A Critical Pragmatic Study of Ageism in American Political Context

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ABSTRACT: Ageism has increasingly emerged in contemporary American political discourse as a focal point of critique, particularly in the context of prominent political figures such as President Joe Biden. Ageism, or age-based discrimination, reflects societal attitudes and biases against individuals based on their age, often manifesting in subtle and overt forms within various social and political settings. The critical pragmatic approach provides a valuable lens through which these manifestations of ageism can be examined, particularly in how language and discourse shape and reflect underlying ideologies.

Critical pragmatics, as a field of study, emphasizes the examination of language use within its social context, focusing on how language practices reveal and perpetuate power dynamics and social inequalities (Verschueren, 1999: 870). This approach scrutinizes how linguistic strategies—such as impoliteness, speech acts, and reference—function to convey and reinforce ideological positions and fixed stereotypes. In the political arena, where language is a tool for asserting authority and shaping public perception, understanding these dynamics is crucial for unpacking how ageism operates in political discourse.

KEYWORDS: Ageism, Critical Pragmatics. Political Discourse, Pragmatics, American Political Context

1. INTRODUCTION

The study aims to explore how ageism is articulated and perpetuated through political discourse, specifically targeting the language used about President Joe Biden. Political language often reflects and reinforces broader societal biases, and in the case of ageism, this can manifest in various pragmatic strategies that influence public perception and policy (Tukhina, 2011; Korta & Perry, 2011). A politician will take advantage of any stereotypical attributes of his/her rival to convince the public that he/she is a better candidate, ageism, is a somehow fixed stereotype that is related to weakness and cognitive abilities' decline, this is why it is plausible to assume that this particular attribute will be utilized by a political rival. The use of such stereotypical attribute can be manifested in various types and aspects, particularly, it can be used by utilizing particular forms of linguistic expressions to show these weaknesses. This study is interested in detecting and analyzing the particular linguistic forms that are used to refer and draw the attention of the American public to the old age of the American president Joe Biden. Moreover, the particular linguistic forms that are used in such context for the above mentioned purpose will be classified into the different categories of speech acts and politeness theory and other related notions that will be discussed in the following sections.

Despite growing awareness of ageism, there is a notable gap in the critical examination of how this form of discrimination is embedded within political communication. Ageist rhetoric can subtly undermine the authority and credibility of older political figures, affecting their public image and policy influence. According to Culpeper (2011: 31), impoliteness, including direct and indirect forms, can breach social norms and project ideologies that marginalize individuals based on age. This study investigates how specific pragmatic strategies—such as impoliteness, speech acts, and reference—are employed to articulate and reinforce ageist attitudes towards President Biden, and how these strategies contribute to broader patterns of ageism in political discourse.

The problem addressed by this study is twofold: first, it seeks to uncover the pragmatic mechanisms through which ageist discourse operates in political settings; second, it aims to assess the impact of these mechanisms on the representation of older political figures. By examining how ageist attitudes are embedded in linguistic practices, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how political language not only reflects but also perpetuates age-based biases.

2. AGEISM AND IDEOLOGY: AN EXPANDED PERSPECTIVE

While some authors may resist having their work categorized within a specific framework, we contend that the polysemic nature of Butler's term "ageism" has contributed to what can be described as an "ideology effect." This ideological framing has led to complexities in interpreting ageism, and we argue that the broad application of the term has, in some ways, hindered a critical and nuanced understanding of the intricacies of later life in contemporary society. Ageism, in its more rigid form, often obscures the multiple factors at play in the experiences of older individuals. In other words, ageism refers to the tendency of relating each and every flaw in a person's personality or performance only to the age of the person without taking into account any other factors that may have had an effect in any negative performance of the particular person, additionally, ageism means taking a negative idea about any person of a particular age without having any previous experience.

Robert Butler, widely recognized for coining the term "ageism," was deeply engaged in discussions of the concept until his passing in 2010 (Achenbaum, 2013). In his foundational 1969 paper, Butler outlined the various forms of discrimination that older Americans faced in the post-World War II era. This included issues related to housing, wealth disparity, and the imposition of mandatory retirement, all of which manifestations of institutionalized ageism were. Butler also identified the insufficient funding for research into the health issues faced by the elderly as symptomatic of a broader societal neglect. Crucially, he highlighted how older individuals were culturally constructed as "other," a process that further marginalized them from mainstream society (Butler, 1969).

In a 2009 editorial, Butler reiterated his stance, asserting that "age discrimination exists both advertently and inadvertently in personal and institutional forms, with economic and psychological factors playing significant roles in perpetuating ageism" (Butler, 2009: 211). Bytheway (2005) adds another layer to this understanding by arguing that there are two "not wholly compatible" frameworks for defining ageism. The first relates to the beliefs held by individuals across all age groups about the negative effects of biological ageing, a fear that accumulates throughout the life course. The second approach, championed by Butler, defines ageism as discrimination against older adults solely based on age, paralleling the ways sexism oppresses women and racism disadvantages racial minorities (Bytheway, 2005: 361).

Expanding on this, Bytheway (2005) asserts that ageism is "rooted in the social identity of the individual," which is managed both bureaucratically and conveyed through physical appearance (Bytheway, 2005: 362). This identity is paradoxically most apparent in the disclosure of chronological age in both public and private spheres. A decade earlier, Glenda Laws conceptualized ageism as an oppressive set of practices focused on the aged body, describing it as a "surface of inscription" that reflects the deeper societal prejudice against ageing. Laws concluded that "ageism is an embodied form of oppression," intricately tied to the physicality of ageing (Laws, 1995: 114).

Laws further argued that while ageism is contested in various arenas, such as the workplace, the household, and the state, these separate sites together form a "tapestry" that illustrates the pervasive nature of ageist practices (Laws, 1995: 114). Drawing from feminist and postmodernist thought, Laws rejected an "essentialist" approach, emphasizing the importance of examining the specific locations where ageism manifests and where the aged body is socially constructed (Laws, 1995: 118).

A key question remains: Why does age become a source of oppression? One explanation lies in the economic burden that ageing populations are perceived to impose on the welfare state, particularly in terms of pensions, healthcare, and social services (Oran, 2017). This perspective aligns with the "structured dependency" argument advanced by Peter Townsend (1981), who posited that old age is shaped by the political economy and exacerbated by fiscal crises within the state (Estes, 1986). This model has been further refined to account for the neoliberal restructuring of retirement, which has seen a shift from retirement as a "tragedy" of forced exclusion from work to the prolongation of working life and the increasing retirement age as new forms of ageist discrimination (Macnicol, 2015).

As the focus shifts away from the structural implications of age and work, there has been a corresponding turn in the research agenda toward understanding the social, psychological, and embodied aspects of ageing as key to explaining ageism. Within this broader cultural framework, some scholars, such as Nelson (2005), argue that ageism is rooted in our fears of becoming our future selves. North and Fiske further contend that ageism transcends national boundaries, originating in cohort competition for status and employment, which is expressed through negative evaluations of physical markers of ageing, such as grey hair and wrinkles (North and Fiske, 2012, 2013).

In other words, the discourse on ageism has evolved from its early focus on structural inequities to a more nuanced understanding that incorporates the embodied and psychological dimensions of ageing, all while remaining firmly entrenched in broader social and economic frameworks.

2.1 Age-Based Discrimination

The influence of language used by authoritative figures on public perception is profound, as illustrated by Michael Bronski, a Harvard University professor specializing in media and gender studies. Bronski states, "It is a common sense that the way people speak and the language they use affects people's lives, particularly when it is being used by people in authority" (Bahadur, 2017). This insight

is crucial when analyzing the impact of ageist rhetoric directed toward political leaders. Ageism, or discrimination based on age, played a significant role in public discourse surrounding Joe Biden's candidacy.

Discrimination, in this context, refers to treating individuals differently based solely on their age (Graumann and Wintermantel, 1989: 183). Ageism is a form of exclusion and bias that assumes older individuals are inferior or less capable because of their age. House (2017: 18) points out that policies, practices, and social attitudes in the United States are often geared toward marginalizing various groups, including older adults. In the case of Joe Biden, many critics and media outlets questioned his mental acuity and physical capacity to serve as president, despite his extensive political experience. This form of age-based marginalization reflects a broader societal tendency to discount the abilities of older individuals, especially in positions of leadership. Wodak (2009: 315) emphasizes that discrimination, often stems from the dominance of one group over another—in this case, younger generations exerting power over older individuals through prejudicial attitudes and assumptions.

Ageism in the workplace and political arena is closely tied to perceptions of capability. While younger candidates are often seen as dynamic and forward-thinking, older candidates like Biden are frequently subjected to skepticism regarding their physical and mental abilities. Age, much like gender or race, can influence the opportunities, rights, and constraints individuals face. Wodak and Benke (2007: 89) suggest that these societal divisions—whether based on age or other factors—affect how people are perceived and treated in professional and political contexts. Age becomes a marker by which individuals are categorized and judged, often to their detriment, as seen in the widespread critique of Biden's fitness for office during the election.

The concept of ageism gained prominence in the 20th century, particularly as the population of older adults increased and concerns over retirement, healthcare, and aging began to dominate public policy debates. As noted by Encyclopædia Britannica (2019), ageism refers to "prejudice or discrimination based on age, particularly against older individuals." One of the key features of ageism is the emphasis placed on age even when it is not relevant to a person's qualifications or capabilities. In the case of Joe Biden, his age was frequently foregrounded in political discussions, often overshadowing his policy positions and professional record. Guillaumin (1995: 8) highlights how societal structures of discrimination—whether based on age, gender, or race—benefit certain groups at the expense of others. In this context, younger politicians may benefit from the ageist assumptions that older candidates are less capable or out of touch.

However, it is important to recognize that ageism can affect individuals of all ages. While Joe Biden has faced scrutiny for being one of the oldest U.S. presidents, younger politicians have also been dismissed as inexperienced or immature. Despite this, older individuals, particularly in leadership roles, often bear the brunt of ageist attitudes. Throughout the 2020 election campaign, Biden was frequently criticized for his occasional verbal gaffes or signs of fatigue—common occurrences in any high-stakes environment—but these were often interpreted through an ageist lens, casting doubt on his overall competence.

Identifying ageist speech and rhetoric involves understanding the ways in which language is used to demean or undermine an individual based on their age. Such language is typically directed against older people, often by younger individuals or members of the media, and is intended to generate discomfort or doubt regarding the targeted person's abilities. In the context of Joe Biden's presidential campaign, ageist commentary was often disseminated by influential figures, including political opponents, commentators, and media outlets. These remarks focused on Biden's age-related characteristics, such as his appearance or perceived lack of energy, rather than his qualifications or political positions. This type of ageist discourse is particularly harmful when it comes from authoritative figures, as it not only undermines the individual but also reinforces societal prejudices against older adults.

2.2 Critical Pragmatics and Ageism in Political Discourse

In the context of this study on ageism, critical pragmatics offers a valuable framework for understanding how language is used to influence perceptions of older individuals, especially in political contexts. Political correctness, a concept that suggests monitoring language to minimize offense (Reyes, 2011: 464), aligns with the goals of critical pragmatics, particularly in its effort to expose and challenge discriminatory ideologies. Ageist rhetoric, such as the language used against Joe Biden, can be critically examined through this lens to reveal underlying biases and social injustices.

Verschueren (1999: 896) argues that pragmatics is a deeply complex discipline, where language can obscure certain realities, whether intentionally or not. This is particularly relevant when discussing ageism, as the language used to describe older political figures like Biden often masks deeper societal prejudices about aging. Critical pragmatics, therefore, focuses on exposing these veiled realities by addressing the dissatisfaction with the status quo and challenging the social norms that allow ageism to persist (ibid.: 870). By analyzing the ways language is used in political discourse, critical pragmatics can uncover how ageist ideologies are perpetuated and how they shape public perception of older leaders.

Pragmatics, in its critical form, naturally lends itself to examining power dynamics, as it studies not only language but also the context in which it is used and the individuals who use it (ibid.: 871). The relationship between language and power is evident in the way ageism is manifest in political discourse. For instance, during Joe Biden's 2020 presidential campaign, criticisms of his age were

often framed as concerns about his cognitive and physical abilities, rather than legitimate policy critiques. These ageist narratives reflect broader societal attitudes that equate aging with decline, thereby reinforcing negative stereotypes about older individuals in positions of power. As Mey (2001) suggests, critical pragmatics seeks to bring such critical issues—whether ageism, racism, or sexism—into clearer focus, making them subjects of serious inquiry.

In this approach, it is crucial to examine not just the language used, but also the social function it serves. Critical pragmatics explores how language operates within society and how it can be used to either reinforce or challenge existing power structures (ibid.: 320). Ageism, as a form of discrimination, operates through linguistic variation and the interplay of sociological factors. For instance, the frequent references to Joe Biden's age during the election campaign reflected not just a personal bias but also a societal tendency to view older individuals as less capable or less deserving of leadership roles. Pragmatics, therefore, plays a pivotal role in identifying and addressing these instances of social injustice. By bringing ageism into the open, we become more aware of its impact and can take steps to challenge and dismantle it (ibid.: 313).

Korta and Perry (2011) emphasize the importance of taking a critical view of pragmatic issues, particularly in how language is used to shape human thoughts and actions. In the context of this study, critical pragmatics aims to reveal how ageism, as an ideology, is embedded in the language used to describe and critique older political figures. This analytical approach allows us to understand how power relations and ideologies, such as those that perpetuate ageism, are manipulated through language (Korta and Perry, 2011). The critical component of pragmatics, in this case, seeks to "reproduce" or reinterpret the initial form of discourse to align with movements like political correctness, which aim to reduce harm and promote inclusivity.

Korta and Perry's (2011) contribution to critical pragmatics centers on three key principles: first, that language is action; second, that communicative intentions connect language to ideologies such as beliefs and prejudices; and third, that utterances carry multiple levels of meaning. In the case of ageism, these principles can be applied to reveal how ageist language serves as an action that conveys negative judgments or marginalization. Ageism, as the underlying ideology, is the intentional content embedded in the utterances used to criticize or undermine older individuals like Biden. One of the levels of meaning in these ageist utterances is the perpetuation of stereotypes about aging, even if such meanings are not overt (ibid.: 4).

By applying these principles of critical pragmatics to the study of ageism, we can better understand how language reinforces ageist ideologies in political discourse. For example, when commentators focus on Joe Biden's age-related physical or cognitive limitations, they are not merely describing observable traits but are engaging in a broader ideological narrative that devalues aging. Critical pragmatics helps to uncover this hidden layer of meaning and challenge the ageist assumptions that underlie such discourse. As Mey (2001) argues, bringing these issues to light is the first step toward addressing and ultimately dismantling them.

2.3 Relevant Pragmatic Issues and Ageism in Political Discourse

In political discourse, language is not just a tool for communication but also an instrument for exercising power, demonstrating authority, and achieving strategic goals. Political language is often combative, with verbal exchanges resembling a form of aggression where the aim is to overpower and win (Tukhina, 2011: 98). Ageism, as it relates to this study, can be exposed and understood through various pragmatic strategies that reveal the speaker's underlying ideologies. These strategies serve as deliberate plans aimed at achieving social, political, or psychological objectives, as defined by Wodak (2009: 319). Ageist rhetoric can manifest through impoliteness, specific speech acts, and the manner in which older political figures are referenced. This analysis posits that pragmatic phenomena such as these are essential tools for unraveling the presence of ageism in political language, especially as it pertains to President Joe Biden.

2.4 Impoliteness as a Pragmatic Tool for Ageism

A key concept in analyzing how ageism is embedded in political discourse is impoliteness, which refers to language that breaches societal norms and conventions, often causing offense (Culpeper, 2011: 31). Culpeper argues that impoliteness can occur even when offense is not the primary intention, as long as it undermines a person's sense of identity or disrupts socially embedded norms (ibid.: 246). This concept is especially relevant when examining ageist language aimed at Joe Biden, as it often challenges not just his political stance, but also his personal identity as an older leader. Ageist remarks, whether intentional or not, can cause harm by reinforcing stereotypes about cognitive decline or physical frailty associated with aging, thereby undermining Biden's authority and competency.

The key to understanding impoliteness is not just the language itself but the interaction between the linguistic expression and the context in which it is used (Culpeper, 2011: 125). In Biden's case, the political context plays a significant role—his age has frequently been highlighted in debates and media commentary, not just as a neutral fact but often as a point of criticism or mockery. For example, comments about his "diminished energy" or "forgetfulness" may superficially appear neutral, but in the political context, these remarks act as face-threatening acts that diminish his credibility and suitability for leadership based on ageist assumptions.

2.5 Impoliteness in Political Discourse

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Politeness theories focus on promoting harmonious communication by maintaining positive social relations (Culpeper, 1996: 349). However, in political settings, particularly when ageism is involved, impolite communication is often used to achieve the opposite effect—attacking the opponent's public persona to create disharmony and conflict. This is particularly true in political debates where the goal is to win over voters by undermining the opponent. In Biden's case, remarks targeting his age can be strategically used to create doubt about his capability to handle the rigors of the presidency. Such discourse may not only reflect ideological biases but also exploit them for political gain, especially when the speaker seeks to differentiate themselves from an older rival.

Culpeper (1996: 350) distinguishes between two types of impoliteness: mock impoliteness and genuine impoliteness. Mock impoliteness, often playful and used among friends, does not apply in this context as political figures like Biden and their opponents are not allies or friends. Their interactions, especially during debates or speeches, are characterized by rivalry and opposition. Therefore, the type of impoliteness relevant to this study is genuine impoliteness, which is used intentionally to harm or attack the interlocutor's face.

Genuine impoliteness is more likely to occur in situations where power imbalances exist or when there is no vested interest in maintaining the face of the opponent (Culpeper, 1996: 354). Although candidates are assumed to be equals in terms of political power, ageism can create an underlying inequality. For instance, younger political opponents may exploit Biden's age as a perceived weakness, using language that highlights or exaggerates his age-related characteristics to gain an advantage. Hinck and Hinck (2002: 235) argue that critical ideologies, such as ageism, can create imbalances even in situations where power dynamics appear to be equal. In such cases, ageist language becomes a tool to undermine the older candidate by appealing to societal prejudices about aging.

2.5.1 Super-strategies of Impoliteness in Ageist Political Rhetoric

Culpeper (1996: 356) outlines several superstrategies of impoliteness, three of which are particularly relevant to the analysis of ageism in political discourse:

a. Bold on Record Impoliteness: This strategy involves a direct, clear, and unambiguous face-threatening act. In the context of ageism, bold on record impoliteness can be seen when political opponents directly reference Biden's age as a disadvantage. For example, statements like "He's too old to keep up with the demands of the presidency" are not subtle—they clearly and directly attack his suitability for office by using age as a disqualifier. This type of impoliteness does not leave room for ambiguity; it is designed to directly challenge his fitness for leadership based on the assumption that age equates to incapability.

b. Positive Face Attack: Another strategy involves undermining the opponent's positive face, or their desire to be liked and respected. In Biden's case, ageist remarks that suggest he is "out of touch" with modern society or lacks the energy to engage with current issues serve as attacks on his positive face. These comments implicitly suggest that he is not relatable or competent due to his age, thus diminishing his appeal to voters.

c. Negative Face Attack: Negative face refers to a person's desire for autonomy and independence. Ageist remarks often attack this by implying that Biden, due to his age, is no longer capable of independent decision-making or is overly reliant on younger aides. Such comments undermine his sense of control and autonomy, reinforcing stereotypes about older individuals being less capable of managing their own affairs.

2.6 Ageism and Ideological Impoliteness in Political Discourse

When ageist ideologies are deeply embedded in political discourse, impoliteness becomes a tool for perpetuating those ideologies. As Culpeper (2011) argues, impoliteness can rupture ideologically embedded social norms (ibid.: 153), and in the case of ageism, this means challenging the perception that older individuals are less competent leaders. However, the strategic use of ageist impoliteness serves to reinforce these stereotypes rather than dismantle them. By attacking Biden's age, political opponents are not merely engaging in a personal attack but are also tapping into broader societal biases about aging, using them to their advantage in political battles.

2.6.1 Positive and Negative Impoliteness Strategies

Positive and negative impoliteness are central to understanding how language can be used to attack an individual's social face, particularly in political discourse. Positive impoliteness refers to strategies that are specifically designed to damage the addressee's desire to be liked or admired, also known as their positive face (Culpeper, 1996: 357). In contrast, negative impoliteness involves strategies aimed at damaging the addressee's desire for autonomy and freedom from imposition, or their negative face (ibid.).

Brown and Levinson (1987: 65) define positive face as the individual's wish to be admired and approved of, while negative face is the desire not to be imposed upon or restricted. These two aspects of social face are crucial in analyzing how impoliteness functions in political exchanges, particularly when ageism or other forms of discrimination are in play. In political rhetoric, such as that surrounding Joe Biden's presidency, these strategies often become tools for undermining an opponent by targeting their social standing or perceived capabilities.

Each type of impoliteness comes with its own distinct set of strategies. For positive impoliteness, some common strategies are verbal and highly relevant to political discourse (Culpeper, 1996: 357):

Seeking disagreement by selecting sensitive or controversial topics that put the addressee in an uncomfortable position.
Using taboo words, such as abusive or profane language, to demean or insult the addressee.
Name-calling and derogatory nominations, where the speaker uses offensive labels to attack the opponent.

Such strategies are especially pertinent when analyzing ageist rhetoric against Joe Biden. For instance, discussing topics like cognitive decline or referring to Biden in derogatory terms based on his age serve to damage his positive face, by making him appear less competent or fit for leadership.

Regarding negative impoliteness, which seeks to damage the addressee's autonomy or dignity, the following strategies are significant (ibid.: 358):
Scorn or ridicule, particularly relevant when political opponents mock Biden for age-related issues, such as physical stamina or mental sharpness, thereby undermining his independence as a capable leader.
Belittling, often done through the use of diminutives or patronizing language that implies Biden is incapable of performing his role due to his age.

Such strategies are often employed to make an older leader like Biden appear weak or incapable of independent action, thereby targeting his negative face by questioning his autonomy and capacity to lead effectively.

2.6.2 Off-Record Impoliteness and Speech Acts
In addition to direct forms of impoliteness, off-record impoliteness also plays a crucial role in political discourse. This occurs when a face-threatening act is carried out through implied meaning or indirect speech, allowing the speaker to deny the intent of the insult while still delivering it (Culpeper, 2005: 44). In the context of ageism, indirect statements that subtly question Biden's fitness for office due to his age can be just as harmful as outright insults, as they leave room for interpretation and plausible deniability. These forms of indirect or off-record impoliteness are important to recognize, as they often fly under the radar but still contribute to a broader narrative of ageism in political discourse.

2.7 Speech Acts in Political Discourse
Speech acts are fundamental to understanding how language functions in political communication. According to Wales (2011: 389), speech acts refer to the functional roles that utterances play within different communicative events. Political discourse often features a variety of speech acts such as threats, insults, belittling, and accusations, which serve not just to convey information but to achieve strategic social goals. The theory of speech acts, as originally proposed by Austin (1962: 101), emphasizes that saying is doing—in other words, language is a form of action that can have real-world effects.

Searle (1969, 1979) further elaborates on this theory, proposing four felicity conditions that determine the success of a speech act: propositional, preparatory, sincerity, and essential conditions (Searle, 1969: 54). For instance, in political debates or public speeches, when a politician like Joe Biden makes a promise, the success of that speech act depends on whether these conditions are met—whether the promise is feasible, whether the speaker is sincere, and whether the promise is relevant and appropriate in the given context.

Searle (1979: 3) also introduces a classification of five macro categories of speech acts, each of which serves different communicative functions:
Commissives, where the speaker commits to a future course of action (e.g., promising or pledging).
Declaratives, where the speaker's utterance causes a change in the external world (e.g., declaring war or making an official announcement).
Directives, where the speaker attempts to get others to do something (e.g., issuing commands or requests).
Expressives, where the speaker conveys emotions or attitudes (e.g., praising, criticizing, or apologizing).
Representatives/Assertives, where the speaker makes statements about the truth of a situation (e.g., affirming, asserting, or reporting facts).

In political discourse, negative speech acts are particularly significant because they involve the intentional threatening of the addressee's face or causing discomfort (Brown and Levinson, 1987: 65). Such acts, whether they take the form of ridicule, accusations, or belittling comments, are frequently employed in political arenas where the goal is to undermine the opponent's credibility. When

these negative speech acts are tied to ageist rhetoric, they reflect underlying societal biases that associate age with incompetence or irrelevance.

2.7.1 Speech Acts and Ageism

The connection between speech acts and ageism becomes apparent when examining how political figures like Biden are addressed in debates or speeches. For example, derogatory remarks about Biden's cognitive abilities, suggestions that he is "too old" to understand current issues, or implications that he should "step aside" for younger leadership are all speech acts that simultaneously express a negative attitude and attempt to shape public perception. These utterances not only convey a message but actively contribute to an ageist narrative that frames Biden's age as a liability rather than an asset.

As Leech (1983: 48) notes, engaging in illocutionary acts (i.e., acts performed via speech) involves a functional approach to language that has broader implications for power dynamics and social relationships. In political discourse, ageist speech acts function to reinforce existing stereotypes and societal biases, marginalizing older individuals by portraying them as less capable or less deserving of leadership roles.

Halliday (1973) identified three primary functions of language: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The interpersonal function, which lies within the realm of pragmatics, is particularly relevant to the study of ageism in political rhetoric. This function is concerned with how language expresses the speaker's attitudes and relationships with others (Leech, 1983: 56). In the case of a sexist or ageist speaker, these interpersonal attitudes are reflected in the language they use, revealing their underlying biases and intentions.

2.8 5.3 Reference

Reference is a complex field of study characterized by its context-dependent nature and variable meanings. According to Crystal (2003: 231), reference involves the speaker's attempt to convey information about a specific object, often including attributes or relationships pertinent to that object. This concept encompasses various linguistic elements, such as proper names, definite descriptions, demonstratives, and pronouns (Korta & Perry, 2011: 12). For this study, deixis and definite descriptions are particularly relevant.

Deixis, from a philosophical perspective, refers to language features that are tied to the context in which an utterance occurs. It is inherently subjective, intentional, and dependent on the situational context (Levinson, 2007: 97). Deictic expressions are categorized into several semantic fields:

Personal deixis: Involves pronouns and forms of address that denote speakers, listeners, and others involved in the conversation (e.g., "I", "you", "he").

Spatial deixis: Refers to the location of objects or people relative to the speaker (e.g., "here", "there").

Temporal deixis: Pertains to the timing of the utterance (e.g., "now", "then").

Social deixis: Relates to the social status and relationships among interlocutors (e.g., "Mr.", "your highness") (Levinson, 2007: 111).

In social contexts, especially where age and status are recognized, deixis can convey familiarity or respect. For instance, using a third-person reference instead of a direct second-person address in a conversation may signify formality, distance, or even impoliteness. This choice can reflect underlying ideologies and power dynamics (Yule, 1996: 11).

Referential strategies are crucial in constructing positive self-representation and negative other-representation. The choice of referring to someone by their first name versus a formal title, or highlighting specific attributes, reflects ideological stances and social attitudes (Wodak, 2009: 319). These choices reveal how speakers project their viewpoints and biases.

In pragmatic research, the psychological aspect of deixis is of particular interest. Objects or individuals that are physically close to the speaker are often represented as psychologically close as well. Conversely, a speaker might use deictic expressions to create psychological distance from a physically proximate entity due to ideological motives, such as sexism. For example, a speaker might refer to someone standing directly in front of them as "that person" to create a sense of remoteness, both spatially and psychologically. This manipulation of reference can also apply to temporal deixis; using past tense instead of present tense can imply a psychological distance from the event described. This phenomenon underscores how reference can be strategically employed to align with or resist certain ideologies.

3. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE STUDY

This study employs a critical pragmatic framework to analyze ageism in American political discourse, with a particular focus on language used in relation to President Joe Biden. The analytical framework integrates concepts from critical pragmatics, impoliteness theory, and reference theory to systematically examine how ageist attitudes are conveyed and reinforced in political communication.

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3.1 Critical Pragmatics

Critical pragmatics focuses on understanding how language reflects and perpetuates power structures and social ideologies (Verschueren, 1999: 870). This approach is pivotal for analyzing political discourse because it scrutinizes not just the surface meaning of language but its deeper socio-political implications. Key to this study is identifying how language about President Biden reveals underlying ageist ideologies and power dynamics. The critical pragmatic approach enables the examination of how linguistic choices are employed to construct and reinforce perceptions of age and authority within the political arena.

3.2 Impoliteness Theory

Impoliteness theory, as developed by Culpeper (2011: 31), explores how language can breach social norms to cause offense and undermine the interlocutor's face. The theory distinguishes between positive impoliteness, which aims to damage the addressee's positive face wants by undermining their desire to be admired, and negative impoliteness, which seeks to damage the addressee's negative face wants by infringing on their desire not to be imposed upon (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 65).

For this study, the focus is on genuine impoliteness, which occurs in contexts of imbalanced power relations and when there is no interest in maintaining the interlocutor's face (Culpeper, 1996: 354). Relevant impoliteness strategies include:
Bold on-record impoliteness: Direct and unambiguous face-threatening acts (Culpeper, 1996: 357).
Positive impoliteness strategies: Such as seeking disagreement, using taboo language, and derogatory naming (Culpeper, 1996: 357).
Negative impoliteness strategies: Such as scorn, ridicule, and belittling (Culpeper, 1996: 358).
These strategies will be analyzed to uncover how ageist discourse manifests through impolite language aimed at President Biden, thereby highlighting how such discourse seeks to undermine his authority and credibility.

3.3 Speech Acts Theory

Speech acts theory, developed by Austin (1962: 101) and Searle (1969, 1979), examines how utterances perform actions beyond mere conveyance of information. Searle's categorization of speech acts into commissives, declaratives, directives, expressives, and representatives/assertives provides a framework for understanding how various forms of language act upon and affect the interlocutors (Searle, 1969: 54; 1979: 12-17).

In this study, the focus will be on how negative speech acts, such as accusations, disparagement, or ridicule related to age, are used in political discourse. The analysis will assess how these speech acts contribute to ageist portrayals of President Biden and how they impact public perception.

3.4 Reference Theory

Reference theory deals with how language refers to objects, individuals, and concepts within a specific context (Crystal, 2003: 231). It involves deixis and definite descriptions, which are crucial for understanding how ageist attitudes are encoded in political language. Deixis, including personal, spatial, temporal, and social deixis, reveals how speakers use language to create distance or convey respect (Levinson, 2007: 97; Yule, 1996: 11).

This study will analyze how reference strategies, such as the use of derogatory terms or impersonal pronouns, are employed to project remoteness or diminish the status of President Biden. The use of specific referential strategies will be examined to understand how they contribute to ageist narratives.

3.5 Data Analysis
A. Examples of Ageism in a CNN article about the debate between Trump and Biden, retrieved from:
https://www.google.com/amp/s/amp.cnn.com/cnn/2024/06/28/politics/biden-trump-presidential-debate-analysis
Diminished Figure and Debate Performance:
Quote: "diminished figure at the top of the ticket" and "The president's showing was devastating."
Analysis: The portrayal of Biden as a "diminished figure" and the emphasis on his "devastating" debate performance reflects an ageist bias. This framing suggests that his age negatively impacts his effectiveness and public perception, reinforcing stereotypes about older individuals being less capable (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 65).
Acknowledgment of Age-Related Decline:
Quote: "I know I'm not a young man … I don't walk as easy as I used to. I don't speak as smoothly as I used to. I don't debate as well as I used to."
Analysis: Biden's own admission of his age-related decline is highlighted, which can reinforce ageist stereotypes. The focus on his physical and cognitive decline implies that his age inherently diminishes his suitability for office, aligning with negative impoliteness strategies that undermine his credibility (Culpeper, 2011: 31).

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Comparison with Trump:

Quote: "Biden's claims that he's 'unhinged' and is therefore unfit to return to the Oval Office."

Analysis: This comparison frames Biden's age as a reason for his alleged incompetence, suggesting that his age makes him less fit for office. It contrasts Biden's supposed failings with Trump's, subtly reinforcing ageist attitudes that question the capability of older leaders (Levinson, 2007: 97).

Impairments and Debate Failures:

Quote: "His ability to communicate with the country… is severely compromised."

Analysis: The focus on Biden's compromised communication ability, linked to his age, implies that age affects his effectiveness in political discourse. This reflects an ageist perspective that undervalues older individuals' abilities in high-pressure scenarios (Wodak, 2009: 319).

Derogatory Comments on Cognitive Function:

Quote: "'I really don't know what he said at the end of that sentence. I don't think he knows what he said, either.'"

Analysis: Trump's derogatory remark about Biden's cognitive abilities can be seen as a direct form of ageism. It implies that Biden's age impairs his mental faculties, thereby reinforcing stereotypes that older individuals are less coherent or capable (Searle, 1969: 54).

B. Examples of Ageism in an AP News article about the debate between Trump and Biden, retrieved from:

https://apnews.com/article/debate-trump-biden-presidential-campaign-44e71c900a1c4af2bed93041fdfe923d

Quote: "Already fighting voter concerns about his age, Biden, 81, was halting and seemed to lose his train of thought."

Analysis: The emphasis on Biden's age (81) and his perceived halting performance highlights ageist biases by suggesting that his age is directly linked to his cognitive lapses and overall effectiveness. This portrayal aligns with negative stereotypes about older individuals' abilities in high-pressure situations (Levinson, 2007: 97).

Comparison with Trump's Performance:

Quote: "is only three years older than the Republican ex-president."

Analysis: The comparison between Biden and Trump, focusing on Biden's alleged lack of vigor and smoothness, underscores an ageist perspective. It implies that Biden's age contributes to his perceived deficiencies, while Trump's relative youth (at only three years younger) is associated with vitality and competence (Culpeper, 2011: 31).

Biden's Difficulty and Cognitive Decline:

Quote: "Biden was often halting, his voice raspy, even when he had the facts on his side."

Analysis: The description of Biden's "halting" speech and "raspy" voice reinforces ageist views by attributing his difficulties to his age. This portrayal reflects common stereotypes about older individuals being less capable of effective communication and argumentation (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 65).

Specific Instances of Cognitive Lapses:

Quote: "trailing off and looking down at his lectern before mumbling briefly and saying 'we finally beat Medicare.'"

Analysis: Highlighting Biden's difficulty in maintaining focus and coherence during the debate serves to emphasize age-related cognitive decline. This framing perpetuates the stereotype that older individuals are more prone to mental lapses and reduced cognitive function (Wodak, 2009: 319).

Impact on Public Perception:

Quote: "Biden's supporters consistently express concern about the president's age and capacity and he did little to reassure them."

Analysis: The focus on Biden's supporters' concerns about his age and capacity reinforces ageist sentiments by suggesting that age inherently undermines his ability to perform presidential duties effectively. This perception influences public opinion and underscores biases against older leaders (Culpeper, 1996: 354).

C. Examples of Ageism in a Reuters article about Biden's Debate, retrieved from:

https://www.reuters.com/world/us/reactions-joe-biden-donald-trumps-debate-performances-2024-06-28/

Quote: "Obviously the biggest factor is that Biden still seemed old and raspy and less coherent than when he ran last time, and that's going to be the big story, I think, out of the debate."

Analysis: This statement also directly connects Biden's performance with his age by emphasizing that he "seemed old and raspy." The reference to his age as "the biggest factor" implies that his perceived decline in coherence and energy is a direct result of his aging, reinforcing ageist stereotypes that associate older age with diminished cognitive and physical capabilities. This reflects a common ageist narrative where aging is linked to a reduction in performance or competence.

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Quote: "Trump on the other hand was 'more restrained' than in previous debates... One guy's crazy, the other guy's too old. They were definitely validated in thinking the one guy is too old."

Analysis: The article contrasts Biden's age with Trump's behavior by labeling Biden as "too old" while describing Trump as "more restrained." This comparison suggests that Biden's age is a liability, framing his performance in the debate as a direct consequence of his age. The phrase "validated in thinking the one guy is too old" reinforces the ageist perception that Biden's age is a disqualifying factor, implying that being older automatically reduces a candidate's effectiveness.

Quote: "Biden, 81, was halting and seemed to lose his train of thought Thursday night, sparking quick concerns among Democrats about the man they hope will keep former President Donald Trump from returning to office."

Analysis: This statement highlights ageism by associating Biden's performance with his age. It implies that his age (81) is a significant factor in his perceived cognitive decline and effectiveness, reflecting common ageist stereotypes about older individuals' capacities (Levinson, 2007: 97).

Quote: "Trump seemed smoother and more vigorous than Biden, who is only three years older than the Republican ex-president."

Analysis: The comparison of Biden's and Trump's performances based on their age emphasizes ageist attitudes. It suggests that Trump's slightly younger age is associated with greater energy and competence, while Biden's age is linked to diminished performance (Brown & Levinson, 1987: 65).

Quote: "There is no way to spin this. His performance was disqualifying… It cannot be described how bad this performance was."

Analysis: The harsh criticism of Biden's debate performance, described as "disqualifying," is rooted in perceptions linked to his age. The statement suggests that Biden's age-related performance issues are severe enough to consider replacing him, further reinforcing the notion that age makes a candidate less capable of fulfilling their role effectively. This reflects an ageist perspective that older individuals should be replaced by younger, more "capable" leaders. The strong negative reaction to Biden's debate performance, attributed to his age, reinforces ageist perspectives by suggesting that his age is a disqualifying factor. This reflects a bias that older candidates are less capable of handling high-stakes situations (Culpeper, 2011: 31).

Quote: "Biden still seemed old and raspy and less coherent than when he ran last time… he had trouble getting his points across and just seemed a lot softer."

Analysis: These observations about Biden's physical and cognitive state highlight ageist biases by framing his age as a factor in his perceived weakness and incoherence. The last observation that Biden is getting softer criticizes Biden's ability to communicate effectively, attributing his perceived struggles to his age. The term "softer" can be interpreted as a subtle ageist remark, implying a loss of vigor or sharpness associated with aging. The focus on Biden's communication difficulties reinforces the stereotype that aging diminishes one's ability to think and express ideas clearly. This suggests that aging is linked to reduced mental and physical capabilities (Wodak, 2009: 319).

Quote: "So there's not a message in his favor. And to the extent that it has an influence, the influence will be to make people's concerns about Biden's age even more salient."

Analysis: The comment highlights how public concerns about Biden's age are amplified by his debate performance. It implies that age is a critical factor in shaping public perception of his capability as a leader. By stating that concerns about Biden's age will become "more salient," the article underscores the ageist notion that an older candidate is inherently less suited for the presidency.

Quote: "One guy's crazy, the other guy's too old. They were definitely validated in thinking the one guy is too old."

Analysis: This comment reflects ageist sentiments by explicitly categorizing Biden as "too old" and linking his age to perceptions of weakness and ineffectiveness. It underscores how age can become a focal point in evaluating a candidate's suitability (Culpeper, 1996: 354).

The results can be summarized as follows:

Table 1: **Analysis of Ageism in Political Discourse in the First Article:**

Feature	Count	Critical Pragmatics	Impoliteness Theory	Speech Acts Theory	Reference Theory
References to Biden's Age	5	Age discussed as a negative factor	-	-	Age-related terms used
Impoliteness Strategies	4	Criticizes age-related performance	3 Bold on-record impoliteness	1 Representative	3 Negative impoliteness

				3 Representative	2 Declarative
Speech Acts	5	-	-	3 Representative	2 Declarative
Age-related Descriptions	4	Reflects age stereotypes	-	-	Descriptors used

Table 2: Analysis of Ageism in Political Discourse in the Second Article:

Feature	Count	Critical Pragmatics	Impoliteness Theory	Speech Acts Theory	Reference Theory
References to Biden's Age	8	Age as a vulnerability	-	-	Age-related terms used
Impoliteness Strategies	6	Highlights age issues	3 Bold on-record impoliteness	2 Representative	1 Negative impoliteness
Speech Acts	8	-	-	5 Representative	3 Declarative
Age-related Descriptions	5	Reflects cognitive decline	-	-	Descriptors used

Table 3: Analysis of Ageism in Political Discourse in the Third Article:

Feature	Count	Critical Pragmatics	Impoliteness Theory	Speech Acts Theory	Reference Theory
References to Biden's Age	6	Age as a factor in competence	-	-	Age-related terms used
Impoliteness Strategies	5	Criticizes performance due to age	2 Bold on-record impoliteness	2 Declarative	2 Negative impoliteness
Speech Acts	6	-	-	4 Representative	2 Declarative
Age-related Descriptions	4	Reflects negative perceptions	-	-	Descriptors used

Table 4: Statistics Across All Articles

Feature	Total Count	Critical Pragmatics	Impoliteness Theory	Speech Acts Theory	Reference Theory
References to Biden's Age	19	Discusses age negatively	-	-	Terms used to imply age-related issues
Impoliteness Strategies	15	Highlights age issues	8 Bold on-record impoliteness	5 Representative	6 Negative impoliteness
Speech Acts	19	-	-	12 Representative	7 Declarative
Age-related Descriptions	13	Reflects stereotypes	-	-	Descriptors used to highlight age issues

3.6 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION:

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The analysis consistently highlights how Biden's age is portrayed negatively. The total count of references (19 occurrences) to age and descriptions reflects an underlying theme that age impacts performance and competence. All the negative aspects of Biden's performance in the debate were directly attributed to his age and not to any other plausible factors. This portrayal aligns with negative stereotypes about older individuals' abilities in high-pressure situations (Levinson, 2007: 97). Additionally, Bold on-record impoliteness and negative impoliteness strategies are frequently used to undermine Biden's authority and credibility with a total count of 15 occurrences during the three designated articles. These examples about using the type of language that breaches societal norms and conventions, often causing offense align with the notions of impoliteness as were described by (Culpeper, 2011

Similarly, representative speech acts are most common, with a significant use of declarative statements to assert age-related issues with a total of 19 occurrences in the three articles. The above cited examples clarify the use of declarative and representative types of speech acts against Biden's age, this aligns with the notions of Searle (1969, 1979). The consistent use of age-related terms and descriptors reinforces negative perceptions about Biden's age and competence. With a total of 13 occurrences that use different types of descriptors to refer to Biden's age and the stereotypical nature of those descriptions, these examples reveal how speakers use language to create distance or convey disrespect to Biden's age, this method of using language was described by (Levinson, 2007).

The results reveal how ageism is systematically embedded in the political discourse about President Biden, through both direct and indirect references, as well as impolite and disparaging language.

4. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the three articles demonstrates a clear pattern in how ageism is manifested in political discourse regarding President Joe Biden. Through a critical pragmatic lens, the discourse frequently highlights and scrutinizes Biden's age as a factor affecting his performance and credibility. The application of impoliteness theory reveals that both bold and negative impoliteness strategies are employed to undermine Biden's authority and competence, reflecting an underlying bias against older politicians. Additionally, speech acts theory underscores that representative and declarative speech acts are used to assert and reinforce these ageist narratives.

The frequent references to Biden's age and the use of age-related descriptors illustrate how age is leveraged to create a narrative of diminished capability and authority. The analysis of impoliteness strategies highlights a deliberate effort to challenge Biden's credibility, often through direct and confrontational language. The speech acts and reference strategies further contribute to constructing a negative portrayal of Biden based on his age.

All in all, the findings suggest that ageism plays a significant role in shaping political discourse and public perception of President Biden. The critical pragmatic framework effectively exposes how language reflects and perpetuates power structures and social ideologies, particularly in the context of age and political authority.

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