



Digital Political Branding: A Comparative Linguistic Analysis of Social Media Communication by the Indonesian and U.S. Presidents

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Abstract. This study explores how political leaders take advantage of language to shape evaluative meanings, assert power relations, and express ideological positions. The analysis focuses on two public statements released by Prabowo Subianto and Donald J. Trump about the same diplomatic event. Using a qualitative descriptive approach grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics, the study combines Martin and White's Appraisal Theory with Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Through this integration, the research provides both detailed linguistic observations and broader socio-political interpretations of how meaning is constructed in political discourse. Appraisal Theory is used to examine Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation resources across both texts, while CDA provides an interpretive framework for understanding how these linguistic choices reproduce power, identity, and ideology. The findings show clear differences in how the two leaders position themselves and shape meaning. Prabowo's statement leans toward moderate judgement and measured appreciation, uses monoglossic language to build consensus, and employs graduation in a controlled way. Together, these choices create a discourse of diplomatic politeness, mutual benefit, and balanced geopolitical positioning. In contrast, Trump's statement is marked by highly amplified appreciation, assertive monoglossia, and extreme graduation, producing a discourse centred on national superiority, economic triumph, and a strong sense of personal authority. The combined Appraisal - CDA approach demonstrates that the two leaders frame the same event through distinct political lenses: one emphasizing cooperation and stability, the other foregrounding achievement and dominance. The study concludes that bringing together linguistic and critical perspectives makes it possible to fully understand how political discourse influences public perception, legitimizes power relations, and shapes different forms of national identity.

Keywords: Appraisal Theory; Critical Discourse Analysis; Political Discourse

1 Introduction

Political elites increasingly use social media to spread their ideologies, making it essential to examine linguistic patterns in order to understand how language interacts with

social practices [55]. Social media also functions as a political marketing tool that enables direct communication and engagement with the public, allowing politicians to shape their messages more strategically [29]. In addition, political actors make use of visual communication on these platforms strengthen the impact of their messages [12, 37]. Beyond messaging, social media provides a space where political conversations unfold and individual psychological responses can mirror broader social dynamics, creating an environment where competing discourses can emerge and circulate [43]. It also offers users opportunities to express their political views and support various causes openly [32].

Despite the growing body of research on political communication in digital spaces, there remains a need for more systematic linguistic analyses that explain how specific language choices contribute to meaning-making, persuasion, and identity construction in online political discourse. As one of means for political marketing or communication, hashtags and visual content enhance the effectiveness of political branding by creating an engaging and memorable political image during election campaigns [51]. Persuasive language and rhetorical strategies in branding help strengthen a brand's appeal by tapping into audience emotions and beliefs [3, 16]. These strategies can frame political campaigns in ways that spark online debate, ultimately positioning brands as active political actors in the digital sphere [44]. In addition, an online persona functions as a linguistic and communicative construct that allows for the strategic shaping - and at times manipulation - of public perception [11]. [34] further demonstrates that users tend engage more deeply with political content on social media, showing how digital platforms have become key spaces for political consumerism and participation. Also, symbolic power inherent in language informs and sometimes distorts political realities [41]. Ultimately, shifts in digital discourse mirror the changing political landscape, showing how political rhetoric evolves connect with and engage today's digital audiences [42].

From a linguistic perspective, using different narratives that speak to specific social identities can strengthen engagement and increase recruitment potential in political settings [43]. In the Indonesian context, narratives on social media are deliberately shaped to build political identities and foster emotional ties with constituents [2]. These narratives not only help frame national identity but can also play both integrative and divisive roles within political branding [8]. Similarly, these narratives can shape party identity and predict voter segmentation [35] both as a means for identity construction [17]. Political conflicts often arise from competing identity narratives, highlighting how powerful narratives can be in shaping collective identity and political loyalty [27]. In this regard, [38] underscores the importance of delivering a coherent message and building an emotional connection with a political brand.

[31] note that political leaders are increasingly expected to share personal stories that reflect their values and backgrounds, helping voters perceive them as authentic. Such stories typically blend elements that are both heroic and relatable [49]. [33] explore narratives explore narratives play pivotal roles in shaping political brand identities. Political branding can be viewed as a multi-layered construct made up of the personality traits and attributes that a political leader communicates to the public. [31] argue that qualities such as warmth, reliability, and success are central building a strong political brand. From an appraisal perspective, voters form their perceptions of these

traits through cognitive assessments of a leader's actions and public image. For example, when a leader is seen as trustworthy, this perception can trigger positive emotional responses, ultimately strengthening their overall brand equity [24].

How branding efforts are expressed through political discourse can be clearly seen in the case of Donald Trump during his presidency in the United States. A key feature of Trump's communication style is his strategic use of social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, where he cultivates an image of openness and directness that differs markedly from conventional political rhetoric. By taking advantage of the immediacy and personal feel of these platforms, he constructs a distinctive political brand that resonates with a large portion of the electorate [36, 47]. In his discourse, Trump's use of transitivity in his speeches reflects his positioning as an active agent within his narratives. Trump's frequent use of active verbs helps portray himself as a decisive and hands-on leader, while casting his opponents as passive or negative forces [6, 13]. This linguistic strategy builds a narrative that highlights his energy and agency, reinforcing a sharp divide between "us" (his supporters) and "them" (his opponents). In many instances, this contrast is directed toward marginalized groups, including Muslims and Mexican immigrants [33, 40]. Such framing utilises language to craft an in-group mentality, reinforcing a populist ideology that resonates with many of his followers who feel disenfranchised by the political establishment [25].

Moreover, Trump's rhetoric makes use of multiple persuasive strategies including ethos, pathos, and logos to build credibility and evoke emotional reactions from his audience [45]. His communication style often relies on personal anecdotes, exaggeration, and rhetorical questions, which help capture public attention while shaping a persona that feels relatable his supporters [14, 56]. From a linguistic standpoint, these choices contribute to a direct and confrontational style that can be both compelling and polarizing, effectively appealing a wide audience while simultaneously alienating his critics [13]. This engagement style is indicative of a more fundamental strategic choice in his branding: to position himself as a political outsider who disrupts the conventional discourse, thus resonating with voters who favor authenticity over political correctness [9, 47]. The implications of this branding strategy are substantial. It not only shapes how the public perceives political actors but also influences the wider political landscape by using discourse. This challenges existing norms and paves the way for grass-roots support [4, 14].

After all, this research views political branding as a discursive and emotional process built through how languages are played in digital context. By combining views from political communication, branding studies, and linguistic appraisal theory, the research aims to portray how political actors construct identities, mobilise affect, and negotiate power through discourse. The analysis aims to reveal how evaluative language, narrative framing, and agency attribution function to reinforce ideological positioning and voter alignment in contemporary political communication.

2 Literature Review

Current research on digital political branding has increasingly highlighted the role of language, narrative, and emotional appeal in making political identities across different

national contexts. Within this body of research, comparative perspectives remain particularly valuable for understanding how political branding strategies are adapted to distinct cultural and political environments. A political figure who offers an interesting comparison to Trump is Prabowo, the current president of Indonesia. In several of his speeches, Prabowo's use of populist rhetoric—particularly the term “wong cilik”—serves as a clear branding strategy. Through this framing, he criticizes government corruption and policy failures, positioning himself as a defender of ordinary people's interests [46, 58]. By drawing on metaphorical expressions and emotionally charged language, he presents his leadership as a moral counterforce to economic exploitation and entrenched political elites. This approach strengthens his appeal among wider segments of the population who feel disillusioned with the existing political order [15, 52]. In the debate, by employing aggressive tones to foster trust and articulate strong positions, Prabowo not only creates a compelling narrative but also influences audience perceptions through language that is rich in emotional resonance and visual cues [30, 53, 54]. He has also shifted his branding from a stern, authoritative figure to a more approachable and relatable “gemoy” persona, reflecting changing voter preferences and the growing influence of digital communication [50, 59]. Prabowo makes strategic use of various rhetorical devices to shape his public image and guide how audiences perceive him. His inaugural speech, for example, demonstrates a deliberate use of language aimed at fostering national unity while simultaneously reinforcing his reputation as a strong and decisive leader [52]. He also blends emotional appeal (pathos) with credibility-building (ethos) through deliberate linguistic choices - such as repetition and rhetorical questions - that are crafted to intensify emotional responses and mobilize public support [28, 30].

Combined with existing analyses of Donald Trump's political discourse, these studies offer that while political branding strategies may differ in form, they often rely on similar linguistic resources to construct authority, authenticity, and emotional connection. Despite extensive research on political communication in digital spaces, the linguistic mechanisms through which political branding operates comparatively across national leaders remain underexplored. Although previous studies have explored digital political communication, emotional engagement, and narrative construction, they rarely compare how leaders from different political contexts use linguistic strategies shape their political brands during periods of geopolitical tension. This study addresses that gap by integrating narrative identity theory with Martin and White's Appraisal Theory to examine how Donald Trump and Prabowo Subianto construct their political personas, express evaluations, and frame national interests through language. By focusing on their responses to the tense negotiations surrounding the proposed 19% Trump tariff on Indonesia, this research explores how each leader uses narrative and evaluative discourse assert authority, manage public emotion, and strengthen their political branding. The purpose of this study is shown how linguistic choices on social media function as strategic tools for building political identity and shaping emotional positioning within high-stakes diplomatic communication.

3 Research Method

This research employs a qualitative descriptive research design rooted in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to check how evaluative meaning, power, and ideology are discursively constructed in two political statements. Appraisal Theory [39] operates as the micro-level analytical framework for identifying and mapping evaluative language, while Fairclough's CDA [19, 20, 21, 22] offers the macro-level interpretive framework for tracking these linguistic choices within more extensive socio-political and ideological contexts. The intersection of these frameworks enables the analysis to shift systematically from textual description to ideological interpretation.

The data are two posted political statements referring to the same diplomatic moment: one released by Prabowo Subianto via social media while the other one attached to Donald J. Trump highlighting the outcomes of their bilateral negotiation. These captured texts were chosen purposively because they show contrasting political expression responding to a shared geopolitical condition, making them matched for comparative discourse analysis. The English translated statements were taken as the primary data to comply with analytical consistency. The Indonesian version of Prabowo's statement was analyzed selectively for semantic clarification when ambiguity arose.

Both statements were manually converted into a research document. All non-linguistic parts were deleted to avoid analytical issues. Linguistically relevant elements—such as punctuation, capitalization, and emphatic markers—were retained, taking a part as evaluative and intensifying resources within Appraisal Theory.

Stage 1: Text Segmentation and Unit Identification

Each statement, prior to coding, was classified into clauses and clause complexes, complying with the SFL principle that the clause constitutes the main unit of meaning. Each clause was assigned a unique code to ensure traceability and consistency throughout the analysis. This coding supported a stable analytical unit for systematic text comparison.

Stage 2: Development of the Analytical Matrix

An analytical coding matrix was then built to operationalize the integration of Appraisal Theory and CDA. For each clause, the matrix covered:

- the clause text,
- the type of Attitude (affect, judgement, appreciation) and its polarity,
- the Engagement category (monoglossic or heteroglossic),
- graduation resources (force and/or focus), and
- interpretive notes linking linguistic choices to CDA concerns (e.g., power relations, identity construction, ideological positioning).

This matrix functioned as both a coding instrument and an audit trail, making each analytical decision explicit and reproducible.

Stage 3: Appraisal Analysis

The analysis proceeded with repetitive close readings of both texts to grab a comprehensive understanding of tone, thematic emphasis, and communicative purpose. Each clause was then checked using Appraisal Theory.

First, attitude analysis was used to decide whether evaluation was realized as affect, judgement, or appreciation, and whether it was framed positively or negatively. Meantime, engagement analysis tested how speakers positioned their voices in relation to other possible viewpoints, distinguishing between monoglossic assertions and heteroglossic expansions. Lastly, graduation analysis focused on the lexical and grammatical resources used to amplify or delimit meaning, including intensifiers, quantifiers, superlatives, capitalization, and other emphasis markers.

Stage 4: CDA Interpretation

After completing clause-level Appraisal coding, CDA interpretation was applied. Mapping on Fairclough's three-dimensional model, each statement was checked as (1) a textual product, (2) a discursive practice, and (3) a social practice. At this level, the analysis looked for patterns of evaluative language implemented to build power relations, establish national identities, and highlight particular ideological positions.

For instance, intensified appreciation in Trump's statement were understood not only as Graduation features but also as ideological strategies to legitimate national authority and geopolitical dominance. Conversely, Prabowo's more restrained use of judgement and appreciation was seen as a reflection of a discourse in diplomatic balance, strategic moderation, and geopolitical politeness.

Stage 5: Comparative Synthesis

Data gained from appraisal coding resulted in CDA interpretation, while emerging CDA insights prompted re-examination and refinement of evaluative categorization. Once both texts had been fully checked and compared, patterns were synthesized comparatively to identify similarities and contrasts in how attitude, engagement, and graduation correlated and have interplay with discursive power and ideological positioning.

To make it more systematic, all coding decisions were written structurally, and each sample of evaluative language was cross-checked against the definitions offered by [39] and [19, 20, 21, 22]. Reflexivity was maintained by explicitly grounding interpretations in textual evidence and acknowledging the researcher's interpretive role. Although qualitative discourse analysis does not aim for statistical generalizability, the transparency, systematic staging, and theoretical triangulation employed in this study strengthen its analytical reliability and theoretical robustness.

Through this integrated methodology, the study not only traces the evaluative patterns in each political text but also reveals how these linguistic choices feed into broader

ideological narratives and international power dynamics. The combination of Appraisal Theory and CDA provides a strong methodological foundation, enabling the analysis to move beyond surface-level linguistic description and toward a deeper understanding of how political meaning is constructed.

The data compared are both published in media. The following statement was produced by Prabowo and was released in his Instagram account @prabowo dated 19th July 2025.

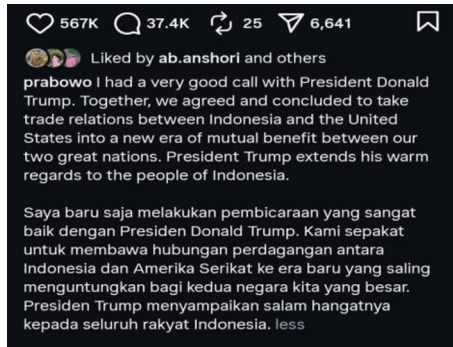


Fig. 2 : Prabowo’s statement following his negotiation with Trump

While Trump also provided response following the same negotiation as what he stated in X account @realDonaldTrump which are as follows:



Fig. 2 : Trump Statement following his negotiation with Prabowo

Both were taken as research data to be compared and analyzed.

4 Discussion

4.1 Attitude and Ideological Positioning

Within Appraisal Theory, attitude refers to how speakers express affection, judgement, and appreciation serve as an interpersonal meaning. In Prabowo's statement, these attitudinal choices appear measured and diplomatically positive, reflecting a tone of moderation and mutual respect. His use of judgement is evident in expressions such as a very good call, which evaluates the interaction as productive and respectful. The phrase President Trump extends his warm regards presents Trump as courteous and well-intentioned, reinforcing a narrative of amicable diplomacy. Prabowo further employs appreciation through phrases like a new era of mutual benefit and two great nations. These expressions frame the relationship and its future prospects in a positive light, helping construct an image of a balanced partnership and shared geopolitical significance. Phrases like *saling menguntungkan* in the Indonesian version further reinforce this diplomatic tone, emphasizing equality and mutual respect.

From a CDA perspective, Prabowo's attitudinal choices reflect having an ideology centred on harmony, equality, and diplomatic politeness. By highlighting cooperation rather than asserting dominance, he positions Indonesia as an equal partner on the global stage and distances himself from narratives of dependency. His careful lexical choices - avoiding having superlatives, exaggeration, or overtly emotional expressions - further reinforce Indonesia's diplomatic identity as measured, balanced, and aligned with established international norms. This discursive positioning aligns with Fairclough's view that linguistic choices help reproduce social identities and ideological commitments [18, 26]. Prabowo's use of moderate Attitude resources therefore reinforces an ideo-logical stance rooted in equality, partnership, and global respectability.

In contrast, Trump's statement exhibits an intensified attitudinal stance. Judgement is amplified through the description of Prabowo as a highly respected president, enhancing both Prabowo's legitimacy and Trump's credibility as a leader engaging with esteemed counterparts. Appreciation resources appear in statements such as landmark deal, important deal, complete and total access, and the entire market. These expressions elevate the status of the agreement to the level of historical achievement. Further attitudinal intensification appears in statements like our ranchers, farmers, and fishermen will have complete and total access, which portrays the agreement as a monumental victory for the American people. Although explicit expressions of affect are limited, an emotional tone still emerges through his enthusiastic framing, his self-ascribed achievements, and his broad, sweeping claims of success.

Viewed through a CDA lens, Trump's Attitude choices construct a discourse of American exceptionalism, triumphalism, and economic dominance. By repeatedly highlighting "historic" achievements and national gains, he reinforces a power hierarchy that places the United States in a position of superiority. His language aligns with Fairclough's idea of ideology as naturalized power [10, 23] where the United States is presented as the decisive economic benefactor, while Indonesia is implicitly positioned as the recipient of American initiative. In this way, Trump's attitudinal pattern works

ideologically to legitimize U.S. superiority and strengthen his political persona as a successful, victory-driven negotiator.

4.2 Engagement (Appraisal) and Discursive Power

Engagement refers to how speakers acknowledge - or choose not to acknowledge - alternative voices. While both texts are strongly monoglossic, they differ in tone and ideological effect. Prabowo's monoglossia appears in expressions such as *We agreed and concluded*, which frame diplomatic consensus as clear and uncontested. His statement contains no modal verbs, evidentials, or markers that signal other possible viewpoints, giving his message an authoritative but non-confrontational quality. This linguistic closure helps construct an impression of diplomatic certainty and institutional stability.

From a CDA perspective, Prabowo's monoglossic stance establishes discursive control through stability rather than dominance. By closing off alternative interpretations, he crafts a public narrative of smooth and predictable diplomacy - an important element for sustaining domestic trust and international credibility. His engagement choices signal an ideology centered on unity and consensus-building, aligning with Fairclough's view that discourse plays a key role in shaping institutional authority [5].

Trump's engagement pattern is similarly monoglossic but significantly more forceful. Statements such as *This morning I finalized an important deal and for the first time ever assert personal agency and exclusivity of action*. His monoglossic style leaves no room for shared credit or alternative interpretations. By avoiding hedging and modal qualifiers, Trump positions himself as the sole architect of the agreement, while Indonesia is implicitly cast in a passive, secondary role.

Through a CDA lens, Trump's monoglossic stance reflects having a hierarchical and unilateral power dynamic. His engagement choices place himself at the centre as the decisive actor, minimize Indonesia's presence in the narrative, and reinforce the primacy of American interests. This aligns with Fairclough's argument that discourse can enact and legitimize unequal power relations [18]. In this context, Trump's engagement patterns reproduce an ideology of unilateral dominance and personal authority.

4.3 Graduation (Appraisal) and Rhetorical Intensification

Graduation examines how speakers amplify or sharpen meaning through force and focus. In Prabowo's statement, the use of graduation is restrained and carefully managed. Mild intensifiers such as *very in very good call* and symbolic sharpeners like *new era* elevate the importance of interaction without exaggeration. The Indonesian phrasing mirrors this moderation, avoiding hyperbole or emotionally charged language. Such controlled intensification aligns with diplomatic communication norms, where restraint signals professionalism, respect, and cultural politeness.

CDA interprets Prabowo's restrained use of graduation as part of a broader discourse of measured diplomacy - one that avoids sensationalism and foregrounds stability. This low level of intensification works ideologically to present Indonesia as rational, respectful, and aligned with international norms of diplomatic communication. In this way, the discourse enacts a national identity that portrays Indonesia as a mature and

equal participant in global diplomacy, consistent with Fairclough's view that discourse helps shape and project social identities.

Trump's graduation, however, is highly amplified. Examples include ENTIRE MARKET, complete and total access, for the first time in history, \$15 billion, 19% tariff, and We will keep DELIVERING. These resources amplify meaning dramatically, combining superlatives, quantifiers, and strategic capitalization to heighten rhetorical impact. This intense use of graduation frames the event as unprecedented, unprecedented, monumental, and overwhelmingly advantageous for the United States.

From a CDA perspective, Trump's intensification strategies create a discourse of hyperbolic self-legitimation and populist performance. His exaggerated scaling of accomplishments reinforces nationalist ideology and positions him as an exceptionally effective leader. This aligns with Fairclough's view that discursive exaggeration can serve ideological functions - mobilizing support, normalizing dominance, and producing simplified yet emotionally resonant narratives [1].

Beyond the clause-level analysis, CDA helps the broader ideological meanings embedded in each text. Prabowo constructs Indonesia's geopolitical identity through themes of equality, partnership, and diplomatic respect. His discourse legitimizes Indonesia's legitimises Indonesia's international standing by stressing mutual benefit and balanced cooperation. Trump, on the other hand, frames U.S. identity around identity around ideas of superiority, economic victory, and personal authority. His discourse promotes a worldview in which global relations are centred on American initiative and success. Together, these macro-themes show how linguistic choices actively reproduce power relations and ideological assumptions within the international arena.

Combining Appraisal Theory with CDA creates a more comprehensive analytical perspective. Appraisal Theory offers detailed tools for examining how evaluations, attitudes, and intensifications function within the text. CDA then places these places these linguistic patterns within broader social contexts, revealing how power, ideology, and identity both shape and are shaped by discourse. Appraisal helps clarify how the texts build interpersonal meaning, while CDA explains why those meanings carry political and ideological significance. Together, the two frameworks provide a strong account of how micro-level linguistic choices connect to macro-level socio-political effects.

The table below summarizes the integrated Appraisal-CDA findings.

Table 1. Comparison between Prabowo and Trump's statements interpretation

No	Feature	Prabowo Subianto	Donald Trump
1	Tone	Diplomatic, restrained	Boastful, assertive, promotional
2	Attitude	Moderate judgement and appreciation, aligned with equality ideology	Intensified judgement and appreciation, aligned with nationalist ideology
3	Engagement	Monoglossia promoting unity and consensus	Monoglossia promoting unilateral authority

4	Graduation	Low-to-moderate scaling, reinforcing measured diplomacy	Extreme scaling, reinforcing dominance and self-legitimation
5	CDA Ideology	Partnership, mutual respect, geopolitical balance	Superiority, triumphalism, American centrality
6	Identity Construction	Collective, cooperative, respectful	Dominant, victorious, leader-centred
7	Overall Purpose	To promote stability and bilateral harmony	To promote national achievement and personal credit

Overall, the integrated analysis shows that although both leaders respond to the same diplomatic event, they construct strikingly different political narratives. Prabowo's discourse emphasizes harmony, equality, and international dignity, whereas Trump's discourse highlights triumph, authority, and national superiority. Appraisal Theory helps reveal the linguistic mechanisms that shape these orientations, while CDA uncovers the ideological structures they reinforce.

5 Conclusion

This study shows that integrating Appraisal Theory with Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis offers a comprehensive way to understand how political figures construct evaluative meaning, negotiate authority, and reproduce ideology through language. The micro-level Appraisal analysis highlights clear contrasts in Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation between Prabowo Subianto's diplomatic moderation and Donald Trump's heightened assertiveness. Prabowo's restrained lexical choices and focus on mutual benefit build a discourse of partnership and geopolitical balance, while Trump's intensified claims and monoglossic certainty create a narrative centered on national triumph and personal achievement.

The macro-level CDA interpretation shows that these linguistic choices are not merely stylistic but carry broader ideological functions. Prabowo's discourse reflects values of cooperation, respect, and diplomatic politeness, reinforcing Indonesia's identity as a responsible actor on the global stage. In contrast, Trump's discourse embodies a nationalist and triumphalist ideology, positioning the United States as superior and central within global economic relations. Taken together, the dual frameworks illustrate how the same diplomatic event can be framed through very different political lenses, highlighting the power of language that shapes public perception and constructs political realities.

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