



## PERIPHRAISIS IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE: COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS, LINGUISTIC MECHANISMS, AND ETHICAL IMPLICATIONSE

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### Abstract

This article examines periphrasis as an influential instrument of political discourse rather than a marginal stylistic ornament. In political texts, indirect naming is used to soften sensitive information, regulate public emotions, reduce the visibility of agency, and frame events in ways that appear legitimate, balanced, or necessary. The study is based on a qualitative discourse-analytic reading of forty English-language political texts published between 2015 and 2024, including speeches, press statements, and media-mediated political messages. The analysis shows that periphrastic expressions perform several recurrent functions: euphemization, strategic ambiguity, ideological framing, diplomatic politeness, and positive self-presentation. The article also demonstrates that these functions are supported by specific linguistic mechanisms such as nominalization, passive constructions, abstract evaluative vocabulary, and generalized institutional references. At the same time, periphrasis has a double effect. It may facilitate tact and communicative flexibility, but it may also weaken transparency and blur political accountability. The article concludes that the study of periphrasis is essential for understanding how political language organizes public perception and legitimizes particular interpretations of reality.

**Keywords:** periphrasis; political discourse; euphemism; framing; strategic ambiguity; political language

### Introduction

Political language is rarely limited to straightforward naming. Public actors generally speak under conditions of pressure, visibility, and ideological contestation, which means that lexical choice is never accidental. A policy can be described as reform, adjustment, modernization, or emergency intervention, and each option activates a different evaluative frame. For this reason, the study of indirect naming is especially relevant to political discourse, where the wording of an event often influences how that event is judged.

Periphrasis is usually defined as an indirect, descriptive, or roundabout way of naming a person, process, institution, or event. In literary stylistics, it may serve expressive or aesthetic purposes. In political communication, however, it performs more practical work. It can soften controversial information, delay direct commitment, distribute responsibility more vaguely, and package actions in morally acceptable terms. Such usage becomes particularly visible in texts dealing with war, migration, economic hardship, surveillance, and institutional reform.

The relevance of the topic is connected with the fact that many citizens encounter politics through mediated language rather than through direct experience. Official statements, speeches, interviews, and headlines do not merely transmit information; they organize attention and interpretation. In that process, periphrastic wording often becomes a subtle

mechanism of influence. It allows speakers to avoid openly confrontational or damaging forms of expression while still guiding audiences towards a preferred reading of reality.

The aim of this article is to identify the main communicative functions of periphrasis in political discourse, to describe the linguistic mechanisms that support those functions, and to explain the ethical implications of indirect naming in public communication. The object of the research is contemporary English-language political discourse, while the subject is the functional and linguistic behavior of periphrastic expressions in political texts. The scientific novelty of the article lies in the attempt to connect three analytical levels within one framework: the communicative purpose of political periphrasis, the linguistic forms through which it is realized, and the ethical consequences that follow from repeated indirect naming.

#### Literature Review and Theoretical Background

Periphrasis has been examined in rhetoric and stylistics as a form of secondary nomination that replaces a shorter direct expression with a descriptive alternative. In ordinary communication such wording may seem verbose, but in institutional discourse it is often motivated by pragmatic goals. Allan and Burridge (1991) showed that euphemistic reformulation helps speakers manage socially sensitive meanings and protect interaction from excessive emotional pressure. This observation is highly relevant to politics, where controversial actions must frequently be presented in acceptable and administratively controlled language.

Critical discourse analysis provides an additional perspective. Fairclough (1995) argues that media and political discourse do not simply reflect reality; they produce and circulate social meanings shaped by power. Van Dijk (1997) likewise stresses that political discourse analysis must attend to ideology, context, and the reproduction of group interests. From this point of view, periphrastic wording can be understood as a discursive strategy that guides interpretation while maintaining an appearance of neutrality.

Lakoff's work on framing is also important here. According to Lakoff (2004), political language is effective not only because it names things but because it activates patterns of interpretation. Expressions such as "security enhancement," "order restoration," or "fiscal consolidation" do more than rename actions; they place those actions inside evaluative frames associated with necessity, stability, or expertise. Chilton (2004) similarly notes that political language develops under conditions of contestation and public risk, which is why politicians often prefer formulations that keep space for reinterpretation or diplomatic maneuver.

The symbolic dimension of language is emphasized by Bourdieu (1991) and Edelman (1988). Their work helps explain why indirect naming matters in politics: power depends not only on coercion or law but also on the ability to impose legitimate descriptions of reality. Periphrasis is one of the devices through which politically charged realities are turned into linguistically manageable and publicly reproducible forms. Beard (2000) adds that political rhetoric is persuasive precisely because it links concrete policy questions to broader values and emotional positions. This is why the analysis of periphrasis should not be reduced to style alone; it belongs equally to discourse analysis, pragmatics, and ideological criticism.

#### Methodology

The article uses a qualitative discourse-analytic approach. The material for analysis consists of forty English-language political texts published between 2015 and 2024. The sample includes speeches by heads of state and government officials, official press statements,



campaign communication, and media-mediated political messages on security, economic policy, migration, and international relations. These domains were selected because they regularly involve contested meanings, public sensitivity, and strong persuasive pressure.

The procedure of analysis had three stages. At the first stage, the texts were read closely in order to identify expressions in which direct naming was replaced by a descriptive, softened, generalized, or metaphorically loaded alternative. At the second stage, the collected units were grouped according to their primary discourse function. At the third stage, the examples were interpreted in relation to context, speaker intention, and likely audience effect. The analysis did not aim at exhaustive quantitative measurement; its goal was explanatory interpretation of how indirect naming operates in political communication.

The main methods used in the study are contextual analysis, functional analysis, and elements of critical discourse analysis. Contextual analysis made it possible to compare the periphrastic form with the more direct naming option that it displaced. Functional analysis was used to determine the communicative purpose of each expression. Critical discourse analysis helped explain how indirect wording participates in broader processes of legitimation, depersonalization, and ideological framing.

The methodological limitation of the article should also be acknowledged. Because the study focuses on qualitative interpretation, it does not claim to represent all national political traditions or all genres of political communication. Nevertheless, the chosen material is sufficient for identifying stable tendencies that characterize contemporary English-language political discourse.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

The first and perhaps most visible function of political periphrasis is euphemization. Political actors rarely use entirely blunt language when speaking about casualties, restrictions, surveillance, austerity, or institutional failure. Expressions such as "collateral damage," "enhanced screening," or "economic adjustment" do not simply rename unpleasant realities; they reduce emotional sharpness and recast those realities in technical or administrative terms. In such cases, periphrasis works as a protective buffer between political action and public reaction.

A second function is strategic ambiguity. In many political situations, direct wording may create diplomatic, legal, or reputational costs. Indirect expressions allow a speaker to signal orientation without fully closing interpretive options. Phrases such as "an evolving situation," "partners who have not yet fulfilled commitments," or "measures under active consideration" preserve room for negotiation and later reformulation. This function is especially important in crisis communication and foreign policy, where full explicitness may be politically disadvantageous.

A third major function is ideological framing. Political language is rarely satisfied with naming an action; it seeks to place that action inside a moral or historical narrative. Restrictions can be described as "temporary stabilization measures," budget cuts as "responsible fiscal discipline," and military intervention as "security support" or "humanitarian action." Through such choices, periphrasis links concrete policies to broader values such as order, responsibility, reform, protection, or solidarity. The persuasive force of the expression lies not only in what it conceals but also in the positive frame it activates.



Periphrasis also contributes to diplomatic politeness and image management. Public leaders rarely present themselves as seeking institutional advantage or exercising harsh control. Instead, they "respond to national needs," "act in the public interest," or "take necessary steps." Similar patterns appear in interstate communication, where direct confrontation is frequently replaced by formulas such as "differences in approach," "constructive dialogue," or "the need for de-escalation." The indirect form allows disagreement to be voiced without the full interpersonal cost of blunt accusation.

Another important function is the redistribution of agency. In political discourse, responsibility is often softened by means of passivization and generalized nomination. Constructions such as "mistakes were made," "conditions required action," or "changes became necessary" shift attention away from concrete actors. Fowler (1991) showed that ideological effects are often produced through apparently ordinary grammatical structures. Political periphrasis confirms this insight by revealing how lexical and syntactic choices can present decisions as inevitable developments rather than human actions open to criticism.

The material analyzed in this article suggests that the functions of periphrasis are interconnected rather than isolated. A single expression may euphemize a negative event, create strategic ambiguity, and support ideological framing at the same time. For example, a phrase like "temporary stabilization measure" is not only softer than a direct reference to restriction; it also sounds administrative, provisional, and responsible. This multifunctionality explains why indirect naming remains so attractive to political actors.

From a linguistic perspective, political periphrasis is supported by several recurrent mechanisms. One of the most productive is nominalization. Actions and decisions are transformed into abstract nouns such as "transition," "response," "enhancement," "consolidation," or "modernization." Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) note that nominalization is a powerful resource for packaging processes as impersonal entities. In political texts this often weakens the visibility of agency. A government does not merely "cut spending"; it introduces "fiscal consolidation." A ministry does not simply "restrict movement"; it announces "mobility management measures."

A second mechanism is passivization or depersonalized syntax. When contentious outcomes are expressed through passive or impersonal structures, blame becomes less direct and institutional accountability less visible. Closely related to this is generalized institutional reference: expressions such as "relevant authorities," "decision-makers," "the international community," or "our partners" identify actors in broad terms while avoiding sharper specification. Such forms create an appearance of objectivity and collective procedure even when responsibility is unevenly distributed.

A third mechanism is abstract evaluative vocabulary. Words like "stability," "resilience," "security," "partnership," and "modernization" carry positive public resonance while remaining semantically broad. When incorporated into periphrastic expressions, they help transform contested policies into apparently self-evident public good. The result is not simple concealment but guided interpretation. Political speakers do not only minimize discomfort; they also shape the emotional and moral horizon in which events are perceived.

For clarity, the core tendencies observed in the material may be summarized as follows:

Function	Typical linguistic form	Likely discourse effect
Euphemism	technical or softened nomination	reduces emotional sharpness of controversial information
Strategic ambiguity	broad and non-committal phrasing	preserves room for reinterpretation or negotiation
Ideological framing	positive abstract vocabulary	links action to values such as order, stability, or reform
Depersonalization	passive and impersonal constructions	weakens visibility of responsibility
Diplomatic politeness	indirect evaluative formulas	maintains civility under political disagreement

The analysis shows that periphrasis should be treated as a flexible discourse resource with double potential. On the one hand, indirect naming may perform legitimate communicative work. It can reduce unnecessary confrontation, maintain diplomatic tact, and enable careful speech in sensitive contexts. Political communication does sometimes require caution, especially when statements concern conflict, grief, or ongoing negotiation. In such cases, a certain degree of indirectness may be appropriate.

On the other hand, repeated reliance on periphrastic wording can weaken democratic transparency. When agency is systematically blurred, controversial decisions begin to appear as technical necessities rather than political choices. When coercive or unequal measures are persistently renamed through positive abstractions, citizens may find it more difficult to evaluate the real social cost of policy. Wodak and Meyer (2009) emphasize that discourse becomes powerful through repetition and institutional circulation. Periphrastic expressions are particularly effective in this regard because they are portable, memorable, and easily reproduced across speeches, headlines, and commentary.

This ethical dimension is crucial. The problem with political periphrasis is not that it is always deceptive, but that it can normalize opacity. A phrase designed for tact may gradually become a routine device for evasion. Therefore, critical reading of political texts should ask three related questions: what direct naming has been replaced, what value frame has been introduced, and whose responsibility has become less visible as a result. Such questions help move the analysis from stylistic observation to discourse critique.

### Conclusion

Periphrasis occupies an important place in political discourse because it links nomination with evaluation, strategy, and ideology. The article has shown that indirect naming in political texts performs several major communicative functions: it euphemizes sensitive realities, creates strategic ambiguity, frames events ideologically, supports diplomatic politeness, and contributes to positive self-presentation. These functions are realized through recurrent linguistic mechanisms, especially nominalization, passive constructions, abstract evaluative vocabulary, and generalized institutional references.

The study also demonstrates that periphrasis should be assessed not only as a stylistic device but as a mechanism of political meaning production. Its communicative value lies in its flexibility: the same expression may soften, legitimize, and depersonalize at once. At the same



time, this flexibility creates ethical risk, since indirect wording may reduce transparency and obscure accountability. For this reason, the analysis of periphrasis remains important for linguistics, discourse studies, media literacy, and the critical interpretation of contemporary public communication.

Future research may extend this topic through larger corpora, contrastive cross-linguistic analysis, or genre-based comparison of speeches, parliamentary debates, diplomatic texts, and digital political communication. Even in its present qualitative form, however, the article confirms that political influence is often exercised not only through what is said openly, but also through the ways reality is renamed.

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