

## SPEECH ACT-BASED LEGITIMISATION IN SELECTED INAUGURAL SPEECHES OF BRITISH PRIME MINISTERS

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**Abstract:** This paper offers insight into discursive patterns of the two most recent British Prime Ministers' inaugural speeches from an anthropological pragmatics perspective. The paper employed speech act theory in conjunction with a qualitatively centered critical discourse analysis study to unveil messages within the illocutionary communicative acts in the context of public political speeches. It is argued that both speeches are inherently embedded within threat-based rhetoric whose persuasive effect follows from a predominant use of the *pathos* and *ethos* appeals. Advancing the concept of speech acts as a tool for establishing pragma-discursive patterns, this paper demonstrates that generating fear in public discourse is essentially strategic and goal-oriented practice. Most importantly, the strategies used by Rishi Sunak rely heavily on his use of promises and statements, reflecting patterns of legitimisation through building a credibility schema and proximising the frame of fear mongering. Liz Truss on the other hand, develops slightly different narrative patterns, drawing mainly upon promises that help enact 'collective leadership' in the times of threat and a socio-economic crisis.

**Key words:** speech act theory, political discourse, critical discourse analysis, legitimisation.

**Słowa kluczowe:** teoria aktów mowy, dyskurs polityczny, krytyczna analiza dyskursu, legitymizacja.

### Introduction

The relationship between political figures and their voters is a constantly discursively negotiated state. Politicians communicate decisions to the public through a wide array of discourse strategies and linguistic acts. This paper compares the two inaugural speeches made by two British Prime Ministers who took office less than two months apart - Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak. The proximity in time and space of the speeches allows for a rare analysis with a very similar context. Both faced the same issues and had the same tools to counter them. Given the quintessential political atmosphere and economic struggles around the world it is highly beneficial to study inaugural speeches that not only serve as leading indicators for future policy, but also serve as a way for politicians to introduce

themselves to the citizens. In a socio-political context of uncertainty and post-truth one may expect political discourse to become more polarising and centered around fear mongering than before (Van Dijk, 2006).

### **The framework of speech acts**

The speech act pragmatic perspective as the dominant structuring linguistic unit of the current study provides a window onto the analysis of specific discourse representations that become evident in the gathered data. Alongside the CDA theories, this article focuses on the anthropological-pragmatic dimension (Chruszczewski, 2011; 2022) of speech acts as linguistic acts that underlie any type of human communication (Searle, 1969: 16) and unfold in a fluctuating context. In exploring the category of speech acts it is observed that they account for systematic language/discourse patterns that are crucial for creating representations and mapping the conceptual premise of specific discourse practice. Therefore, these meaningful linguistic acts operate methodologically on two levels of anthropological pragmatics understood as “[t]he study of the essence of language and the essence of culture in the form of their combined and simultaneous regularities in a specific and contextualized functional environment” (Chruszczewski, 2011:48). That said, our frame of analysis takes as its point of departure the system of patterned rules that assign certain functions to linguistic practices (Levinson, 1983: 279) and as a consequence, organise institutional discourse to which political discourse most notably belongs.

The speech act patterns are acknowledged to be performative acts of creating a certain type of reality that is established and amply investigated at the level of the locutionary, illocutionary, and a perlocutionary force of an utterance (Austin, [1962] 1975; Searle, 1975) that heavily rely on context. Within linguistic pragmatics, the following typology of Searle’s speech acts (Searle, 1975: 354–358) has been widely accepted:

**REPRESENTATIVES** that present a state of affairs as either true or false; the acts that have a word-to-world fit, e.g., stating, announcing, describing.

**DIRECTIVES** that attempt to get the hearer do something; the acts that have a world-to-word direction of fit, e.g., wants, wishes and desires.

**COMMISSIVES** that commit a speaker to some future course of action. The direction is world-to-words in which an intention is expressed, e.g., promises, favours, offers, requests.

**EXPRESSIVES** that indicate psychological states where there is no direction of fit, e.g., congratulations, apologies, condolences, thanking.

**DECLARATIONS** that define the successful performance through acts of bringing something about in the world where no affect is expressed, e.g., declaring, resigning, naming, appointing, sentencing, christening.

From the anthropological pragmatics perspective, speech acts fundamentally draw upon the contextualised and convention-based meaning, which are not only a promising path to study individual identities of British politicians, but also signpost directions of political agenda which is a goal-based and process-driven political action. As such, studying the pragmatolinguistic patterns of speech acts is helpful in establishing politicians' rhetoric where they perform their credibility that is necessary to legitimise their actions (Cap, 2006; 2013). Most approaches to legitimisation have their lens on the speaker's socio-political right to be obeyed (e.g., Cap, 2013; Van Leeuwen, 2007; Cosmides and Tooby, 2000; Van Leeuwen and Wodak, 1999). The essence of this concept is grounded in a claim that of the speaker to establish a political role and authority that provide rationale for being obeyed. Therefore, legitimisation as a discourse concept specific to CDA is accomplished in a context of political urgency to introduce changes, strengthen self-presentation, and reinforce leadership. For the purpose of this study legitimisation has been used primarily in reference to political context that "[i]nvolves, among other things, the promotion of representations, and a pervasive feature of representation is the evident need for political speakers to imbue their utterances with evidence, authority and truth, a process that we shall refer to in broad terms (...) as 'legitimation'" (Chilton, 2004: 23).

With an understanding of legitimisation as the indirect experience of events in the form of representations that are at issue as well as knowledge along with the shared assumptions of the state of the facts in the world (Chovanec, 2010: 2), it is germane to highlight that discussions of legitimisation through the lens of speech act performance is not dry theorising but they give insight into strategies and mechanisms underlying the current state of British politics as well as point to a performative action which is largely defined with the study of speech activities. A major advantage of implementing a speech act format into this study is that it can explain the patterned pragmatic force of speeches which provides a vast spectrum of meanings that are to be investigated with the all-encompassing framework of micro and macro functional aspects of discourse.

Since speech acts lie at the core of discursive practice it seems imperative to make an account of their functional and contextual potential in the generic forms of inaugural speeches that are anchored in the specific social-cultural milieu. The essential role of political context in the examination of the form and function of speech acts endorses a connection between legitimization (Cap 2013), positive self-representation (Goffman, 1956), and threat rhetoric (subsuming axiological or valuational rhetoric) (Cap 2010, Romanyshyn, 2020; Pomeroy, 2004; Krzeszowski, 1997). The pragmatolinguistic macrostructure of the two inaugural speeches is of key importance in studying political discourse since it helps to establish the functional type of speech behaviour which is reflected in the patterned structure of the same predication and reference (Searle, 1969: 29) which are the building blocks of legitimisation (Cap, 2013: 53). Given the macrostructure framework it is possible to make an extension of its

scope and offer evidence for their microstructures in the form of lexico-grammatical choices, e.g., logical terms ('and', 'if', 'or') (Gough and Talbot, 1996; Schiffrin, 1987; 1992), cohesion of texts (Halliday and Hasan, 1976), metaphors (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980), or evaluation and attitude (White, 1999) which are particularly useful socio-pragmatic tools of analysis. On a political plane, studying the British Prime Ministers' inaugural speeches is one way of capturing the patterned discourse structure which bring us to considerations of pragma-rhetorical tools of persuasion used by politicians, strategies that lie at the core of building their positive self-representation and the enactment of mapping out the vision of social change which underlies the ideology—based status created by means of speech act performance. Thus, we are faced with the inquiries that engage us in the analysis that follows.

### Rhetoric triangle

One of the aims of politicians is to persuade an audience into following their concepts and ideals. Aristotle believed that the success of a speaker to persuade their audience members depends on how well they exercise three modes of appeal to the listeners. The first one is *pathos*, an appeal to emotions and a pre-existing belief system every individual has (Fortenbaugh, 1974: 232). The second form of appeal, *ethos*, concentrates on the person of the speaker and is connected with their trustworthiness and credibility. A good speaker will use the authority they have to strengthen their message. Finally, *logos* is the appeal to logical thinking. The speaker aims to persuade their audience by providing data and logical arguments (Aristotle, [348–322 B.C.] 2001).

The study of emotions in the political sphere has been a focal point of discourse analysis for many years. Politicians tend to make use of negative emotions more frequently in their discourse; in many cases fear mongering and creating a world view of insiders standing in opposition against outsiders can be seen (Altheide, 2002; 2006). This is known as the us versus them concept where a mental image of inclusion and exclusion is created and used for dissuading people from supporting the latter group. It is commonly applied in contexts referencing wars, immigration, racial stratifications, and many more (van Dijk, 2000). It is worth mentioning that the us versus them polarisation is one of several applications of fear mongering and play on emotions that public figures use to evoke predetermined reactions in their audience members. For instance, there is a strong positive correlation between issuing terror warnings and presidential approval ratings in the United States of America (Willer, 2004). Thus it may be assumed that in a world still fighting the pandemic, food shortages caused by the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and a potential economic crisis, fear mongering in politics and media may be discursively exercised at a larger degree than previously.

## Data and Methodology

In the study that follows we present the two inaugural speeches of British Prime Ministers, Rishi Sunak and Liz Truss retrieved from two websites entitled: Rishi Sunak's first speech as Prime Minister: 25 October 2022 - GOV.UK and Analysis: Liz Truss's first speech as UK prime minister in full - CGTN. The main objective of this study is to demonstrate the key linguistic/discursive patterns and strategies that are representative of the British parliamentary system. With this idea in mind, we have decided to compile a qualitative discourse analysis with a quantitative comparison of lexical density.

Our choice of the research material is determined by two overriding factors, the first one being the socio-economic context of an all-encompassing threat stemming from various triggers which are the source of social imbalance and they include Brexit, COVID-19 pandemic and economic instability while the second deals with Russian aggression. Consequently, threat-based rhetoric is a germane concept to approach within the spatio-temporal frame of the current analysis since it presupposes both physical threat of war and crisis as well as increased imminent and momentous cultural turn that requires preventive action.

### Analytical framework: analysis of Rishi Sunak's speech

The analysis based on the gathered data shows that the most salient speech acts produced by Rishi Sunak have been commissives (promises 47,3%) and representatives (statements 32,7%). Although almost half of his utterances belong to this pragmatic category, they cannot be taken to indicate evidence-based linguistic acts. The cornerstone of her speech in terms of promises production is her commitment to act in a specific way in the future as the British Prime Minister. However, one could argue that the way he makes promises is not convincing enough to be considered effective in terms of realising persuasive goals since they follow the same pattern of flouting maxims of conversation (Grice 1975). While doing this, Sunak reinforces his status as a politician who provides insufficient information and gives vague explanations. Through the use of this strategy, he flouts the Gricean Maxims of cooperation and hence disrupts effective communication. His promises work consistently towards maxims nonfulfillment at the level of **(a) Maxim of Quality** (make a contribution that provides adequate evidence), e.g., *And that works begins immediately*, **(b) Maxim of Manner** (be do not be vague), e.g., *I will unite our country, I will bring compassion to the challenges we face today*, and the use of **(c) Generalisations**, e.g., *I will work day in and day out to deliver for you, This government will have integrity, professionalism and accountability at every level, Trust is earned. And I will earn yours*. Using generalisations follows the schemata in political discourse in which speakers make many void and meaningless statements (Urbaniak and Bielak, 2021). As a result

of the lack of details, the speakers decrease the risk of being held accountable for uttering anything controversial.

Building on the idea that the gist of communication is acting according to the principles of cooperation (Kecskes, 2014: 32) viewed as a “[c]omplex kind of intention that is achieved or satisfied just by being recognised (...) as mutual knowledge” (Levinson, 1983: 16), following this analysis, the recognition of uncooperativeness has considerable implications for legitimising his actions which is seen as a process of building authority through reinforcing positive self-representation. Based on these findings it can be argued that his performance creates unstable contexts of enacting “common ground” which is crucial for building trust in a society, especially during the times of threat and crisis.

Furthermore, it ought to be pointed out that this speech act pattern is also an indicator of Rishi Sunak’s role as a credible speaker that directly leads to the ethical character of his speech. Within a larger macro pragmatic frame of promises it can be observed that, at one point, it is the failure in fulfilling the criteria of informativeness and clarity that weaken his status as a leader, however, at another point his frequent use of the inclusive first-person ‘I’, serves as the major premise for claiming personal responsibility for future action. Bearing in mind that that one of the preparatory conditions for promising is “[a]n act of placing oneself under the obligation” (Searle, 1969: 178), the use of first person singular ‘*I will*’ presupposes the control over a threat-based reality, highlights the enactment of leadership and points to the establishment of beliefs that are accepted by the collectivity.

Rishi Sunak’s inaugural speech also accounts for the prevalent discursive pattern of representatives in the form of assertives which state the truthfulness of his propositions. They are recognised as true based on the factual representation of a current state of affairs. Regarding the conditions that underlie the use of assertives in the current speech, the two operating strategies that run parallel tracks can be roughly identified: the presentation of the existing danger, e.g., and the orientation towards imminent danger in the near future. Since assertions are instrumental in creating a new reality in the here and now, they are also concerned with the future which is reassessed based on negative projections constructed at present (Dunmire, 2011). In relation to this, the analysis yielded results that pointed to the threat-based rhetoric which reflected the socio-economic context of fear and crisis. Importantly, it predicates the macrostructure (Van Dijk, [1998] 2000: 35) of the current state of affairs but frames the negative perspective of a looming danger through listings of the potentially realistic scenarios (Cruz, 2000: 298).

Drawing upon the topic-related data, two thematic clusters have been identified. The first conceptual perspective involves the tangible threat caused by a COVID-19 pandemic, Russian invasion on Ukraine and destabilisation of the economy, while the second thematic orientation continues to address aspects of her political role as the Prime Minister. The lexico-grammatical material includes, respectively, a number of items that directly point to a tangible physical threat e.g., the country facing a profound economic crisis, the COVID-19 pan-

demic, a destabilisation of energy markets and supply chains, but he also makes an account of trust that has been lost and needs to be restored. There has been an important observation: the mechanism behind the use of his assertives perform his credibility as a political leader in tough times of socio-economic instability. Interestingly, the mechanism in question is the cornerstone prerequisite for claiming “common ground” with the audience and consequently legitimising his actions as true and collectively profitable.

The results markedly demonstrate that another strategy utilised by Sunak has been his appeal to *pathos* through evoking fear by reminding a society about critical times. This rhetorical pattern creates his power claim by stirring up strong emotions of fear and uncertainty. The emotive effect underlies a well-knit strategy of legitimising his actions at the cognitive level of creating an ‘in-group’ entity and a positive representation of his political identity. This process is essentially based on cognitive schema triggered by the activation of emotion programs resulting from specific, usually negative representations (Cosmides and Tooby, 2000). As shown in the analysis a bulk of discursive patterns are embedded in political legitimisation processes which build positive self-representation which is strengthened on the canvas of a threat-based rhetoric.

From a thematic analysis outlook it can be said that Prime Minister Sunak’s speech is filled with cases of fear mongering and means of strengthening his position and credibility, both of which at the time were low. This was the result of Sunak becoming UK’s Prime Minister without a national vote, but as a replacement for two failed predecessors. From the very beginning of his speech the need of being recognized as a legitimate leader can be seen.

(1) *It is only right to explain why I am standing here as your new Prime Minister.*

Rishi Sunak begins with a statement that indicates both the need to justify his new role as the leader of the country, but also, the use of “explain” suggests a focus on the *logos* appeal in his speech. However, as it will be shown both *pathos* and *ethos* appeals were applied more often. The three sentences that follow frame the actual narrative of the speech. They unveil the focus on fear mongering and highlight *pathos* as the core mode of appeal of the message.

(2) *Right now our country is facing a profound economic crisis. The aftermath of Covid still lingers. Putin’s war in Ukraine has destabilised energy markets and supply chains the world over.*

Rishi Sunak has gained prominence in British politics as a skilled Chancellor of the Exchequer, dealing with financial issues and the economy. As a Prime Minister who was not voted for by the public, he refers to a possible economic crisis to make

himself seem as the right person for the position. By doing so he elevates his authority equaling the role of the PM to the role of the person who is supposed to stop the economic crisis, which he was educated for and equipped to fight. Moreover, Sunak indicates the culprits of that economic crisis at the same time bringing to the public's attention other problems his government will face. The main message conveyed in these sentences is related to fear and uncertainty. The public is made aware of not one, but three problems that need immediate attention. The prime element of fear mongering and incorporating (outside) threats into political speeches is to prepare the public for new laws and changes that otherwise people may have opposed. One such example is the way American politicians discussed the Patriot Act in the post 9/11 era. An act that, with few opposing it, took away some of the freedoms people had enjoyed (Gore, 2004; Thorne, 2010). Sunak seems to point in a similar direction by adding "This will mean difficult decisions to come". One can see the use of *pathos* here and the play on emotions of the audience.

(3) *I will place economic stability and confidence at the heart of this government's agenda.*

The Prime Minister utilises the heart metaphor, frequently attached to issues that evoke emotional reactions. Kardia, or the heart, is a concept present throughout classical European anthropology. It serves as the representation of the emotional and thought-based core of an issue (Berendt and Tanita, 2011: 67). It appears twice in Sunak's speech, both times as a leading indicator for a key concept.

As it was mentioned in the analysis of example (1), Sunak is aware that his leadership might be questioned. He activates the inclusive/exclusive cognitive frame relating to the relationship between politicians and the people. In the following example he includes everyone listening into the same group, attempting to present himself as a member of the same community and as a propagator of the same attitude and mandate as Boris Johnson, who won in a general election.

(4) *I will always be grateful to Boris Johnson for his incredible achievements as Prime Minister, and I treasure his warmth and generosity of spirit. And I know he would agree that the mandate my party earned in 2019 is not the sole property of any one individual, it is a mandate that belongs to and unites all of us.*

Sunak speaks of unity in times where there is little of it. Most UK citizens aim to vote for the Labour Party (51%) in the next elections (Politico Data: 2022). It seems that the newly elected Prime Minister has three main goals throughout his speech. Firstly, he tries to establish himself as an authority and rightful PM, se-



condly, he presents a fearful future in order to receive a specific reaction from the public and form an image of himself as a protector. Finally, his speech includes eighteen promises, pledges regarding actions he and his government will do to create a better future.

### Analytical framework: analysis of Liz Truss's speech

The results clearly demonstrate that Liz Truss's rhetoric is heavily based on a discursive pattern of commissives, predominantly promises, which amount to 59,1%. The data might be taken to indicate that the explanatory power of promises predominantly lies in the context of their occurrence. Henceforth, the contextual features that specify the conditions under which she commits herself to the truth of her propositions which relate to some future action, seem to be of utmost importance. It is clear from the data that the selected contextual features involve 'local contexts' that address issues regarding Britain and its economy, e.g., *We need to build roads, homes and broadband faster. We need more investment and great jobs in every town and city across our country, Now is the time to tackle the issues that are holding Britain back, We need more investment and great jobs in every town and city across our country, We need to reduce the burden on families and help people get on in life, We will transform Britain into an aspiration nation... with high-paying jobs, safe streets and where everyone everywhere has the opportunities they deserve.*, just to name a few. Politicians frequently make use of repetition. This strategy aims at strengthening a selected notion or action. Liz Truss in her speech aimed at delivering a discourse of unity and togetherness. The inclusive "We" aims at passing on the message that despite the difficulties the country faces – nobody is alone with the problems – whether economic, war related or connected with COVID. The discourse of unity and inclusion is very visible in Truss's speech. On the other hand, another significant contextual information is organised around the 'global contexts' of international issues which is evident in the following lines: *We will transform Britain into an aspiration nation... with high-paying jobs, safe streets and where everyone everywhere has the opportunities they deserve, I will take action this week to deal with energy bills and to secure our future energy supply.* As threatened reality requires immediate reparatory action, the objective seems to be restoration of Britain and its public service and also taking the preventative action that aims at tackling issues internationally. On the lexical plane, the act of national reinforcement and establishing a strong position transnationally is performed by promises expressed through the use of a modal verb 'need' preceded by a collective first personal plural 'we', e.g., *We need to build roads...*, *We need more investment ...*, *We need to reduce the burden on families...*, *We will transform Britain.* Clearly enough, *the Pluralisation of the 'I' pronoun strategy* (Brown and Levinson, [1978] 1987: 199) is closely linked with creating belonging to a group and serves as a stylis-

tic resource to display and develop professional identity, including the political one (Aijón, 2013: 575; Helmbrecht, 2002: 42). The examples of pluralisation above show that Liz Truss implements a legitimisation frame which hinges on solidarity, joint effort, and social standing that she hoped to derive from British society. As observed, the emphasis on the premise of a social status is directly presented in the lexical choices and textual realisations subsuming these forms. The analysis of promises in the given data set builds more complex forms that regulate political status (Al-Ammedi and Mukhef, 2017: 196) and if reinforced, may give rise to the establishment of an in group mechanism that, in its extreme realisation can lead to an antagonistic *us vs. them* relation (e.g., Van Dijk, 1992a; 2002; Wodak et al., 2007).

### Lexical density

A lexical density and textual analysis of the two transcribed speeches have led to two conclusions. Firstly, Rishi Sunak put far more emphasis on him being the doer, the person responsible for crafting a new future for the UK, while Liz Truss focused on a party wide effort. The below data shows the most frequently used two-word phrases by both politicians. Rishi Sunak's dataset included "I will" (7 instances), "and I" (7 instances), "I have" (4 instances), "it is" (3 instances) and Prime Minister (3 instances). When it comes to Liz Truss the following has been observed: "I will" (8 instances), "we can" (6 instances), "we will" (5 instances), "our country" (3 instances), and "we need" (3 instances). Secondly, both speeches were prepared at a similar level of lexical difficulty. They were relatively easy to comprehend with lexical density scores of 51 percent for Sunak's speech and 48.5 percent for Truss's. Furthermore, the SMOG grade and the Flesch Reading Ease oscillated around the same values with the former at 10.6 for both and the latter at 66.6 (Sunak) and 63.8 (Truss). Thus the data indicates that both speeches were prepared to be understood by people of different backgrounds and levels of education, which in politics is very important and serves the purpose of reaching a maximally numerous audience.

### Conclusions

The paper presents the micro macro-textual analysis "of discursive patterns evidenced in two inaugural speeches delivered by Rishi Sunak and Liz Truss. The overarching aim is to explore the mechanisms and strategies utilised in these specific generic forms that are anchored in the interpandemic socio-cultural milieu. As the analysis above indicates, the common denominator of all linguistic acts produced by both speakers is threat-based rhetoric aimed at generating public fear. This has some further implications in their specific discourse practice.

The schematic patterns that have been found can be conceptually categorised as the following: (1) evoking fear by using pathos and establishing the character of an ethical speaker, (2) creating a positive self-representation through a manipulation with informativeness and shifts in the use of the 'I' pronoun. At various points the two texts are markedly different from each other, although they intersect at a rhetorical perspective. Both speeches have an abundance of propositions that show how the speakers built their ethos and created a fearful reality. The results obtained with respect to rhetorical discourse patterns are consistent in showing that for Rishi Sunak being a credible and truthful speaker entailed establishing "common ground" with the audience through taking personal responsibility for present and future actions (the use of the first-person pronoun 'I'). However, the results show that appointing him an effective speaker is a foregone conclusion since he flouts several maxims of conversation which lie at the core of successful communication. It is mainly due to failure in fulfilling the informativeness criteria that his promises turn out to be broken and flawed. The rhetorical patterns pertaining to Liz Truss reflect her collective approach to enactment of leadership. Contrary to Rishi Sunak, she represents herself as part of the solution to the problems surrounding the United Kingdom at the time of her speech. The inclusiveness which she highlights by using the pronoun 'we' and the possessive determiner 'our' serves two purposes. Firstly, it frames her message of fixing the country as a collective responsibility of all citizens, of whom she is a representative. This forms a mental image of the politician acting as a true leader of the people. Secondly, this collective responsibility allows her to decrease the impact of potential failure and being ineffective in reaching her goals and promises. Both speeches approach the issue of legitimisation in a way that best served the speakers at the time and they seem to reflect the social tensions in the United Kingdom relating to the individual politicians.

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