SPEECH ACTS IN IMMIGRATION DISCOURSE: A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL RHETORIC BY RISHI SUNAK AND KEIR STARMER ON DIGITAL PLATFORMS

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Abstract: *This article delves into how British political leaders use speech acts in their immigration speeches. The analysis draws on theories of speech acts by prominent scholars such as Austin and Searle, combined with Critical Discourse Analysis by Fairclough. The main two British leaders' speeches used in my paper are those of Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer on YouTube. The data for this study is primarily qualitative, collected from YouTube videos featuring Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer's speeches, debates, interviews, and policy statements on immigration between 2019 and 2024. YouTube was the main platform for analysis due to its rich, formal, and policy-oriented content, which provides in-depth political rhetoric. In addition to YouTube, social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook were used for comparison, focusing on posts and interactions related to immigration. The content was selected based on its direct focus on immigration issues such as border security, asylum policies, and public opinion, with priority given to videos or posts that have garnered significant public engagement. This study adopts qualitative coding to identify and categorize selected YouTube videos based on five key speech acts. The article points out that Sunak uses directives and commissives according to Speech Act theory, and his policy focuses on border control and government actions. On the other hand, Starmer uses assertives and directives, through which he tries to criticize the government's performance and shed light on political weaknesses concerning immigration. Additionally, this study emphasizes the role of political language and its effects on public opinion, and explores how language plays a crucial role in online political communication.*

Keywords: *speech act theory, political rhetoric, immigration discourse, critical discourse analysis, digital political communication.*

Introduction

Immigration is an important issue in British politics today. It affects both policies and how people think about immigration. Politicians often choose their words carefully, not just to share their ideas but also to influence how people discuss these issues. This

paper looks at how two well-known British politicians, Prime Minister Rishi Sunak and Labour Party Leader Sir Keir Starmer, use speech acts in their messages about immigration on platforms like YouTube, X, and Facebook.

This study draws on Speech Act Theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969) and elements of Critical Discourse Analysis (Fairclough, 2013). this research will explore the illocutionary forces behind their rhetoric and the pragmatic functions these serve in framing immigration issues. By analysing their public statements, this study seeks to reveal the interplay between language, ideology, and audience engagement in digital political discourse.

Political Discourse and Rhetoric

Political discourse is crucial in shaping ideological struggles and driving political action. As Finlayson (2013) discusses in relation to Quentin Skinner, normative statements are instruments in ideological debates, while William Riker highlights the importance of strategic issue framing (Skinner, 2002a). It is through the dynamic interplay of rhetoric and audience engagement that political ideologies are constructed (Dryzek, 2010).

Ideological narratives and public engagement rely heavily on political discourse and rhetoric. As Austin (1962) argued, language performs actions and therefore has political implications. In fact, Searle (1969) asserted that speech acts create meaning in context, making them crucial for the study of social interaction. Embedding these insights into a text demonstrates the importance of rhetoric in politics, as it determines how the political environment is interpreted and shapes issues to influence public perception.

Political debate and rhetoric are vital for ideological discussion and public opinion formation. Alan Finlayson (2013) points out how Quentin Skinner shows that political theories are "moves" in specific contexts, where normative statements become "tools and weapons" in ideological confrontations. Moreover, Riker's heresthetic highlights the art of framing and altering the dimensions of politics to shape preferences. This dynamic has important implications for our understanding of the role of rhetoric in political discourse and the powerful impact framing has on changing public perception and participation in democracy.

Digital Platforms

As Driscoll and Thorson note, the complexity of cross-platform political communication requires new and innovative methodologies that can bring together content across platforms. Regular analyses, which most often concern either Twitter or Facebook, are more specialized than helpful: they only serve to blur the big picture of user interactions and public debate. To overcome this limitation, the authors introduce two big frameworks: one is the URL-based integration method based on the posting of fixed URLs across different services and another thematic integration method based on semi-automated text clustering with the purpose of spotting relevant discourses across social media.

By combining these, the researchers can create rich multi-dimensional data sets that mirror the complex nature of political communication and highlight, as relevant, the biases likely to emerge from analyses restricted to platform-specific sources. The detailed description Driscoll and Thorson give is about how political messages are crafted nowadays and get spread, hence fostering even more understanding regarding the cross-boundary nature of online spaces.

Digital platforms that allow users to create and share their own content are deceptively powerful. Richard M. Perloff explores their business and social ramifications in The Dynamics

of Political Communication. He also points out that social media enables daily communication between political actors and citizens, contributing to a more participatory environment where citizens can actively engage with political content (Perloff, 2014).

Critical Discourse Analysis and Power Relations

It is clear when analysing speeches about immigration how political figures use language to influence their audience. For them, language is not only a means of communication but also a tool to serve their interests by employing rhetorical strategies, such as those explained by Speech Act Theory. Fairclough (2013) emphasizes that political language does not simply reflect existing power structures but actively contributes to shaping and maintaining them. Through Critical Discourse Analysis, we can thus understand how language reinforces social structures and strengthens societal ties.

Through speech acts, political leaders such as Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer aim to shape immigration discourses in ways representative of their ideological stance by framing immigration issues in support of their respective political agendas. For instance, specific rhetoric from Sunak as "border control," his framing of "illegal immigration," may ring changes and pose a subject germane to national security at the same time that one will find Starmer using protective parlance, such as "refugee protection of rights" and "protections that are humanely grounded." These stylistics undergird rather readily how language is elaboratively used in building particular voices and shaping public opinion on immigration.

CDA also makes it possible to investigate the ways in which language reflects and reinforces more general societal-level ideologies. Van Dijk's work on political discourse notes that political actors engage in a series of discursive efforts to control public understandings of reality; a rhetoric that performs what he identifies as a "constructive function," in that, through active discursive manipulation, political realities are moulded. Building upon this, Chilton (2004) illustrates that in political discourse, deeper structures of ideology can be shown to underpin the linguistic surface, in support of power relationships at the social level.

This paper, in particular, demonstrates how, through speech act analysis of Sunak and Starmer, language is not a reflection of public attitudes on immigration but constructs them to further existing political and social frameworks.

Methodology

The data for this study will be primarily qualitative, collected from YouTube videos featuring Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer's speeches, debates, interviews, and policy statements on immigration between 2019 and 2024. YouTube will be the main platform for analysis due to its rich, formal, and policy-oriented content, which provides in-depth political rhetoric. In addition to YouTube, social media platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook will be used for comparison, focusing on posts and interactions related to immigration. The content will be selected based on its direct focus on immigration issues such as border security, asylum policies, and public opinion, with priority given to videos or posts that have garnered significant public engagement.

This study adopts qualitative coding to identify and categorize selected YouTube videos based on five key speech acts. Following Searle (1969), assertives are defined as speech acts that express beliefs about the world (e.g. "Immigration strengthens the economy."), while directives aim to influence the listener's actions (e.g., "We must tighten

border security."). Commissives commit the speaker to future actions, as exemplified by promises like "If elected, I will reform immigration policies." Meanwhile, expressives convey emotions or attitudes (e.g., "I am deeply concerned about the refugee crisis."), and declarations enact change through speech (e.g., "As of today, this law is in effect."). By categorizing these speech acts, this study examines how Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer strategically shape immigration discourse to align with their political ideologies.

Subsequently, the analysis extends to the illocutionary force of each act to reveal the underlying political or social intentions, while an examination of their pragmatic functions further clarifies how these speech acts frame immigration issues and inform public discourse. Final conclusions will be drawn by comparing how Sunak and Starmer adapt their rhetoric across different platforms – specifically contrasting their more formal speeches on YouTube with more reactive posts on social media. This multifaceted approach refines the methodology for understanding how leading politicians construct ideologies, engage with the public, and shape discussions related to immigration.

Key Speech Acts in Video 1

Directive (Sunak): "I will put them on planes to Rwanda because they shouldn't be able to stay." (*The Guardian*, 0:12).

Illocutionary Force: Asserts a firm policy decision regarding the deportation of migrants. Sunak presents this statement as an unambiguous action plan that signals his government's commitment to strict immigration policies.

Pragmatic Function: Reinforces Sunak's stance on deportation as a necessary solution to control illegal migration. This statement appeals to an audience that favours strong immigration enforcement and portrays Sunak as a leader taking decisive action.

Directive (Sunak): "What will you do with illegal migrants who come to our country?" (*The Guardian*, 0:19).

Illocutionary Force: Challenges Starmer to clarify his position by posing a direct question. The use of repetition emphasizes urgency and forces his opponent into a defensive position.

Pragmatic Function: Positions Sunak as proactive while framing Starmer as indecisive. This tactic aims to put Starmer under pressure, making it seem as though he lacks a concrete solution to the issue. The use of rhetorical questioning is a strategic tool to reinforce Sunak's argument while discrediting his opponent.

Assertive (Starmer): "At the moment, 100% of them are effectively being granted asylum in this country because they can't go anywhere." (0:36).

Illocutionary Force: Criticizes the government's handling of asylum seekers by highlighting a flaw in the system. The statement presents an empirical claim that suggests a lack of viable deportation measures.

Pragmatic Function: Highlights the inefficiency of deportation policies by framing them as ineffective in practice. By pointing out that asylum seekers remain in the country by default, Starmer questions the effectiveness of Sunak's proposals, emphasizing the reality of immigration enforcement challenges.

Assertive (Starmer): "The Prime Minister knows this, and if he thinks I'm wrong, he should say so." (0:45).

Illocutionary Force: Challenges Sunak's knowledge and transparency by asserting that the Prime Minister is aware of the policy failure.

Pragmatic Function: Pressures Sunak to acknowledge the limitations of his policies by creating a moment in the debate where a lack of response would be seen as an implicit concession. This rhetorical strategy is aimed at gaining the upper hand in the discussion by shifting the burden of proof onto Sunak.

Expressive (Sunak): "He's not answering the question!" (0:55).

Illocutionary Force: Expresses frustration with Starmer's response, implying that his opponent is avoiding the issue rather than addressing it directly.

Pragmatic Function: Portrays Starmer as evasive, weakening his credibility. This tactic is frequently used in debates to depict an opponent as untrustworthy or unwilling to commit to a clear stance. By voicing frustration, Sunak appeals to the audience's potential dissatisfaction with political ambiguity.

Directive (Sunak): "Return them!" (0:51).

Illocutionary Force: Demands the deportation of illegal migrants in an authoritative manner. The short, commanding phrase conveys urgency and a no-compromise stance.

Pragmatic Function: Reinforces a strong enforcement stance, positioning Sunak as a leader who prioritizes national security. This direct approach resonates with voters who support strict immigration controls and reinforces Sunak's image as decisive and firm.

Assertive (Starmer): "They cannot be returned to where they came from, can they, Prime Minister?" (0:48).

Illocutionary Force: Questions the feasibility of Sunak's deportation strategy by drawing attention to international legal and logistical challenges.

Pragmatic Function: Undermines Sunak's claim by pointing out legal and practical obstacles to returning asylum seekers to their home countries. By posing the question directly to the Prime Minister, Starmer forces Sunak to address a key weakness in his plan, which may cause hesitation or an unsatisfactory response.

Expressive (Sunak): "Are you going to sit down with the Iranian Ayatollah? Are you going to try and do a deal with the Taliban?" (1:04).

Illocutionary Force: Expresses incredulity at Starmer's return policy by associating it with extreme and controversial geopolitical actors.

Pragmatic Function: Mocks Starmer's position by linking it to negotiations with hostile governments, thereby making it appear unworkable or naïve. This strategy seeks to discredit Starmer's approach by suggesting that his policy would require impossible diplomatic negotiations with uncooperative states, reinforcing Sunak's argument that deportation is the only viable solution.

Key Speech Acts in Video 2:

Directive (Sunak): "If you come here illegally, you will be detained and swiftly removed." (*Daily Mail*, 2024, 3:51).

Illocutionary Force: Declares strict government action against illegal immigration.

Pragmatic Function: Reinforces a tough stance on border control, signalling an uncompromising approach to deter illegal crossings. This statement appeals to an audience that prioritizes national security and legal immigration enforcement.

Assertive (Starmer): "The number is 21. I thought it was a man of detail. 21 out of 18,000!" (*Daily Mail*, 2024, 8:48).

Illocutionary Force: Highlights the inefficiency of Sunak's deportation plan.

Pragmatic Function: Uses numerical evidence to challenge Sunak's claims of success in immigration control. By emphasizing the low number of deportations compared to the overall cases, Starmer undermines Sunak's argument that the government's policies are effective.

Directive (Starmer): "The Prime Minister promised to stop all small boat crossings. No ifs, no buts. So when will he achieve that?" (5:02).

Illocutionary Force: Demands accountability from Sunak regarding immigration promises.

Pragmatic Function: Pressures Sunak to commit to a clear timeline for his policy's success. By framing the question with Sunak's own words, Starmer holds him responsible for potential failures.

Commissive (Sunak): "We will implement this plan as soon as Parliament approves it." (5:10).

Illocutionary Force: Pledges legislative action to enforce stricter immigration laws.

Pragmatic Function: Reassures the public and Parliament of immediate implementation, aiming to convey decisiveness and urgency. This statement works to counter Starmer's criticism that Sunak's policies are ineffective or delayed.

Assertive (Starmer): "This government has introduced five immigration plans in a decade—five utter failures." (2:55).

Illocutionary Force: Declares the ineffectiveness of the government's past immigration policies.

Pragmatic Function: Positions Labour as a more competent alternative by discrediting the Conservative approach to immigration. This statement also appeals to public frustration over repeated policy failures.

Directive (Sunak): "We must secure our borders at all costs." (3:49).

Illocutionary Force: Commands strict measures for national security.

Pragmatic Function: Seeks to rally support for stringent immigration enforcement by invoking national security concerns. This directive is intended to appeal to voters who favour tougher immigration laws.

Expressive (Starmer): "I am deeply troubled by these inhumane policies." (6:12).

Illocutionary Force: Expresses moral concern over Sunak's immigration policies.

Pragmatic Function: Calls for empathy and policy change by framing Sunak's approach as lacking humanitarian considerations. This strategy appeals to an audience that values ethical immigration policies.

Directive (Sunak): "We will break the criminal gangs." (3:40).

Illocutionary Force: A firm commitment to dismantle human trafficking networks.

Pragmatic Function: This directive functions as a powerful declaration of action, reinforcing Sunak's position as a leader taking decisive steps to combat illegal immigration. By associating immigration issues with criminal activity, Sunak frames his policies as not just administrative measures but as essential security interventions. The use of "we will" conveys certainty and authority, eliminating any perception of indecisiveness. This speech act reassures conservative voters who favour strict immigration control and presents Sunak as a leader actively solving a crisis rather than merely managing it.

Assertive (Starmer): "Five utter failures." (2:55).

Illocutionary Force: Highlights the Conservative government's inability to manage immigration effectively.

Pragmatic Function: Starmer employs this assertive to discredit the Conservative government's track record. The use of "utter failures" intensifies the critique, making it more than just a factual observation – it is an emphatic dismissal of past efforts. The terseness of the statement adds rhetorical force, ensuring that it resonates with frustrated voters. By listing multiple failures rather than isolating a single issue, Starmer broadens the scope of his argument, strengthening the Labour Party's position as a more competent alternative.

Commissive (Sunak): "We will continue to enforce our border laws." (4:30).

Illocutionary Force: Promises continued immigration enforcement.

Pragmatic Function: This statement reassures voters of Sunak's commitment to strict immigration enforcement. The phrase "continue to" implies consistency and stability, appealing to an electorate that values strong borders. This speech act also counteracts any opposition claims that Sunak's policies are ineffective by positioning the enforcement of border laws as an ongoing, necessary measure rather than a reactive response to criticism.

Directive (Starmer): "The Prime Minister must answer for his failures." (5:50).

Illocutionary Force: Demands accountability from Sunak.

Pragmatic Function: This directive forces Sunak into a defensive position, compelling him to justify his immigration policies. The phrase "must answer" imposes an obligation, framing Sunak as someone who owes an explanation rather than someone leading with authority. This rhetorical strategy enhances Labour's position as a party willing to hold the government accountable, appealing to voters who feel disillusioned with the Conservative government.

Expressive (Sunak): "We are acting with fairness and compassion." (7:30).

Illocutionary Force: A defence of government policies against criticisms of harshness.

Pragmatic Function: This expressive speech act counters accusations that the Conservative immigration policy is excessively strict. The choice of words "fairness" and "compassion" softens the perception of rigid enforcement, making Sunak's stance appear balanced. This also signals an attempt to appeal to moderate voters who may support border control but have concerns about humanitarian considerations.

Assertive (Starmer): "You have no real plan." (6:50).

Illocutionary Force: Accuses Sunak of lacking a concrete immigration strategy.

Pragmatic Function: This statement weakens public confidence in Sunak's leadership by suggesting that his immigration strategy lacks substance. By asserting a lack of a "real plan," Starmer not only questions Sunak's policies but also his broader competency as a leader. The phrase is structured in an accusatory manner, ensuring that it carries rhetorical weight in political discourse.

Directive (Sunak): "We must act now to stop illegal crossings." (5:30).

Illocutionary Force: Calls for immediate action.

Pragmatic Function: Sunak uses this directive to justify stricter immigration measures. The phrase "must act now" creates a sense of urgency, positioning his policy as a necessary response to an immediate crisis. This rhetorical move discourages delay and opposition, framing dissent as irresponsible in the face of pressing security concerns.

Assertive (Starmer): "The government has failed at every turn." (7:15).

Illocutionary Force: A sweeping critique of the Conservative government's immigration record.

Pragmatic Function: This broad assertion reinforces the idea of continuous failure, making it difficult for Sunak to counter with isolated successes. By using "at every turn," Starmer extends his critique beyond a single issue, suggesting systematic incompetence rather than incidental missteps.

Commissive (Sunak): "We will never allow open borders." (6:00).

Illocutionary Force: Promises continued border security.

Pragmatic Function: This statement reassures conservative voters that Sunak remains committed to strong immigration policies. The phrase "never allow" eliminates any ambiguity, reinforcing the perception that Sunak's stance on immigration is non-negotiable.

Significance

First of all, language plays a very important role in our daily life. Without it, we cannot communicate or do many other things. Nowadays, language can be used for good or bad purposes, especially by political figures. This study focuses on how political leaders, especially from the UK, use Speech Acts and CDA in direct or indirect ways to achieve their goals and communicate with the public. All of these points help us understand and realize the huge role that digital communication tools play in today's political world.

Conclusion

Usually, political figures use different types of language or expressions to connect with their audience. In the speeches of Starmer and Sunak, we can see that they use different styles and expressions when talking about immigration. Sunak usually uses directives and promises, which I believe are meant to show his confidence and that he is in control of the situation, giving voters more trust in his leadership. On the other hand, Starmer uses statements and expressions to point out the government's mistakes and to question Sunak's performance. In general, this study shows that Speech Acts play a crucial role in politics, as they can influence people's opinions and help shape political ideas.

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