

A Case Study of Commitment Strategies in U.S. Presidential Debates from the Perspective of Pragmatic Identity

Bingjie Xu

*School of Foreign Studies, Nanjing University of Science and Technology, Nanjing, China
icey48143910@163.com*

Keywords: Pragmatic identity, U.S. Presidential debate, Commitment strategies

Abstract: Grounded in social constructivism, the research treats identity as a contextual and communicative transactional resource rather than a static trait. Using Harris’s discourse from the September 10, 2024 Trump–Harris TV debate as the corpus, the study focuses on her responses to questions and her closing remarks on key topics such as the economy, immigration, and abortion. The findings show that Harris mainly alternates between two types of pragmatic identity: a default identity appropriate to the presidential debate context and a deviational identity tailored to specific communicative purposes. By selectively highlighting these identities, Harris strengthens persuasion and credibility, thereby making her policy and value claims more committed and convincing.

1. Introduction

As social constructivism rises, identity research have gradually shifted from static analysis of language and identity to the dynamic construction of language and identity. Under this circumstances, pragmatic identity^[4] who takes identity as a social construct has emerged, paying attention to the contextualized and communicative nature of identity. In other words, its core elements lie in its communicative dependence and dynamic selectivity. Aiming to maximize communication effectiveness, communicators often select a suitable pragmatic identity within a specific communicative context.

Meanwhile, as Widdicombe^[1] notes, identity is often used as a “transactional resource” by communicators. By construction, highlight, consultation, challenge and even deconstruction of specific identity^[6], communicators can support business activities, assign responsibilities, assign blame or defense, and invoke other identities. It can be classified into “default identity” and “deviational identity”^[5], and the latter can be further subdivided into “group identity” and “personal identity”. This classification providing an analytical framework for understanding the identity construction in complex communicative context.

Based on pragmatic identity theory, this study takes the discourse delivered by Kamala Harris in the 2024 US presidential TV debate as the corpus, focusing on the construction of pragmatic identity and the commitment strategies. Specifically, this study takes the discourse of Harris in the debate as the analysis object, and reveals its commitment strategy of responding questions through

the dynamic construction of pragmatic identity. Through analyzing the alternative use of default identity and deviation identity to study the commitment mechanism in specific discourse.

2. Literature review

Existing research on pragmatic identity theory mainly involve two aspects: theory construction and theory application. The former camp emphasizes on theory construction. Chen adopts the perspective of social constructivism, and combines the existing identity research to explore and conclude a new framework of “pragmatic identity theory”.^[4] Cui & Wang have explored the dialectical relationship between “diachronic pragmatic identity” and “temporal pragmatic identity” from the perspective of time.^[7]

The latter camp focuses on theory application in specific communication contexts, especially in medical discourse, educational discourse, argumentative discourse, political discourse and so on. Firstly, in terms of medical discourse, Yuan and Chen^[11] discussed how medical consultants can adjust their pragmatic identities according to the communicative needs of different consultation stages to achieve communicative purposes. Secondly, from the perspective of educational discourse, Xu and Li^[10] analyzed the authentic conflict conversation between the university and the students families to explore how pragmatic identities are constructed to manage conflict conversations. Moreover, studies on pragmatic identity have also been directed to argumentative discourse. Han and Liao^[8] took argumentative discourse as the research object to explore the positive influence of the construction of pragmatic identity on the debate process. It shows that communicators can control the process of debate by dynamically adjusting their identity. Move on to political discourse, Wang^[9] delves into the pragmatic identities that are established by the spokespeople of China’s Taiwan Affairs Office. It concludes that the choices made, the construction of identity, and the positioning of the speaker are interconnected.

While previous research has provided valuable results, there remain several areas that need further clarification. Primarily, most of existing studies focus on the analysis of types and discourse practices involved in pragmatic identity construction, with limited attention given to the dimensions of effect and the specific strategies employed in identity construction. Moreover, there has been a limited attention on commitment through pragmatic identity construction. Consequently, this study will focus on effect dimensions as well as the behavior of commitment through pragmatic identity construction.

3. Research design

3.1. Research questions

This study focuses on the communicative needs as well as effect dimensions of identity construction, combining commitment with pragmatic identity construction through the analysis of Harris’s debate. Specially, it aims to answer the following two questions:

- (1) What pragmatic identities did Harris construct for himself in the debate? And in what way?
- (2) How did Harris achieve commitment by way of pragmatic identity construction?

3.2. Data collection

The data for the present study is gathered from debates between the former president Donald Trump and the current vice president Kamala Harris on September 10, 2024. The whole debate spanned 90 minutes. In the debate, Trump and Harris engaged in extensive discussions on a range of topics, including the economy, immigration, abortion, war, peaceful transfer of power, racial

issues, healthcare reform, climate change and so on. The moderator asking questions, after which Trump and Harris responded separately.

This study primarily transcribed the topics where Harris addressed the economy, immigration, and abortion, as well as her closing statement. Specially, the selected statements mainly deal with the three issues mentioned above: 1) Is the U.S. economy better now than it was four years ago when Trump was in presidency? 2) Should the right to abortion be determined by states or the federal government? 3) Should immigration policy be more diverse?

4. Data analysis and preliminary findings

As a proficient communicator, their pragmatic identity serves as a tool for selecting appropriate expressions and maintaining a desired stance aiming to persuade others. Therefore, it is necessary to construct a pragmatic identity that is suitable within the current communicative context. In the debate, Harris mainly constructs two types of pragmatic identities: 1) default identity suitable to the context of presidential debate. 2) deviational identity driven by specific communicative purposes. In other words, the “default identity” of Harris refers to the presidential candidate participating in the debate, and the corresponding non-default identity is the “deviational identity”, which refers to the strategic identity temporarily constructed during the debate for communicative purposes such as commitment.

The default identity constructed by Harris can not only be elaborated through the overall context of the debate, but also the linguistic features. For example, Harris directly pointed to the core of the meeting “have a debate” after self-introduction. Meanwhile, Harris directly referred to Trump as “my opponent”.

[Example 1]

Harris: Kamala Harris. Let’s have a good debate.

Trump: Nice to see you. Have fun.

[Example 2]

Harris: My opponent, on the other hand, his plan is to do what he has done before, which is to provide a tax cut for billionaires and big corporations, which will result in \$5 trillion to America’s deficit. My opponent has a plan that I call the Trump sales tax, which would be a 20% tax on everyday goods that you rely on to get through the month.

In example (1), Harris first greets and introduces herself “Kamala Harris”, and then directly points out the ultimate purpose of the meeting, “have a good debate” and conveys her friendly attitude. In example (2), except for the address form “my opponent” which indicates the identity of the other party, Harris also uses “on the other hand” and “what he has done before” to strengthen the contrast. Moreover, the tension between the two parties has become evident through the establishment of their opposing identity relationships.

[Example 3]

Harris: So I think you’ve heard tonight two very different visions for our country. One that is focused on the future and the other that is focused on the past. And an attempt to take us backward. But we’re not going back. And I do believe that the American people know we all have so much more in common than what separates us and we can chart a new way forward. And a vision of that includes having a plan, understanding the aspirations, the dreams, the hopes, the ambition of the American people, which is why I intend to create an opportunity economy, investing in small businesses, in new families, in what we can do around protecting seniors, what we can do that is about giving hard-working folks a break in bringing down the cost of living. I believe in what we can do together that is about sustaining America's standing in the world and ensuring we have the respect that we so rightly deserve including respecting our military and ensuring we have the most

lethal fighting force in the world. I will be a president that will protect our fundamental rights and freedoms including the right of a woman to make decisions about her own body and not have her government tell her what to do.

Example 3 is an excerpt from Harris's closing statements. Harris's communication purpose is to persuade voters and thus win in the general election. Through this debate, Harris pledged to "chart a new way forward" for the American people, create an "opportunity economy" and protect fundamental powers and freedoms. "I do believe that" "what we can do" "I will be" and so on expressions are perfectly consistent with her default identity and emphasizes her responsibility as a potential future "president". The speech form and formal style all imply the form and seriousness of speech, helping Harris to construct her default identity.

Pragmatic identity is not a static one, but emerges from the communicator's choice of identities within a communicative context. Given that Harris conducts public debate on behalf of Democratic candidates, her "deviational identity" can be subdivided into individual and group identity. Individual identity has unique characteristics different from other individuals, including gender, occupation, race, age and other attributes^[3]; group identity refers to the common attributes of a specific social group. ^[2]

In terms of personal identity, Harris mainly adopted the identity of female, middle class, prosecutor and vice president.

[Example 4]

Harris: So, I was raised as a middle-class kid. And I am actually the only person on this stage who has a plan that is about lifting up the middle class and working people of America. I believe in the ambition, the aspirations, the dreams of the American people. And that is why I imagine and have actually a plan to build what I call an opportunity economy. I was actually -- my mother raised my sister and me but there was a woman who helped raise us. We call her our second mother. She was a small business owner. I love our small businesses.

Example 4 is the beginning of Harris's speech, directly indicating her middle-class identity, "I was raised as a middle-class kid". Not only did she emphasize her middle-class background, but she also specifically mentioned her "second mother" as a small business plus to prove that she is a supporter of the small business and middle class. Through a brief introduction of her family background and raising experience, Harris consolidated her personal identity as a middle class, showing that she had reason to serve the middle class. Thus, her commitment to the "creating an opportunity economy" was further strengthened. Once again, she strengthened her position by criticizing Trump's tax policies, stressing that Trump's policies serve the rich and let "middle-class people paying for tax cuts for billionaires".

[Example 5]

Harris: And one does not have to abandon their faith or deeply held beliefs to agree the government, and Donald Trump certainly, should not be telling a woman what to do with her body.

Example 5 is the Harris's discussion on abortion issues. She noted that Trump's repeal of "the Roe V. Wade" case weakened the rights of abortion and was a violation of women's "physical rights". Instead of directly indicating her female identity, she indirectly implied her female identity by emphasizing "the government, and Donald Trump certainly, should not be telling a woman what to do with her body" and indicating the male identity of Trump. Through this gender contrast, it provides her with an appropriate position to express her sympathy. Thus, gaining more empathy by being a woman, while the commitment to "protecting the fundamental power of women" is further strengthened.

[Example 6]

Harris: I'll tell you, I started my career as a prosecutor. I was a D.A. I was an attorney general. A United States senator. And now vice president. I've only had one client. The people. And I'll tell

you, as a prosecutor I never asked a victim or a witness are you a Republican or a Democrat. The only thing I ever asked them, are you okay?

[Example 7]

Harris: My work that is related to having a friend when I was in high school who was sexually assaulted by her stepfather. And my focus then, on protecting women and children from violent crime, is based on a value that is deeply grounded in the importance of standing up for those who are most vulnerable. My work that is about protecting social security and Medicare is based on long-standing work that I have done. Protecting seniors from scams.

[Example 8]

Harris: And thankfully, as I've been vice president and we over the last four years have strengthened the Affordable Care Act, we have allowed for the first time Medicare to negotiate drug prices on behalf of you the American people.

In addition to being a female and a middle-class children, Harris also chose her personal identity as a prosecutor, state attorney general, senator, and vice president to demonstrate her power and commitment. Example 5 is excerpted from closing statements, Harris explicitly claimed her profession of prosecutor and state attorney general, and example 6 is Harris as a response to the question of her values. In response to "My work that is about protecting social security and Medicare." Harris again mentioned her original intention in politics, "I've only had one client. The people", implying that she was a "public servant" and a "police" of justice, thus to protect women and the weak and enhance the persuasion of her commitment. Her "police" experience also contrasts in contrast to Trump's conviction in a hush money case that illegally influenced the 2016 election. In example 7, Harris mentioned that she, as vice president, a strong advocate of the Affordable Care Act, and therefore has important discourse power. Through this speech, Harris built her identity as a "servant of the people", a justice "police" and a strong leader to enhance her commitment to "protect fundamental power and freedoms" and "serve all Americans".

As representatives, the individual identity selected by Harris contributes to a positive group identity. In the debate, the group identities constructed by Harris are: 1) a universal government; and 2) a democratic government.

[Example 9]

Harris: I intend to be a president for all Americans and focus on what we can do over the next 10 and 20 years to build back up our country by investing right now in you the American people.

[Example 10]

Harris: And when I am president we will do that for all people understanding that the value I bring to this is that access to health care should be a right and not just a privilege of those who can afford it. And the plan has to be to strengthen the Affordable Care Act, not get rid of it, in terms of where Donald Trump stands on that.

On behalf of her camps, the first group identity built by the Harris is a government "for All Americans". A reasonable example is example 9. In the closing speech, Harris cleverly constructed the group identity through the address form "we", emphasizing "for all Americans", "investing right now in you" and "the American people", Harris shows the determination of Harris government to become a government "for All Americans". In example 10, Harris strengthens this group identity in an attempt to gain trust through commitment manipulation. In response to issues on the Medical Act, she used the "privilege" and "right" contrast to emphasize that everyone has equal authority. By praising past efforts of "we", above discourse has effectively demonstrated the government's commitment to "serve all Americans".

[Example 11]

Harris: So for everyone watching who remembers what January 6th was, I say we don't have to go back. Let's not go back. We're not going back. It's time to turn the page. And if that was a

bridge too far for you, well, there is a place in our campaign for you. To stand for country. To stand for our democracy. To stand for rule of law. And to end the chaos. And to end the approach that is about attacking the foundations of our democracy because you don't like the outcome.

The second group identity Harris constructed is a democratic government. The US Constitution states that the power of government comes from the people and ultimately belongs to the people. Therefore, democracy is the heart of American politics. In response to the issue about peaceful transfer of power, she highlighted her camp's advocacy of democracy and the rule of law. To further strengthen the contrast, Harris describes Trump as criminals and people who attack the foundations of democracy. In this way, Harris effectively accused the Trump, while also emphasizing the positive social contributions of their camp.

5. Conclusion

This study endeavors to explore how Harris dynamically selects and constructs her pragmatic identities to achieve specific communicative goals during presidential debates, especially the process and effects of commitment. It is found that pragmatic identity is both an important strategic tool and a "transactional resource" for realizing communicative needs.

In the presidential debates, Harris constructed two main types of pragmatic identities: Firstly, a default identity suitable to the presidential debates, that is, an identity as a presidential candidate. Secondly, a deviational identity driven by a specific communicative purpose. The dynamic construction of these identities is not only reflected in content and formal style, but also through linguistic features. For example, by directly addressing Trump "my opponent" and highlighting her oppositional position, Harris reinforces her default identity as a presidential candidate, while using "have a good debate" to convey her attitude as "friendly but firm".

In addition, Harris reinforces her position by selectively highlighting individual identities, that is, female, middle-class background, occupation and so on. For example, by emphasising her professional experience of prosecutor, she successfully portrays herself as a "servant" of the people and a "police" of justice. Moreover, by indirectly implying her female identity and middle-class background, she gain an appropriate position to express her sympathy and strengthen her commitment. At the same time, Harris also has constructed a positive group identity centred on democracy, diversity and inclusiveness, demonstrating the broader social significance of the governmental ideas and policies she represents. For example, by using slogan "To stand for country. To stand for our democracy. To stand for rule of law" and addressing issues like equal rights, she establish the potive image of her camp and demonstrate commitment to serving all citizens.

In summary, Harris's commitment strategy is closely related to her construction of pragmatic identity. As a "transactional resource" resource, pragmatic identity can be flexibly selected in different communicative contexts to meet the needs of communication. This finding provides a new perspective for understanding discourse practices in political discourse interactions and reveals the relationship between pragmatic identity construction and communicative effects.

References

- [1] Antaki, C. & Widdicombe, S. (1998). *Identities in talk*. London: Sage Publications.
- [2] Bucholtz, M. & Hall, K. (2005). *Identity and Interaction: A Sociocultural Linguistic Approach*, *Discourse Studies*, 7, 585-614.
- [3] Simon, B. (2004). *Identity in Modern Society: A Social Psychological Perspective*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- [4] Chen, X. R. (2013). *Pragmatic identity: Dynamic selection and discourse construction*. *Foreign Language Research* (4): 27-32, 112.
- [5] Chen, X. R. (2018). *Pragmatic Identity Theory: Doing Things with Identity Discourse*. Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press.

- [6] Chen, X. R. (2020). *Identity work and politeness evaluation*. *Journal of PLA University of Foreign Languages*, 43(2): 1–10, 159.
- [7] Cui, Z. L., & Wang, H. L. (2019). *The two dimensions of pragmatic identity*. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching* (4): 28–36.
- [8] Han, G. L., & L, G. H. (2020). *Research on debate discourse under a pragmatic identity framework*. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research* (6): 55–65, 148–149.
- [9] Wang, B. (2014). *Discourse–identity–stance: A discourse analysis of the spokespersons of the Taiwan Affairs Office regarding related-to-Taiwan discourse*. *Journal of Zhejiang International Studies University* (3): 23–29.
- [10] Xu, X. P., & L, Y. (2022). *Discourse construction and negotiation of pragmatic identity in conflict discourse management*. *Modern Foreign Languages* (5): 585–596.
- [11] Yuan, Z. M., & Chen, X. R. (2013). *A study on pragmatic identity construction from the perspective of communicative/linguistic adaptation theory: A case study of medical consultation conversations*. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research* (4): 518–530, 640.