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Antithesis as Rhetorical Strategy in American Concession and Withdrawal Speeches: Harris (2024) and Biden (2024)

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Abstract. *This article examines antithesis as a rhetorical strategy in two landmark American political speeches of 2024: Kamala Harris's concession speech at Howard University (November 6, 2024) and Joe Biden's withdrawal address from the Oval Office (July 24, 2024). Drawing on classical rhetorical theory, the genre theory of concession speeches, face theory, and Critical Discourse Analysis, the study identifies and analyses ten antithetical constructions in Harris's speech and twelve in Biden's. The analysis demonstrates that antithesis functions simultaneously at four levels: as a textual figure creating memorability and argumentative force, as a genre convention enabling speakers to concede while maintaining strength, as a pragmatic device managing the face of speaker, opponent, and supporters, and as a ritual element in democratic legitimation. The comparative analysis reveals that Harris's antitheses pivot from electoral loss to continued struggle, while Biden's pivot from personal honour to national duty — two distinct rhetorical tasks unified by the same structural device. The article contributes to rhetorical studies by connecting figure theory to genre analysis in an under-theorised speech type.*

Keywords: *antithesis, rhetorical strategy, concession speech, withdrawal speech, political discourse, face theory, critical discourse analysis*

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Amerika təslim və geri çəkilmə nitqlərində antiteza ritorik strategiya kimi: Harris (2024) və Bayden (2024)

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Xülasə. *Bu məqalə 2024-cü ilin iki mühüm Amerika siyasi nitqində — Kamala Harrisin Hovard Universitetindəki təslim nitqi (6 noyabr 2024) və Co Baydenin Oval Kabinetdən geri çəkilmə müraciəti (24 iyul 2024) — antitezanın ritorik strategiya kimi rolunu araşdırır. Tədqiqat klassik ritorika nəzəriyyəsi, təslim nitqlərinin janr nəzəriyyəsi, üz (face) nəzəriyyəsi və Tənqidi Diskurs Təhlili çərçivələrini birləşdirir. Harrisin nitqində on, Baydenin nitqində isə on iki antitetik konstruksiya müəyyən edilmişdir. Təhlil göstərir ki, antiteza eyni vaxtda dörd səviyyədə fəaliyyət göstərir: yaddaqalanlıq və arqumentativ qüvvə yaradan mətn fiquru kimi; natiqə zəiflik göstərmədən təslim olmağa imkan verən janr konvensiyası kimi; natiqin, rəqibin və tərəfdarların üzünü idarə edən praqmatik vasitə kimi; və demokratik leqitimləşdirmədə ritual element kimi. Müqayisəli təhlil göstərir ki, Harrisin antitezaları seçki məğlubiyyətindən davam edən mübarizəyə doğru yönəlir, Baydenin antitezaları isə şəxsi şərəfdən milli vəzifəyə doğru. Bu iki fərqli ritorik vəzifə eyni struktur vasitə ilə*

həll olunur. Məqalə fiqur nəzəriyyəsini janr təhlili ilə əlaqələndirərək az tədqiq olunmuş nitq növünə dair ritorika elminə töhfə verir.

Açar sözlər: *antiteza, ritorik strategiya, təslim nitqi, geri çəkilmə nitqi, siyasi diskurs, üz nəzəriyyəsi, tənqidi diskurs təhlili*

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Introduction

The 2024 American electoral cycle produced two speeches of extraordinary rhetorical interest: Kamala Harris's concession speech, delivered on November 6, 2024, at Howard University in Washington, D.C., and Joe Biden's withdrawal address, delivered on July 24, 2024, from the Oval Office. Both speeches confronted the same fundamental rhetorical challenge: how to acknowledge political defeat or voluntary departure while simultaneously maintaining the speaker's dignity, affirming democratic values, and mobilising supporters for continued engagement. Both speakers resolved this challenge through the same primary rhetorical device: antithesis – the juxtaposition of contrasting ideas in parallel grammatical structures.

Antithesis has been recognised since Aristotle as one of the most powerful figures of speech. In *Rhetoric* (III.9), Aristotle argued that antithetical expressions are pleasing because contraries are easily understood, especially when placed side by side, and that antithesis resembles a syllogism because refutation is a bringing together of contraries (Aristotle, 1991). Despite this ancient pedigree and its pervasive presence in political oratory, antithesis has received surprisingly little systematic attention in the analysis of concession and withdrawal speeches – genres that, by their very nature, require speakers to hold opposing realities in rhetorical balance. Recent corpus and discourse-analytic work on political rhetoric confirms that figures of balance remain central to contemporary political persuasion (Reyes, 2020; Degani & Sancho Guinda, 2023).

This article addresses that gap. The research questions are: (1) What antithetical constructions do Harris and Biden deploy, and how are they structurally organised? (2) What pragmatic and ideological functions do these antitheses perform within the generic conventions of concession and withdrawal speeches? (3) How does antithesis enable the simultaneous management of multiple faces – speaker, opponent, and supporter – in the act of political exit? The analysis integrates four complementary frameworks: classical figure theory (Aristotle, 1991; Fahnestock, 1999), concession speech genre theory (Corcoran, 1994), face theory (Goffman, 1967; Brown & Levinson, 1987), and Fairclough's (1992) Critical Discourse Analysis.

Theoretical Framework

Antithesis in Classical and Modern Rhetoric

The classical tradition provides the foundational understanding of antithesis as both ornament and argument. Aristotle's dual characterisation – antithesis as aesthetically pleasing and as resembling syllogistic reasoning – establishes its unique status among rhetorical figures: it is simultaneously a scheme (a pattern of arrangement) and a figure of thought (a cognitive operation) (Aristotle, 1991). Corbett and Connors (1999) classify antithesis as a scheme of balance, emphasising its structural properties.

Fahnestock's (1999) modernisation of figure theory is particularly relevant. She argues that rhetorical figures are not ornaments but formal embodiments of certain ideational or persuasive functions – epitomes of lines of argument (Fahnestock, 1999, p. 46). Antithesis specifically builds on powerful natural pairs, the use of one in the first half of the figure creating the expectation of its verbal partner in the second half (Fahnestock, 1999, p. 47). This concept of pattern completion explains why antithetical structures feel both inevitable and satisfying to audiences, and why they are particularly effective in political oratory where speakers need audiences to arrive at conclusions that feel self-evident. Subsequent work has confirmed the cognitive basis of this effect: balanced contrastive structures reduce processing effort and increase persuasive uptake (Mitchell, 2022).

Burke's (1969) concept of identification by antithesis extends the analysis from textual form to social function. Burke argues that antithetical structures promote unity between speaker and audience by establishing common opposition to an external force, observing that the more urgent the oratory, the greater the profusion and vitality of the formal devices (Burke, 1969, p. 58). This directly predicts the antithesis-dense character of both speeches under examination, where the urgency of political exit demands maximal rhetorical intensity.

Genre Theory: Concession and Withdrawal Speeches

Corcoran's (1994) foundational study identifies four generic elements of presidential concession speeches: periphrasis of defeat (circumlocuting the word loss); unity appeals; a paean to democracy; and a plea for continued struggle. This generic structure creates a paradoxical rhetorical situation: the speaker must simultaneously acknowledge defeat and deny its finality, accept the opponent's legitimacy and maintain their own relevance. Antithesis is structurally suited to this paradox because it holds two opposing propositions in simultaneous balance. Recent studies of concession rhetoric confirm the durability of Corcoran's model while extending it to new media and non-American contexts (Kane, 2021; Bull & Miskinis, 2023). Presidential withdrawal speeches remain an under-theorised genre; Biden's 2024 address shares concession conventions but adds distinctive elements – legacy construction and self-sacrificial narrative – in which voluntary departure must be constructed as strength rather than weakness.

Face Theory and Pragmatic Function

Goffman's (1967) concept of face – the positive social value a person claims for themselves – and Brown and Levinson's (1987) elaboration into positive face (desire for approval) and negative face (desire for autonomy) explain why antithesis is structurally necessary in these genres. Concession and withdrawal speeches require managing three faces simultaneously: the speaker's own face (reframing loss as noble sacrifice), the winner's face (legitimisation through congratulation), and the collective face of supporters (preventing demoralisation). Antithesis – conceding one thing while affirming another – is the device uniquely suited to this triple facework, as recent pragmatic studies of political concession have confirmed (Sharifi & Ebrahimi, 2024).

Critical Discourse Analysis

Fairclough's (1992) three-dimensional model connects textual features (antithetical structures) to discursive practice (genre conventions of concession and withdrawal) and social practice (democratic legitimation and the peaceful transfer of power). Van Dijk's (2001) ideological square – positive self-presentation combined with negative other-representation – maps directly onto antithetical structures where speakers contrast their values against those of unnamed opponents, as demonstrated by Abbas's (2024) Critical Discourse Analysis of Harris's speech.

Methods

The corpus comprises the official transcripts of two speeches: Harris's concession speech (approximately 1,145 words, delivered November 6, 2024, at Howard University; sourced from TIME and Roll Call/Factbase) and Biden's withdrawal address (approximately 2,100 words, delivered July 24, 2024, from the Oval Office; sourced from the Biden White House Archives and ABC News). Both transcripts were cross-referenced across multiple sources for accuracy. The study employs a qualitative case study design supplemented by descriptive frequency counts; the figures reported describe only the two texts analysed and are not generalisable beyond them.

The analytical procedure involved three stages. First, all antithetical constructions – defined as instances where contrasting ideas are juxtaposed in parallel or near-parallel grammatical structures – were identified through close reading. A construction was classified as antithetical when it met Fahnestock's (1999, p. 47) criterion of contrary thoughts in successive clauses or Corbett and Connors's (1999, p. 70) definition of a scheme of balance. This yielded ten antithetical constructions in Harris's speech and twelve in Biden's. Second, each construction was analysed for its structural type (syntactic parallelism, semantic opposition, negation-based contrast, comparative hierarchy), its pragmatic function (face-saving, face-threatening, mobilising), and its relationship to Corcoran's (1994) generic elements. Third, the two speeches were compared to identify common patterns and genre-specific variations.

Results and Discussion
Harris's Concession: Antithesis as Pivot from Defeat to Struggle
Harris's concession speech is architecturally organised around antithetical pivots – each acknowledging a negative reality before swinging to an affirming counter-claim. The speech's central and most widely quoted antithesis sets the tone for the entire address:

"While I concede this election, I do not concede the fight that fuelled this campaign."
This construction operates through what classical rhetoricians termed *antanaclasis* – the repetition of a word in two different senses. The verb concede appears twice but shifts meaning: from formal political concession (acknowledging the electoral result) to philosophical surrender (abandoning the cause). The syntactic parallelism creates Fahnestock's (1999, p. 47) pattern completion: the audience processes the first clause and anticipates its opposite, making the second clause feel both surprising and inevitable. In pragmatic terms, this single sentence performs all three facework operations: it saves Harris's face by reframing defeat as a strategic concession of the particular while preserving the general, it respects the winner's face by acknowledging the electoral result, and it protects supporters' face by denying that their efforts were wasted.

A second major antithesis deploys contrasting body metaphors to construct a physical image of resilience:
"This is not a time to throw up our hands – this is a time to roll up our sleeves."
The identical frame creates structural balance, while the gestural contrast – hands raised in surrender versus sleeves rolled for labour – transforms abstract political sentiment into embodied action. This antithesis performs Corcoran's (1994) fourth generic element – the plea for continued struggle – through figural rather than propositional means: the audience does not merely hear an argument for continued engagement but feels it through the kinaesthetic imagery of sleeves being rolled.

Further antithetical constructions in Harris's speech include a negation-based loyalty contrast ("We owe loyalty not to a president or a party but to the Constitution"), a temporal antithesis ("Sometimes the fight takes a while. That doesn't mean we won't win"), an emotional validation pivot ("It is OK to feel sad and disappointed, but please know it's going to be OK"), and the climactic light/darkness

antithesis drawn from Martin Luther King Jr.'s final speech. This last construction democratises the light source — each supporter becomes a star – distributing agency from a single prophetic leader to a collective movement.

Across all ten antithetical constructions, a consistent pattern emerges: Harris's antitheses pivot from electoral loss to continued struggle. The first element of each pair acknowledges defeat, disappointment, or darkness; the second affirms fight, hope, or light. This pattern performs what Burke (1969) termed identification by antithesis: by establishing shared opposition to despair, Harris unites her audience around the common project of continued resistance. The cumulative effect is a speech that performs concession and mobilisation simultaneously – the central paradox of the genre, resolved through antithetical form.

Biden's Withdrawal: Antithesis as Pivot from Personal Honour to National Duty
Biden's withdrawal address deploys a systematic but structure in which the conjunction serves as a rhetorical pivot, repeatedly conceding something personal before asserting something larger. The speech's central antithesis compresses the entire argument into a single sentence:

"I revere this office, but I love my country more".
This construction operates through comparative hierarchy: both elements are positive (reverence and love), but the comparative more establishes a value ranking that transforms withdrawal from loss into sacrifice. The antithesis is not between good and bad but between good and greater good — a sophisticated variant that reframes political exit as the highest form of patriotism. In Goffman's (1967) terms, this sentence simultaneously performs face-enhancement (I am capable of supreme sacrifice) and face-threat mitigation (my departure is not weakness but strength).

Biden extends this pattern through a series of parallel constructions. The honour-duty antithesis recurs: "It's been the honor of my life to serve as your president. But in the defense of democracy... I think it's more important than any title." A self-other pivot shifts agency from Biden to the American people: "I draw strength and I find joy in working for the American people. But this sacred task... it's not about me. It's about you." The pronoun shift from I to you enacts the antithesis grammatically.

Biden's most structurally elaborate antithesis is a triple antithetical tricolon: *"America is going to have to choose between moving forward or backward, between hope and hate, between unity and division."*

This construction combines three binary pairs within a single anaphoric frame, each pair escalating in moral weight: spatial direction, emotional disposition, and political condition. The tricolon creates what Aristotle called a bringing together of contraries that mimics the structure of logical proof. The unnamed opponent is positioned on the negative pole of all three pairs without being named – antithesis here performs van Dijk's (2001) negative other-representation through structural implication rather than direct accusation. The presidential portrait sequence adds an implicit antithetical dimension: Biden names four predecessors – Jefferson, Washington, Lincoln, Roosevelt – attributing specific virtues to each, with the implication that the opponent represents their antithesis. This operates as what classical rhetoric termed *praeteritio* combined with antithetical structure.

Across Biden's twelve antithetical constructions, the consistent pattern is a pivot from personal honour to national duty. Where Harris's antitheses pivot from defeat to fight, Biden's pivot from self to country. This distinction reflects the generic difference between concession and withdrawal: Harris must convert involuntary defeat into continued agency, while Biden must convert voluntary departure into supreme sacrifice. Both tasks are accomplished through the same structural device – antithesis – but with different semantic content and different face-management priorities.

Comparative synthesis

Table 1
Comparative analysis of antithesis in Harris and Biden

Dimension	Harris (Concession)	Biden (Withdrawal)
Antitheses identified	10	12
Central antithesis	"I concede this election / I do not concede the fight"	"I revere this office / I love my country more"
Pivot pattern	Defeat → struggle	Personal honour → national duty
Dominant face operation	Supporter face-saving	Speaker face-enhancement
Genre function	Mobilisation despite defeat	Sacrifice as highest duty
Opponent representation	Unnamed; implied through value contrast	Unnamed; implied through portrait antithesis
Key supporting devices	Anaphora, antanaclasis, MLK allusion	Tricolon, praeteritio, JFK allusion

Source. Author's analysis, 2025

The comparison reveals that antithesis performs a consistent macro-function across both genres: it enables the speaker to hold two incompatible realities in simultaneous rhetorical balance — defeat and defiance in Harris's case, departure and devotion in Biden's. This dual-holding capacity is what makes antithesis structurally indispensable to political exit rhetoric. No other figure of speech can simultaneously acknowledge and deny in the way antithesis does, because only antithesis formally encodes opposition within a single structural unit.

At the sociopolitical level analysed through Fairclough's (1992) framework, both speeches use antithesis to perform democratic ritual. The peaceful transfer of power — whether through concession or withdrawal — requires a public speech act that simultaneously closes one political chapter and opens another. Antithesis provides the linguistic architecture for this transition: the first element of each pair closes, while the second element opens. The figure thus performs at the level of social practice what it performs at the level of text: a pivot from ending to beginning, from loss to legacy, from individual to collective.

Conclusions

This article has demonstrated that antithesis functions as the primary rhetorical strategy in both Harris's 2024 concession speech and Biden's 2024 withdrawal address, operating simultaneously at four analytical levels. At the textual level, antithetical constructions create memorability and

argumentative force through balanced opposition and pattern completion. At the discursive level, antithesis serves as a genre convention that enables the paradoxical rhetorical task of conceding while maintaining strength. At the pragmatic level, antithesis functions as a face-management device, allowing speakers to perform face-threatening and face-saving acts within single syntactic structures. At the sociopolitical level, antithesis performs the democratic ritual of peaceful transition.

The comparative analysis has revealed a significant genre-specific distinction: Harris's antitheses consistently pivot from electoral loss to continued struggle, while Biden's pivot from personal honour to national duty. This distinction reflects the different rhetorical tasks inherent in concession versus withdrawal: involuntary defeat demands mobilisation, while voluntary departure demands sacrifice. Both tasks are accomplished through the same structural device but with different semantic content and face-management priorities.

The findings contribute to rhetorical studies in two ways. First, they connect classical figure theory to genre analysis in a speech type that has received insufficient scholarly attention, demonstrating that antithesis is not merely a decorative feature of political exit rhetoric but its structural foundation. Second, they provide the first systematic analysis of antithesis in presidential withdrawal speeches — a genre that, until Biden's 2024 address, had not occurred in American politics since 1968 and had never received dedicated rhetorical study. Future research could extend this framework to historical concession speeches, cross-cultural concession rhetoric, or multimodal analysis incorporating delivery, gesture, and audience response.

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