

A Pragmatic Analysis of Conversational Implicature Types in U.S Presidential Candidates' Debate

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Abstract

Language is a communication tools use in various context, including debate. In the presidential debates, candidates engage in verbal battles to showcase their leadership qualities, demonstrating their abilities to address challenging questions. Beyond the explicit context of their speeches, the implicit meanings conveyed through language hold significant power. This study aims to analyze the types of conversational implicature found in the first presidential debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, based on Grice theory. The focus was on identifying and classifying the conversational implicatures such as generalized implicature, particularized implicature and scalar implicature. This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach. This study used the transcript of debate as the data source and were verified by reviewing the video recording to ensure accuracy. The result revealed a total of 95 conversational implicature, consisting of 39 generalized implicature, 50 particularized implicature, and 6 scalar implicature. This study shows that conversational implicature play a crucial role in political communication, enabling candidates to deliver indirect yet persuasive messages.

Keywords: Conversational Implicature; Grice's Theory; Presidential Debate

INTRODUCTION

Language is a tool for communication in human daily life. In the context of political discourse, especially debates, it plays a crucial role in shaping public opinion and influencing decisions. In presidential debates, candidates engage in verbal battles to present their vision and mission, showcase their leadership qualities, demonstrating their abilities to address challenging questions to gain voters' support. Beyond the explicit context of their speeches, the implicit meanings conveyed through language hold significant power. According to Santos (2023), emphasizes that political discourse often employs vague and euphemistic expressions to obscure meaning, creating implicit messages. These implicit meanings or what lies between the lines are critical to understand, as they often carry the true intention of the speaker. One effective way to study these implied meanings is through the pragmatic field, namely the theory of implicature. Pragmatics, as a subfield of linguistics, provides tools to investigate and analyze how meaning is conveyed not only through explicit expressions but also through implicit meanings, often referred to as conversational implicatures (Levinson, 1983). The concept of "implicature" introduced by Grice (1975) in his seminar work "*Logic and Conversation*" explains how speakers rely on conversational maxims to communicate indirectly. Conversational implicature refers to conclusions drawn when someone speaks, arising from their interpretation of the literal meaning of what is said (Paltridge, 2006 as cited in Qordawi, 2022). Conversational implicature is a theory about how we can understand more than just the word spoken during communication. Poggi (2018) explain that conversational implicature is closely related to how the cooperative principle and maxims interact. Grice further categorizes

conversational implicature into three types there are generalized, particularized and scalar. Generalized conversational implicature (GCI) are conclusions derived from an utterance without considering specific contextual detail. In contrast, particularized conversational implicature (PCI) depend heavily on context and requires listeners to consider situational details to infer meaning. Scalar Implicature although related to generalized implicature, deserves separate attention due to its focus on the interpretation of information along a scale. It involves interpreting expressions like *some*, *many*, or *few* on a scale of informativeness.

Research that provides support to this research refers to “Identifying and addressing implicature of politicians’ statement on climate change found in Headline news of the Jakarta Post Newspaper.” Was undertaken by (Roni & Perdhani, 2019). In their research analyzed implicature in the *Jakarta Post* headlines contained in statements made by Indonesian politicians regarding climate change, as reported in Jakarta Post headlines during the post-Jokowi era. Their research focused on the generalized and particularized implicatures, as well as instances of scalar implicature. Their findings shows that implicatures often emerge through strategic language use, emphasizing scientific, ethical, and social dimensions. Where politicians employed graded terms like *some* or *many* to shape public perception without making absolute claims. Other previous study is the conversational implicature of Arabian students in daily conversations conducted by (Elmahady Muda, et al., 2022). The qualitative approach is used in this research. In this research, there are Generalized, Particularized, Scalar implicature and violation of maxims. This study aims to identify how conversational implicature of Grice’s theory occur in everyday conversations and how the context of the conversation influences the interpretation of implicatures. However, few studies have examined conversational implicature in spoken discourse, such as debate. This study aims to fill that gap by analyzing the conversational implicatures in a political debate. It highlights how implicature operates in the dynamic and interactive context of spoken political discourse, emphasizing its role in shaping audience perceptions and advancing argumentative strategies. This study focuses on conversational implicature as Levinson (2004) describes it as one of the most critical concepts in pragmatics. The ability to infer implied meanings beyond the literal interpretation of utterances is essential in understanding how language functions as a tool of persuasion. This research focuses on identifying and classifying the types of conversational implicature such as generalized, particularized, and scalar implicature found in the debate.

METHOD

Qualitative research, as stated by Taylor and Bogdan in Moleong (2010;4 as cited in Supit, et al., 2021), generates descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words derived from observations of behavior and interactions. This research employed a qualitative descriptive approach. By focusing on conversational implicature which is analyzed to identify the types of conversational implicature contained in the first debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump. In qualitative research, the researcher often acts as the primary instrument. According to Sugiyono (2015), “The researcher is the key instrument in qualitative studies, as they directly collect, interpret, and analyze data.” In this research, the researcher serves as the primary instrument by collecting, observing, and analyzing data. The transcript of the debate serves as the primary data source for identifying instances of conversational implicature. The data collection procedure includes systematic steps to gather information relevant to the research objectives. According to Hashimov (2015), the process should involve identifying data sources, selecting suitable methods, and validating the data. There were some procedures to analyze the debate. First, Accessing the transcript of the first debate from the ABC News website (www.abcnews.go.com). Second, the researcher watching the YouTube video of the debate to synchronize and verify the accuracy of the transcript. Third, Reading the transcript of the

presidential debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump and thoroughly understanding its content. Forth, carefully analyzing the transcript to identify utterances containing conversational implicatures. Fifth, using a checklist table to record and categorize the implicatures.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

In analyzing the transcript of the first presidential debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, this study identified numerous utterances that reflect the use of conversational implicature such as Generalized, Particularized and Scalar. The result of analysis focuses on classification of each types of conversational implicature found in the debate. The utterances containing implicature are marked with underline text.

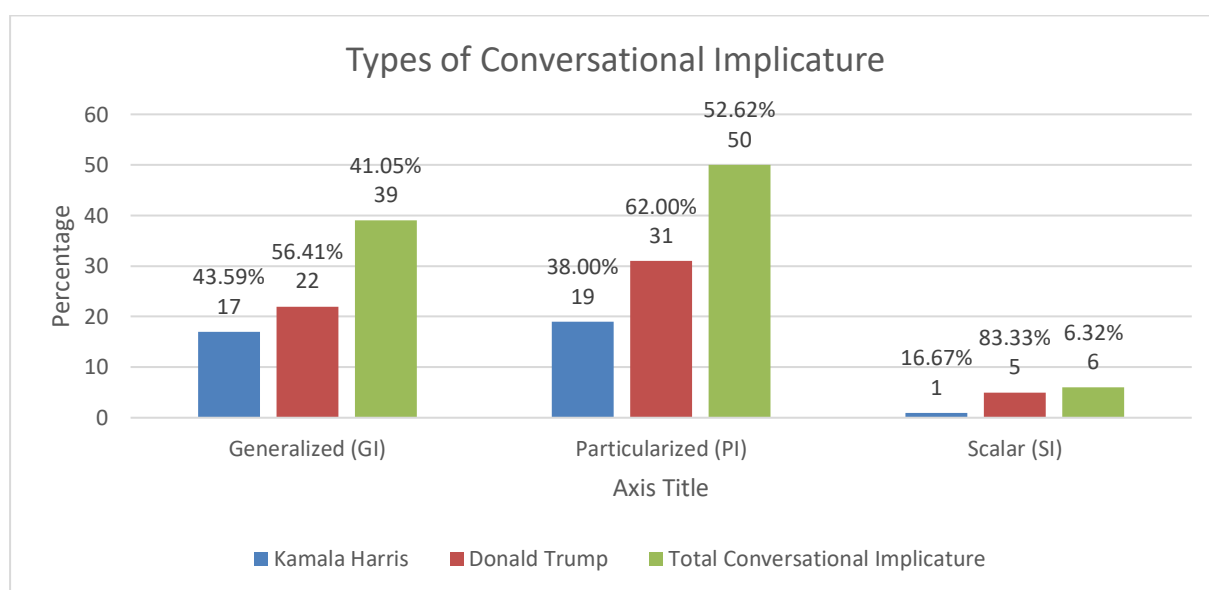


Figure 1. Types of Conversational Implicature

The figure 1 indicate there are 95 types of conversational implicature found in the first debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump. The table above shows that particularized implicature is the highest in frequency among generalised implicature and scalar implicature produced by the two candidates in the debate. Kamala Harris produced a total of 37 conversational implicatures, with Particularized Implicature being the most dominant at 48.72%, followed closely by Generalized Implicature at 43.59%, while Scalar Implicature was the least used, making up only 2.56% of her utterances. Donald Trump, on the other hand, used a total of 58 conversational implicatures, with Particularized Implicature also being the most frequent at 50.82%, followed by Generalized Implicature at 36.07%, and a notably higher use of Scalar Implicature at 8.20% compared to Harris

1. Generalized Implicature

In the first debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, a total of 39 generalised implicature were found, with 17 identified in Kamala Harris's utterances and 22 in Donald Trump's. The following are some of the data that have been obtained from the debate, namely datum 1 and 12 for Kamala Harris's utterances, And datum 11 and 35 for Donald Trump's Utterances.

- a) Data 1
(1) Datum 1 Kamala Harris's Utterances

When David Muir opened the debate question about the economy, it was whether Americans were better off economically than they were four years ago. The question was directed to Kamala Harris as the incumbent Vice President

Transcript:

DAVID MUIR: "When it comes to the economy, do you believe Americans are better off than they were four years ago?"

VICE PRESIDENT KAMALA HARRIS: "And I am actually the only person on this stage who has a plan that is about lifting up the middle class and working people of America."

In Kamala Harris's answer indicates generalized implicature. Although Harris did not directly answer whether Americans are actually better off economically compared to four years ago, she stated that she is the only one who has a plan that focuses on the middle class and workers.

- b) Data 2
(2) Datum 12 Kamala Harris's Utterances

In the debate segment that discussed abortion right also known as Roe v. Wade, Donald Trump previously stated that he succeeded in pushing the Supreme Court to hand the decision on abortion bans back to the states and the people through voting. He stated that the legislative efforts by Harris's side to restore abortion rights would not succeed. Moderator Linsey Davis then asked Kamala Harris directly whether she supports any kind of limitation on women's rights to abortion.

Transcript:

LINSEY DAVIS: "Vice President Harris, I want to give you your time to respond. But I do want to ask, would you support any restrictions on a woman's right to an abortion?"

VICE PRESIDENT KAMALA HARRIS: "I absolutely support reinstating the protections of Roe v. Wade"

In Kamala Harris's answer indicates generalized implicature. Harris's response to Linsey Davis's statement directly shows that she firmly supports limitations on abortion rights.

- c) Data 3
(3) Datum 11 Donald Trump's Utterances

Moderator David Muir challenged Donald Trump to respond to Harris's criticism of his tariff policy, which, according to Harris, would burden middle-class families by \$4,000 per year. Muir asked whether the people could afford that burden.

Transcript:

DAVID MUIR: "Do you believe Americans can afford higher prices because of tariffs?"

FORMER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: "The polls say 80 and 85 and even 90% that the Trump economy was great that their economy was terrible."

In Donald Trump's answer indicates generalized implicature. Trump did not explicitly whether the people could afford the burden of the tariffs. Instead, he shifted the focus by saying that the economy during his administration was "great" and compared it to be the economy under the Biden-Harris administration, which he said is "terrible."

d) Data 4

(4) Datum 35 Donald Trump's Utterances

Moderator Linsey Davis asked Kamala Harris about the differences in her policy positions between the previous presidential campaign and now, including issues such as fracking, immigration, and gun purchases. Harris answered with a detailed explanation that her values have not changed and gave a defense of the policies she has taken.

Transcript:

LINSEY DAVIS: President Trump, your response.

FORMER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: "... And everybody's laughing at it, okay? They're all laughing at it."

In Donald Trump's answer indicates generalized implicature. Trump responded directly and sarcastically that Harris's change of attitude was unconvincing and considered fake by the public and assumed everyone was laughing at Harris's change of attitude

2. Particularized Implicature

In the first debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, a total of 50 particularized implicature were found, with 19 identified in Kamala Harris's utterances and 31 in Donald Trump's. The following are some of the data that have been obtained from the debate, namely datum 5 and 30 for Kamala Harris's utterances, And datum 13, 8, and 17 Donald Trump's Utterances.

a) Data 1

(1) Datum 5 Kamala Harris's Utterances

In this part, after Trump expressed his views on tariffs and immigration, he blamed Harris and Biden for rising inflation and crime, and mentioned waves of immigration that, according to him, are taking over cities and threatening the working class. Moderator David Muir then gave Kamala Harris the chance to respond to this economic argument.

Transcript:

DAVID MUIR: "We are going to get to immigration and border security during this debate. But I would like to let Vice President Harris respond on the economy here."

VICE PRESIDENT KAMALA HARRIS: "...you're going to hear from the same old, tired playbook, a bunch of lies, grievances and name-calling. What you're going to hear tonight is a detailed and dangerous plan called Project 2025 that the president intends on implementing if he were elected again."

In Kamala Harris's answer indicates particularized implicature. It was a direct response to Trump's argument blaming immigration for economic problems, and his claim of having created the best economy. Literally, she mentioned the same old playbook, lies, and name-calling. But the implication suggests that Trump's communication style is seen as irrelevant, abusive, and dangerous. One must have specific contextual knowledge about Trump's previous rhetoric and the Project 2025 agenda to fully understand this meaning.

b) Data 2

(2) Datum 30 Kamala Harris's Utterances

This section represents Harris's counterattack against Trump, particularly in the segment discussing U.S. support for Ukraine and the approach toward Vladimir Putin.

Transcript:

DAVID MUIR: "... But also as commander in chief if elected how would you deal with Vladimir Putin and would it be any different from what we're seeing from President Biden?"

VICE PRESIDENT KAMALA HARRIS: "... what is known to be a dictator who would eat you for lunch."

In Kamala Harris's answer indicates particularized implicature. The sentence was not just an ordinary metaphor, but a political sarcasm aimed at Trump's soft attitude toward Putin. Understanding the history of Trump-Putin relations and the Russian invasion of Ukraine is necessary to interpret this meaning

c) Data 3

(3) Datum 13 Donald Trump's Utterances

In this section, moderator David Muir challenged Kamala Harris to explain the Biden administration's position of maintaining several tariff policies from the Trump era. Harris responded by blaming Trump for the trade deficit and for policies that, according to her, helped the Chinese military and weakened America's competitive position.

Transcript:

DAVID MUIR: "President Trump, I'll let you respond."

FORMER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: "... In fact, I was going to send her a MAGA hat. She's gone to my philosophy."

In Donald Trump's answer indicates particularized implicature. It was a direct reply to Harris's narrative that accused him of causing the trade deficit and benefiting China's military. Trump reversed the accusation by implying that Harris and the Biden administration are now imitating his policy philosophy. Understanding the meaning of the "MAGA hat" is necessary to grasp the full implication. The MAGA hat is a symbol of the "Make America Great Again" movement, which is closely associated with Trump's political and economic philosophy economic nationalism, import tariffs, and protectionism.

d) Data 4

(4) Datum 17 Donald Trump's Utterances

This part was presented in response to a question from moderator Linsey Davis regarding Trump's changing stance on abortion, including policies in Florida and public trust in his consistency.

Transcript:

LINSEY DAVIS: "... Vice President Harris says that women shouldn't trust you on the issue of abortion because you've changed your position so many times. Therefore, why should they trust you?"

FORMER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: "But what I did is something for 52 years they've been trying to get Roe v. Wade into the states."

In Donald Trump's answer indicates particularized implicature. He said that he had done something that people had fought for during 52 years. Understanding the shared background of Roe v. Wade and the historical efforts to overturn it is necessary.

3. Scalar Implicature

In the first debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, a total of 6 scalar implicature were found, with 1 identified in Kamala Harris's utterances and 5 in Donald Trump's. The following are some of the data that have been obtained from the debate, namely datum 2 for Kamala Harris's utterances. And datum 4 and 24 Donald Trump's Utterances.

a) Data 1

(1) Datum 2 Kamala Harris's Utterances

When the debate opened, moderator David Muir discussed the economy and cost of living. Kamala Harris responded in this part, focusing particularly on support for middle-class families.

Transcript:

DAVID MUIR: "... When it comes to the economy, do you believe Americans are better off than they were four years ago?"

VICE PRESIDENT KAMALA HARRIS: "..., which is the largest child tax credit that we have given in a long time."

In Kamala Harris's answer indicates scalar implicature. Kamala Harris aimed to communicate that the current administration had provided significant fiscal assistance for young families, particularly through the child tax credit, and that this policy was the largest of its kind in a long time. The keyword "largest" functions as a scale of degree

b) Data 2

(2) Datum 4 Donald Trump's Utterances

This is Trump's response to Kamala Harris's previous claim that Trump planned to implement a sales tax that would cost middle-class families \$4,000 per year.

Transcript:

DAVID MUIR: "President Trump, I'll give you two minutes."

FORMER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: "... 50, 60, 70, and 80% higher than they were just a few years ago."

In Donald Trump's answer indicates scalar implicature. Trump denied the claim and shifted to discussing inflation and the general state of the economy, mentioning extreme price increases as the result of current economic policies. He used figures in a graded scale. These expressions belong to the numerical scale of quantity.

Discussion

Based on the analysis, a total of 95 conversational implicatures were identified from both candidates. Kamala Harris's utterances contained 37 implicatures, consisting of 17 Generalized, 19 Particularized, and 1 Scalar implicature. Meanwhile, Donald Trump's utterances showed a higher frequency, with 58 implicatures: 22 Generalized, 31 Particularized, and 5 Scalar. These findings reflect the strategic communication style employed by both candidates, particularly in their use of implied meaning to persuade, criticize, or respond without explicitly stating everything.

1. Generalized Implicature

Generalized implicature refers to a type of implied meaning that can be understood by most people without requiring knowledge of the specific context or situation. This is because such meaning relies on common knowledge and shared assumptions already present within the speech community. The use of Generalized Implicature in both candidates demonstrates that not all implied meanings depend on highly specific contexts. Statements such as on datum 1 and 12 for Kamala Harris's utterances, And datum 11 and 35 for Donald Trump's Utterances illustrate meanings that can be understood broadly, without needing detailed situational information.

The examples found in data 1 and 12 from Kamala Harris show that Harris often delivers implicit meanings which can still be understood by the general public. For instance, in data 1, Harris states that she is the only candidate who has a plan to uplift the middle class and workers. Although she does not mention specific data or evidence, the statement can still be generally understood as a form of criticism toward her opponent, Donald Trump, who does not have the same plan. Meanwhile, in data 12, Harris emphasizes that she supports the limits set by Roe v. Wade.

Similarly, in data 11 and 35, Donald Trump also shows the same strategy. In data 11, Trump claims that based on the surveys, the economy under his administration was very strong, while

now it is the opposite, very weak. In data 35, Trump sarcastically responds to Harris' explanation about her change of stance, saying that everyone is laughing at her because of it. The use of Generalized Implicature like this supports the function of political communication in debates, where candidates need to deliver messages that are quickly understood by the wider public. This is in line with Grice's theory (1975), which states that Generalized Implicature refers to implied meaning that does not require specific context to be interpreted, because it is usually already shared knowledge or common assumption between speaker and listener. This is also supported by previous research from Aqromi (2011), which stated that Generalized Implicature is often used in formal communication such as speeches or public dialogues, because it can reach audiences with diverse levels of understanding.

2. Particularized Implicature

Particularized Implicature is a type of implicature in which the implied meaning can only be interpreted through understanding the specific context of the conversation, including social background, interpersonal relationship, and communicative purpose of the speaker. In political communication, this strategy is used to convey messages implicitly while still being understood by audiences who share certain contextual understanding. In this debate, the data show that Particularized Implicature is more dominant compared to other types of implicature. Kamala Harris is recorded to have used 19 instances of particularized implicature, while Donald Trump used 31 instances. This difference in frequency not only indicates each candidate's preference in choosing linguistic strategy, but also reflects how they build their political image and respond to issues raised by their opponent. Both actively used implicit meaning to express political stance, criticize the opponent, or strengthen their claims without having to state them explicitly. The examples in data 5 and 30 from Kamala Harris show that Harris used Particularized Implicature to deliver strong criticism implicitly toward Trump. For example, in data 5, Harris stated that the public would hear "a bunch of lies and insults" from Trump's old strategy. This utterance not only responds to Trump's economic claims, but also implies that Trump's rhetoric is not credible and even dangerous. Understanding of "Project 2025" and Trump's communication style is needed to interpret this meaning. Furthermore, in data 30, Harris uses the metaphor "dictator who would eat you for lunch" to criticize Trump's closeness with Vladimir Putin. This utterance can only be fully understood if the audience knows the background of Trump and Putin's relationship, as well as the current global political context. Meanwhile, in data 8 and 13 from Donald Trump, the use of Particularized Implicature can be seen in his attempt to weaken Harris's claims about the economy. In data 8, Trump stated that the jobs created under Biden's administration are only "bounce-back jobs," implying that those jobs were not the result of economic policy, but only a natural recovery after the pandemic. Understanding the economic context at that time is necessary to catch the implied message. Then, in data 13, Trump said that Harris had "moved to my philosophy" and that he was ready to send her a "MAGA hat," implying that Harris's current policies are now aligned with Trumpism. The meaning of this sarcasm can only be understood if the audience is familiar with the symbolism of the "MAGA hat" and the nationalist economic ideas associated with Trump. This use of Particularized Implicature reflects a complex and exclusive political communication strategy. Candidates use implicit messages that can only be understood by audiences who have certain background knowledge, creating the impression of "in-group communication." This strengthens solidarity with core supporters who "understand the context," while subtly attacking or discrediting the opponent. According to Grice's theory (1975), Particularized Implicature occurs when the implied meaning can only be understood with specific additional information. This is supported by Asridayani & Soekarno (2019), who stated that this type of implicature in political debate is strategic because it allows politicians to control who the message is truly intended for. Therefore, in a public debate like this, the role of the audience is crucial in determining whether the implicit message is successfully delivered or not.

3. Scalar Implicature

Scalar Implicature is a type of implicature that occurs when the speaker delivers meaning through a certain scale or level, whether in the form of quantity, quality, frequency, or logical order. In this form, the speaker does not mention all levels, but only part of them, and lets the listener infer the rest. In the context of political debates, Scalar Implicature is used to create a sense of comparison, emphasis, or evaluation toward an issue in an indirect but strong way. In the findings of this research, Scalar Implicature is the least frequently used type by both candidates, with Kamala Harris using only 1 datum and Donald Trump using 5 data.

The example in data 2 from Kamala Harris shows that Harris used Scalar Implicature to emphasize the success of the family tax program. In her statement, Harris said that the child tax credit policy provided by her administration is “the largest ... in a long time.” The word “largest” contains a sense of intensity scale because it places the policy at the highest point in a certain time range. Although no specific numbers or data are mentioned, the audience is expected to understand that this program is bigger compared to similar programs in the past. This is the point of scalar implicature: Harris presents a limited fact, but the audience infers that the program is superior to previous ones.

Meanwhile, Donald Trump used Scalar Implicature more often to describe the economic condition and sensitive issues such as abortion. In data 4, Trump stated that prices have increased “50, 60, 70, even 80%,” as a form of attack against the Harris-Biden administration’s economic policy. This statement shows a sequence of numbers that form a quantitative scale to give the impression that inflation is very severe. Although he did not mention the source or context of the increase, the audience perceives that the current economic condition is worse than before. This is a linguistic strategy to strengthen political claims without the need to prove them in detail.

This use of Scalar Implicature is very strategic because it allows the speaker to express evaluation or judgment implicitly, with high rhetorical power. According to Grice's theory (1975), Scalar Implicature happens when the speaker chooses to state only part of the scale and lets the listener infer that the unmentioned information is not applicable or less relevant. This is strengthened by Horn's view (2014), who developed the idea of semantic scales that may include quantity (such as numbers), quality, intensity, or frequency. In the context of debates, such scales are used to strengthen political positions without appearing overly aggressive or exaggerating. Thus, even though its frequency of use is lower compared to the other two types of implicature, Scalar Implicature still plays an important role in shaping public perception of policies or the opponent’s image. It works subtly but effectively in constructing persuasive and rhetorically strong political narratives.

CONCLUSION

The objective of this research is to analyze the types of conversational implicature in the first presidential debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump in the 2024 U.S. presidential election. After conducting the analysis, it can be seen that based on the findings and discussion, there are 95 conversational implicatures identified in the debate. These consist of 39 generalized implicatures, 50 particularized implicatures, and 6 scalar implicatures. The data show that particularized implicature is the most dominantly used by both candidates, indicating a strong tendency to use context-based expressions to deliver indirect meaning. Meanwhile, generalized implicature is more often found in statements that are easier to understand without requiring specific context, and scalar implicature appears less frequently and is usually used in arguments involving quantity or comparison. These findings are expected to enrich the study of pragmatics, especially in applying Grice’s implicature theory to real contexts such as political debates. Furthermore, this research can also serve as an alternative resource in debate learning,

particularly to improve students' ability in building arguments, understanding implied meanings, and communicating persuasively.

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