

Scientific Diction and Identity Construction in the 2024 Presidential Debate: Implications for Language Learning and Political Discourse

Lusi Komala Sari ^{1*}, Lusi Mgbemgasha Apakama ²

¹ Universitas Islam Negeri Sultan Syarif Kasim Riau, Indonesia

² Alvan Ikoku Federal University of Education Owerri, Nigeria

* Author Correspondence

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Abstract

This study investigates the use of scientific diction in the 2024 Indonesian presidential debate as a rhetorical strategy for constructing intellectual identity and power relations. Drawing on critical discourse analysis and a descriptive qualitative approach, the research identifies how scientifically and technically nuanced vocabulary, such as terms related to national security, technology, and policy was employed by presidential candidates to convey credibility, assert authority, and position themselves as knowledgeable leaders. The data were collected from transcriptions of televised debates and analyzed thematically based on diction type, field of reference, and rhetorical function. The findings reveal that scientific diction functions not merely as a communicative device but also as a performative and symbolic resource to enhance public perception, ideological appeal, and discursive power. This phenomenon suggests that language in political contexts is both strategic and ideological. From an educational perspective, these insights contribute to language learning by offering real-world examples for developing critical literacy, academic vocabulary, and rhetorical competence. Scientific diction in political discourse can thus be used as a pedagogical resource to teach persuasive speaking, analytical writing, and discourse awareness in language classrooms.

Contact : Corresponding author  e-mail: lusikomalasari@gmail.com

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Introduction

Language is not merely a tool for communication but a symbolic instrument through which power, identity, and ideology are constructed (Fairclough, 1995; Burke, 1969). In political discourse, verbal performance serves both rhetorical and ideological purposes, shaping how individuals and institutions are perceived (van Dijk, 2006). Across democratic contexts, political figures strategically use language not only to inform but also to persuade, legitimize, and construct public personas. The use of specialized or scientific diction, terms often drawn from academic or professional registers, has emerged as a key strategy in this process (Hyland, 2005). Such diction evokes authority and signals intellectual competence. In this way, language functions performatively and ideologically, making political speech an arena of symbolic contestation (Aristotle, 2007; Cicero, 1942).

Importantly, this phenomenon also holds pedagogical relevance. In the context of language education, particularly English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and critical literacy, exposure to scientific diction in real-world discourse offers a meaningful basis for cultivating academic vocabulary, discourse awareness, and evaluative reasoning (Pennycook, 2001; Canagarajah, 1999). Through political discourse, students can examine how diction choices function not just semantically, but also socially and ideologically. Thus, the study of scientific diction contributes to both civic education and language learning by linking linguistic features to power and persuasion.

Indonesia, as the third-largest democracy in the world, has increasingly embraced televised presidential debates as a vital platform for political communication. The 2024 presidential debate, broadcast nationally and followed by millions, offered a high-stakes rhetorical stage where candidates competed not only on policy content but also on discursive performance. These debates were instrumental in shaping public opinion, political branding, and intellectual identity (Sari, 2022). Unlike earlier election cycles dominated by populist appeals and emotive slogans (Heryanto, 2011), the 2024 debate revealed a distinct linguistic shift: the deliberate use of scientific diction to frame issues such as climate change, military defense, digital transformation, and economic sovereignty. This reflects a growing public expectation for rational, knowledge-based leadership.

One prominent strategy observed in the 2024 presidential debate was the use of scientific diction, defined here as terminology and expressions typically found in academic, technocratic, or professional domains (Anindita et al., 2017; Leech & Short, 1981). For the purpose of this study, scientific diction is further operationalized into three functional categories: (1) technocratic diction, characterized by references to institutional systems, governance mechanisms, and bureaucratic language (e.g., roadmap digitalisasi, reformasi birokrasi); (2) epistemic diction, involving assertions grounded in evidence or data to convey objectivity and rationality (e.g., berbasis riset, hasil kajian, data bps); (3) formal-rhetorical diction, which emphasizes lexical precision, elevated register, and abstract conceptualization (e.g., kedaulatan ekonomi, ekosistem digital, transformasi hijau). Each of these types serves both a semantic function in denoting technical or conceptual meaning and a pragmatic function in constructing credibility, aligning with informed audiences, or asserting ideological stance. This linguistic choice reflects a rhetorical effort to project intellectual authority and differentiate

oneself from opponents through a rational, expert-oriented persona. However, the implications of this strategy have not been systematically studied in the Indonesian context, particularly with regard to how such diction contributes to identity formation, audience alignment, and political persuasion.

Previous research on Indonesian political communication has often focused on populist narratives, religious appeals, or emotional language (Persada & Syahrudin, 2018; Rosyad et al., 2023). While valuable, such studies have not sufficiently explored the use of formal, scientific language as a rhetorical resource. Moreover, although global scholarship has discussed the ethos-building function of scientific language in Western political discourse (Charteris-Black, 2011; Zarefsky, 2004), limited attention has been given to its strategic deployment in Southeast Asian or Indonesian presidential debates. This gap underlines the need for a detailed linguistic analysis of how scientific diction operates in political performances and how it contributes to identity construction and symbolic power in Indonesian democracy.

This study aims to analyze the role of scientific diction in the construction of intellectual identity during the 2024 Indonesian presidential debate. The research addresses the following questions: (1) What types of scientific diction were employed by the candidates? (2) In what discursive contexts did these terms appear? (3) How did this diction shape the rhetorical positioning and public image of the speakers? Using critical discourse analysis (CDA), this study seeks to reveal how language operates ideologically to reinforce perceptions of competence, credibility, and leadership. By focusing on word choice and rhetorical function, the study highlights the strategic dimension of political language use.

The insights gained from this linguistic investigation extend beyond political analysis to inform language education, particularly in the areas of critical literacy, academic vocabulary, and rhetorical skill-building. Scientific diction in real-life political discourse provides a rich, contextual resource for teaching language use with purpose and persuasion. Through analyzing actual political utterances, students can develop awareness of how diction shapes meaning, constructs authority, and positions the speaker socially (Pennycook, 2001; Canagarajah, 1999). This approach enhances not only communicative competence but also civic engagement through critical discourse understanding (Hanifah et al., 2024; Kurniawati et al., 2022).

This article is grounded in linguistic and rhetorical theories, particularly those of Leech (1981) on stylistic diction, Fairclough (1995) on discourse and power, and Aristotle's (2007) theory of rhetoric. It also draws on socio-linguistic perspectives that recognize diction as shaped by social norms, institutional power, and communicative context (Hymes, 1974; Bally, 1951). By exploring the intersection between language, identity, and political performance, this study contributes to both discourse studies and language pedagogy. Ultimately, it positions scientific diction not only as a rhetorical tool in political arenas but also as a pedagogical asset in modern language education.

Method

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach, with the primary aim of interpreting the strategic use of scientific diction in the 2024 Indonesian presidential debates. As emphasized by Moleong (2017), qualitative research enables an in-depth understanding of

social phenomena within their natural context, prioritizing meaning over measurement. In this case, the phenomenon under study is the deliberate use of scientific diction as a means of rhetorical identity construction by political figures. The research subjects are the three presidential candidates, Anies Baswedan (S₁), Ganjar Pranowo (S₂), and Prabowo Subianto (S₃), who participated in the nationally televised 2024 debates. The object of analysis is their spoken utterances, particularly those containing scientific, technical, or academic language. A total of 72 utterances were purposively selected from three debate segments focusing on economy, defense, and governance. The selection criteria were based on the presence of scientific diction, defined in this study as lexical items drawn from academic, professional, or technocratic registers (Hyland, 2005; Anindita et al., 2017). These include terms related to technology, security, institutional systems, and scientific reasoning. The analytical framework used is Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), as developed by Fairclough (1995), which enables the researcher to connect linguistic features to broader socio-political structures. CDA is particularly suitable for examining how discourse constructs power relations, legitimizes ideologies, and shapes speaker identity in political contexts. Through CDA, the study identifies how scientific diction functions not just at the textual level but also in relation to social hierarchy, authority, and symbolic capital. Data were collected through documentation and observation of the televised debates. The speeches were transcribed and coded to identify instances of scientific diction. The researcher served as the main instrument, supported by observation sheets, coding matrices, and thematic analysis forms. The analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), comprising three steps: (1) data reduction, where utterances containing scientific diction were isolated and categorized; (2) data display, in which selected excerpts were organized by candidate, field of reference, and rhetorical function; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification, where patterns were interpreted in relation to identity construction, credibility-building, and discursive power. To ensure the trustworthiness of the analysis, a peer debriefing process was conducted. An independent linguist reviewed 20% of the data coding, and discrepancies were discussed and resolved collaboratively. Thematic coding was conducted in iterative cycles, allowing refinement of categories and improved internal validity. Researcher reflexivity was maintained through memos and analytical journaling throughout the process. Although the data originate from public broadcasts, ethical research principles were observed. No content was altered or decontextualized in ways that could misrepresent meaning. This approach aligns with ethical standards in discourse analysis, especially in studies involving high-profile public figures (Tracy, 2010). It is important to note that this study does not involve classroom participants, instructional intervention, or learner-generated data. The presidential debates are treated as authentic texts that reflect high-stakes rhetorical language, which can be used as material for teaching academic vocabulary, persuasive strategies, and critical language awareness.

Results and Discussion

Results

The analysis of the 2024 Indonesian presidential debate revealed a total of 72 instances of scientific diction, distributed among the three candidates: S₁ (Anies Baswedan) used scientific

diction 31 times, S₂ (Ganjar Pranowo) used it 25 times, and S₃ (Prabowo Subianto) used it 16 times. These utterances appeared predominantly in discussion segments related to economy, defense, governance, and technology. To present the findings clearly, a matrix was constructed to compare the candidates' rhetorical strategies through scientific diction.

Table 1. Scientific Diction Comparison Across Candidates

Candidate	Number of Utterances	Key Scientific Terms	Field of Reference	Rhetorical Function
S ₁	31	"cyber", "climate crisis", "national security"	Technology, Environment, Governance	Project modernity, global awareness
S ₂	25	"decolonization", "sociological", "strategic planning"	Social science, Politics, Economy	Align with reform, show rationality
S ₃	16	"military technology", "defense system", "leadership ethics"	Security, Ethics, Governance	Emphasize strength, stability, and values

A more detailed account of the diction used by each candidate is also provided in the following summary tables.

Table 2. Scientific Diction Frequency by Candidate

Candidate	Scientific Diction Used
S ₁	Cyber, technology, climate crisis, defense and security, sovereignty, social welfare, national security, international diplomacy, international security
S ₂	Decolonization, reform, cyber, institutions, lithium, nickel, sociological, modernization, consensus, ratio, strategic planning, military capability, strategic autonomy
S ₃	Science, defense and security, leadership ethics, strategic leadership (2), military technology, defense systems (2)

Each candidate displayed distinct patterns in the use of scientific diction. S₁ focused heavily on global and environmental issues, S₂ emphasized socio-political transformation and institutional rationality, while S₃ prioritized military strength and ethical leadership. The repetition of certain terms, such as strategic leadership and defense system, suggests a deliberate attempt at rhetorical reinforcement. These findings show that scientific diction in political debates is not randomly distributed but thematically clustered and rhetorically intentional. The vocabulary used reflects strategic alignment with voter expectations and personal branding as intellectually competent leaders.

The systematic appearance of academic and professional terminology in the debate provides a rich dataset for language education. These findings offer concrete material to explore persuasive language, disciplinary vocabulary, and audience targeting in the classroom. This will be further discussed in the next section. However, the current analysis remains centered on the

production side of political discourse, particularly the candidates' strategic use of scientific diction. Future studies should incorporate audience reception data to examine how such diction is interpreted and internalized by viewers, especially in educational contexts. Incorporating feedback from learners through classroom observation, surveys, or interviews would further enrich the pedagogical value of the study. Although the present findings offer a systematic description of scientific diction use, empirical engagement with students and educators is essential to validate its instructional relevance and communicative effectiveness in language education.

Discussion

The results indicate that scientific diction was a prominent rhetorical feature used by all three candidates, albeit with varying intensity and thematic focus. S₁ employed a lexicon related to technology, global diplomacy, and national security to construct a cosmopolitan and strategic persona. His diction emphasized modernization, digital awareness, and international positioning, suggesting an attempt to claim epistemic authority and global relevance. S₂ used terminology rooted in social science, historical reform, and democratic processes. His lexical choices, such as decolonization, sociology, and consensus, reflect a reformist identity grounded in critical awareness and social transformation. Meanwhile, S₃ relied heavily on military and ethical terminology, highlighting concepts like defense systems, military technology, and leadership ethics to present himself as a rational, disciplined, and morally grounded leader. This aligns with Fairclough's (1995) notion of symbolic power, where discourse becomes a means of asserting leadership and ideological dominance.

These findings resonate with earlier studies on the ideological role of diction in political discourse. Persada and Syahrudin (2018) found that presidential candidates in the 2014 election also employed technocratic and nationalist diction to build legitimacy. Similarly, Rosyad et al. (2023) showed that media representations of candidates in 2019 used scientific language to frame intellectual authority and credibility. However, this study extends the analysis by directly linking scientific diction to rhetorical identity construction within live debate performance. Furthermore, while global scholarship (e.g., Aristotle, 2007; Burke, 1969) has emphasized ethos, logos, and pathos in political rhetoric, this study illustrates how scientific diction functions as a discursive vehicle for all three appeals, particularly when performed in front of a national audience. Compared to Western contexts, the Indonesian case adds layers of sociocultural nuance, especially in relation to nationalistic and technocratic ideals embedded in candidate performances (Gultom, 2024).

From a language education perspective, the presence of scientific diction in political debates offers meaningful applications. First, teachers can use debate excerpts as real-world texts for teaching argument structure, stance-taking, and audience positioning (Pennycook, 2001; Canagarajah, 1999). For example, learners can be asked to identify how candidates use specific terms to gain trust or frame authority, such as "strategic planning" versus "moral leadership." Second, students can compare scientific diction with informal or populist language, fostering awareness of register variation and rhetorical effect. Third, debate language can support vocabulary building across domains, such as military, economic, and environmental terminology which aligns with academic language development goals in EAP (English for

Academic Purposes). Finally, such activities can enhance critical discourse literacy, as students become more aware of how language reflects power dynamics and ideological framing (Hanifah et al., 2024; Kurniawati et al., 2022). Educators can design modules that integrate these texts into speaking, writing, and reading tasks focused on argumentation, evaluation, and rhetorical strategy.

This study is limited to a single political event, the 2024 Indonesian presidential debate—and thus may not capture the broader trends in other political contexts or over time. It also focuses solely on linguistic production and does not include audience reception or media reinterpretation, which may affect how scientific diction is ultimately perceived and internalized. Future studies could expand this scope by investigating how students respond to political language in classroom activities, or how exposure to political debates shapes their attitudes toward academic diction and persuasive speech. Another promising direction would be to analyze how scientific diction is adopted or resisted in student debates, examining whether learners internalize such language practices as part of their own rhetorical identity. These extensions would contribute further to both political linguistics and critical language pedagogy.

Nevertheless, the pedagogical implications of these findings warrant deeper attention. Scientific diction, as employed in political discourse, is not merely a rhetorical device but can be recontextualized in educational settings to foster critical language awareness. As argued by Louw and Fairclough (2019), discourse in political arenas can serve as authentic material for sociolinguistic inquiry in the classroom. Integrating political texts into language instruction enables learners to decode ideological positions and reflect on the power of language in shaping public opinion (Clark & Ivanič, 2020).

Furthermore, teaching with real-world political discourse fosters civic literacy and democratic engagement, aligning with the goals of critical pedagogy (Giroux, 2020). Learners are not only exposed to high-register academic vocabulary but are also encouraged to analyze how such diction positions speakers and constructs authority. This echoes findings from Chen & Lin (2023), who demonstrated that the incorporation of political texts into English language classrooms significantly enhances students' rhetorical sensitivity and socio-political awareness. Thus, by incorporating scientific diction from presidential debates into classroom practice, whether through discourse analysis, debate exercises, or reflective writing, educators can bridge the gap between linguistic theory and civic education. This reinforces the notion that language teaching must move beyond grammar and vocabulary to include the ideological dimensions of discourse, empowering students as critical consumers and producers of language in public life.

Conclusion

The use of scientific diction in the 2024 Indonesian presidential debate reflects a calculated rhetorical strategy to construct intellectual identity and assert ideological positioning. Through carefully selected terms rooted in academic, professional, and technical domains, each candidate shaped a distinct public persona whether as a global-minded reformer, a nationalist strategist, or a morally grounded defender of sovereignty. Scientific diction thus emerged not only as a linguistic tool but also as a symbolic resource for gaining legitimacy, projecting competence, and reinforcing political authority. This study confirms that political

language is performative and ideological. The findings emphasize that word choices in high-stakes debates do more than convey information, they construct identity, evoke ethos and logos, and shape collective perception. Each candidate's diction aligns with broader discursive strategies that blend national concerns with global literacy, reinforcing Fairclough's (1995) view of discourse as a medium of power and social practice. From a language education perspective, the insights from this study offer practical applications for developing critical literacy, academic vocabulary, and rhetorical awareness. Scientific diction in political debates can serve as authentic and contextual material for teaching argumentation, persuasive speaking, and discourse analysis. It helps learners understand how language reflects authority and ideology while enabling them to analyze and produce rhetorically effective language. However, this study is limited to a single political event and does not include audience reception or media reframing. Its findings are also context-specific and may not generalize across time or political systems. Future research may explore how students engage with political texts in classroom settings, how exposure to academic diction affects their attitudes and language practices, or how political rhetoric shapes learner identities in debates and discussions. Such studies would deepen our understanding of the intersection between discourse, pedagogy, and civic literacy. In sum, this study offers initial insights into the intersection of political language and pedagogical potential. The findings suggest that political discourse can be a meaningful entry point for cultivating students' rhetorical awareness and reflective language use. Thus, this research contributes modestly to ongoing discussions about how language education can respond to the communicative demands of democratic citizenship.

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Authors' Note

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article. The authors confirmed that the paper was free of plagiarism.

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