

UDC 81'23:81'42:32.019.5

DOI <https://doi.org/10.24919/2308-4863/101-30>

Tetiana STAROSTENKO,

orcid.org/0000-0003-2343-105X

Candidate of Philological Sciences,

Associate Professor at the English Philology Department

H.S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University

(Kharkiv, Ukraine) Tinatroickaja@gmail.com

Alona SHEVCHENKO,

orcid.org/0000-0002-9953-1906

Candidate of Philological Sciences,

Associate Professor at the Department of English Speech and Writing at

H.S. Skovoroda Kharkiv National Pedagogical University

(Kharkiv, Ukraine) alyonageorgievna@gmail.com

THE RHETORIC OF AGGRESSION IN THE BIDEN–TRUMP PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES

The article focuses on the linguistic representation of the concept of AGGRESSION in American political discourse, represented by the 2020 and 2024 presidential election debates between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. The study aims to identify the linguistic means of verbalization of the concept AGGRESSION as well as the impoliteness strategies observed in the three rounds of presidential debates, reconstruct the cognitive model shaping this concept in contemporary American political discourse, and determine the specific features of its realization in the idiolects of both candidates.

The study traces the evolution of the nominative means used to represent aggressive states from the Old English period through Middle English French borrowings to the Latinisms of the Early Modern period. This diachronic perspective provides grounds for viewing the contemporary English lexicon of conflict as the result of centuries of interaction among Germanic, Romance, and Latin linguistic strata. The analysis of the empirical data demonstrates that in the 2020 debates, the concept AGGRESSION is primarily conceptualized through the prism of the domestic political crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, whereas the October debates are dominated by the frames of state sovereignty, national security, and external threat. In the 2024 debates, the conceptualization of aggression escalates further. Geopolitical conflicts are interpreted as a global confrontation, migration is framed through the invasion metaphor, domestic political conflict is represented as a potential civil war, and the international situation is framed as a precondition for global military conflict.

The analysis identifies three dominant conceptual-metaphorical clusters (fire and escalation, destruction, and invasion and contagion), which function as the principal cognitive models for the verbalization of aggression and serve to implement the strategy of attributing responsibility to either a political opponent or an external actor. A comparative analysis of the candidates' idiolects reveals a pronounced asymmetry in their communicative strategies. Donald Trump's discourse is characterized by an action-oriented style, extensive hyperbole, intensive repetition, and the predominance of confrontational rhetoric. Joe Biden's discourse, by contrast, although initially more restrained, demonstrates an increasing tendency throughout the analyzed period toward militarized imagery and more frequent use of the lexicon of threat. The findings indicate a gradual transformation of the cognitive model of political conflict, from its interpretation as institutional disagreement to its representation through narratives of war, existential danger, and national survival. This shift reflects changing dominant patterns in the framing of political reality within contemporary American political discourse.

Key words: aggression, political discourse, conceptual metaphor, frame, idiolect, political debates.

Тетяна СТАРОСТЕНКО,

orcid.org/0000-0003-2343-105X

кандидат філологічних наук, доцент,
доцент кафедри англійської філології

Харківського національного педагогічного університету імені Г.С. Сковороди
(Харків, Україна) *Tinatroitckaja@gmail.com*

Альона ШЕВЧЕНКО,

orcid.org/0000-0002-9953-1906

кандидат філологічних наук, доцент,

доцент кафедри практики англійського усного та писемного мовлення

Харківського національного педагогічного університету імені Г.С. Сковороди
(Харків, Україна) *alyonageorgievna@gmail.com*

РИТОРИКА АГРЕСІЇ У ПРЕЗИДЕНТСЬКИХ ДЕБАТАХ МІЖ БАЙДЕНОМ І ТРАМПМ

Статтю присвячено дослідженню мовної репрезентації концепту АГРЕСІЯ в американському політичному дискурсі на матеріалі передвиборчих теледебатів між Джо Байденом і Дональдом Трампом, що відбулися у 2020 та 2024 роках. Метою дослідження є виявлення мовних засобів вербалізації концепту АГРЕСІЯ та стратегій імполітнесу у трьох раундах президентських теледебатів, реконструкція когнітивної моделі, що організовує зазначений концепт у сучасному американському політичному дискурсі, а також встановлення специфіки його реалізації в ідіолектах обох кандидатів.

У роботі простежено еволюцію номінативних засобів репрезентації агресивних станів від давньоанглійського періоду через середньоанглійські французькі запозичення до латинізмів ранньомодерної доби, що дає підстави розглядати сучасний англійський лексикон конфлікту як результат багатовікового нашарування германських, романських та латинських мовних пластів. Аналіз емпіричного матеріалу засвідчив, що в дебатах 2020 року концепт АГРЕСІЯ концептуалізується переважно крізь призму внутрішньополітичної кризи та пандемії COVID-19, тоді як у жовтневих дебатах домінують фрейми державного суверенітету, національної безпеки та зовнішньої загрози. У дебатах 2024 року відбувається подальша ескалація агресивної концептуалізації, коли геополітичні конфлікти інтерпретуються як глобальне протистояння, міграція осмислюється через метафору вторгнення, внутрішньополітичний конфлікт репрезентується як потенційна громадянська війна, а міжнародна ситуація – як передумова світового воєнного конфлікту.

У результаті аналізу виокремлено три домінантні концептуально-метафоричні кластери, включаючи «вогонь та ескалація», «руйнування» і «вторгнення та зараження», які виступають основними когнітивними моделями вербалізації агресії та реалізують стратегію покладання відповідальності на політичного опонента або зовнішнього актора. Зіставний аналіз ідіолектів кандидатів виявив виразну асиметрію їхніх мовленнєвих стратегій. Так, мовлення Дональда Трампа характеризується діяльністю спрямованістю, високим ступенем гіперболізації, інтенсивною повторюваністю та домінуванням конфронтаційної риторики, тоді як мовлення Джо Байдена, попри початкову стриманість, упродовж аналізованого періоду демонструє тенденцію до посилення мілітаризованої образності й активнішого використання лексики загрози. Отримані результати засвідчують поступову трансформацію когнітивної моделі політичного конфлікту від його осмислення як форми інституційної незгоди до репрезентації через наратив війни, екзистенційної небезпеки та національного виживання, що свідчить про зміну домінантних способів концептуалізації політичної реальності в сучасному американському політичному дискурсі.

Ключові слова: агресія, політичний дискурс, концептуальна метафора, фрейм, ідіолект, політичні дебати.

Problem statement. Every language bears the imprint of a certain historical moment in the development of society, solidifying its anxieties in words, crystallizing its secular or religious vector, revealing its values, and catching its unspoken codes of conduct. In *Othello*, William Shakespeare assigns the antagonist a Spanish name, Iago, thereby alluding to Spain's status as England's political competitor at the time. Much in the same way, G.H. Wells, in his *The Time Machine*, invents two names for humanity's evolutionary descendants that encode their opposing natures through etymological association.

Thus, “Eloi” likely echoes the Hebrew “Elohim” (a name for God) or “El” (God or deity), suggesting the Eloi's angelic, ethereal, almost divine beauty along with their childlike helplessness and passivity, since they've become decorative rather than powerful. On the other hand, the word “Morlocks” has a harsher, guttural sound. Some scholars link it to “Moloch,” the ancient deity associated with child sacrifice, foreshadowing the grim disclosure that the Morlocks farm the Eloi for food. The name's phonetic harshness (hard consonants, “-lock” suggesting entrapment or mechanism) mirrors their subterranean, industrial,

monstrous existence. In 1984, George Orwell suggests the idea of *Newspeak*, designed to shrink the range of thought itself.

This aligns with Norman Fairclough’s discourse interpretation, which points out the stages of social organization, including “*the level of the social situation, or the immediate social environment in which the discourse occurs; the level of the social intuition, which constitutes a wider matrix for the discourse; and the level of the society as a whole*” (Fairclough, 1989: 25).

In the political sphere, players select an acting mask that determines their style, establishes the ethical boundaries they may or may not cross, and appeals to particular cultural frames, helping them manipulate their audience.

The analysis of the main studies and publications. “A Socio-Pragmatic Study of Verbal Abuse in Selected American Political Debates” in the four debates between Joe Biden and Donald Trump was carried out by Ameer Ali Hussein and Huda Abdulhussein Saeed in their article of 2021, in which they retrace “the employment of socio-pragmatic strategies, which are represented by speech act and impoliteness strategies”, and also “investigate the most dominant of pragmatic aspect as well as the most dominant category of verbal abuse.” (Hussein, Saeed, 2021). Padma Dewi Kalingga Putri and Hilmi Akmal highlighted “the Turn-Taking Mechanism and Power

Relations that emerged in the 2024 United States Presidential Debate between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris” in the article “Turn-Taking Mechanism and Power Relations in United States Presidential Debates between Donald Trump and Kamala Harrison September 11, 2024” (Putri, Akmal, 2024: 437-457).

Despite growing scholarly interest in the pragmatic and interactional dimensions of the Biden–Trump debates, the cognitive-linguistic architecture of political aggression remains largely under-examined. Existing studies have productively described *how* aggression is enacted through impoliteness strategies and turn-taking dynamics, yet neither addresses *how aggression is conceptualized* as a mental structure organizing the candidates’ lexical and rhetorical choices. Consequently, questions concerning the conceptual metaphors and frames that shape battle discourse, the associative and loaded connotations of political epithets, and the idiolectal patterns between the two speakers’ cognitive-verbal profiles remain, to date, under-investigated.

Statement of the task. The aim of the research is to detect the linguistic means of verbalization of the concept AGGRESSION in the pre-election debates taking place between Joe Biden and Donald Trump, and to reconstruct the cognitive model (conceptual metaphors, frames, and associative or connotative structures) that organizes the concept within the frame of American political discourse, with a compar-

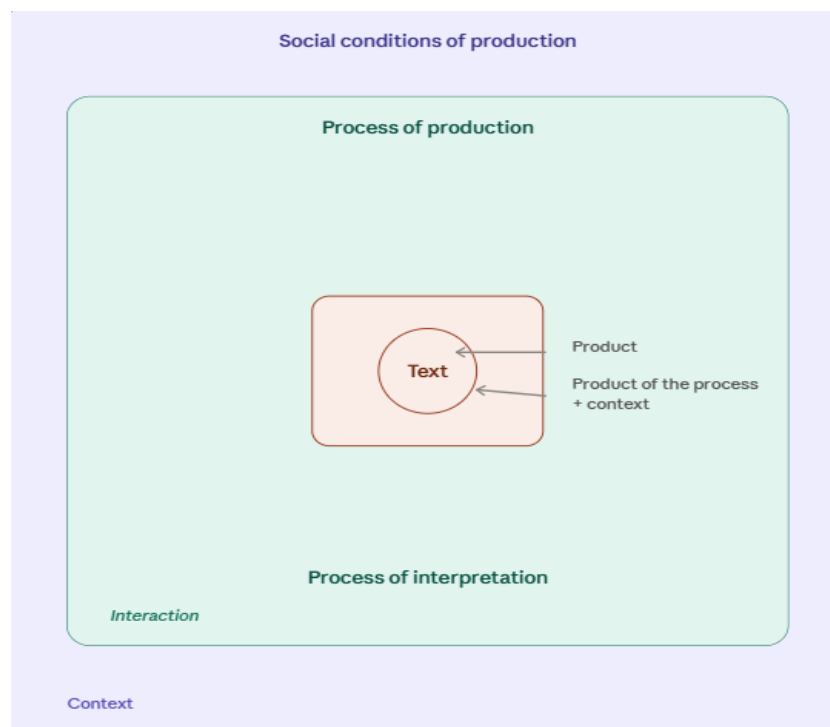


Fig. 1. Discourse as a text, interaction, and context (Fairclough, 1989: 25)

ative focus on the individual verbalization strategies of each candidate.

The study is based on the transcripts of the 2020 and 2024 U.S. presidential debates between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. The primary sources include the September 29, 2020 debate (the first presidential debate, moderated by Chris Wallace), with transcripts obtained from the Commission on Presidential Debates and Rev.com; the October 22, 2020 debate (the second presidential debate), with the transcript provided by the Commission on Presidential Debates; and the June 27, 2024 debate (CNN, Atlanta, moderated by Jake Tapper and Dana Bash), applying the official full transcript published by CNN Politics.

The research adopts a set of cognitive-linguistic and discourse-analytical methods. Conceptual analysis serves as the principal method for reconstructing the cognitive structure of the concept AGGRESSION, while conceptual metaphor and frame analyses identify the metaphorical models and cognitive frames that govern the linguistic expression in political discourse. Lexical-semantic and contextual analyses enable the detection and interpretation of the linguistic manifestations of the concept in the debate transcripts. Comparative discourse analysis is employed to reveal similarities and differences in the verbalization strategies of Joe Biden and Donald Trump, whereas quantitative analysis is used to determine the frequency and distribution of aggressive lexical units, thereby supporting the qualitative findings.

Presentation of the main material. The English vocabulary denoting *aggression*, *attack*, *hostility*, and *conflict* has a long historical development, reflecting both the evolution of the language and its contact with other cultures. During the Old English period (c. 450-1066), the core vocabulary of conflict was of Germanic origin. Words such as *feohtan* (“to fight, make war, struggle”), *beadu* (“battle, war”), *wīȝ* (“fight, battle, war, conflict”), and *here* (“an army, host, infantry, cavalry”) were widely used, particularly in heroic poetry such as *Beowulf* (Bosworth Toller’s Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online).

Following the Norman Conquest of 1066, the Middle English period (1066–1500) absorbed a large amount of French vocabulary. As French became the language of the aristocracy, the legal system, and military administration, English borrowed numerous terms related to warfare and conflict, including *attack* (from Old French *attaquer*) (Etymonline), *invasion*, and *assault* (from Old French *assaut*) (Etymonline). Rather than replacing the existing Germanic lexicon, these Romance borrowings coexisted with native terms, creating synonymous sets with distinct stylistic and semantic nuances.

During the Early Modern English period (1500–1700), borrowing from Latin intensified as it became the dominant language of scholarship, diplomacy, and international affairs. It was during this period that the word *aggression* entered English. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *aggression* is first recorded around 1610 with the meaning “an unprovoked attack.” The term derives from the Latin *aggressio* (from *aggređi*, “to attack”), transmitted via French into English as *aggression* (Oxford English Dictionary). Initially, the word was used primarily in military contexts.

In the Modern English period (from 1700 to the present), *aggression* expanded considerably in semantic scope, extending beyond military usage into politics, psychology, sociology, and international law. After the Second World War, the concept acquired a formal legal status in international law. The Nuremberg Trials and the Charter of the United Nations recognized aggressive war as an international crime. As a result, throughout the twentieth century, *aggression* became one of the central terms of political discourse.

Contemporary English vocabulary relating to aggression is etymologically diverse, combining Germanic elements such as *threat* and *strike*, French borrowings including *attack*, *assault*, and *invasion*, and Latin-derived terms such as *aggression*, *hostility*, and *offense*. In contemporary political discourse, the most frequent lexical items include *aggression*, *attack*, *invasion*, *assault*, *hostility*, *threat*, and *violence*. This historical layering of Germanic, French, and Latin vocabulary has produced rich networks of synonyms with varying degrees of expressiveness, formality, and semantic specificity. Lexical resources are actively employed in political discourse to construct narratives of confrontation, conflict, and ideological opposition.

Political debates are a unique form of institutional discourse in which participants compete to persuade the audience. Their primary objective is to expose the opponent’s error while affirming one’s own political program. Such a frame makes conflict-related language and rhetorical strategy indispensable rather than optional. The applied vocabulary usually serves three key functions: it directly criticizes the opponent, constructs a negative image of the opponent, and mobilizes supporters while legitimizing one’s own actions.

Norman Fairclough believes: “*The most obvious difference between face-to-face discourse and media discourse is the ‘one-sidedness’ of the latter. In face-to-face interaction, participants alternate between being the producers and the interpreters of text, but in media discourse, as well as generally in writing,*

there is a sharp divide between producers and interpreters – or, since the media ‘product’ takes on some of the nature of a commodity, between producers and consumers.” (Fairclough, 1989: 49).

The style of American political debates has undergone significant changes over the past seven decades. The debates of the 1960s, particularly those between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, were characterized by a relatively high level of civility, when politicians focused more on policy positions and ideas than on personal attacks. Over time, however, the style became increasingly confrontational. During the 1980s, Ronald Reagan applied extensive rhetorical strategies to criticize his opponents. In the 1990s and 2000s, political debates grew more combative. The 2020 and 2024 debates between Joe Biden and Donald Trump further reinforced this trend, as both candidates frequently interrupted each other, resorted to personal attacks, and exchanged mutual accusations.

This shift toward a more confrontational style of political debate can be explained by several factors. First, the growing influence of traditional media and social media has encouraged the use of short, emotionally charged statements that are more likely to attract attention, be remembered, and spread virally, thereby incentivizing politicians to adopt more aggressive rhetoric. Second, increasing political polarization in the United States has divided society into two opposing camps, triggering politicians to use harsher language to appeal to their supporters. Third, the shifts towards individual communication strategies rather than following the traditional rules of ethical political behaviour. Donald Trump, in particular, deliberately adopted a highly confrontational style, the psychopathic mask, giving him a wide space for manoeuvre and compelling his opponents to adapt to the new dynamics of political debate. The transformation of political field towards individualization was already analysed by Lance Benet and Alexandra Segerberg in the publication of 2012 *“The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics”* (Benet, Segerberg, 2012: 7–11).

The debates taking place on 29 September 2020 have already outlined the vector for future rhetoric in the political arena. Both candidates relied heavily on vocabulary with negative connotations. Appealing to Biden’s policy, Trump selects the lexeme *destruction* and its derivatives: *“He will destroy this country.”*; [on Insulin cost]: *“it was destroying families, destroying people, the cost.”* (Presidential Debate at Case Western Reserve University and Cleveland Clinic in Cleveland, Ohio, 2020). Another lexical marker of aggression is the words *threat* and *violence*, as well as their derivatives: *“he [Biden] threatened Ukraine*

with a billion dollars”; [Biden to Trump]: *“violent crime went down 17 percent, 15 percent in our Administration. It’s gone up on his watch”*; *“violence in response is never appropriate, never appropriate”* (Presidential Debate at Case Western Reserve University and Cleveland Clinic in Cleveland, Ohio, 2020). Here, we can observe that Trump adopts an attacking strategy, while Biden takes a more conciliatory tone, even though using the same negatively charged vocabulary.

Trump also relies on disease-related vocabulary when addressing the issues of COVID-19, labelling the “responsible” agent, which builds an ‘othering’ blame frame: *“we closed it down because of the China plague”* (Presidential Debate at Case Western Reserve University and Cleveland Clinic in Cleveland, Ohio, 2020). He also evokes a battle discourse: [a metaphor of political survival]: *“I had to fight, both flanks and behind me and above”* (Presidential Debate at Case Western Reserve University and Cleveland Clinic in Cleveland, Ohio, 2020).

The death cluster is activated in both exchanges: [Biden]: *“200,000 dead,” “a lot of people died and a lot more are going to die,” “one in 500 African Americans”* [will have died]; [Trump]: *“two million people would be dead now”*; *“he wants to shut down the whole country”* (Presidential Debate at Case Western Reserve University and Cleveland Clinic in Cleveland, Ohio, 2020).

The conceptual metaphors taking place in the first round of the debates include: a) fire as escalating violence: [Biden]: *“pours gasoline in the fire”*; [Trump]: *“we would put out that fire in a half an hour”* (Presidential Debate at Case Western Reserve University and Cleveland Clinic in Cleveland, Ohio, 2020); b) coup or conspiracy: [Trump]: *“they came after me trying to do a coup,” “spying on my campaign”* (Presidential Debate at Case Western Reserve University and Cleveland Clinic in Cleveland, Ohio, 2020); c) “infected” language: [Trump]: *“China plague”*; [Biden]: *“contracting COVID”* (Presidential Debate at Case Western Reserve University and Cleveland Clinic in Cleveland, Ohio, 2020).

Idiolectal profile of both then-candidates portrays preferred aggression lexis with Trump using the patterns such as *destroy*, *dangerous*, *radical*, *overthrow*, *coup*, *fraud*, and Biden’s choice of *violent*, *dying*, *killed*, and *discredited*. With that, Trump often challenges the speaker with imperative forms, among them *“Will you shut up, man?”* On the other hand, Biden suggests some accusative declaratives like *“He’s the racist,”* labelling the speaker.

Trump demonstrates his creativity by inventing derogatory nicknames for his opponents: *“If Poca-*

hontas would have left two days early you would have lost every primary” (Presidential Debate at Case Western Reserve University and Cleveland Clinic in Cleveland, Ohio, 2020). “Pocahontas” was a nickname Trump used for Senator Elizabeth Warren, referencing her past claims of Native American heritage. Here, Trump remarks that if Elizabeth Warren had dropped out of the primary race two days earlier, Biden would have lost every primary contest instead of winning them.

In the Presidential Debate at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee, held on 22 October 2020 (Presidential Debate at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee, 2020), we observe another stratum of vocabulary with an aggressive connotation. Basically, the opponents use the same range of words adopted during their first round in September. However, the word *threat* and its derivatives are not used directly, but the semantics of treat are implied in the link to geo-politics: [Biden]: “*any country, no matter who it is, that interferes in American elections will pay a price*”; “*They’re interfering with American sovereignty*” (Presidential Debate at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee, 2020). The idea of destruction pops up again: [Biden, on Trump and Putin]: “*he’s engaged in activities that are trying to destabilize all of NATO*”; [Trump, recasting Biden’s health-care plan as an act of aggression against institutions]: “*he’s talking about destroying your Medicare, totally destroying and destroying your Social Security*” (Presidential Debate at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee, 2020).

The explicit lexeme of *war*, absent from the first debate, arrives: [Trump on Obama]: “*He indicated we will be in a war with North Korea, it would be a nuclear war*”; [Biden, outlining the Hitler analogy]: “*We had a good relationship with Hitler before he in fact invaded Europe*”; [Biden]: “*he’s actually paying bounties to kill American soldiers in Afghanistan*” (Presidential Debate at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee, 2020). The line of killing reappears: [Trump]: “*700,000 people would be dead right now*” (counterfactual H1N1 comparison); [Biden]: “*220,000 Americans dead,*” “*We’re about to lose 200,000 more people*” (Presidential Debate at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee, 2020).

The domestic-aggression register is added: [Biden, on family separation]: “*It’s criminal. It’s criminal*”; [Biden]: “*He pours fuel on every single racist fire, every single one*”; “*This guy has a dog whistle about as big as a fog horn*” (Presidential Debate at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee, 2020). “*Fog-horn*” is a very loud horn used by ships to warn others in fog. “*A dog whistle*” refers to a coded message

that seems innocent to most people but carries a specific meaning to a particular audience, often used to describe politicians signalling racist or divisive ideas without saying them outright (only the “dogs,” i.e., the intended audience, can “hear” it).

Thus, in the second round of debates, Biden appears to shift toward a more aggressive, attacking role.

The conceptual metaphors enumerate: a) sovereignty as body under attack: [Biden]: “*interfering with American sovereignty*” (Presidential Debate at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee, 2020), twice-repeated treats the nation as a bounded entity that can be violated by an external and state-level (Russia, Iran, China), not a domestic political rival; b) historical analogy as aggression amplifier: [Biden]: Hitler invasion analogy functions cognitively to recast Trump’s diplomacy with Kim Jong Un as appeasement-before-aggression, importing the entire 1930s war-frame wholesale into a 2020 foreign-policy; c) policy as demolition: [Trump]: on “*destroying your Medicare*”, “*Social Security*”.

The comparative idiolectal profile continues to hold the word-stock: [Trump]: *destroy, terminate, disaster, hoax, spied*; [Biden]: *interfere, sovereignty, destabilize, criminal, invaded*. For Trump, the domain of aggression is largely personal (taxes, Hunter Biden, IRS); Biden shifts outward (geopolitics, sovereignty, historical analogy). This time, a rhetorical escalation device is used: [Trump]: “*Who built the cages, Joe?*”

The Biden-Trump debate transcript in 2024, held in Atlanta and moderated by Jake Tapper and Dana Bash (The Biden-Trump debate transcript, 2024), demonstrates the trajectory of enforcement. The AGGRESSION concept here is dominated by geopolitical war-talk far more than by domestic culture-war language, reflecting the live Ukraine and Gaza conflicts absent (or nascent) in 2020: [Trump about Biden]: “*He will drive us into World War Three, and we’re closer to World War Three than anybody can imagine. We are very, very close to World War Three, and he’s driving us there*”; [Biden on Trump]: “*If you want a World War Three, let him follow and win, and let Putin say, do what you want to NATO*”. The invasion line is adopted again: [Trump, describing what Putin would not have done under his presidency]: “*he would have never invaded Ukraine*”; [Biden, reversing the accusation onto Trump’s foreign policy]: “*he encouraged him, do whatever you want. And he went in*” [Putin into Ukraine] (The Biden-Trump debate transcript, 2024).

Destruction semantics reoccurs: [Trump on migrants]: “*they’re going to destroy our country*”; [Trump on Biden]: “*He is destroying Social Security,*

Medicare, and Medicaid]; [Trump]: “Joe, our country is being destroyed as you and I sit up here” ().

The idea of killing is tied to migrant-crime rhetoric: [Trump]: “They’re killing our citizens at a level that we’ve never seen before”, “We call it migrant crime. I call it Biden migrant crime”; [Trump]: “he has killed so many people at our border”; [Trump about Afghanistan]: “we lost 13 beautiful soldiers and 38 soldiers were obliterated” (The Biden-Trump debate transcript, 2024).

In 2024, the *attack* frame is added, applied to both foreign and domestic contexts): [Biden]: “Iran attacked American troops, killed, caused brain damage for a number of these troops”; [Bash’s framing question]: “in October, Hamas attacked Israel, killing more than a thousand people”; [Biden, characterizing a Trump statement]: “now he says if he loses again, such a whiner that he is, that there could be a bloodbath” (The Biden-Trump debate transcript, 2024).

There continues to be a play on the criminality issue: [Trump, on Biden]: “This man is a criminal”; [Biden, on Trump]: “The only person on this stage that is a convicted felon is the man I’m looking at right now” (The Biden-Trump debate transcript, 2024).

The conceptual metaphors embrace: a) migration as invasion or predation: [Trump on migrants]: “people from prisons, jails and mental institutions”, “take jobs,” “kill our citizens,” “destroying our country” (The Biden-Trump debate transcript, 2024); b) domestic political violence as civil war prelude: [Biden’s Charlottesville narrative]: “people coming out of the woods carrying swastikas on torches”, “singing the same antisemitic bile”).

The comparative idiolectal profile suggests the following frame: [Trump’s vocabulary]: *destroy, killing, invade, criminal, worst in history*; [Biden]: *war criminal, bloodbath, attacked, destroy*; [Trump on Biden]: “This man is a criminal”; “the worst president”; [Biden on Trump]: “convicted felon,” “morals of an alley cat”; [Trump on himself]: “I did nothing wrong”, [Trump on Biden]: “it’s the only way he thinks he can win” (The Biden-Trump debate transcript, 2024). Both presidents use direct personal indictments.

The conclusion and investigation perspectives.

The analysis of the three presidential debates demonstrates that the concept AGGRESSION in American political discourse functions as a dynamic cognitive construct rather than a fixed lexical category, adapting to changing political contexts. Its lexical pattern is built on Germanic (*threat, war, strike*), French (*attack, invasion*), and Latin (*aggression, hostility*)

strata, with speakers selecting different layers according to communicative purpose and register. In September 2020, aggression is primarily framed through domestic crises and the COVID-19 pandemic, with Trump utilizing confrontational vocabulary (*destroy, fraud, radical*), while Biden adopts a comparatively restrained but evaluative lexicon (*violent, dying, discredited*). By October 2020, the concept expanded to questions of sovereignty and external threats through historical analogies and intensified confrontation. In 2024, aggression is overwhelmingly conceptualized through geopolitical conflict, in which migration is framed as an invasion, domestic rivalry as civil conflict, and global war as an imminent threat. This progression reflects a shift from interpersonal and domestic aggression toward a broader war-and-survival frame.

Across all debates, three conceptual metaphor clusters remain dominant: *fire* and *escalation, destruction, and invasion* and *contagion*. These metaphors attribute responsibility for national decline to political opponents or externalized actors, reinforcing polarized interpretations of reality and supporting one-sided ideological framing.

The idiolectal comparison reveals a persistent asymmetry. Trump’s rhetoric is agent-oriented, hyperbolic, and repetitive, relying on direct accusations and imperatives. Biden’s discourse, although initially less confrontational, increasingly incorporated militarized, conflict-oriented vocabulary by 2024. Thus, the count across the three transcripts indicates that the lexeme *destroy* or *destroying* occurs approximately 15–20 times in Trump’s speech (compared to only 2–3 in Biden’s), whereas the lexemes *kill* or *killed* or *dead* appear with roughly comparable frequency in both candidates’ discourse (15–20 occurrences each). As to thematic anchoring, Trump predominantly deploys this lexis in relation to migration and border security, while Biden’s usage clusters around COVID-19 mortality and the war in Ukraine.

Overall, the findings suggest that the growing confrontational style of American presidential debates reflects not only pragmatic shifts in interaction but also a fundamental transformation of the conceptualization of political conflict from institutional disagreement to narratives of war and national survival. Future research should examine whether this war-oriented framing persists in subsequent election cycles and whether similar conceptual patterns characterize political discourse across different linguistic and cultural contexts.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Bennet L., Segerberg A. The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics. 2012. URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/287393379_The_logic_of_connective_action_Digital_media_and_the_personalization_of_contentious_politics.
2. Bosworth Toller's Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online. URL: <https://bosworthtoller.com/search?q=beadu%20>
3. Etymonline. URL: <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=attack%20>
4. Fairclough N. Language and Power. London: Longman, 1989. 259 p. URL: <https://pdfcoffee.com/language-amp-power-n-fairclough-pdf-free.html>
5. Hussein A.A., Saeed H.A. A Socio-Pragmatic Study of Verbal Abuse in Selected American Political Debates. Review of International Geographical Education Online. 2021. Vol. 11. №9. URL: <https://rigeo.org/menu-script/index.php/rigeo/article/view/2121>
6. Presidential Debate at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee, 22 October 2020. URL: <https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/october-22-2020-debate-transcript/>
7. Oxford English Dictionary. URL: <https://www.oed.com/?tl=true>
8. Presidential Debate at Case Western Reserve University and Cleveland Clinic in Cleveland, Ohio, 29 September 2020. URL: <https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/september-29-2020-debate-transcript/>
9. Putri P.D.K., Akmal H. Turn-Taking Mechanism and Power Relations in United States Presidential Debates between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris on September 11, 2024. Journal of Pragmatics Research. 2025. Vol. 7. №2. P. 437–457. URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/395277887_Turn-Taking_Mechanism_and_Power_Relations_in_United_States_Presidential_Debates_between_Donald_Trump_and_Kamala_Harris_on_September_11_2024
10. The Biden-Trump Debate Transcript. CNN. 2024. URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/06/27/politics/read-biden-trump-debate-rush-transcript>

REFERENCES

1. Bennet, L., Segerberg, A. (2012). The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics. URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/287393379_The_logic_of_connective_action_Digital_media_and_the_personalization_of_contentious_politics (accessed 14 July 2026).
2. Bosworth Toller's Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online. URL: <https://bosworthtoller.com/search?q=beadu%20> (accessed 14 July 2026).
3. Etymonline. URL: <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=attack%20> (accessed 16 July 2026).
4. Fairclough, N. (1989). Language and Power. London: Longman. 259 p. URL: <https://pdfcoffee.com/language-amp-power-n-fairclough-pdf-free.html> (accessed 14 July 2026).
5. Hussein, A. A., Saeed, H. A. (2021). A Socio-Pragmatic Study of Verbal Abuse in Selected American Political Debates. Review of International Geographical Education Online. Vol. 11. №9. URL: <https://rigeo.org/menu-script/index.php/rigeo/article/view/2121> (accessed 16 July 2026).
6. Oxford English Dictionary. URL: <https://www.oed.com/?tl=true> (accessed 17 July 2026).
7. Presidential Debate at Belmont University in Nashville, Tennessee. (2020). URL: <https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/october-22-2020-debate-transcript/> (accessed 13 July 2026).
8. Presidential Debate at Case Western Reserve University and Cleveland Clinic in Cleveland, Ohio. (2020). URL: <https://www.debates.org/voter-education/debate-transcripts/september-29-2020-debate-transcript/> (accessed 14 July 2026).
9. Putri, P. D. K., Akmal, H. (2025). Turn-Taking Mechanism and Power Relations in United States Presidential Debates between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris on September 11, 2024. Journal of Pragmatics Research. Vol. 7. №2. P. 437–457. URL: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/395277887_Turn-Taking_Mechanism_and_Power_Relations_in_United_States_Presidential_Debates_between_Donald_Trump_and_Kamala_Harris_on_September_11_2024 (accessed 13 July 2026).
10. The Biden-Trump Debate Transcript. (2024). CNN. URL: <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/06/27/politics/read-biden-trump-debate-rush-transcript> (accessed 17 July 2026).

Дата першого надходження статті до видання: 20.07.2026

Дата прийняття статті до друку після рецензування: 13.08.2026

Дата публікації (оприлюднення) статті: 02.09.2026

Стаття поширюється на умовах
ліцензії відкритого доступу (CC BY 4.0)

