

Unveiling Hidden Meanings: Implicature in Donald Trump's 2017 UN General Assembly Address

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ABSTRACT

Political discourse frequently employs implied meanings to convey ideological positions, authority, and persuasion in indirect ways. This study investigates the use of implicature in Donald Trump's 2017 United Nations General Assembly Address, with a specific focus on identifying the types of implicature and explaining their pragmatic functions within a global diplomatic context. The research aims to reveal how implied meanings operate as strategic rhetorical tools in political communication. Using a descriptive qualitative approach, fifteen selected utterances from the speech were analyzed based on Grice's (1975) theory of implicature, which categorizes implicature into Particularized Conversational Implicature, Generalized Conversational Implicature, and Conventional Implicature. The analysis reveals that Particularized Conversational Implicature is the most dominant type found in the speech, followed by Generalized Conversational Implicature and Conventional Implicature. This dominance indicates that the speaker heavily relied on contextual factors, shared political knowledge, and audience assumptions to convey criticism, warnings, and ideological stances implicitly rather than explicitly. The use of context-dependent implicature allows sensitive political messages, including threats and evaluations of other nations, to be communicated indirectly while maintaining diplomatic formality. These findings suggest that implicature plays a crucial role in shaping meaning, managing face, and influencing audience interpretation in international political discourse. This study contributes to the field of pragmatics and political discourse analysis by demonstrating how implicature functions as a strategic linguistic resource in high-level diplomatic speeches and by highlighting the importance of pragmatic interpretation in understanding political communication beyond literal meaning.

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INTRODUCTION

Language constitutes one of the most fundamental aspects of human life. It functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a reflection of culture, worldview, and social identity. Through language, individuals express emotions, convey ideas, and construct meaning, enabling them to coexist within shared social environments (Holtgraves & Kashima, 2008). In Indonesia, a multilingual and multicultural nation, language serves as a bridge connecting people

across ethnic and regional boundaries (Zein, 2019). Each local language and dialect embodies distinct cultural values and perspectives, illustrating how language operates as a living expression of identity. Moreover, language use in both classroom and social media contexts demonstrates that language functions as a social practice deeply intertwined with identity, culture, and power relations (Norton & Toohey, 2011).

From this foundation, communication emerges as the process through which language fulfills its social function. Communication allows individuals to exchange ideas, negotiate meaning, and build mutual understanding. In everyday Indonesian interactions, communication is guided by cultural principles such as respect, politeness, and social harmony. These values encourage indirectness, where meaning is often implied rather than explicitly stated. Empirical research in Indonesia shows that indirect speech acts are widely employed in daily and service interactions as politeness strategies to preserve interpersonal harmony (Tanduk, 2023). This demonstrates that communication is not merely about transmitting information but also about maintaining social balance.

In the contemporary era of globalization and digital interconnectedness, language has become a powerful tool for shaping social and political realities. Political discourse no longer unfolds solely in formal arenas such as parliaments or press conferences but increasingly across digital platforms where every utterance can be amplified into global conversations. Political leaders use language not only to inform but to persuade, influence, and legitimize authority. As language functions as a medium through which social power and ideological meanings are produced and maintained (Klimova & Kozlovtseva, 2023). Linguistic choices through repetition, metaphor, insinuation, and ambiguity play a crucial role in shaping public perception and emotional response.

This complexity is further intensified by audience participation in digital spaces. The public no longer passively consumes political messages but actively interprets, reframes, and responds through comments, memes, and online activism. Research shows that digital platforms enable citizens, particularly young audiences, to reshape political narratives and influence public opinion collectively (Peter & Muth, 2023). Political messages are often recontextualized through humor, parody, and visual creativity, producing alternative meanings that challenge official narratives (Chernobrov, 2025). Consequently, understanding political discourse today requires attention not only to what is explicitly stated but also to what is implied, suggested, or left unsaid.

This phenomenon highlights the deep connection between language, power, and society. Linguistic choices function as ideological tools that can inspire unity or deepen division depending on how they are framed and interpreted (Hamed & Alqurashi, 2025). Language reflects social structures while simultaneously reinforcing or challenging power relations. In political communication, this relationship becomes particularly visible as language is strategically used to frame issues, promote ideologies, and shape public opinion. Politicians often rely on indirect language such as suggestion, irony, or rhetorical implication to achieve persuasive effects without direct confrontation (Feldman, 2023).

In this context, pragmatics provides a crucial analytical framework, particularly through the concept of implicature. Implicature to explain how speakers convey meanings that are not explicitly stated but inferred by listeners based on shared assumptions and conversational norms (Grice, 1975). This concept is highly relevant to political discourse, where leaders often use implied meanings to manage sensitive issues, maintain diplomatic flexibility, and appeal to diverse audiences. Therefore, analyzing implicature is essential for understanding how political language operates as a tool of persuasion and power in contemporary global communication.

Despite the growing body of research on political discourse and pragmatic strategies (Feldman, 2023; Hamed & Alqurashi, 2025; Klimova & Kozlovtseva, 2023; Peter & Muth, 2023; Tanduk, 2023), previous studies have predominantly focused on explicit rhetorical devices, speech acts, or general persuasive techniques in political communication. Limited attention has been given to the systematic analysis of implicature in high-level diplomatic speeches, particularly

within the context of the United Nations General Assembly, where political language operates under strict norms of formality and diplomacy. This gap indicates a need for closer examination of how implied meanings function as strategic tools in global political communication. The central problem addressed in this study is how implicature is employed by political leaders to convey ideology, criticism, and authority implicitly in an international diplomatic setting. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to analyze the types and pragmatic functions of implicature in Donald Trump’s 2017 United Nations General Assembly Address. This research is significant both theoretically and practically, as it contributes to pragmatic theory by extending the application of Gricean implicature to diplomatic political discourse, and practically by enhancing critical awareness of how political messages are constructed and interpreted beyond their literal meaning in global forums.

The study of political discourse has long attracted scholarly attention due to the central role of language in constructing ideology, authority, and public perception. In media and political contexts, language functions not only as a means of communication but also as a mechanism for constructing power and identity (Fairclough, 2010). Within pragmatics, implicature provides a crucial framework for explaining how speakers convey unstated meanings through contextual inference. Grice’s (1975) theory of implicature demonstrates that meaning frequently emerges when speakers deliberately flout conversational maxims, prompting listeners to infer intended messages based on shared assumptions and contextual knowledge. In political communication, this mechanism allows leaders to manage sensitive issues, maintain ambiguity, and address heterogeneous audiences without explicit commitment.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach within the framework of pragmatics. The research focuses on interpreting implied meanings rather than quantifying linguistic features, making qualitative analysis suitable for examining political discourse. The data of this study consist of utterances containing implicature found in Donald Trump’s 2017 United Nations General Assembly Address, delivered on September 19, 2017, during the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly. The official transcript of the speech was obtained from publicly available and reliable sources. Data were collected using a documentation technique. The researcher carefully read the transcript several times to understand the overall context of the speech. Utterances that potentially contained implicature were then identified and selected as data based on the presence of meanings that extend beyond literal interpretation. The data were analyzed using Grice’s theory of implicature. The selected utterances were categorized into generalized conversational implicature, particularized conversational implicature, and conventional implicature. Each utterance was further examined to identify its pragmatic function within the political context, such as persuasion, legitimization of authority, or ideological positioning. The interpretation of implicature was conducted by considering the situational context, audience, and political background of the speaker to ensure contextual accuracy.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of 14 selected utterances from Donald Trump’s 2017 United Nations General Assembly Address identified three types of implicature: Particularized Conversational Implicature, Generalized Conversational Implicature, and Conventional Implicature. Table 1 presents the frequency and percentage of each implicature type found in the speech.

Table 1. Frequency of Implicature Types in Trump’s 2017 UNGA Speech

Implicature Types	Frequency	Percentage
Particularized	Conversational Implicature	7
Generalized	Conversational Implicature	5
Conventional Implicature	2	14.3%
Total	14	100%

The most frequent type was Particularized Conversational Implicature (50%), indicating that Trump predominantly relied on context-dependent meaning requiring shared global knowledge for interpretation. This was followed by Generalized Conversational Implicature (35.7%), which shows his use of broadly interpretable statements to reinforce ideological messages and project leadership. Conventional Implicature (14.3%), though less frequent, contributed to the speech's persuasive effect by encoding evaluative meaning through specific linguistic structures. These results demonstrate that Trump strategically combined different implicature types to balance indirectness, directness, and rhetorical nuance, effectively communicating political and ideological messages to both domestic and international audiences.

Particularized Conversational Implicature

Particularized Conversational Implicature emerges as the most prominent strategy in Trump's speech, indicating that many implied meanings rely heavily on specific global political contexts. These implicatures require listeners to draw on shared knowledge of international conflicts, nuclear threats, and diplomatic tensions in order to fully interpret the speaker's intentions. In this sense, Trump's use of particularized implicature enables him to communicate sensitive political messages indirectly while still maintaining a strong rhetorical impact. Such reliance on context-dependent meaning reflects the strategic nature of political communication in high-level diplomatic settings.

Datum 1

“Totally destroy North Korea.”

This utterance functions as a Particularized Conversational Implicature because its interpretation depends entirely on shared geopolitical knowledge regarding nuclear tensions between the United States and North Korea. Rather than explicitly outlining specific military actions or conditions, Trump relies on implicature to convey an extreme warning. The indirectness of the statement allows the speaker to project power and seriousness while maintaining ambiguity in a diplomatic forum. Political leaders often employ indirect language to communicate confrontational messages without explicit elaboration (Feldman, 2023).

Datum 2

“Some nations arm and support this regime.”

This statement conveys implicature by implicitly assigning responsibility to certain countries without explicitly naming them. The implied meaning can only be inferred through shared global awareness of international alliances and geopolitical relations. By avoiding direct reference, Trump delivers criticism while minimizing the risk of overt diplomatic confrontation. This indirect evaluative strategy aligns with observation that political discourse frequently relies on implication to criticize powerful actors in a restrained manner (Hamed & Alqurashi, 2025).

Datum 3

“Iran's leaders fear their own people.”

Through this utterance, Trump employs particularized implicature to portray Iran's leadership as unstable and lacking legitimacy. The evaluative meaning is not stated directly but emerges from contextual understanding of Iran's internal political situation. This indirect portrayal allows the speaker to criticize a political opponent without making an explicit accusation. Such use of implicature supports Chernobrov's (2025) argument that implied meaning is often used to construct negative ideological images of opposing regimes.

Datum 4

“No nation should bear an unfair burden.”

This statement carries an implied meaning that becomes clear only when connected to broader discussions of international alliances and defense responsibilities. Trump indirectly signals dissatisfaction with what he perceives as unequal global obligations, particularly those borne by the United States. Rather than stating this claim explicitly, the speaker relies on implicature to frame his position. As Fairclough (2010) explains, political language often embeds ideological claims beneath seemingly neutral expressions, allowing speakers to advance political agendas indirectly.

Datum 5

“Oppressive regimes cannot endure forever.”

In this utterance, Trump implies that certain nations—commonly identified as U.S. adversaries—are unstable and destined to collapse. The inference arises not from the literal wording but from shared global knowledge of countries frequently labeled as “oppressive” in U.S. political discourse. This indirect prediction enables the speaker to express ideological judgment without direct reference.

Datum 6

“If it is forced to defend itself or its allies, we will have no choice but to totally destroy North Korea.”

This conditional statement produces a particularized implicature that suggests readiness for extreme military action while leaving the triggering conditions intentionally vague. The implied meaning depends on listeners’ awareness of ongoing nuclear tensions rather than explicit explanation. By using indirect threat construction, Trump balances assertiveness with diplomatic ambiguity.

Datum 7

“Major portions of the world are in conflict, and some, in fact, are going to hell.”

This utterance contains a particularized conversational implicature because its evaluative meaning depends on shared knowledge of global political instability, including conflicts in regions such as the Middle East and North Korea. The phrase “going to hell” functions metaphorically rather than literally, expressing Trump’s negative judgment toward regions he views as failing or collapsing. The implied meaning can only be interpreted through contextual awareness of international crises and U.S. foreign policy priorities.

Generalized Conversational Implicature

Generalized Conversational Implicature (GCI) refers to implied meaning that can be understood without reliance on a highly specific context. Such implicatures are derived from shared cultural assumptions and common expectations in communication, allowing meanings to appear natural and widely acceptable. In political discourse, GCI enables leaders to embed ideological messages such as national strength, unity, and moral authority without stating them explicitly. In Trump’s 2017 UN General Assembly Address, GCI appears in broad evaluative statements that rely on commonly shared beliefs rather than detailed geopolitical references, allowing the speaker to project power and reinforce ideology through seemingly straightforward language.

Datum 8

“The United States will always be the greatest force for good in the world.”

This utterance functions as a Generalized Conversational Implicature because its implied meaning does not depend on a specific geopolitical situation. The phrase “the greatest force for good” operates as a broad evaluative claim that implicitly elevates the United States above other nations in moral and political terms. Through this generalized praise, Trump encourages the audience to accept American moral leadership without requiring empirical justification.

Datum 9

“Our people are strong and resilient.”

This statement produces a Generalized Conversational Implicature because its meaning can be understood without reference to any particular event or context. The description of Americans as “strong and resilient” is vague yet emotionally charged, inviting positive interpretation without concrete evidence. The implied meaning emphasizes national unity and inherent capability, thereby strengthening Trump’s political ethos. As noted by previous study, generalized national praise functions to foster emotional solidarity and reinforce collective identity through shared cultural assumptions (Ghawaidi & Alsmari, 2025).

Datum 10

“We appreciate the nations who join us...”

Although this utterance appears to express gratitude, it also generates a Generalized Conversational Implicature. The phrase “join us” implicitly frames alignment with the United States as morally correct and legitimate, while positioning non-aligned nations outside that moral framework. This meaning does not rely on a specific diplomatic event but on general expectations surrounding political alliances. As Fairclough (2010) observes, political language often embeds power relations within evaluative expressions. In this case, the implicature subtly reinforces U.S. centrality and influence in global cooperation.

Datum 11

“We will stop radical Islamic terrorism.”

This utterance represents a Generalized Conversational Implicature because the implied meaning is accessible without reference to a particular military or political context. The statement promises a broad and complex outcome without specifying concrete strategies, encouraging the audience to infer American capability and authority. The implicature constructs the United States as a powerful and morally legitimate global actor. This aligns with Camp (2026) view that generalized political claims function to project strength and reinforce ideological assumptions about national responsibility.

Datum 12

“We will fight together, stand together...”

This utterance also functions as a Generalized Conversational Implicature, as its meaning is interpreted broadly without requiring contextual detail. The generalized call for unity implies collective strength and shared purpose, while avoiding specific commitments or strategies. By offering an inclusive yet vague promise, Trump reinforces ideological narratives of leadership and solidarity. As Camp (2026) argue, such generalized formulations allow political leaders to project authority and global leadership while maintaining rhetorical flexibility.

Conventional Implicature

Conventional implicature refers to implied meaning that is encoded through specific lexical markers rather than derived from conversational context. Such implicatures are typically triggered by fixed expressions such as *but*, *however*, *still*, and *even*, which inherently signal contrast, evaluation, or speaker stance beyond literal meaning. Because the implicature is linguistically encoded, its interpretation remains relatively stable across contexts. In this study, conventional implicature accounts for 20% of the total data, indicating that although it occurs less frequently than other types, it plays an important role in embedding ideological meaning through subtle linguistic structures.

Datum 13

“The problem in Venezuela is not that socialism has been poorly implemented, but that socialism has been faithfully implemented.”

This utterance clearly exemplifies Conventional Implicature through the use of the contrastive conjunction *but*. The structure signals an evaluative contrast that conveys an implied ideological judgment beyond the literal meaning. The implicit message suggests that socialism is inherently flawed and destined to fail, regardless of implementation. Through this linguistic contrast, Trump advances an ideological stance that delegitimizes opposing political systems. This supports Fairclough’s (2010) argument that political language embeds ideological dominance within specific linguistic constructions.

Datum 14

“We will fight together, stand together...”

This utterance is categorized as a Conventional Implicature through its repetitive and declarative structure, which encodes an implied expectation of unity and collective action. Rather than merely stating cooperation, the formulation suggests that unity is necessary and unquestionable. Pragmatically, this implicature functions as collective persuasion, encouraging alignment and solidarity among audiences. As noted by Fairclough (2010), such linguistic patterns play a role in constructing and legitimizing social order and political authority.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of implicature in Donald Trump’s 2017 United Nations General Assembly Address demonstrates that political communication operates beyond explicit language. Through strategic use of implicature, Trump embeds multiple layers of meaning that allow him to project power, convey ideology, and influence both domestic and international audiences without relying on overtly confrontational statements.

The findings show that Particularized Conversational Implicature (PCI) occurs most frequently, appearing in 7 out of 14 utterances. This indicates that many of Trump’s implied meanings rely on specific geopolitical contexts, such as nuclear tensions, authoritarian regimes, and international security alliances. These context-dependent implicatures enable the speaker to deliver implicit threats, criticisms, and warnings while maintaining diplomatic flexibility. Generalized Conversational Implicature (GCI), appearing in 5 utterances, conveys broad ideological messages that do not depend on specific contexts. Through generalized evaluative statements, Trump reinforces narratives of American exceptionalism, moral authority, and global leadership, strengthening national identity and unifying audiences by appealing to shared assumptions rather than detailed explanation. Conventional Implicature (CI), though less frequent with 2 instances, contributes to the persuasive impact of the speech by encoding evaluative meaning through specific linguistic markers, such as contrastive and repetitive structures. This type subtly embeds ideological judgments and legitimizes political positions

independently of context.

Overall, this study demonstrates that implicature serves as a powerful rhetorical tool in global political discourse. Trump's combined use of PCI, GCI, and CI illustrates how political leaders strategically employ implied meaning to balance assertiveness and diplomacy, shape ideological narratives, and influence audience interpretation. Understanding these layers of implied meaning is therefore essential for critically analyzing how language functions as a mechanism of power and persuasion in contemporary international relations.

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