Social Actor Representation in Prabowo Subianto's 2024 Debate Discourse

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ABSTRACT

This study examines how social actors are represented in Prabowo Subianto's discourse during the first 2024 Indonesian presidential debate. Drawing on Theo van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Theory within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), the study analyzes seventeen selected utterances to uncover the ideological and discursive strategies employed to construct political identity and reinforce legitimacy. Using a qualitative descriptive design, the data were obtained from the official debate transcript and analyzed through categorization of inclusion, exclusion, activation, personalization, and other representation strategies. The findings reveal that Prabowo frequently activates himself as a patriotic reformer, elevates the people as sovereign decision-makers, background institutions, and subtly delegitimizes political opponents through irony, contrast, and historical recontextualization. The study also shows how humor, metaphor, and informal language are strategically used to foster emotional proximity with the public. These strategies contribute to building a persuasive and ideologically charged public persona. The results demonstrate that live political performance in presidential debates functions as a site of symbolic authority construction and ideological negotiation. This research offers both theoretical and empirical contributions to discourse studies and political communication, particularly in the context of contemporary Indonesian democracy.

INTRODUCTION

In democratic societies, political rhetorical discourse plays a crucial role in shaping public perception, influencing voter behavior, and legitimizing power structure (Van Dijk, 1984). Rather than conveying information objectively, it often serves to embed ideological perspectives and reinforce existing power relations (Van Djik, 1988). Political debates, in particular, function as strategic platforms where candidates do more than present policy - they construct political identities, assert authority, and manage social alignments. These events are saturated with linguistic strategies that reveal how actors position themselves and others in relation to core values such as democracy, justice, and national unity. Drawing on Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, social actors are represented through voices that respond to, intersect with, or suppress other voices, revealing the ideological tensions embedded in discourse (Gee & Handfort, 2012). These dynamics culminate in Prabowo Subianto's dominant presence in the 2024 presidential debates,

where he fused nationalist appeals with ideological representations of self, rivals, and "the people," laying the groundwork for deeper analysis of his rhetorical strategy.

Prabowo's inauguration speech in 2024 employed historical anecdotes and a well-structured argumentative flow - from vision statement to problem identification and call to action - to establish legitimacy and evoke emotional resonance with the audience (Budiarsih & Asropah, 2024). This rhetorical style was further evident in his performance during the 2024 presidential debates, where he went beyond articulating policy to project a particular worldview, construct a political identity, and strategically position other actors within the political landscape. The debates featured recurring themes such as patriotism, democracy, justice, and national unity, which were deployed in ways that not only affirmed Prabowo's leadership persona but also implicitly evaluated and positioned other candidates, institutions, and "the people." Given the socio-political stakes of these debates, it is essential to examine how language functions as a tool for representing social actors and enacting ideological positioning. As Van Leeuwen (2008) argues, political discourse often foregrounds institutional authority while backgrounding or suppressing the operational agents behind controversial actions, thereby shaping public perception and maintaining ideological comfort.

A critical approach to political discourse reveals that such representations are never neutral; rather, they are constructed through deliberate linguistic and discursive choices. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) offers a systematic approach to uncover how such narratives operate within broader social and political structures (Ratnaningsih, 2019). It grounds the analysis of ideology and power in close, contextualized examinations of language, allowing analysts to be explicit and systematic in their interpretations (Young & Harrison, 2004). Among the various models of CDA, Van Leeuwen's (2008) framework on the representation of social actors provides a systematic toolkit for analyzing how individuals and groups are included, excluded, categorized, activated, or passivated within texts. Van Leeuwen's model enables scholars to uncover the often-hidden ideological functions of discourse by mapping the linguistic strategies used to represent social roles and relations.

Several recent studies have utilized Theo van Leeuwen's Social Actor Approach within Critical Discourse Analysis to explore how individuals and institutions are discursively portrayed in media texts. For instance, Firiani and Sabilah (2019) examined how inclusion strategies were used in an online news article reporting on the controversial role of Ferdy Sambo's domestic assistant, revealing how van Leeuwen's framework can uncover subtle ideological cues in journalistic discourse. Similarly, Humaira et al (2023) investigated news coverage of the Istanbul bombing in BBC Arabic, showing that most clauses employed inclusion rather than exclusion strategies, which pointed to the media's alignment with the Turkish state. Another study by Putri & Mardiah. (2024) used corpus-assisted CDA to compare representations in CNN and Al Jazeera coverage of George Floyd's murder, finding contrasting ideological alignments: CNN's reporting tended to support law enforcement narratives, while Al Jazeera emphasized the victim's perspective.

Although these studies offer valuable insights into how media texts construct social actors, they primarily focus on international news reporting or legal and crisis-related events. Very few have examined Indonesian political discourse, and even fewer have analyzed real-time interactions in presidential debates using van Leeuwen's social actor framework. This represents a significant research gap, particularly given the performative nature of political debates, where identities, power relations, and ideological positions are negotiated in public view. This study seeks to address this gap by analyzing how Prabowo Subianto, as a major contender in the 2024 Indonesian presidential election, represents himself, his opponents, and broader political concepts such as "the people" and "the state." By applying van Leeuwen's taxonomy to this context, the study aims to expand the application of CDA to Indonesian political performance and uncover the underlying ideological mechanisms at play.

By examining how Prabowo Subianto constructs representations of himself, his

opponents, state institutions, and the Indonesian people, this study seeks to uncover the ideological mechanisms embedded within his 2024 presidential debate discourse. These debates go beyond policy articulation; they function as performative arenas where political identities are crafted, power is legitimized, and opposing narratives are strategically countered. Van Leeuwen (2008) social actor model provides a useful analytical lens to explore how rhetorical strategies - such as inclusion, exclusion, activation, and categorization - are employed to align with dominant ideologies, evoke nationalist sentiment, and marginalize alternative voices.

This study therefore focuses on the question: How are social actors represented in Prabowo Subianto's 2024 presidential debate discourse, and what ideological meanings do these representations convey? By addressing this central question, the research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of how political language functions as a vehicle for constructing symbolic authority, legitimizing leadership, and reinforcing dominant ideologies. Applying van Leeuwen's social actor framework within the context of Indonesian political performance, this study highlights the discursive strategies used to foreground certain figures while backgrounding others, ultimately revealing the underlying ideological architecture of political communication.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The representation of social actors in media and political discourse has become a central focus in the field of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA, as conceptualized by Fairclough (2013), views language not only as a tool for communication but also as a means of reproducing and challenging social structures and power relations. In political settings such as presidential debates, language plays a strategic role in constructing identities, reinforcing ideologies, and shaping public opinion. One prominent analytical model in this field is Van Leeuwen (2008) framework for the representation of social actors.

Van Leeuwen (2008) framework outlines core strategies for representing social actors in discourse. Inclusion and exclusion determine whether actors are mentioned or omitted, thus shaping their visibility and perceived relevance. Activation and passivation affect how agency is distributed, framing actors either as doers or as those being acted upon. Personalization presents actors as individuals with names or human traits, while impersonalization refers to them abstractly through institutions or generalized labels. Nomination identifies actors by name or title, reinforcing identity and authority, whereas categorization classifies them by roles, functions, or evaluative attributes. These strategies, often subtly embedded in political texts, play a critical role in managing perceptions of legitimacy, credibility, and power.

Several studies have applied these tools across media contexts to explore how social actors are portrayed in terms of visibility, agency, and functional roles within discourse. A study by Humaira et al. (2023) illustrates this model effectively. They analysed a BBC Arabic report on the Istanbul bomb explosion using van Leeuwen's framework. The findings revealed that over 90% of the sentences utilized inclusion strategies, thereby frequently mentioning the actors involved in the incident. This high level of visibility, particularly toward the Turkish state, suggested an implicit ideological alignment with the victimized nation. The study demonstrates how inclusion not only enhances narrative clarity but also signals ideological partiality through actor positioning.

This aligns with Evayani and Rido (2019) that investigated how social actors are represented in media coverage of sexual violence, using articles from *The Jakarta Post* and *The New York Times*. Their study revealed that both newspapers commonly framed victims as passive agents and perpetrators as active agents, thereby influencing readers' perceptions of agency and blame. However, a key distinction emerged in the use of inclusion strategies: *The Jakarta Post* tended to refer to actors using more specific attributes such as gender, age, and occupation, while *The New York Times* preferred nominal forms like surnames and titles. These findings highlight how representational strategies vary across cultural and institutional contexts, shaping the narrative stance and ideological tone of reporting.

The study by Jendeya (2022) also examined linguistic exclusion strategies in Arabic and

English news reports covering the *March of Return* in Gaza. Using van Leeuwen's (2008) framework and corpus-based analysis, the study found significant differences in how exclusion was used across languages and regions. While Arabic newspapers tended to conceal certain actors to protect identities or shift focus, English newspapers often excluded actors to reframe responsibility or emphasize institutional narratives. These contrasting practices reveal how exclusion functions as a rhetorical tool for controlling narrative focus and guiding audience interpretation across geopolitical contexts.

Furthermore, Budhiono (2020) applied van Leeuwen's theory to analyse the media portrayal of the "Keraton Agung Sejagat" movement in Indonesia. Drawing from news reports published on Kompas.com, the study identified eleven techniques of social actor representation, including exclusion, activation, passivation, genericization, specification, nomination, and categorization. These strategies revealed how the media constructed the public identity of the actors involved, portraying them either as frauds or misguided actors. The research highlights how representational choices help frame legitimacy or deviance, contributing to public perceptions of social phenomena.

Similarly, Firiani and Sabilah (2021) analysed how the domestic worker "Susi," involved in the Ferdy Sambo trial, was represented in news discourse. Using van Leeuwen's inclusion strategy, they examined a report from TVONENEWS.com and found that Susi's visibility was heightened through selective quoting and repetition. The media's inclusion of her voice, while dramatizing the courtroom setting, revealed the ideological function of actor representation in shaping narrative focus and tension. Such findings are highly relevant for understanding how political debates use similar techniques to create dramatic contrasts between candidates or ideologies.

Another study, a corpus-assisted critical discourse analysis by Putri and Mardiah (2024) examined how CNN and Aljazeera portrayed the social actors involved in the murder of George Floyd. Using van Leeuwen's (2008) framework and the AntConc tool, the study found that CNN tended to align with law enforcement, while Aljazeera portrayed Floyd more sympathetically. This contrast in actor representation underscores the role of ideological positioning in media discourse, demonstrating how inclusion and exclusion strategies may influence audience perception and reveal implicit media biases.

The application of van Leeuwen's framework is not limited to media discourse. Sarani and Kord (2021) applied van Leeuwen's (2008) and Kress and van Leeuwen's (2006) frameworks to analyze gender representation in the *Touchstone* English Language Teaching (ELT) textbook series. They found that gender roles were constructed differently through linguistic and visual elements. While female characters were more frequently featured in linguistic content, male figures appeared more prominently in visual illustrations and were often idealized. This multimodal approach demonstrated how gender bias can be embedded in educational materials, offering valuable implications for textbook writers and curriculum developers concerned with promoting gender equality in learning environments.

The reviewed studies collectively reinforce the critical role of social actor representation in shaping ideological meaning. In the context of the 2024 Indonesian presidential debates, Prabowo Subianto's use of language may be strategically constructed to highlight his strengths and minimize those of his opponents. Through activation, he may portray himself as a decisive leader, while impersonalization or categorization may be used to reduce opponents to generalized threats or negative stereotypes. These techniques serve to frame national identity, legitimize political power, and influence voter behavior (Van Leeuwen 2008).

Taken together, these studies underscore the analytical strength of van Leeuwen's (2008) framework in uncovering how discourse constructs visibility, agency, and legitimacy of social actors across diverse genres. However, despite its broad application in media and educational texts, its use in real-time political discourse - particularly in the context of Indonesian presidential debates - remains limited. This study addresses that gap by applying van Leeuwen's social actor

model to Prabowo Subianto's 2024 debate discourse, aiming to reveal how inclusion, exclusion, activation, and categorization are strategically deployed to construct authority, manage opposition, and reinforce ideological narratives in a highly polarized electoral setting.

METHOD

This research employs a qualitative approach within the framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), specifically utilizing Van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Theory to examine the discursive construction of social actors in political discourse. This approach is designed to explore and interpret the meanings constructed through language within a specific social context. According to Creswell (2014), qualitative research is "an approach for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem." This interpretive nature aligns with the purpose of this study, which seeks to uncover the ideologies embedded in political discourse. Within this qualitative design, the study adopts a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework, specifically utilizing Van Leeuwen's (2008) Social Actor Theory to examine how social actors are represented and constructed through linguistic strategies in the 2024 Indonesian presidential debate.

The study is designed as a descriptive-qualitative textual analysis, focusing on Prabowo Subianto's utterances during the first 2024 Indonesian presidential debate. This design aligns with the study's objective to reveal the ideological strategies embedded in the representation of social actors. The primary data source is the transcribed discourse of Prabowo Subianto from the presidential debate broadcast. The data were purposively selected based on relevance to social actor representation and the presence of discursive strategies such as inclusion, exclusion, and categorization. Prabowo was selected due to his prominent role in the 2024 political landscape and his consistent use of ideologically loaded language.

The data collection technique was documentation, in which utterances from the debate were transcribed manually from the official video recording. Key segments that contained social actor references were then extracted and categorized for analysis. No survey or interview instruments were used, as the research relies solely on naturally occurring discourse. Data were analyzed using Van Leeuwen's (2008) framework of social actor representation, which includes categories such as Inclusion and Exclusion, Activation and Passivation, Genericization and Specification, and Association and Dissociation. Each clause or sentence was examined to identify the representation strategies used and their ideological implications. The analysis was conducted interpretively, focusing on how linguistic choices reflect broader political positioning and identity construction.

The credibility of the findings was ensured through methodological consistency, triangulation of data sources (video, transcript, and media reports), and rigorous theoretical grounding. The use of Van Leeuwen's established CDA framework enhances the analytical validity, while repeated close reading and peer-reviewed theoretical references ensure interpretive reliability.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This study uncovers how social actors are strategically represented in Prabowo Subianto's 2024 presidential debate discourse through Van Leeuwen's *Social Actor Theory*. The analysis of seventeen selected excerpts reveals consistent discursive patterns that construct a persuasive political identity while embedding ideological meanings within the representation of self, opponents, the people, and state institutions.

One of the most dominant patterns observed is the centralization of the speaker himself as a moral and ideological authority. Through the repetitive use of first-person references such as *saya* and declarative statements like "saya siap mati untuk negara ini" and "saya pertaruhkan jiwa saya," Prabowo positions himself not merely as a candidate but as a symbol of ideological commitment. He activates his persona as a guardian of national values, someone who is not only

politically experienced but also personally invested in defending the integrity of the nation. His discourse elevates him as the embodiment of patriotism, sacrifice, and reform, portraying his leadership as a continuation of the founding vision of the Republic. This strategy of heightened self-activation allows him to claim moral superiority while implicitly contrasting himself with others.

The people, represented as *rakyat*, consistently appear as powerful and sovereign agents throughout the debate. They are not passivated or merely symbolic but activated through expressions such as "rakyat yang akan menghukum" and "hakim yang tertinggi adalah rakyat." These utterances reflect a populist rhetorical structure, where the electorate is portrayed as politically mature, morally upright, and fully capable of judgment. Prabowo repeatedly acknowledges the wisdom of the people, constructing a narrative in which the public serves not just as voters but as the ultimate moral force in democracy. Their role is functionalized as decision-makers and evaluators, thereby legitimizing the speaker's position as someone who submits to the people's authority.

In contrast to the glorification of *rakyat*, the representation of political opponents reveals a more nuanced and strategic positioning. Figures like Anies Baswedan and Ganjar Pranowo are personalized and addressed directly, yet often framed as inconsistent, reactive, or hypocritical. Through phrases like "Mas Anies ini agak berlebihan" and "kenapa yang 13 orang hilang ditanyakan kepada saya," the speaker seeks to expose contradictions in the opponents' arguments, undermining their credibility. Rather than engaging in aggressive attacks, Prabowo utilizes rhetorical understatement and irony to delegitimize his rivals. He relies on contrast, counterfactual reasoning, and historical reference to present himself as stable, logical, and ideologically consistent in comparison to his adversaries.

To illustrate the range and intention of the discursive strategies employed in the data, Table 1 summarizes the seventeen excerpts analyzed, including the social actors represented, the types of representation strategies used, and their ideological implications.

Table 1. Summary of Social Actor Representation in Prabowo Subianto's Debate Discourse

No	Data	Social Actor(s) Represented	Representation Strategies (Van Leeuwen)	Ideological Function
1	Data 1	Prabowo, the founding fathers	Inclusion, Activation, Specification	Constructs legitimacy as ideological heir of the Republic
2	Data 2	Prabowo, democracy, human rights	Personalization, Objectivation, Activation	Emphasizes moral sacrifice and defense of values
3	Data 3	Indonesian people, foreign nations	Genericization, Association, Exclusion	Highlights Indonesia's stability compared to global chaos
4	Data 4	Citizens, national leaders	Categorization, Functionalization, Inclusion	Builds moral framework for collective responsibility
5	Data 5	Corruption, Prabowo, the people	Objectivation, Personalization, Repetition	Frames corruption as enemy and himself as reformer
6	Data 6	Anies Baswedan, Prabowo	Personalization, Activation, Contrast	Delegitimizes rival and highlights past political support
7	Data 7	Anies, Jokowi, democracy	Hypothetical Reasoning, Personalization, Association	Challenges opponent's narrative through factual contradiction
8	Data 8	Judiciary, power structures	Abstraction, Functionalization, Suppression	Advocates for institutional independence and reform
9	Data 9	Judges, law enforcers, citizens	Specification, Activation, Backgrounding	Connects justice reform to public sovereignty
10	Data 10	Constitutional Court, Ganjar, citizens	Inclusion, Allusion, Objectivation	Calls for legal clarity while suppressing blame
11	Data 12	Prabowo, Anies	Personalization, Activation	Reaffirms personal detachment from political ambition
12	Data 13	The people, the court, Anies	Activation, Specification, Reversal	Positions the people as the final judge of democracy
13	Data 14	Jokowi, investors, economic actors	Specification, Acknowledgment	Praises rival administration's economic success

14	Data 15	Public, weather, government	Abstraction, Irony, Attribution	Critiques evasive governance using sarcasm
15	Data 16	Human rights victims, Prabowo, Ganjar	Personalization, Reframing, Inclusion	Reclaims moral legitimacy through reconciled past
16	Data 17	Missing persons, Ganjar, Prabowo	Personalization, Exclusion, Confrontation	Defends against human rights accusations and redirects blame

Table 1 confirms that each data point involves a purposeful combination of social actor representation strategies, serving to either reinforce Prabowo's legitimacy, align with democratic ideals, or challenge the credibility of his opponents.

State institutions such as the judiciary, the Constitutional Court, and the broader government apparatus are discussed in abstract and impersonal terms. These institutions are typically *objectivated* and *functionalized*, with their internal agents *suppressed*. For example, *"kehakiman harus independen"* and *"pemerintahan harus kuat dan tidak boleh diintervensi"* express institutional ideals without attributing failure or corruption to specific individuals. The use of *backgrounding* here is deliberate. It allows the speaker to call for reform and integrity without naming or directly criticizing current political figures or allies. This maintains a stance of professionalism and restraint, while still appealing to public concerns about institutional integrity.

Another striking discursive pattern is the frequent use of language related to reform and rectification. Phrases such as *"kita akan perbaiki,"* *"kita akan memberantas korupsi,"* and *"saya akan memperbaiki kualitas hidup hakim"* reflect a forward-looking, problem-solving leadership style. The speaker uses strong metaphoric language, particularly when describing corruption as something that must be *"dibersihkan sampai ke akar-akarnya."* Such metaphors not only dramatize the problem but also portray Prabowo as a figure with the will and capacity to confront deep-rooted systemic issues. Yet, despite the intensity of these reform-oriented declarations, the discourse avoids direct identification of perpetrators. The actors responsible for corruption or institutional weakness are often *suppressed* or generalized as *kekuasaan*, *pengintervensi*, or simply left unnamed. This strategic ambiguity minimizes political conflict while maximizing rhetorical strength.

There is also a deliberate use of informal language, humor, and sarcasm in several excerpts. Statements like *"sory ye,"* or *"susah kalau kita menyalahkan angin dari mana,"* infuse the political discourse with a sense of populist intimacy. These linguistic choices bridge the gap between elite politics and everyday speech, humanizing the speaker and reinforcing his image as approachable and down-to-earth. Through such expressions, Prabowo constructs himself not only as a statesman but also as someone who resonates emotionally with the audience. The performative aspects of his speech, including direct audience acknowledgment such as *"[Tepuk tangan],"* further strengthen the immediacy and responsiveness of his discourse.

To provide a clearer view of the overall strategic pattern, Table 2 below shows the dominant representation strategies found across the dataset.

Table 2. Dominant Representation Strategies Identified

Representation Strategy (Van Leeuwen)	Frequency	Commonly Represented Actors	Discursive Function
Activation	15	Prabowo, the people, state actors	Positions speaker and public as active agents of change
Personalization	12	Political rivals, Prabowo, victims	Establishes character contrast and personal accountability
Objectivation	10	Democracy, law, corruption	Converts abstract concepts into moral reference points
Exclusion	9	Power holders, corruption agents	Avoids direct blame while implying critique
Association/Inclusion	8	People, Prabowo, institutions	Aligns speaker with audience and shared values
Categorization/Functionalization	7	Leaders, officials, citizens	Defines social roles and expected behavior

| Abstraction | 6 | Institutions, political values | Elevates discourse to ideological level |

These dominant strategies reinforce the speaker's efforts to construct a persuasive, authoritative, and morally-grounded political identity. Together, both tables reflect the strategic use of discourse in navigating political confrontation, public expectations, and national ideology.

Discussion

These dominant strategies reinforce the speaker's efforts to construct a persuasive, authoritative, and morally-grounded political identity. Together, both tables reflect the strategic use of discourse in navigating political confrontation, public expectations, and national ideology.

The findings of this study underscore how discourse serves as a powerful medium for constructing political identity, asserting ideological positions, and shaping public perception. Prabowo Subianto's 2024 presidential debate discourse demonstrates that the representation of social actors is not merely about describing individuals or groups, but is a strategic process tied to broader objectives of persuasion, legitimacy, and emotional resonance. Through the application of Van Leeuwen's *Social Actor Theory*, this research reveals how language choices are carefully deployed to foreground certain roles, *suppress* others, and ultimately frame the speaker's narrative in a way that resonates with audiences across political, social, and cultural lines (Van Leeuwen, 1996; 2008).

One of the key observations is the centralization of the speaker as a figure of moral authority, personal sacrifice, and ideological steadfastness. Rather than merely presenting policy proposals or political critiques, Prabowo constructs his persona through repeated *activation* of the self, using expressions such as *"saya siap mati untuk negara ini"* and *"saya pertaruhkan jiwa saya."* These performative declarations are not neutral statements but calculated acts of self-legitimation. They draw upon nationalist sentiment and emotional symbolism to position the speaker as a patriot above political contestation. This aligns with the broader characteristics of populist discourse, where the leader seeks to embody the soul and values of the nation.

This research builds upon and extends previous works by Firiani and Sabilah as well as Humaira et al. (2020), who analyzed political discourse in media and online platforms. Unlike those studies, which focused on how media represent political figures, this study offers an in-depth look at first-person political performance in real time. This distinction matters because it shifts the focus from mediated framing to self-presentation, allowing us to examine how politicians actively shape their image in direct communication with the public. The results reveal that spoken political discourse, especially in debate contexts, requires not only strategic use of content but also mastery of emotional tone, rhythm, and interpersonal cues.

The representation of *"rakyat"* or the people further amplifies this populist positioning. Rather than portraying the public as passive recipients of political decisions, Prabowo *activates* them as judges, sovereigns, and moral arbiters. Phrases such as *"rakyatlah yang akan menghukum"* and *"hakim tertinggi adalah rakyat"* function to elevate the people to a sacred status. This discursive move not only flatters the audience but also strengthens the speaker's legitimacy by tying it directly to popular will. In this context, the electorate is portrayed as wise, discerning, and incorruptible, while political institutions are often generalized or *backgrounded*, suggesting a redistribution of power from elites to the masses (Van Leeuwen, 1996; 2013).

At the same time, opponents such as Anies Baswedan and Ganjar Pranowo are represented through subtle strategies of delegitimization. The speaker does not engage in direct insult or hostile attack but relies instead on contrast, irony, and insinuation. Statements like *"Mas Anies ini agak berlebihan"* and rhetorical questions about past political roles serve to question the consistency and credibility of his rivals without appearing overtly confrontational. This allows the speaker to maintain a composed and rational tone while planting doubt in the minds of the audience. The result is a discourse that both protects the speaker's moral position and weakens the opposing narrative.

In addition to personal and popular representations, the discourse also touches on institutions such as the judiciary, the Constitutional Court, and government structures. These entities are often *objectivated* and described in abstract terms, without reference to specific actors. Phrases such as *"kehakiman harus independen"* or *"aturan sudah jelas"* highlight institutional ideals without identifying individuals who may have violated or upheld those ideals. This strategic *suppression* enables the speaker to critique systems without provoking political backlash. It reflects a nuanced form of accountability, one that critiques problems without naming names, thereby preserving a diplomatic and reformist tone (Van Leeuwen, 2013; 2008).

This research contributes novel insights by exploring political discourse in a live debate setting, which differs from scripted speeches or formal documents. It shows how leaders balance rational argumentation with emotional appeal, criticism with civility, and authority with humility. For example, the speaker uses informal expressions such as *"sory ye"* and sarcastic remarks like *"kalau kita menyalahkan angin"* to inject humor and relatability into his speech. These moments of informality are not incidental but deliberate strategies to create a sense of intimacy with the audience. They position the speaker as a figure who is not only authoritative but also approachable and emotionally in tune with the people.

Moreover, the study reveals how the speaker reframes controversial issues, such as past human rights violations, by aligning himself with former political detainees who now support him. This form of testimonial alignment serves to neutralize historical accusations and present a narrative of personal transformation. Rather than denying past allegations, the speaker incorporates them into a story of reconciliation and redemption, which adds depth and complexity to his political persona. This approach reflects a sophisticated understanding of how historical memory can be reshaped through discourse.

The broader significance of this research lies in its ability to illustrate the intersection between language, ideology, and political performance. It shows that effective political communication in contemporary Indonesia is not only about articulating policies but about managing perceptions, emotions, and historical narratives. The findings suggest that in a competitive democratic context, political actors must simultaneously affirm national values, engage opponents, and connect with the public on a personal level. Language becomes the medium through which these multiple demands are negotiated.

This study also contributes methodologically by demonstrating how Van Leeuwen's *Social Actor Theory* can be applied to spontaneous, unscripted discourse. It confirms the theory's adaptability to contexts beyond news texts or written reports, showing that its categories of *activation, passivation, inclusion, exclusion, abstraction,* and *categorization* remain relevant in live political performance. However, it also calls for a more dynamic interpretation of these categories, one that takes into account tone, timing, and audience reaction (Van Leeuwen, 2008; Machin & Mayr, 2012).

One limitation of the present study is that it focuses solely on the discourse of one speaker. Future research could benefit from a comparative approach that includes the discourse of opposing candidates, media framing, or public reception. Such studies would allow for a more comprehensive understanding of how political meanings are co-constructed across different discursive arenas.

Despite this limitation, the current research provides a compelling analysis of how a political figure constructs authority, legitimacy, and emotional connection through language. It highlights the complex rhetorical choices that underlie political discourse and offers valuable insights into the symbolic strategies used to mobilize support and shape democratic debate in Indonesia.

CONCLUSIONS

This study examined how Prabowo Subianto represented social actors in the first 2024 Indonesian presidential debate using Theo van Leeuwen's Social Actor Theory. The analysis of seventeen excerpts revealed that Prabowo strategically activated his persona as a patriotic and

reformist leader, aligned with Indonesia's foundational ideals. He employed inclusive pronouns, emotive language, and metaphors to construct a compelling political identity while subtly delegitimizing opponents through contrastive personalization and irony. Institutions were often abstracted, and the public was framed as morally upright and intelligent, reflecting a populist rhetorical style designed to foster connection and authority.

These findings highlight how political discourse in Indonesia serves as a key site for constructing legitimacy, shaping ideology, and managing emotional resonance. By revealing the layered linguistic strategies embedded in Prabowo's speech, this study contributes to the broader field of political communication and discourse analysis. While the scope was limited to a single speaker and debate, future research should explore comparative perspectives, media framing, and public reception to further illuminate the dialogic dynamics of electoral discourse in Indonesia's democratic landscape.

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