# Semiotic Analysis of Public Political Space: Euphemisms, Dysphemisms and Hyperboles as Tools of Political Manipulation

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## Abstract

*The study presented shares the results of semiotic analysis of political slogans used in the political campaigns of Donald Trump (in the 2016, 2020 and 2024 presidential elections; especially his MAGA – Let´s Make America Great Again" slogan), and political slogans used in five billboards by the ĽSNS part (Folk Party Our Slovakia) and its representative Marian Kotleba. The authors focus on the semiotic analysis of specific use of modifiers (euphemisms, dysphemisms and hyperboles) in the context of their extra-linguistic means (such as visual signs), by which politicians put forward both the direct and implicit meanings of their utterances. The research by Cingerová, Dulebová and Štefančík (2021) served as a theoretical framework for the basis of analysis. As a result, the authors arrived at an identification of well-known methods of political manipulation by the use of figurative language, applied to ongoing campaigns, as well as at a definition of a new function of dysphemisms, i.e., de-sensitising the public towards strong language and controversial statements.*

**Key words:** critical discourse analysis (CDA), euphemism, dysphemism, understatement, overstatement, political discourse, manipulation.

## Introduction

Štefančík, Cingerová, Dulebová (2021), Niehr (2014) and Javorčíková, (2021) agree that philology and cultural studies, alongside political sciences and history are of key importance in understanding current aspects of public life, especially in an era of globalization and rapidly shared content. Political discourses are influential instruments of power that may enhance progress, as well as grow into various malign manifestations, such as populism, demagogy and manipulation. Politicians often pragmatically exploit the valences of meanings of polysemantic and figurative words and devices, which are not only typical for stylistics (such as euphemisms and dysphe-

misms), but also those, originally used in literature, such as metaphors, hyperboles and overstatements, understatements and their variants (litotes and meiosis), and many more. Therefore, linguists, experts in cultural studies and professional political scientists, historians and journalists need to critically analyse political discourses and confront public speakers with their statements, in order to explain explicit and also implicit meanings to the general public and, most importantly, the electorate.

With the upcoming parliamentary elections in Slovakia (to be held on September 30, 2023) in mind, the purpose of the presented study is to compare selected strategies, using stylistic, rhetoric and literary devices in the political slogans of ĽSNS (Folk Party Our Slovakia) represented by Marian Kotleba, and those used by the 45th US President Donald Trump, in his successful 2016 and unsuccessful 2020 presidential campaigns and also in his controversial January 6, 2021 speech, leading to escalation of violence in the Congress. Both politicians represent right-wing platforms, defining themselves against minorities, immigration and the EU, to name a few. Based on the ongoing research (Blake 2021; Hamed 2021; Cingerová, Dulebová, Štefančík 2021), we will demonstrate how both politicians (mis)use euphemisms, dysphemisms and their variants to manipulate their audience in their political campaigns.

## Theoretical outcomes and methodological platform of the research

### Stylistic, rhetoric and literary devices altering discourses: euphemisms, political euphemisms, understatement, litotes and political correctness vs. overstatement and hyperbole

According to Zavrl (2016, p. 26), language is the most important political instrument. Expressive, transactional, as well as poetic discourses recognize several terms, denominating ways to stylistically and artistically alter facts. Among these are euphemisms (with the variant of political euphemisms and politically correct language), generally pointing out positive aspects of a phenomenon and neutralizing negatives. Dysphemisms, on the other hand, emphasize and amplify negatives of a phenomenon. There are many other literary, rhetoric and stylistic terms, that generally serve as modifiers of meaning(s), such as understatements, overstatements, litotes, meiosis, adynaton, and many others. Table 1 shows their taxonomy, definitions and other attributes.

Table 1: Rhetoric, literary and stylistic devices, modifying utterances.

| Term | Type of device | Coined | Example | Purpose of the speaker | Definition |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Euphemism | Literary, stylistic | *Glassographia* 1956 | She was **differently abled** (vs. crippled) | To change context, emotion or purpose of the statement | A good or favourable interpretation of a bad word (Thomas Blount's *Glassographia,* 1956) |
| Variant of euphemisms: Political euphemism | Stylistic | | **Freedom fighters** intervened (vs. terrorists) | To disguise, cheat or persuade (Zhao, Dong 2010) | They were created in political life and serve political purposes as a tool for political leaders to control information transmission, they have two main social functions: disguising or cheating function and persuasive function (Zhao, Dong 2010). |
| PC (politically correct) language | Stylistic | 1934 | **Police officer** addressed the journalists (vs. policeman) | To neutralize the utterance (i.e., gender) To use language that helps instead of harms (AI). | A term used to describe language, policies, or measures that are intended to avoid offense or disadvantage to members of particular groups in society (AI). |
| Understatement | Literary (figure of speech, Holman-Harmon, p. 516) | | Toni Morisson has **a few** fans (vs. numerous) | 1-Showing politeness 2-Emphasizing the enormity of a problem. 3-Avoiding hurting the reader's feeling and making the hearer sulky. 4-Criticizing someone (particularly people of lower rank and position in society) subtly. | Description of something as having much less quality than it does, i.e., as less valuable, important, smaller than it is. Understatements often have ironic effects because the intensity of the situation is not adequately expressed (AI). |

| | | | | 5-Being more subtle than sarcasm. 6-Functioning as a metaphor. 7-Making problems less serious. | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Variant of understatement: Litotes | Literary | | The new Spielberg film is **not bad** (vs. fantastic) | To express stoic restraint (Holman-Harmon, p. 277). | Emphasizing the good qualities by negating the bad ones. |
| Variant of understatement: Meiosis (double negation) | Literary | | She was **not unkind** (meaning: kind) She was **not unmindful** (meaning: She gave thorough attention) | To intentionally express understatement, detachment for humorous, satiric reasons or emphasis (Holman-Harmon, p. 294). | Replacement of a word by the negation of its antonym. |
| Dysphemism | Stylistic | 1884 | He was **stupid** (vs. slow) | To characterize a given object in a negative and disparaging way (AI). | Antonym of euphemism: substitution of offensive and disparaging meaning(s) for agreeable and inoffensive ones (MW, 2023). |
| Hyperbole or overstatement (synonyms) | Literary, rhetorical | | You're **tearing me apart**! (Rebel without Cause, 1955); Overstatement: Meeting my idol was **a matter of life and death** (MW, 2023). | To intentionally amplify the meaning and express emotions that accompany it and emphasize the importance of your statement (MW, 2023). | |

| Variant of Hyperbole: Adynaton (plural: adynata) | Literary | | I will sooner have **a beard grown in the palm of my hand** than he shall get one on his cheek. | To make a comparison that is completely impossible or unfeasible (AI). | Exaggeration so magnified as to express impossibility (WI, 2023). |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|

Source: JJ, RGS.

Based on Cingerová, Dulebová and Štefančík's research of ideological lexicon (2021: 33), it may be stated, that terms, listed in Table 1 may in political linguistics function as *Fahnenwöter* (positive expressions, bringing up positive connotations of democracy, solidarity, equality, freedom, etc.) or *Stigmawörter* (negative expressions, bringing up negative connotations of totality, self-centeredness, racism, oppression, etc.).

In order to understand the significance of modified language in political discourses, we often need to go beyond rudimentary definitions. Zhao and Dong (2010) suggest, if a euphemism's semantic meaning's deviation of degree with a range from 1 to 10, in which a greater number refers to a greater degree of deviation, the above-mentioned political euphemism expressions should be marked with a 10, while some ordinary expressions, such as "overweight" and "fat", can only be marked as signifier 1. Almost all of the terms, listed in Table 1, share a certain imprecision or vagueness of expression, allowing interpretative scale of various valences of meanings. For example, the statement *I hated the book*, can be expressed by several other expressions (*I didn't like the book; The book left me cold; The book was nothing to write home about*, etc.) which can be very effectively used as political tools, disguising speaker's intentions or showing them in more palatable light. And vice versa, dysphemisms and hyperboles (overstatements) can be used to emphasize, intensify or make the phenomenon more dramatic than it is. Generally, all the aforementioned phenomena are very effective tools of political discourse, especially when serving pragmatic political purposes, as they replace direct expressions with implied, obscure and vague ones. In the next section, we will demonstrate how various terms, listed in Table 1, are used for pragmatic purposes in Slovak and American political discourses. Given the limited scope of this study, attention will be paid to euphemisms, dysphemisms and hyperboles as used in political slogans; other related terms will be the subject of further research.

**Research corpus: politicians and political campaigns**

Both the USA and Slovakia are currently in the process of political campaigning. In the USA, the next presidential elections will be held on November 5, 2024 (both Joe Biden and Donald J. Trump are running for re-election). In Slovakia, the next parliamentary elections in Slovakia are planned for September 30, 2023, and up to twenty-five political parties are running for elections (Voľby, 2023). The purpose of the presented study is to compare selected strategies of using stylistic, rhetoric and literary devices in political slogans of ĽSNS (Folk Party Our Slovakia) representative Marian Kotleba, and those used by the 45th US President Donald Trump, in his successful 2016 and unsuccessful 2020 presidential campaigns and also in his controversial January 6, 2021 speech, leading to escalation of violence in Congress. Both politicians represent right-wing platforms, defining themselves against minorities, immigration and the EU, to name a few.

Political campaigns, especially top-level presidential and parliamentary election campaigns, employ various forms of public campaign techniques. These may, for example, include:

- physical gatherings (e.g., rallies, whistle-stop tours and political house parties),
- media campaign advertising (using paid media, such as newspapers, radio, TV and billboards),
- campaign communication (e.g., writing to the public, leaflets and campaign newspapers and also internet- supported communication, such as e-mails, websites, podcasts, etc.),
- campaign merchandise (buttons, flags, caps, T- shirts, etc.).

In this study, we will focus on publicly displayed political slogans, summarizing the main points of the respective political platform. Donald Trump publicized his and the Republican political slogans in his rallies, via internet-supported platforms, such as twitter(X), and various campaign merchandise (he did not use conventional forms of campaigning, such as billboards, as he focused on broader impact of technologically transmitted campaigns).

On the other hand, in the 2023 parliamentary election campaign, Marian Kotleba communicates the essentials of his politics mostly via political slogans in publicly displayed billboards (5 of them, currently displayed in various parts of Slovakia, were part of this research).

Both Donald Trump and Marian Kotleba use euphemisms, dysphemisms and hyperboles, in order to manipulate the public. However, the message of political slogans, as displayed in public political space (in billboards, rallies, merchandise) is communicated not only via text, but also via a broad complex of non-verbal visual, acoustic and haptic phenomena that *co-create* explicit and implicit meaning(s) alongside with verbal utterances. In order to understand these implicit meaning(s), a researcher of political rhetoric should conduct a concise semiotic analysis[1] and pay attention to a variety of signs, that pragmatically communicate meaning with each other, such as:

1. Words (e.g., the word *policeman* is used to describe how the speaker feels toward gender; note: JJ)
2. Images (e.g., the images of politicians or a state symbol(s) used alongside a billboard will impact the readers' understanding of the message encoded in the billboard; note: JJ)
3. Colours (e.g., the tricolor indicates patriotism in Slovakia and incidentally also the USA; red colour alerts attention; note: JJ)
4. Symbols (e.g., the exclamation mark '!' can convey a sense of surprise or excitement)
5. Gestures (e.g., a 'thumbs up' shows positivity)
6. Sounds (e.g., music played on the piano in the minor key can create a sense of sadness; irrelevant for billboards)
7. Fashion (e.g., clothing can reveal a lot about a person's socioeconomic status, values and priorities)

(based on: Chandler 2021; examples altered for the purposes of this article by JJ). Thus, semiotic analysis of the meaning(s) of selected political slogans will include the analysis of figurative expressions that distort, change alter statements (such as euphemisms, dysphemism and hyperboles) in the context of six other aforementioned semiotic signs. In the following section, semiotic analysis of selected Donald J. Trump's and ĽSNS Marian Kotleba's political slogans will demonstrate how language is used to change

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[1] Semiotics is the study of cultural signs and symbols, that may include visual language (e.g., billboards; note: JJ) and signs (including images, symbols, gestures, sounds, and design; these may translate to e.g., the number and size of national flags in political meetings; note: JJ). Semiotic analysis is a close look into the unconscious cultural patterns that shape consumer behaviour and response to textual messages, thematic content and still or video imagery (based on: Chandler, 2021). Semiotics helps to explain how different modes of communication (e.g., language, visuals, or gestures) work together to create **meaning in context**. Finally, semiotics can help us develop a deeper understanding of the world around us, including the media we see (e.g., films, news, adverts and novels).

the context, emotion or purpose behind a statement in order to manipulate the audience and transmit additional intended meanings beyonde the literal ones.

## Euphemisms, dysphemisms and hyperboles in the American and Slovak public political space

The USA held presidential elections in 2016, 2020 and currently is preparing for the upcoming 2024 presidential elections. Slovakia, at the moment, is also in the campaign for parliamentary elections, that was launched in March, 2023. Both Donald Trump and Marian Kotleba effectively used political euphemisms, dysphemisms and hyperboles with a multiplicity of effects.

### Political euphemisms in American and Slovak public space

### Semiotic analysis of the euphemism: make something great "again"

Donald Trump (in his 2016 presidential campaign, via slogan: "Let's Make America Great Again", abbreviated as MAGA) and Marian Kotleba (in his 2023 parliamentary elections billboard campaign, via slogan: "We will bring Slovakia 'again' back to feet.") used, among other political tools, the adverb 'again', that in both contexts, served as a political euphemism, indicating previous downfall of their respective country.

Historically, in the USA, the adverb of time 'again' has been used in political slogans several times as an effective political tool. According to the United States Studies Centre (2019), it is believed to have first been used in a speech by the Republican senator Alexander Wiley at the third session of the 76th Congress, just before the 1940 presidential election: "America needs a leader who can coordinate labor, capital, and management; who can give the man of enterprise encouragement, who can give them the spirit which will beget vision. That will *make America great again*." Twenty-four years later, similar wording has been used in an advertisement for Barry Goldwater in his unsuccessful 1964 presidential campaign. However, MAGA became nationally and internationally popular after successful Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign as: "Let's Make America Great Again" (see photo 2):

Photo 1: "Let's Make America Great Again", used in Ronald Reagan's 1980 presidential campaign



Source: Busy Beaver Button Museum, 2023.

The term was created in 1979 during a time in which the USA was suffering from a worsening economy at home marked by high unemployment and inflation. At the time, the USA was suffering from an economic downturn and stagflation. In his acceptance speech in 1980, Reagan reinforced the message of the slogan: "For those without job opportunities, we'll stimulate new opportunities, particularly in the inner cities where they live. For those who've abandoned hope, we'll restore hope and we'll welcome them into a great national crusade to *make America great again*." (Reagan, 1980). The slogan was popularized by campaign merchandise, e.g., campaign buttons (photo 1), accentuating references to the national flag and generally to patriotism by the tricolor layout and stars and stripes. Several other presidents and presidential candidates, including Bill Clinton (1992) and Hillary Clinton (2008), alluded to the phrase as it proved to be a very effective political tool (United States Studies Centre, 2019). That is perhaps why Donald Trump changed the intended phrase "Keep America Great" to MAGA in his 2016 presidential campaign and, intends to recycle it in 2024 presidential elections (see Photo 2):

Photo 2: Donald Trump wearing campaign merchandise with MAGA political slogan.



Source: MAGA, 2023.

However, the MAGA phrase is seen as controversial as it semiotically points out dissatisfaction with the previous government of Barrack Obama and pro-immigration policy. One of the sources agrees, "…the hats were a powerful reminder of the dramatic change in power (…) to unfold in Washington" (Spodak 2017). The MAGA hat has become a symbol of violence, division and exclusion. The MAGA hat and the movement that wears it represent a denial of the liberty at the heart of the American dream. The message is clear: you don't belong. Several journalists and representative of public institutions formulated their views about the slogan and its meaning:

Robin Abcarian wrote that "[w]earing a 'Make America Great Again' hat is not necessarily an overt expression of racism. But if you wear one, it's a pretty *(sic.)* good indication that you share, admire or appreciate President Trump's racist views about Mexicans, Muslims and border walls." (Abcarian 2019).

Aliya Danzeisen (The Islamic Women's Council member) warned: "That hat represents the denial of the freedom of beliefs. That hat represents the denial of minority voices. That hat represents the vitriol that has been harming that nation and has been harming the world for the last four years." (The Conversation 2023).

Further, a 2018 study (using text mining and semantic network analytics of Twitter text and hashtags networks) confirmed that the "#MakeAmericaGreatAgain" and "#MAGA" hashtags were often used by white supremacist and white nationalist users and had been used as "an organizing discursive space" for far-right extremists globally (Eddington, 2018).

The adverb of time 'again' was, in a way similar to MAGA, used by Marian Kotleba in one of his billboards. Kotleba, as a representative of ĽSNS party, promises to bring Slovakia 'again' back to feet (see Photo 3):

Photo 3:
Text on the top right: "We will bring Slovakia back to feet again."
Text in the middle: "As the only parliamentary party, we are not (highlighted in red) immersed in corruption!"
Text at the bottom left: "Kotleba – Folk Party Our Slovakia" (ĽSNS coat-of-arms)
Text at the bottom: "Folk Party Our Slovakia"



Source: JJ.

Semiotically, the verbal part of the billboard (metaphor 'to bring somebody back to his or her feet' *again*) implies one or both of two potential messages:

1. Slovakia is on its knees or, worse, laying down, and needs to be brought back to its feet (meaning: Slovakia is doing poorly economically, socially, culturally, etc. and needs revival), or,
2. Slovakia is upside down and needs to be brought back to its feet (meaning: order has to be restored in Slovakia).

The coded language ('again'), alludes to the previous unsatisfactory politics in Slovakia: the president was a woman with pro-American and pro-EU tendencies, parliamentary parties were in constant quarrels and many situations (e.g., C-19) were managed and communicated to the public chaotically or incompetently.

Kotleba very effectively uses the adverb 'again' as an allusion, or, a political euphemism, indicating that 'before', Slovakia was not in proper shape and needs a change to 'shape up' again. However, he does not communicate his dissatisfaction clearly; instead, he hides the meaning behind a political euphemism.

Semiotically, the message is reinforced by several other obvious patriotic symbols, e.g., the image of the Slovak coat-of-arms on the bottom right, 'mirrored' by the green-and-white ĽSNS party coat-of-arms on the left.[2] This balanced position of ĽSNS coat-of-arms indicates that the platform of ĽSNS is similar and equal to the values and priorities of the Slovak Republic. Moreover, there are two other signs, emphasizing the patriotism of ĽSNS:

1. the colour scheme pointing to the Slovak national colours (red, blue and white) – used in the national coat-of-arms, repeated in the tricolor stripe at the bottom of the photograph and also the three-coloured print.
2. The title of the party – '*Our* Slovakia' (emphasis by: JJ) – also communicates the alleged ĽSNS common interest in public welfare of all the citizens of Slovakia. However, as Cingerová, Dulebová and Štefančík (2021: 34) note, the use of personal and possessive pronouns, such as *we* and *our* is a sign of manipulative and stigmatizing language, which denominates who belongs to *US* and who does not.

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[2] The original double cross, bearing direct resemblance with the Nazi heraldry was replaced in 2018 by a more neutral version of the Slovak coat-of-arms: Slovak double cross and national Slovak mountains (https://www.kosiceonline.sk/lsns-si-zmenila-znak-rovnoramenny-dvojkriz-nahradil-dvojkriz-a-trojv-sie).

Both Trump's and Kotleba's slogans use the adverb 'again' to put forward an implied meaning that their countries are not currently 'great' or 'firmly standing' and need help to regain the significance and power they had lost during the previous governments.

**Semiotic analysis of the euphemism: 'protection'**

Another popular euphemism, that is used by politicians nationally and internationally, is the political euphemism of 'protection'. Donald Trump in his speeches often appeals to the urgent need *to protect* the USA and its culture, against his opponents. For example, in his January 6 speech, he claimed: "We're supposed *to protect* our country, support our country, support our Constitution, and *protect* our constitution" (Trump, 2021). In a similar fashion, in ĽSNS billboards, Marian Kotleba appeals to various fears of the electorate, and semiotically communicates the (urgent) need to protect Slovaks and their country. The most obvious example of this political euphemism is seen in photo 4:

Photo 4:
Text on the top right: "We speak clearly"
Text in the middle: "We will protect Slovakia from LGBT and *(sic.)* gender!"
Text at the bottom left: "Kotleba – Folk Party Our Slovakia" (a coat-of-arms)



Source: JJ.

Semiotically, the billboard transmits several layers of meanings:

1. The central slogan ("We will *protect* Slovakia against LGBT and gender!") primarily communicates the need for "protection" from phenomena, such as (presumably negative) influence of sexual minorities and all the people, involved in equal gender politics, e.g., professional politicians and public figures advocating gender equality, amateur activists, role models, etc. on the morals and values of Slovak citizens.

2. Further, the metonymy ("we will protect *Slovakia*") indicates, the whole Slovakia is endangered and needs protection. This exaggerated statement also represents a sort of hyperbole. Undoubtedly, not all the people in Slovakia need or require protection from LGBT community and gender advocates; certainly not the LGBT community itself.

3. Linguistically, plural pronoun ("*We* will protect…") indicates the politician in the billboard (Marian Kotleba) represents a larger community or, rather a mass of people who will act in favour of Slovakia and its people and defend public safety. These anonymous defenders ("we") are postulated as the stronghold of morals and good manners.

4. Moreover, the text of the billboard is insensitive and possibly deliberately insulting: the abbreviation LGBT is used incorrectly, ignoring the current form of the abbreviation, including more alternatives: LGBTIQA+.[3] On the other hand, the meaning of the English text ("gender") as used in the billboard is unclear – it alludes to gender politics and rights activists, however, the lack of any conjugation indicates the speaker does not care about the nuances of the word and rejects it as a whole. Both spelling inaccuracies communicates disinterest in the community, its principles and values.

5. Finally, another strong verbal meaning is communicated via the use of an exclamation mark, indicating excitement (Chandler, 2021), strong determination and perhaps threat (the trend of using exclamation marks is used in almost all ĽSNS billboards).

Another text in the billboard is represented by the circular ĽSNS coat-of-arms on the left, stating the last name of their leader and full name of the

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[3] Evolution of the term: LGB (pre-1990s), LGBT&Q (1990s), LGBTQA (A- asexual, 2020). https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/article/from-lgbt-to-lgbtqia-the-evolving-recognition-of-identity

party. The coat-of-arms makes the impression of a seal, confirming the message of the billboard. The text at the right top, quite ironically to what has been said on unclear formulations, states another ĽSNS mission, repeated in many of their billboards: "We speak clearly". Both the coat-of-arms and the slogan "We speak clearly" verbally indicate the will to stand for their programme and reject any form of compromise or tolerance.

In terms of other visual signs, the billboard again emphasizes patriotism, reinforced by the image of the Kriváň hill (a large symbol of Slovakia at the back). The third clear meaning is communicated by the flag of the EU, crossed out by red cross. It very clearly demonstrates the ĽSNS desire for the divorce Slovakia from the EU, which stands for the right of minorities, including sexual minorities.

The message, pointing out the need for protection of Slovakia, is even more dramatically put forward in another variant of ĽSNS billboard (see Photo 4):

Photo 5
Text in the middle: "Hands off Slovakia!"
English text in the caption bellow: "Yankees stay home!"
Text at the bottom: "Folk Party Our Slovakia"
Text at the bottom right: "Kotleba – Folk Party Our Slovakia" (coat-of-arms)



Source: JJ.

This billboard differs from the one in Photo 4; it is one of the few that lacks the leader's oversized photograph. Instead, it shows a cartoon paw-like left hand[4] wrapped up in a fragment of the US state flag, attempting to grasp Slovakia (symbolized by a contour map). Semiotically, the billboard indicates the Americans are greedy for Slovakia (presumably the whole of Slovakia, as the billboard does not specify whether it is the Slovak natural riches, or other advancements, the billboard creators had on their mind), which can be also classified as overgeneralized, exaggerated statement. The overall impression of the billboard is scary (the wrinkled and emaciated hand with long nails resembles the hand of a witch or a monster) and evokes the feeling of fear in the viewer. The billboard in photo 5 indirectly, but very clearly, communicates a very urgent need for protection of Slovakia, and the protection is supposed to be coming from ĽSNS. Just like in photo 4, the billboard is politically incorrect: Yankee is a term, referring mostly to the Americans, living in the North-East of the USA. During the WWII, the term spread to Europe, and started to denominate all Americans, not only Northerners. However, it is viewed as pejorative and disrespectful (MW, 2023). Again, ĽSNS communicates here lack of interest in the Americans and their intentions and rejects them as a whole, as a potential threat to Slovakia.

## Semiotic analysis of the hyperbole (overstatement): "the only party"

Hyperboles are also very popular ways in which political language can evoke strong emotions. Donald Trump often postulates himself to the position of the only option to preserve American values (Trump, 2021) and so does ĽSNS. As already discussed in subchapter 2.1.1, the billboard in photo 3 not only used political metaphors and euphemisms, but also very effectively reinforced the central political message by hyperbole, used in the caption: "As *the only parliamentary party*, we are not immersed in corruption". To be immersed in corruption expresses very vividly the situation when somebody is *up to his ears in* some frauds, nepotism and bribery, etc. Semiotically, the adjective *the only* puts forward the meaning of certain exclusivity of ĽSNS and its exceptionally clear moral credit. Again, the slogan is accentuated by an exclamation mark, indicating excitement over the shared information. That semiotically again transmits the tone of urgency, and the need to consider ĽSNS as the only option if one wants to vote for a corruption-free political party.

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[4] Left hand used to symbolise weakness, decay and death (Symbolism of Hand 2023).

Photo 6 shows another hyperbole:

Photo 6
Text in the middle: "We reject immigrants because we love Slovakia!"
Text at the bottom: ""Vote for number 24: The Kotlebas – Folk Party Our Slovakia"
Text at the bottom left: "Kotleba – Folk Party Our Slovakia" (coat-of-arms)



Source: JJ.

Except for other, already discussed semiotic symbols, photo 6 shows hyperbole ("we *love* Slovakia"), which can be taken as exaggeration intended to amplify the meaning and express emotions that accompany it (MW, 2023).

**Semiotic analysis of dysphemisms: "anti-social individuals and parasites"**

Donald Trump is proverbial for his use of very explicit and politically incorrect language. In his public speeches, he often calls his opponents "poll-stealers" and also employs other unevidenced claims that can be classified as **dysphemisms.** He depicts them as incompetent ("They have no idea. They have totally lost control"), manipulative ("they have used the pandemic as a way of defrauding the people in a proper election") and deliberately mean ("Democrats enacted policies that shipped away our jobs, weakened our military, threw open our borders, and put America last"). He calls the Democrats by a variety of other insulting dysphemisms, such as "poll-stealers". Finally, Trump uses statements, which fall off the categories of

hyperboles and dysphemisms and simply are not based on any factual evidence (lies): "I've been in two elections. I *won them both* and the second one, I won much bigger than the first." To reinforce the lie, he uses many synonymic expressions for the expression fraud: such as: lie, hoax, rigged elections, a steal, or stolen elections:

- All of us here today do not want to see our election victory *stolen* by emboldened radical-left Democrats, which is what they're doing. And *stolen* by the fake news media.
- We will stop the *steal*. Today I will lay out just some of the evidence proving that we won this election and we won it by a landslide. This was not a close election.
- As you know, the media has constantly asserted the outrageous *lie* that there was no evidence of widespread *fraud*...
- The states *got defrauded*. They were given false information. They voted on it. Now they want to recertify.
- We will not be intimidated into accepting the *hoaxes* and the *lies* that we've been forced to believe.
- For years, Democrats have gotten away with *election fraud* and weak Republicans. (Trump, 2021)

The expression *fraud* is mentioned twenty-two times, the expression "steal" is repeated four times, the expression hoax or hoax-ed" is mentioned once and "rigged elections" four times. By repeating, Trump pragmatically attempted to plant and reinforce the idea of fraud into his audience and prepare an excuse for their invasion to the Congress building later that afternoon.

Marian Kotleba also does not hold back on the use of strong language. Photo 7 demonstrates another interesting use of hyperbole:

Photo 7:
Text on the top right: "We speak clearly"
Text in the middle: "We will find a way with anti-social individuals and parasites!"
Text in the bottom left: "Kotleba – Folk Party Our Slovakia" (coat-of-arms)
Text on the bottom right: "Vote for number 21: The Kotlebas – Folk Party Our Slovakia"

Source: JJ.

Verbally, the central message of the billboard uses a euphemism "We will find way" or "We will get our ducks in a row with anti-social individuals and parasites" (translated by: JJ), which is emphasized by the exclamation mark at the end of the statement, indicating excitement and determination. What could be the intended meaning of the utterance *we will find way with*, is a variety of precautions: cutting unemployment support and benefits, more police surveillance, more strict laws against people living at a subsistence level, etc. František Tanko (2023), the head of The Roma Union in Slovakia, has already vigorously protested against the hidden agenda of the billboard. However, Kotleba is on safe ground here as figurative language is not meant to be taken literally and it is very difficult to prove the intended meaning is a race crime against the Roma minority. Charges have already been pressed against Marian Kotleba (Weisenbacher, 2023), however, just like in Trump's January 6 speech, it will be very difficult to prove the intended meaning of euphemisms and dysphemisms.

Non-verbal aspects of the billboard, in the same repetitive way as in photo 3, point out patriotism (showing the Kriváň hill, the coat-of-arms of the party – double cross above three Tatra hills and tricolour).

## Discussion

Through a linguistic and semiotic analysis of selected political slogans of Donald Trump's (used in his 2016, 2020 and 2024 presidential campaigns and in January 6 speech) and ĽSNS political slogans used in their campaign

billboards for 2023 Slovak parliamentary elections, we have shown that, among other linguistic means of manipulation (elaborated by Štefančík et al. 2021), Slovak and US politicians make very effective use of dysphemisms, euphemisms and hyperboles to underpin their pragmatic logics.

Euphemisms (…*to make way* with parasites*; Hands off Slovakia;* We will *protect* Slovakia and attempts to *protect* our country, support our country, support our Constitution, and *protect* our constitution) serve, as suggested by Zhao and Dong (2010) to disguise the meaning, which could be understood as inhumane, counter-human rights or too rightwing by ĽSNS or, Trump's political opponents.

Hyperboles (*The only party* that has not been immersed in politics) were used to appeal to the exclusivity of the agent and represent it as the only option for those who value fair-play and corruption-free politics.

However, dysphemisms were used differently by ĽSNS representative Marian Kotleba and Republican candidate Donald Trump. Whereas Trump deliberately avoids politically correct language and uses dysphemisms to directly insult his opponents (the Democrats, whom he called *poll-stealers* and *frauds*; Trump, 2021), Kotleba uses dysphemisms (*parasites, anti-social individuals*) as a form of disguise, to avoid more direct allusions to the Roma, social and perhaps also other minorities. Moreover, both politicians use dysphemism in the public political space with one more pragmatic aim: to de-sensitise the public by frequent exposition of strong language and accept it as a fact. That reminds of Aldous Huxley novel *Brave New World* (1932), where people were taught to accept controversial ideas via constant repetitions in their sleep or effective marketing techniques, based on extreme exposure to marketing strategies in advertising.

Manipulative use of figurative language can be considered a benign form of political discourse, because the means through which the populist achieves his methods often occur on the verge of good taste, or the law, and can lead to the decline of democracy (Cingerová, Dulebová, Štefančík 2021: 35). They also contribute significantly to what Moffitt (2018) refers to as the era of 'post-truth politics', where emotions run over facts. The authors of the study see potential expansion of the research in creating a broader research corpus of political slogans, mapping the whole campaign or the selected politicians.


## Conclusion

There are various ways to distort the truth. Donald Trump, experienced veteran of political speeches and campaigns, through his pragmatic rhetoric, is

able to manipulate the emotions of the mob like a virtuoso. Marian Kotleba uses similar techniques to transmit intended meanings, disguise inhumane and counter-civil rights messages, and de-sensitise the general public towards strong and politically incorrect language.

As we have already discussed (Javorčíková 2021), the language of politicians is becoming an increasingly powerful tool for the dissemination of indirect political messages, but also of political (un)culture. A politician can effectively manipulate the public via a complex of linguistic and semiotic signs. Therefore, the viewer of such manipulative political discourse must be doubly alert, must constantly cultivate his or her ability to think critically, based on the analysis of context, the confrontation of known and new information, but above all on the separation of the factual, linguistic and emotional components of the statement. Therefore, the critical perception of public speeches poses challenges, not only for political scientists, but also for educators, cultural studies and linguists. Experts confirm that, critical reading and thinking, as well as knowledge of cultural contexts are among the key global skills required in modern times (Pecníková, Slatinská 2016; Zelenková, Hanesová 2020; Pondelíková 2021).

Thus, politicians should not be tolerated by the civil and professional public when they are vague and ambiguous in meanings, enabling and potentially inciting expressions of hatred or even violence. In order to achieve this, critical listeners, readers and thinkers, in both native and foreign languages, who are aware of cultural contexts (Kolečani-Lenčová 2020) need to be cultivated. Moreover, politicians should be confronted with the content of their public speeches, their literal and implied meanings. Otherwise, political culture will find itself in danger of losing its essence, which lies on fairness and truth in political discourse.

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