

Politics and politeness: An analysis of Presidential Inaugural Speeches of Philippine and American Presidents

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Abstract

This study compares the politeness strategies utilized by two presidents from different world Englishes: American English and Philippine English. Given how language is a powerful tool and how inaugural speeches share their vision for their country, the study used each president's recent inauguration speech, gathering from the respective official websites of the presidents, this study demonstrates how language subtly shows how the presidents want to be viewed or how they view themselves using polite theory. It argues that culture is also embedded in their manner of speaking, what their focus is, and how the identity of one president can be analyzed using verbal patterns.

Keywords: politeness theory, inaugural speech, world English, American English, Philippine English, comparative analysis

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1. Introduction

Language is a powerful tool in politics. It serves as a means of communication, and a force in negotiations and influencing public opinion. It is a public marker of ethnolinguistic, national, and religious identity (Ng & Deng, 2017). Public officials mainly used speeches to convey their message to the people. It is in these political speeches that are cautiously written (Stobbs, 2012, as cited by Ghzani, 2016) that a politician's ideology is occasionally expressed with clarity. One of the key speeches that a president gives is his inaugural speech. Done after taking the oath of office, inaugural speeches or addresses present the president's vision of their country and set forth their goals for the nation (Joint Congressional Committee on Inaugural Ceremonies, n.d.) With the importance of how leaders communicate with their constituents, this study will focus on two figures of executive power in the Philippines and United States of America, particularly the inaugural speeches of President Ferdinand “Bong Bong” R. Marcos Jr. and President Donald Trump, respectively. In relation to this, Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed Politeness theory, which allows the development of the idea that how one speaks is in relation to how they wish to be perceived by others, particularly their audience. Politeness also plays a crucial role in the culture of the society, as the use of language varies from one culture to another (Al-Duleimej et al., 2016). Thus, it is vital to take notice how leaders from Western and Eastern cultures present themselves to the public.

Theoretical Framework - In this theory, there are two desires or face wants. One is ‘negative face’, the basic claim to territories, personal preservers, and rights to non-distraction (Sadeghogli & Niroomand, 2016). In other words, no pressure from the public and how one perceives themselves as how they want. Meanwhile, ‘positive face’ is when one's self-image is claimed by interactants (Sadeghogli & Niroomand, 2016). This is when the speaker has the desire or need that their self-image, their personality and reputation, be appreciated and approved by the audience or the public. These two face desires encounter ‘face threat acts,’ which are naturally done acts that run contrary to what is intended or desired (Brown & Levinson, 1987). Guided by this, the study focused on the microblog posts of these two presidents, and how they present themselves in these short messages to the public in relation to a common topic. It discussed the linguistic features of how they communicate to their peers, followers, constituents, and how they present themselves to the public.

Statement of the Problem - This research aimed to analyze microblog posts of President Trump and President Marcos by analyzing the linguistic traits of these posts through the lens of culture and speech. Specifically, it sought to answer (1) what politeness strategy can be identified in the inaugural speech of President Donald J. Trump and President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr., and (2) how do cultural differences influence their speech in the use of positive and negative politeness in political discourse?

2. Methodology

Research Design - This study used a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the politeness strategy of President Trump and President Marcos, drawing on Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory. This qualitative design will allow an in-depth understanding of how politeness is constructed and conveyed across different cultural and political settings, as well as an understanding of how language reflects each culture's approach to face-saving acts in political communication.

Corpora of the Study - The corpus of this study was based on the inaugural speeches of President Trump on his second term, having done the address on the 20th of January 2025. The other corpus of this study was President Marcos Jr.'s inauguration speech last June 30, 2022. Both of them were taken from their official

government websites, the White House (<https://www.whitehouse.gov>) and the Presidential Communications Office (<https://pco.gov.ph>) respectively. This presents how two presidents of different cultures utilize the same language to present their ideas, make promises, and declare their intentions before the entire nation. These data also served as an opportunity to examine the politeness strategies in political discourse.

Data Gathering Procedure - The data gathering procedure began with the corpora copied and pasted in a word file document. The aforementioned corpora were Philippine President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr.'s inauguration speech given last June 30, 2022 and American President Donald J. Trump's second inaugural speech given last January 20, 2025. They were retrieved from the official websites of their respective government websites: The Presidential Communications Office and the White House. Any styles on the text, such as differing fonts, highlights, bold and italics will be removed. Upon retrieving these texts, they were uploaded into AntConc, a free online corpus analysis tool, to generate frequency lists in both addresses that will present the politeness strategies and the rhetorical devices present. These were then be manually coded and interpreted using Brown and Levinson's (1987) Politeness Theory to identify any linguistic features present related to positive and negative faces, and how culture is embedded in their address.

In their theory, Brown and Levinson (1987) provided lists of politeness strategies such as exaggeration, joking, optimism, assumptions, questions, apologizing, and deference to name a few and these will be utilized in analyzing the two corpora of the study. The results of the analysis were utilized to delve deeper on the cultural influence on the politeness strategies presented by the two presidents.

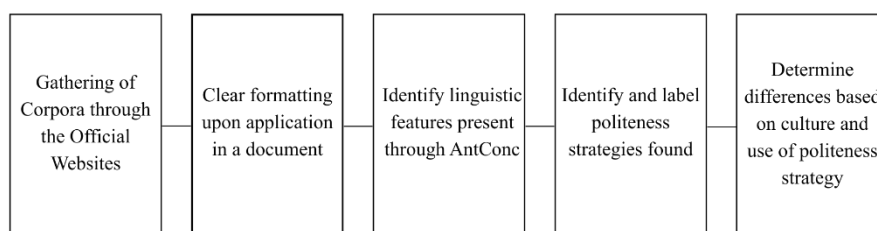


Figure 1. Overview of Data Gathering Procedure.

3. Results and Discussion

The politeness strategies found in the research corpora have been categorized in terms of politeness strategies. In the following sections, positive and negative politeness strategies will be defined according to Brown and Levinson's (1987) theory, and a discussion as to how it reflects the culture of Filipino and American political speeches, in this case, inaugural speeches.

3.1 Positive Politeness Strategies

Brown and Levinson (1987) define this as “the positive self-image that he claims for himself” and that positive politeness is “approach-based.” What this means is that how the speaker expresses friendliness, camaraderie, and a sense of inclusion and solidarity. What the audience wants is what the speaker wants. In other words, positive politeness strategies are identified through linguistic markers displaying the speaker maintaining or protecting the positive face of their audience (Phúc & Yén, 2016).

Notice/Attending to Their Interests, Wants, Needs, and Goods. This strategy demonstrates the awareness or attention to the audience's desires, needs and concerns. By acknowledging them, the speaker shows consideration to these, as well as strengthening connections.

Table 1

Mention of voters through second-person pronouns.

President Marcos' Inaugural Speech		President Trump's Inaugural Speech	
Cluster	Frequency	Cluster	Frequency
your children	1	your choice	1
your cooperation	1	your help	1
your decisions	1	your inspiring	1
your dreams	1	your voices	1
your hands	1	your vote	1
your hopes	1	thank you	23
your other	1		
your own	1		
your self	1		
your sentiments	1		
your servant	1		
your vote	1		
your work	1		
your yearnings	1		

In Brown and Levinson's (1987) positive politeness strategies, they listed that attending to the addressee's needs and including them in the activity saves their face. In the table, it is seen that President Marcos made mention of the voter's aspirations and wants before, during, and after the election more than President Trump. However, it is noticeable that President Trump thanked his audience 23 times in the beginning, middle, and end of his speech, while President Marcos said “*salamat*” (“thank you”) only once at the end of his inaugural speech. In total, President Trump used this strategy 28 times, while President Marcus utilized it 16 times.

“You and your children want a good chance at a better life... Your dreams are mine...” (Marcos, 2022, para. 26)

Offering promises. The speaker shows commitment to his campaign promises and future action that would benefit his constituents. With the verb “will” “promise”, the speaker assures the listeners that he will meet their needs and do action to demonstrate reliability and trustworthiness.

Table 2

Frequency of Presidents' promises in their inaugural speeches

President Marcos' Inaugural Speech		President Trump's Inaugural Speech	
Cluster	Frequency	Cluster	Frequency
i will	11	i will	15
we will	12	we will	46
government will	1	administration will	2
my promise	1	America will	5
		it will	4
		this will	2

Offering promises was also listed as one of the positive politeness strategies. These are patterns that express strong commitment and fulfilment of their campaign promises (Phúc & Yên, 2016). President Trump once again has a high count with promises of his administration being said 69 times in his speech. However, it is important to note that one “we will” is not a campaign promise, and more of an assurance.

“We will be the envy of every nation, and we will not allow ourselves to be taken advantage of any longer... I will, very simply, put America first.” (Trump, 2025, para. 3)

Being optimistic. This strategy involves confidence and positive outlook to the future. In gives a sense of trust from the listeners that their vote would not go to waste and that the future has a positive outcome.

Table 3
Frequency of optimism in the presidents' inaugural speeches.

President Marcos' Inaugural Speech		President Trump's Inaugural Speech	
Cluster	Frequency	Cluster	Frequency
never give up home	1	bring back hope	1
there is hope	1	my hope	1
have hope	1		
i am confident	1		
so confident	1		

“And if you ask me why I am so confident of the future, I will answer you, simply that have 110 million reasons to start with. Such is my faith in the Filipino. Believe, have hope: the sun also rises like it did today; and as it will tomorrow. And as surely as that, we will achieve the country all Filipinos deserve. God bless the Philippines, God bless our work.” (Marcos, 2022, para. 50)

President Marcos was the more optimistic of the two in terms of vocabulary usage; offering more optimism in his speech than President Trump, although this portrays the latter as being assured that his promises will be fulfilled. President Marcos thrice mentioned “let us,” endearing his audience to cooperate in order for his campaign promises to happen.

3.2 Negative Politeness Strategy

Negative politeness strategies are more focused on satisfying one's negative face. This is when the speaker recognizes and respects the addressee or audience's negative face, not interfering with their freedom of action (Brown & Levinson, 1987). According to Phức and YẾN (2016), while positive politeness strategies present “solidarity”, negative politeness present “deference”.

Pessimism in inaugural speeches. This strategy occurs when the speaker gives highlight to problems, instability, and negative descriptions of the current conditions of things.

In their speeches, the presidents would cite terrible news and slowly build to a hopeful segment. This build up allows them to establish their plans on addressing these concerns and issues.

“We face prospects of the spread of the ward broad, of which we are totally blameless... But countries like ours will bear the brunt of it... the same dark prospect of conflict will spread to our part of the world.” (Marcos, 2022, para. 12)

“... our government confronts a crisis of trust. For many years, a radical and corrupt establishment has extracted power and wealth from our citizens while the pillars of our society lay broken and seemingly in complete disrepair.” (Trump, 2025, para. 9)

Hedging. It occurs when the speaker softens statements or reduces the amount of a directive to avoid imposition or to respect autonomy of the other. It softens the impact of what an action might do to threaten the audience's face, especially their negative face.

“It will be massive amounts of money pouring into our Treasury... If we work together, there is nothing we cannot do and no dream we cannot achieve.” (Trump, para. 45)

“I believe that if we but focus on the work at hand, and the work that will come to hand, we will go very far under my watch.” (Marcos, 2022, para. 4)

Giving deference. Giving the audience or the addressee deference is another negative politeness strategy as it shows respect to their negative face. By showing humility and respect in their speech, the presidents also show deference, even to the former presidents of the country.

“His Excellency David Hurley, Governor-General of Australia, and First Lady Linda Hurley; their Excellencies, Special Envoys and Heads of Delegations; His Excellency Most Reverend Charles John Brown and the esteemed members of the Diplomatic Corps; Vice President Sara Duterte; President Fidel Ramos; President Joseph Ejercito Estrada; President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo... I was not the instrument of change. You were that; you made it happen.” (Marcos, 2022, para. 1)

“Vice President Vance, Speaker Johnson, Senator Thune, Chief Justice Roberts, justices of the Supreme Court of the United States, President Clinton, President Bush, President Obama, President Biden... To the Black and Hispanic communities, I want to thank you for the tremendous outpouring of love and trust that you have shown me with your vote.” (Trump, 2025, para. 2)

3.3 Comparative Analysis of Politeness Strategies in American and Filipino Inaugural Speeches and Reflection on Culture

The inaugural speeches of President Donald J. Trump and President Ferdinand R. Marcos, Jr. reflect the cultures of their respective countries. Looking at American speech, specifically President Trump's 2025 inaugural speech, positive politeness was utilized to foster unity and inclusion, appealing to national pride and achievements in the past. He also used negative politeness to hedge statements to his audience (3), respecting the audience's autonomy while also promoting collaboration and cooperation at the same time. This reflects on the individualistic nature present in American culture.

On the other hand, Filipino inaugural speech, as provided by President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr.'s 2022 address, positive politeness was used to create a sense of calm with the citizens, sharing dreams and solidarity. Negative politeness was prominent in acknowledging officials and deference to others, This brings into light the sense of collectivism in the Filipino culture and respect. However, it is important to note that President Marcos used less personal first-person pronouns (I=55, We=60), compared to President Trump (I=36, W=88). This supports Sadeghogli and Niroomand's (2016) study that politeness theory reveals the power relationship, social distance, and degree of imposition that actions done through communicative means display and they vary from one context to another. Still, both American and Filipino leaders used positive politeness to urge a sense of unity and motivation to their constituents. While Americans tend to be more assertive and goal oriented, while Filipinos balance inclusivity and deference, reflecting the community-oriented culture.

4. Conclusion

The use of politeness strategies in American and Filipino inaugural speeches, particularly those of President Donald J. Trump and President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr., highlights how one's culture shape political communication. Speeches of the American president were assertive and goal-focused, showcasing individualism with collective results in mind, while the Filipino president showed humility, solidarity, and community. These illustrate that politeness is not only a toy, but a reflection of the culture and the historical contexts of each nation.

Recommendation - Limitations must be considered based on the findings of this study. First, the study was carried out using only two corpora that were transcripts of their speech, and not their written speech thus it must be considered that the presidents may have inserted some adlibs and improvisations. Hence, the findings here limit the analysis in writing and are more focused on the transcript of their reading from the official websites. Second, the analysis is focused on the politeness of the inauguration speech, which limits the scope of the findings such as other potential metaphorical functions found in the speech. Future studies may investigate these and explore literary patterns used in various cultures and contexts.

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