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# The language of impeachment in the trial of the Philippine Chief Justice

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**Abstract.** This paper focuses on the language used in the impeachment of the Philippine Chief Justice. The data, treated here as a power resource, come from the opening statements of the heads of the prosecution and the defense teams in the Senate trial. Drawing on the interdisciplinary perspective of critical discourse analysis, which combines textual and social analysis (Fairclough, 1997; Fairclough and Wodak, 1997), the study focuses on the use of language in the impeachment of the Chief Justice in the halls of the Senate as an instrument of control. It examines how ideological strategies such as positive self- and negative other- presentation as well as strategies of legitimization and delegitimization or derogation are linguistically constructed by the ‘power elites’ (van Dijk, 1993). It analyzes the linguistic devices to make the opaque aspects of discourse explicit and to show how language is used to influence the minds of the public and indirectly control their actions. The analysis reveals that the discourses of both teams show the struggle for power between the branches of the government, thereby establishing that the language of impeachment is ideological--exposing how the power elites establish power and relationships in the context of Philippine society.

**Keywords.** Critical discourse analysis, ideological strategies, language of impeachment, positive self- and negative other- presentation, strategies of legitimization and delegitimization.

### 1. Introduction

The impeachment of Philippine Chief Justice Renato Corona in 2012 has become a history changing event for the country as Corona was the first Chief Justice to have been impeached from his office. The timeline of events leading to his impeachment trial provides a glimpse of a man who was close to the former president and whose appointment to the Supreme Court came under heavy scrutiny and a newly-elected president determined to put an end to his power. This is the context of this study—the struggle for power between the Executive branch of the government versus the Judiciary, as evident in the discourses during the impeachment trial.

This study is premised on the belief that language users accomplish social actions in their interactions, and that every instance of language use can transform society, including power relations (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997).

This interplay of power as constructed in discourse is the focus of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The notion of power, more specifically the social power of groups or institutions, according to van Dijk (2001) is crucial in most critical work of discourse.

Furthermore, CDA sees language as a form of social practice (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997; Fairclough, 1997; van Dijk, 1993; Titscher, Meyer, Wodak, & Vetter, 2000) and discourse is “an inherent part of society and partakes in all society’s injustices (van Dijk, 1997). This study on the language of impeachment in the trial of the Philippine Chief Justice examines how power elites establish power and relationships in the context of the Philippine society.

The study draws on the interdisciplinary perspective of CDA. This examines how ideological strategies such as positive self- and negative other-presentation, as well as strategies of legitimization and delegitimization or derogation are constructed by the “power elites” (van Dijk, 1993).

### 2. The analysis and interpretation of data

The study looks at various linguistic devices such as topics, implications, presuppositions, lexicalizations, as well as style and rhetorical devices to make the opaque aspects of discourse explicit.

#### 2.1. Topics

In terms of topics, the use of “we” in both the discourses of the defense and the prosecution shows a high degree of exclusivity, e.g.: “By issuing such verdict, we took the first step towards the fulfilment of our oath...(Statement 8)“ Clearly, the public does not issue verdicts on impeachment.

Tab. 1 interestingly shows that while the focus of the trial is Corona and/or his impeachment, it is outranked by the use of “we” (prosecution), which besides being the most frequent topic, is endowed with much power. In effect, it appears that the trial is about the power of the House, and not about the impeachment of Corona.

Topics	Frequency/Occurrence (1135 words per 1000 words (N))
Prosecution/We/I/Natin/ Representative of people	14.9
Chief Justice/Renato Corona/He / Corona’s Appointment/Standards/ Pagkatakaw/Loyalty, loyal servant / Deep indebtedness/Mockery	10.6
Supreme Court/Arellano, Abad Santos/Code of judicial conduct/ Justice/Governing principle/ Acceptability/ Constitution	7.0
Impeachment; impeach/Article	3.5
Filipino people/Power of people	1.7

Table 1: Topics and their associated words in the discourse of the prosecution

The same can be said about the discourse of the defense (more about the power of the Supreme Court).

Tab. 2 shows that in the discourse of the defense, Corona is rarely used as the topic—showing that he is a non-issue in the trial. In the discourse of the prosecution, Aquino is never a topic, in effect saying that this impeachment is neither about the president nor the president’s wishes (See Tab.1). Note that this is the opposite in the discourse of the defense—Aquino ranks second among the most frequent topics.

Topics	Frequency/Occurrence (1302 words per 1000 words (N))
Supreme Court/Hukuman/Decisions	7.6
President Aquino/He, His/Executive office / Crusading officials	7.6
Defense/We/I/Ako/	6.1
Impeachment; articles of/ Those/Complaint/Issues/ Properties	6.1
Prosecution/Complainants/ House of Representatives/ Sila, Nila	4.6
Chief Justice	3.8

Table 2: Topics and their associated words in the discourse of the defense

It is important to note here that the construction of “we” is a construction of identity, which is linked to power. Both the prosecution and the defense are presented as powerful. The prosecution portrays itself as an agent of change.

2.2. Lexicalizations

The choice of lexical items and their associated terms implements the ideological strategy of positive self- and negative other- presentation.

Fig. 1 affirms the statements made earlier that the prosecution’s use of “we” conveys power. “We,” referred to by the other terms such as the prosecution, the legislature, the house, and the representatives of the people, can do so many things such as “uphold the people’s will,” “of service to the country,” and “search the truth,” among others.

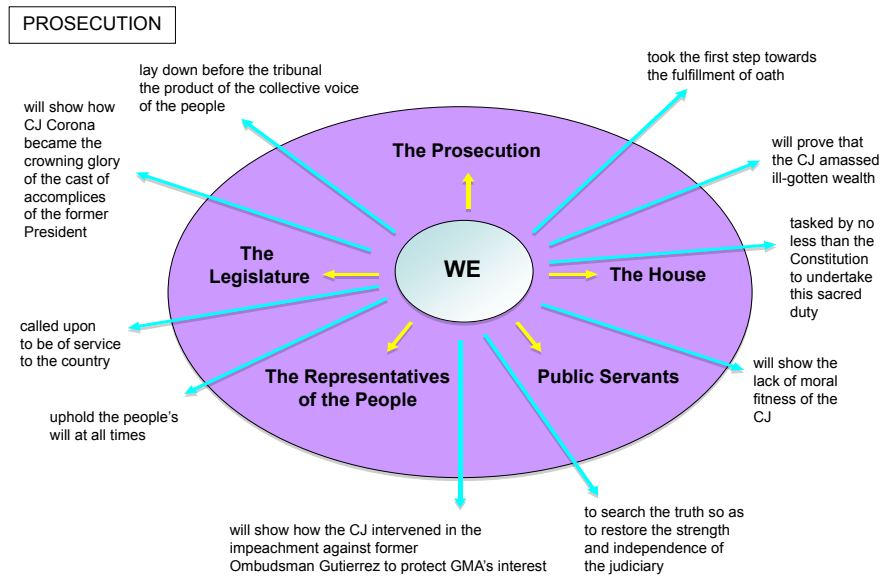


Figure 1: Sample associated terms for “we” for prosecution

While the prosecution is portrayed positively in its own discourse, the *other*, that is, the Chief Justice, is presented negatively. Fig. 2 shows the terms associated with the Chief Justice: “crowning glory of the cast of accomplices”, “an enemy to good government”, “loyal servant to former president”, “sold country for a mess of pottage”, among others.

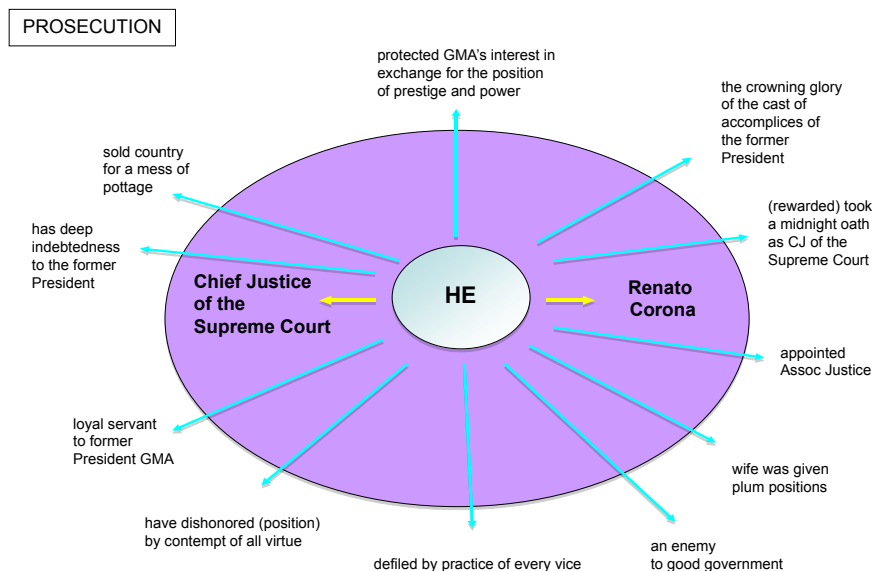


Figure 2: Sample associated terms for the Chief Justice for prosecution

The defense, on the other hand, focuses on the Supreme Court and President Aquino in its discourse. Fig. 3 shows that in its choice of lexical items, it at times presents the Supreme Court side by side with the Chief Justice, thereby emphasizing their good qualities. Associated with the Supreme Court and the Chief Justice are the phrases “do not betray the public trust,”

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“cannot be considered the enemies of the people,” and “cannot be considered as obstacles to clean government.”

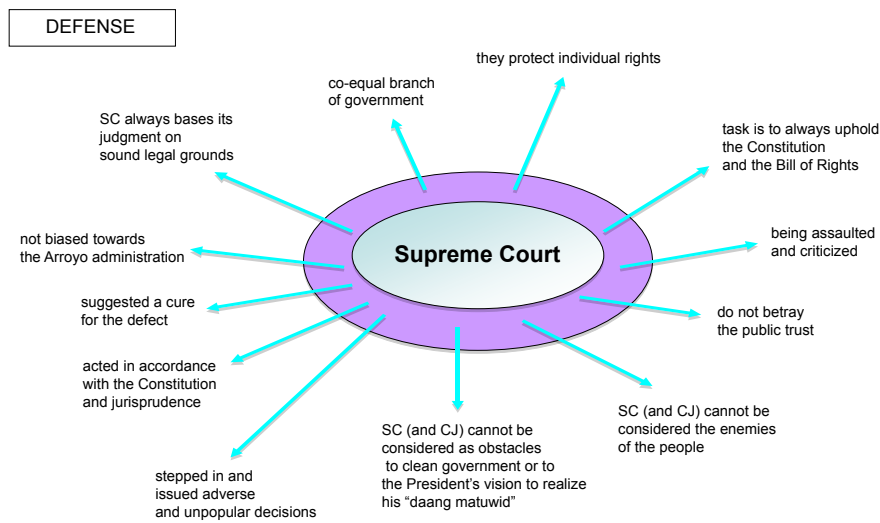


Figure 3: Sample associated terms for the Supreme Court for the defense

The defense negatively portrays the president in its discourse. As shown in Fig. 4, sometimes, the defense is very explicit in its criticism such as when it uses the following terms: “antagonistic to the court,” “obsessive in the pursuit of his goal,” “stubbornly refused to adapt such simple amendment.”

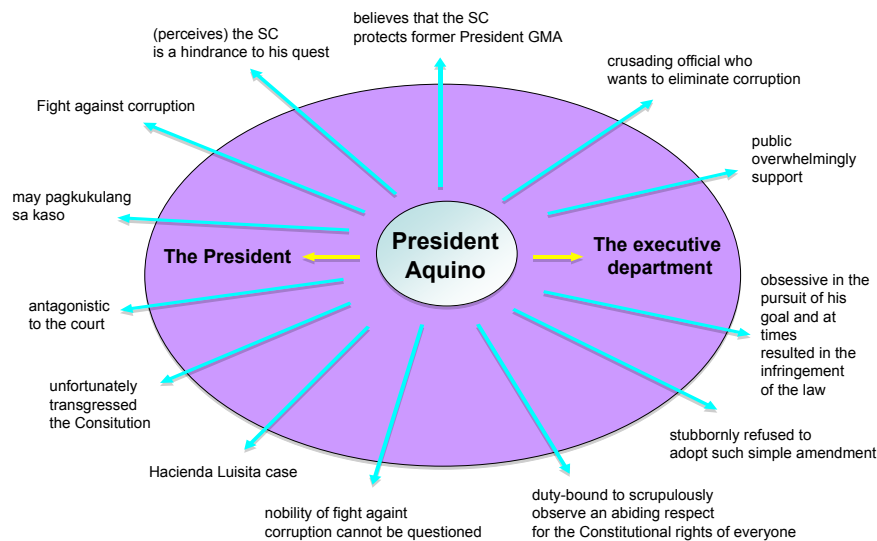


Figure 4: Sample associated terms for President Aquino for the defense

### 2.3. Presuppositions and implications

The discourse of both the prosecution and the defense teams are replete with presuppositions and implications, thereby making indirect attacks to some parties. Statement 11 of the prosecution, „We are here because one man—CJ Renato Corona--- has bartered away for the pot of porridge the effectiveness, independence, and honor of the SC,“ presupposes that the former Supreme Court was effective, independent, and honorable. The phrase „bartered away“ presupposes the presence of another party—that is, the former President Arroyo. The whole statement implies that the Chief Justice has caused the loss of the „virtues“ of the judiciary.

When the defense, on the other hand, states, “The impeachment finds its roots in President Aquino’s fight against corruption and his perception that the SC is a hindrance to his quest,“ the

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defense in effect reminds the public about the president's campaign slogan on the elimination of corruption in government. The statement also presupposes that the Chief Justice was appointed by the former president and so is regarded by the president as an ally of the former president. All these imply that the President is the "prime mover" of the impeachment case against Chief Justice Corona.

The discourse of the prosecution makes constant reference to the House of Representatives' "oath" and "power." Clearly, theirs is a legitimization discourse. In the process of self-legitimization, the prosecution engages in the delegitimation or derogation of the *other* (CJ Corona). However, while the discourse of the prosecution is explicit on the wrongs and flaws of Corona, it is silent on the corruption of elective officials.

The discourse of the defense, on the other hand, implies that CJ Corona is an ordinary person just like anyone, who has to be afforded his rights under the Constitution.

### 2.4. Style and rhetorical devices

In terms of style and rhetorical devices, the discourses of both the prosecution and the defense use code-switching to connect the discourse producers to a greater number of audience. It is also utilized for emphasis. It is interesting to note that the defense, in juxtaposing the President and Diokno, opts for an indirect attack on the President.

Both the defense and the prosecution give detailed and specific information when it serves them. Their statements make references to previous events and circumstances and to great men.

The prosecution, in its closing statements says "In the name of God, go!" This is a case of "demonization of the enemy," a derogation strategy employed for the discourse consumers to see that the *other* is the enemy. The discourse shows that this impeachment is a battle between good and evil.

### 3. Generalizations

Taking into account the linguistic items in the discourses, the prosecution presents itself in a positive manner, and preserves its legitimacy and the legitimacy of its actions in the process. On the other hand, the *other*- CJ Corona, is presented in a negative way. The *other*- Corona, is portrayed as 'evil' and, therefore, must be 'expunged' from office. The binary structure of "we" (the prosecution) and "he" (Corona) is an ideological form- legitimizes the prosecution and delegitimizes Corona.

The strategy of derogation is very subtle and indirect in the discourse of the defense. Not so in the discourse of the prosecution, that it used the strategy to the point of "demonizing" the other.

The discourses show a battle between the branches of the government, or between the "power elites"-- The Supreme Court vs President Aquino (Defense) and the House of Representatives vs the Chief Justice. It is a struggle for power-- a fight between the Executive and The Judiciary- with the House as in instrument of the Executive in the impeachment of the Chief Justice.

The discourses, therefore, are ideological as they construct beliefs and establish power and relationships.

### 4. Acknowledgements

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