworks, and societal dominance.

**1.Metaphor Usage**

Trump frequently employs metaphors that depict immigration as a menacing and overwhelming force. During his 2016 Arizona address, he remarked:

"*We are going to build a great border wall. . . to halt the invasion of our country by illegal immigrants.*"

And at the 2025 Michigan rally, he noted:

*"The influx of migrants streaming across our border is unsustainable. It's an utter disaster."*
Viewed through Fairclough's lens of textual analysis, these metaphors "invasion" and "flood "act as ideological constructs that conjure images of military threats and natural calamities. They lexically encode fear and urgency, converting a social matter into a crisis-oriented narrative.
Utilizing Van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework, such metaphors engage existing schemata and mental models in the public's consciousness, linking immigrants with violence, disorder, and peril. They create a divide between insiders and outsiders while laying the cognitive groundwork for legitimizing oppressive governmental measures.

These metaphors carry significant weight. By framing migration as either a natural disaster or an aggressive assault, Trump's rhetoric influences public sentiment to view immigrants not as individuals in search of safety, but as a menacing force jeopardizing national integrity. This metaphorical framing aligns with a right-wing populist agenda focused on reclaiming sovereignty.

## 2 Us vs. Them Dichotomy

Trump constructs his immigration narrative on a dichotomy of insiders and outsiders. In his 2016 Arizona address, he proclaimed:
*"We will always prioritize the jobs, wages, and safety of the American population."*
And in Michigan (2025):
*"They enter our country, take our resources, take our jobs, and lack love for America."*
Applying Fairclough's dimension of discursive practice, it becomes evident how Trump reinterprets social reality. He establishes a clear distinction between "we"the virtuous, diligent citizensand "they"the menacing, parasitic outsiders. This aligns with Van Dijk's ideological square theory, portraying "we" positively and "they" negatively.
This dichotomous framing carries substantial ideological consequences: it normalizes exclusion, undermines compassion, and ethically justifies stringent measures such as detention, deportation, and heightened border security. Trump's speeches are imbued with ideology, aimed at reshaping public perception by appealing to identity, security, and economic anxieties.

## 3 Dehumanization

One of the most ethically concerning elements of Trump's rhetoric is his persistent dehumanization of immigrants. In both speeches, he categorizes undocumented migrants as:
*"Criminals, drug dealers, rapists, and animals."*
In the Michigan 2025 address, he intensified this characterization:
*"They're not sending their best. These are individuals who bring crime and bloodshed to our streets."*
From Fairclough's textual perspective, these nouns and adjectives serve as nominalizations that strip away individual agency. Immigrants are reduced to a category, deprived of their complexity and humanity.
Through Van Dijk's cognitive framework, this discourse promotes detrimental stereotypes within collective memory. Immigrants are positioned as existential dangers, facilitating public approval for cruel measures (such as family separations and detention centers).
This process of dehumanization aligns with Van Dijk's notion of symbolic elites wielding discursive authority to uphold social structures. Trump's role as a political figure grants his rhetoric weight, influencing not just media narratives but also legislative actions and public policies.

## 4 Scapegoating

Trump consistently portrays immigrants as the source of the nation's deterioration:

*"Illegal immigration costs our country over $113 billion annually."*

*"Innocent Americans have lost their jobs, lives, and safety because our government is unwilling to take action."*

Employing Fairclough's social practice perspective, these statements mirror larger societal dialogues rooted in economic nationalism and racialized anxiety, notably heightened during times of perceived decline.

From Van Dijk's viewpoint, this is a textbook example of scapegoating: linking systemic issues (such as economic disparity, inadequate healthcare, and employment instability) to an outgroup. This redirection shifts public attention from underlying systemic failures to personal accusations. Additionally, Trump seldom backs his claims with concrete evidence; however, the emphasis and authoritative delivery of his statements encourage internalization among his listeners. Consequently, the immigrant figure transforms into a symbolic adversary, with policies developed not from empirical data but from emotionally charged otherness.

## 5 Nationalist Appeals

Nationalism serves as the foundation of all rhetorical techniques in Trump's addresses. He frequently invokes national identity:

*"From this point forward, it's America First."*

*"We will reestablish law and order and restore American greatness."*

Fairclough might contend that this illustrates a hegemonic agendaan effort to reshape national common understanding. Trump's narrative constructs an idealized national historyuntainted, secure, and thrivingwhich is claimed to have been corrupted by immigration and globalization.

Van Dijk interprets this through the cognitive framework of nostalgia, suggesting that individuals, particularly those in economically precarious situations, are more susceptible to populist rhetoric that promises restoration.

Trump's use of terms like "we," "our values," and "our country" positions nationalism as inclusive, yet exclusively for the in-group. The discursive marginalization of immigrants suggests that they are excluded from this envisioned national renewal. This tactic is an effective means of discursive erasure.

## Synthesis: Ideology and Power in Trump's Discourse

Both Fairclough and Van Dijk converge on the concept that discourse transcends mere description; it is both performative and constitutive. Trump's addresses do not simply mirror ideology; they serve as tools through which ideology is enacted, sustained, and validated.

By incorporating threats, delineating identity binaries, and invoking appeals to national redemption, Trump legitimizes xenophobia and reframes it as patriotism. His rhetoric perpetuates a hegemony built on fear, where policies are crafted more around symbolic distinctions than

## 6. Findings

The critical discourse analysis of Donald Trump's rhetoric on immigration, specifically examining his 2016 Arizona Immigration Speech and the 2025 Michigan Rally, uncovers a nuanced and calculated manipulation of language grounded in authority, belief systems, and persuasive techniques. The insights reveal that language is not only a reflection of but also a tool for shaping socio-political contexts, establishing ideological superiority, and legitimizing policy decisions.

Employing Fairclough's three-dimensional framework alongside Van Dijk's socio-cognitive theory, several critical observations come to light:

## 6. 1 Discursive Construction of Fear and Crisis

Trump's frequent employment of metaphors such as "invasion," **"flood,"** and **"onslaught"** creates a sense of urgency. These metaphors frame immigration as an urgent issue that requires containment, resistance, or eradication. This choice of language transcends simple political critique, heightening public apprehension and paving the way for authoritarian measures, including mass deportations, family separations, and stringent border management.

**Key Observation:** The use of crisis metaphors engineers consent for extreme measures by depicting immigrants as immediate dangers.

## 6. 2 Polarization Through Ideological Binaries

Trump's language enforces a clear us-versus-them narrative, which is pivotal to nationalist populism. This binary opposition characterizes Americans as moral, lawful, and deserving while categorizing immigrants particularly those undocumented as criminal, invasive, and parasitic.
*"They come here, take our benefits, our jobs, and disrespect our country."*
By emphasizing these binaries, Trump cultivates discursive exclusion, portraying immigrants not just as outsiders but as moral outcasts, unworthy of empathy or inclusion.

**Key Observation:** This tactic undermines democratic discussion, replacing it with exclusionary nationalism that constricts the definition of **"the people."**

## 6. 3 Dehumanization and Moral Disengagement

The most ethically concerning insight is the prevalent use of dehumanizing descriptors like **"animals," "rapists,"** and **"criminals."** Such terminology strips individuals of their identity, reduces moral empathy, and rationalizes coercive governmental measures. It also exemplifies Van Dijk's theory on the manipulation of mental models from above, illustrating how elite narratives distort public perception of marginalized groups negatively.

**Key Observation:** Dehumanization is a deliberate strategy to erode public compassion, thereby facilitating harsh immigration policies.

## 6. 4 Scapegoating and Economic Nationalism

Trump's continual assertions that immigrants are to blame for crime, job losses, and welfare drain embody classic scapegoating rhetoric. This aligns with Van Dijk's perspective that elite discourse often shifts focus from structural problems to vulnerable populations, thereby reinforcing existing social stratifications.
*"Illegal immigration costs us $113 billion a year."*
Such statements, seldom backed by empirical data, serve more as symbolic narratives than factual claims, redirecting attention from policy failures or systemic inequality.

**Key Observation:** The scapegoating tactic effectively channels public frustration, simplifying intricate socio-economic dilemmas into easily understandable, blameworthy tales.

## 6. 5 Nationalist Restoration as Ideological Vision

Trump's phrases **"Make America Great Again"** and "America First "extend beyond mere campaign slogans. They express a restorative ideology that appeals to a romanticized past as a rationale for current exclusions. Fairclough would argue that this establishes a hegemonic common sense in which anti-immigrant initiatives are perceived as essential for national renewal.

**Key Observation:** These slogans encapsulate a diverse array of exclusionary and nostalgic beliefs into compelling discursive symbols that resonate strongly with economically and culturally vulnerable groups.

## 6. 6 Discourse as Political Instrument

In conclusion, the examination indicates that Trump's rhetoric is neither arbitrary nor merely reactive. It acts as a calculated political tool, operating on several dimensions:

Textually, it is charged with emotion and tends to polarize opinions.

Interdiscursively, it references themes related to crime, warfare, and economic issues.

Socially, it endorses systemic inequality and defends oppressive state authority.

Therefore, his speeches fulfill a dual role: energizing a political constituency and redefining moral and political boundaries.

## 6. 7 Broader Sociopolitical Implications

The observations further imply that such rhetoric extends its influence well beyond the topic of immigration:

It fosters the normalization of xenophobia and racism within public conversation.

It supports authoritarian rule, particularly in relation to surveillance, deportation, and law enforcement.

It undermines democratic principles like inclusiveness, thoughtful discourse, and tolerance.

**Final Insight:** Trump's rhetoric surrounding migration illustrates how language can be wielded to alter societal moral frameworks, establishing a hierarchy that values certain lives over others. Through empirical analysis.

## 7. Conclusion and Implications

## 7. 1 Conclusion

This study aimed to thoroughly examine the immigration rhetoric employed by former U. S. President Donald Trump, particularly focusing on the discursive techniques used in his 2016 Arizona Immigration Speech, the 2025 Michigan Rally, and other related public speeches. By applying Fairclough's three-dimensional model of discourse along with Van Dijk's socio-cognitive framework, the research revealed that Trump's language transcends mere rhetoric; it is imbued with ideological bias, politically strategic elements, and significant social ramifications.

Trump's discourse on immigration fosters a provocative and fear-driven narrative, depicting immigrants particularly those undocumented as dangers to American security, economy, and identity. Through language such as **"invasion"** and **"flood,"** dehumanizing terms like **"animals"** and **"rapists,"** and binary distinctions of "us versus them," Trump positions immigration not merely as a policy concern, but as a vital struggle for the nation's essence.

This analysis exposes the manner in which elite political discourse can sway public opinion, dictate media narratives, and ultimately affect legislative and executive choices. Trump's speeches are not just standalone political acts; they are part of a broader ideological initiative rooted in nationalism, nativism, and populist exclusion. His rhetoric takes advantage of societal divides, amplifies perceived threats, and redefines ethical perspectives, rendering the denial of rights to immigrants seem not just necessary but also justified.

## 7. 2 Implications

## 7. 2. 1 Theoretical Implications

This research validates the influence of discourse in shaping both political and social realities. Fairclough's model facilitated the identification of the textual, interdiscursive, and sociopolitical

facets of Trump's rhetoric, while Van Dijk's theory shed light on how discourse propagates ideologies and cognitive frameworks. It emphasizes the necessity for critical discourse scholars to delve deeper into the relationship between language, ideology, and policy, especially within populist political environments.

### 7. 2. 2 Sociopolitical Implications

The analysis demonstrates how Trump's rhetoric has:

Brought xenophobia and racism into the realm of acceptable political dialogue.

Validated stringent policies, such as the Muslim ban, family separations, and ICE operations.

Affected worldwide far-right movements, as similar expressions have been mirrored in anti-immigration discourse across Europe, Latin America, and South Asia.

### 7. 2. 3 Media and Public Discourse

Media outlets commonly act as amplifiers of elite narratives. Trump's speeches, widely reported by both mainstream and right-wing media, have normalized extremist language, shifting the standards of acceptable public discussion. This underscores the importance of ethical journalism and the necessity for critical media literacy to counteract manipulative discourse.

### 7. 2. 4 Policy Implications

Policymakers need to acknowledge how rhetoric precedes and validates action. Trump's statements provided the groundwork for some of the most stringent immigration policies in U. S. history, and this research reinforces the notion that discourse is far from neutralit is performative, deliberate, and frequently coercive.

### 7. 3 Recommendations for Future Research

**Comparative Discourse Studies**: Examine immigration rhetoric among other populist leaders (e. g., Viktor Orbán, Narendra Modi, Marine Le Pen) to discern the global trends in exclusionary language.

**Audience Reception Studies:** Explore how various audiences perceive and incorporate Trump's language, particularly within working-class, rural, or conservative demographics.

**Digital Media Analysis:** Investigate the dissemination of Trump's rhetoric across social media platforms, including memes, hashtags, and the effects of algorithmic amplification.

**Long-Term Influence of Policy:** Analyze the enduring consequences of this conversation on U. S. immigration policy, the mental well-being of immigrants, and societal unity.

### 7. 4 Concluding Thoughts

Trump's immigration discourse illustrates the capacity of political language to alter perception. It goes beyond reflecting the views of the publicity transforms them, utilizing fear and division for political advantage. This discussion encompasses more than immigrants it pertains to issues of belonging, decision-making authority, and significance. As scholars, media professionals, and members of society, we need to remain critically mindful of how language creates realities frequently inequitable ones.

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