

Intertextual Strategies in American and Vietnamese Politicians' Discourse: A Comparative Analysis of Donald Trump and Tô Lâm's Speeches

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Abstract

This qualitative paper aims to comparatively analyze the intertextual practices of US President Donald Trump and that of Vietnam's Party General Secretary Tô Lâm in order to discover different models of political legitimation that the two leaders represent. In the study, a discursive dataset comprising 3 important speeches and public utterances of each leader has been analyzed in terms of manifest and constitutive intertextuality within the framework of CDA. The findings reveal the existence of two antithetical models: the populist disruptor (Trump), defined by a widely-open and eclectic discursive practice, and the institutional guardian (Lâm), characterized by a closed and coherent discursive practice. The results suggest that the function of intertextuality in these two distinct political systems is to establish disruption (Trump) and continuity (Lâm) respectively. This study proposes a new comparative model, demonstrating that the political function of language is deeply rooted in specific cultural contexts, thereby contesting the universal applicability of Western models of discourse analysis.

1. INTRODUCTION

Within the current political dispensation, political leadership is fundamentally a communicative process where the skill of persuasion complements the skill of engagement with the cultural and historical consciousness of a nation. Political leaders are not speaking to their audience in a void but based on a text that precedes the current message. This process is referred to as intertextuality and is a crucial but underrated process in the construction of political legitimacy and the reinforcing of political ideology (Fairclough, 1992). The choice of texts by political leaders to refer to, whether historical documents, popular culture, literary classics, and religious texts, indicates the political leader's clear agenda to communicate a shared identity and a sense of a particular worldview to the listening audience.

The present research offers a comparative analysis of the intertextual practices employed by two extremely influential but very differently styled politicians: the 47th President of the United States, Donald J. Trump, and the present General Secretary of the Communist Party of Vietnam, Tô Lâm. The theoretical basis for comparison encompasses a number of clearly separate but until now vaguely related streams of prior scholarly inquiry. Firstly, there exists a rather well-developed area of scholarly concern

related to the rhetoric of the presidency in the United States (Mariam, Said & Rahman, 2025). There are also studies that attempt to analyze the populist rhetoric of the president (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Homolar & Scholz, 2019), the construction of the anti-elitarian imagination, and the use of emotional vocabularies (Wodak, 2021). Secondly, there exists a rather more specialized area of scholarly concern related to the rhetoric of Vietnamese political discourse (Nguyễn, 2020; Nguyen, 2024), the focus of the same on the construction of a communal identity, the performative and ceremonial nature of verbal practices, and the mediational role of the Communist Party as a social organization to create a positive historical narrative to legitimize its role (Lucius, 2009). Finally, the theoretical foundations of the current scholarly project, namely the concepts of intertextualities and critical discourses, have already been well established.

Until now, and to the best of the present researcher's knowledge, a scholarly contribution has not been made to provide a comparison of the rhetorical practices of Donald Trump and Tô Lâm through the medium of intertextualities. This study addresses that gap by arguing that both leaders strategically deploy intertextuality to construct their authority, but their divergent choices of reference reveal two fundamentally different models of political legitimacy.

The primary aim of this research is to comparatively analyse how Donald Trump and Tô Lâm strategically deploy intertextuality to construct and legitimize their political authority.

To achieve this aim, the study pursues the following objectives:

- To identify the primary cultural and textual archives referenced in the key speeches of each leader.
- To analyse the rhetorical functions of these intertextual references in shaping their respective leadership identities.
- To compare their strategies to reveal insights into the different models of political legitimacy they represent.

Based on the objectives, the paper addresses the following research questions:

- What are the primary cultural and textual archives from which Donald Trump and Tô Lâm draw in their key speeches?
- How do these intertextual references function to construct their respective leadership identities?
- What do the differences in their intertextual strategies reveal about the contrasting political cultures of the United States and Vietnam?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Intertextuality in political discourse

The theoretical framework forming the rationale for this study is intertextuality which was developed by Kristeva (1980). Intertextuality nowadays is amongst the core strategies used in discourse analysis because it was pioneered by Fairclough (1992) with the concept of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and focuses on the processes and activities concerning the selection and reinterpretation of discourse from different inter-texts for ideological reasons (Fairclough, 1992). This framework asserts that discourse is used as an instrument of critical practice for constructing social realities, codifying and maintaining relationships of power, and espousing ideological beliefs (van Dijk, 1993).

The major proposition is that every text always already consists of quotations and is defined by pre-existing discourses (Kristeva, 1980). According to Fairclough (1992), there are two key modes of intertextuality with regard to political discourse:

INTERTEXTUAL STRATEGIES IN AMERICAN AND VIETNAMESE POLITICIANS' DISCOURSE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DONALD TRUMP AND TÔ LÂM'S SPEECHES

- Manifest Intertextuality: This is the obvious form where the quotation or citation of the specific texts is made. The intention is to invoke the authority of the antecedent text.

- Constitutive intertextuality/ interdiscursivity: This is a more covert process describing the construction of meaning through the combining of various discourses, genres, or styles (Fairclough, 1992).

This framework has been extensively used in the analysis of political discourse to foreground issues of how leadership establishes authority, orients public opinion, and validates their ideologies (Kitaeva, 2019). To completely comprehend these issues, it is vital to look beyond Anglo-American discourse and engage with a variety of linguistic traditions. For example, French Discourse Analysis (FDA) has always highlighted the significance of interdiscursivity in the enactment of political power. Researchers such as Charaudeau (2005) have extensively shown how political figures enact their legitimacy through the theatrical appropriation of existing socio-cultural discourses. Researchers have extensively examined its use in mainstream political discourse worldwide, showing its use in validating historical precedents and canonical ideologies to enact legitimacy (Ellah, 2022; Han, 2024). In a nutshell, intertextuality has been highlighted as a vital tool in the enactment of political discourse in a variety of media environments worldwide.

2.2 The Cultural archive and archival bounding

Although intertextuality outlines the mechanisms by which politicians reference antecedent materials, the concept of the 'cultural archive' delineates the actual reservoir of knowledge from which they draw to legitimize their ideologies. Therefore, while moving beyond the conventional understanding of an archive merely in terms of physical records and documents, cultural theorists and postcolonial scholars have understood the cultural archive to be an epistemological system that encompasses the narratives, texts, myths, and assumptions that construct cultural identities (Said, 1993). The idea of an archive, in this sense, is extremely inclusive and encompasses not only texts and documents but also the latent, historically specific notion of common sense and feelings that continue to linger in the cultural consciousness of societies (Wekker, 2016). In the context of political discourse, an archive could include anything from formal resolutions and religious texts to popular media and folklore.

Most importantly, political leaders do not access this vast reservoir indiscriminately; rather, they conduct a process of symbolic boundary-drawing on the archive. Following on from sociological theories on symbolic boundaries as the conceptual boundaries that social actors use to categorize objects, people, and practices to create dichotomies between 'us' and 'them' (Lamont, 1992), the process of archival boundary-drawing refers to the ideological boundaries set by the leader to determine what is legitimate. By drawing symbolic boundaries around certain texts or certain cultural narratives, the politician is able to promote certain histories while actively excluding others. In order to determine the underlying model of legitimation held by the leader, it is therefore important to consider the process of symbolic boundary-drawing on the cultural archive, whether through the maintenance of closed borders to maintain the orthodoxy within an institution, or through the maintenance of open borders to promote populist subversion.

2.3 Donald Trump's rhetorics

Donald Trump's speeches have become one of the most scrutinized topics in modern political communication. On the other hand, his rhetorical style, in general, has been identified by researchers as a type of 'right-wing populism', marked by the 'crystallization of the contrast between the moral category of the 'people' and the corrupt category of the 'elite' (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Wodak, 2021). The populist dichotomy can also be further explained through the perspective of Latin American studies, a region that has had significant historical experiences in populism. Based on the Hispanic linguistic school of thought, in which there is a significant emphasis on the 'adversative word' (la palabra adversativa), defined by Verón (1987), linguists from different parts of the world have pointed

out some specific features of his rhetorical style that have made his speeches simple, repetitive, familiar, and even conversational, moving away from the traditional political rhetoric to connect with his base (Bolívar, 2018; Volkova & Gerasimenko, 2020; Mammadov, 2023).

At its heart lies a nostalgic form of nationalism. The ‘America First’ construct is rooted in ethnic and cultural definitions of national identity. There is a clear ‘us’ and ‘Them’ dichotomy (Hristova, 2024; Khan et al., 2025). The rallying call to ‘Make America Great Again’ speaks to an imagination of decline and restoration (Harsin, 2018; Homolar & Scholz, 2019). There has been a great deal of research on Trump’s intertextual archive. This body of work speaks to his anecdotal evidence and strategic referencing of historical events such as the Reagan era to lend credence to his plans (Mariam, Said & Rahman, 2025). There has also been a great deal of research on his nostalgic rhetoric. This form of rhetoric relies on vague allusions to a romanticized notion of America’s past to conjure a sense of decline (Hochschild, 2016; Harsin, 2018; Tilli, 2025). This is done in isolation from his other intertextual elements to construct a unique ‘populist-star’ persona.

2.4 Vietnamese political discourse

In contrast to the extensive work on Western populism, the study of Vietnamese political discourse is a specialized linguistic field that analyzes how language is used to reinforce collective identity and legitimize the rule of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) (Nguyen, 2023). A central topic in this branch is the enduring legacy of Ho Chi Minh’s communication style, a combination of Marxist-Leninist doctrine and simple, accessible language rooted in Vietnamese tradition (Duiker, 2000). Foundational research has explored how state-controlled media serve to spread Party ideology and shape a cohesive public story.

One of the common themes found in this collection of studies is the way the CPV attains legitimacy in its constant reliance upon the same classical record of history and ideology (Womack, 2006). Historical studies have found not only the modern record of colonialism and the wars of independence to be important factors in the discourse of the CPV, but also the long-established record of myth and legend of this culturally rich and philosophically sophisticated society, such as the legend of the dragon (Hoang, 2025). While comparative linguistic works have explored features such as conceptual metaphors (Nguyễn, 2018; Nguyễn, 2020) and pragmatic strategies (Nguyen, 2024), a systematic intertextual comparison with a Western populist leader remains absent.

A significant scholarly gap continues to exist at the interface of these three well-developed fields. Although comparative linguistics has looked at specific features like metaphors or pragmatic strategies (Nguyễn, 2020; Nguyen, 2024), no study has systematically connected these fields to conduct a comparative intertextual analysis between a Western populist leader like Donald Trump and a Vietnamese ideological leader like Tô Lâm.

The core question of how these two politicians strategically use their fundamentally differently styled cultural and textual archives to achieve the similar goal of legitimacy construction remains unexplored. This study addresses that gap by arguing that intertextuality is the key medium to compare and reveal two antithetical models of political legitimacy: the populist disruptor embraced by Trump through an open, eclectic archive, and the institutional guardian projected by Tô Lâm through a closed, coherent archive.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design based on a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) approach to investigate the use of intertextuality as a political rhetorical strategy in the political discourse of Donald Trump and General Tô Lâm. The rationale for this research design and methods

INTERTEXTUAL STRATEGIES IN AMERICAN AND VIETNAMESE POLITICIANS' DISCOURSE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DONALD TRUMP AND TÔ LÂM'S SPEECHES

assumes that political discourse embodies a form of social practice where language use is a means for conveying information but also for appropriating power relations and consolidating ideologies (Fairclough, 1992). Due to political culture differences between a polarization democracy and a one-party state, a CDA approach for this study focuses on a comparison analysis about how a “cultural archive” might be used for similar purposes.

3.2 Data collection

In service of the study’s aim, the material consists of a purposefully selected corpus of six key political speeches, three from each leader. Given the small, focused sample, these speeches were chosen to represent pivotal moments of authority construction in each leader’s career.

Table 1.

Description of the data

Leader	Code	Speech/ Context	Function in Corpus Selection (Pivotal Moment)
President Donald Trump	T1	2017 Inaugural Address	The pivotal point of asserting executive power and initiating the Disruptor message.
	T2	2020 Speech at Mount Rushmore	Key speech about national history, cultural conflict, and identity.
	T3	2024 Victory Speech	A performance of continued populist appeal and celebrity status.
General Secretary Tô Lâm	L1	2024 Speech to the Party Central Committee upon assuming leadership	The time of official institutional ascent and alignment.
	L2	Speech at the 80th Anniversary of the Cultural Sector’s Traditional Day 2025	Discussion based on ideology, morality, and Party rectification.
	L3	2025 National Day Address on September 2nd	In annual high-level speech, construction of a glorious past, progress, and shared future.

The text data used for the analysis of speeches made by President Donald Trump was taken from the official transcripts of the U.S. federal government posted on the official website of The American Presidency Project, and for General Secretary Tô Lâm, it was sourced from the official online platforms of the Communist Party of Vietnam and reliable news agencies.

3.3 Data analysis

The analysis follows a two-fold process with a clear unit of analysis: the intertextual instance (a phrase, sentence, or section referring to another text or genre).

Stage 1: Systematic Identification: A close reading of the corpus was conducted to systematically identify and classify all instances of intertextuality based on Fairclough’s (1992) typology:

- Manifest Intertextuality: Direct quotes, specific historical references, allusions, and citations.
- Constitutive Intertextuality (Interdiscursivity): The appeal to particular genres, styles, or discourses (e.g., marketing, religious, or bureaucratic jargon).

Stage 2: Critical Analysis of Function: The second stage critically examined the rhetorical function of the identified intertextual instances. This stage determined how the references constructed specific models of authority (populist disruptor vs. institutional guardian), defined group identities, and legitimized the leader’s political acts and ideological framework.

For speeches by Tô Lâm, the analysis was conducted in the original language (Vietnamese). For presentation in this paper, a faithful translation into English was provided by the researcher. This dual-language quotation format ensures that the full rhetorical and cultural implications, which can be obscured or simplified when translated, are preserved for the scholarly reader.

4. RESULTS

4.1 President Donald Trump's intertextual strategies

4.1.1 Manifest intertextuality

Trump's use of manifest intertextuality is integral to his building of a Manichaean narrative in which an ideal people are pitted against an immoral and incompetent elite (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017). His citations of history, religion, and modern culture are chosen with this in mind.

Table 2.

Statistics on the use of Manifest intertextuality in Trump's speeches

No.	Discursive Strategy	T1	T2	T3	Total	Example
1	Allusion to a romanticized and threatened national past	5	16	3	24	"This American carnage stops right here"; "It lost that little thing called special"
2	Citation of religious and patriotic canons	4	15	3	22	"The Bible tells us..."; "...endowed with the same divine rights – given [to] us by our Creator"; "...God spared my life for a reason"
3	Reference to media, celebrity, and business worlds	3	3	9	15	"...American industry"; "...Elvis Presley, and Mohammad Ali"; "A star is born, Elon"
	Total	12	34	15	61	

Among the salient characteristics of Trump's discourse is his use of a nostalgic, heroic, and simplified narrative of American history. This is employed not as a means of celebrating the contemporary, but as a way of signaling a sense of irrevocable loss and a need for restoration.

(1) First, he explicitly frames the recent past as an era of illegitimate rule by promising "January 20th 2017 will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again". (T1)

(2) The speech dedicates extensive passages to retelling the hagiographic life stories of Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and Roosevelt, presenting them as unambiguous giants and directly stating, "Our nation is witnessing a merciless campaign to wipe out our history, defame our heroes, erase our values." (T2)

(3) The very slogan invoked – to "make America great again" – is an intertextual reference to a lost, superior past that must be reclaimed. (T3)

This nostalgic intertextuality is the cornerstone of Trump's populist appeal. The detailed, heroic biographies in T2 are not simply a history lesson; they are a polemical act designed to construct Trump as the sole defender of a true national story against a radical view of American history allegedly peddled by his opponents. The past becomes a weapon to frame the present as a state of "American carnage" (T1) caused by the political elite.

Another tactic is the citation of religious and patriotic canons. Trump sparingly quotes sacred or foundational American texts. These citations function less as deep ideological arguments and more as accessible moral and patriotic anchors for his populist message.

INTERTEXTUAL STRATEGIES IN AMERICAN AND VIETNAMESE POLITICIANS' DISCOURSE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DONALD TRUMP AND TÔ LÂM'S SPEECHES

(4) The Bible tells us, how good and pleasant it is when God's people live together in unity. (T1)

(5) An allusion to the Battle Hymn of the Republic, quoting the lyric, "As He died to make men Holy, let us die to make men free". (T2)

(6) A strategic appropriation of Martin Luther King, Jr., arguing Dr. King called on citizens "not to rip down their heritage, but to live up to their heritage." (T2)

These references provide a veneer of traditionalist authority to an otherwise anti-establishment message. The Bible quote (T1) frames his call for unity as divinely sanctioned. The invocation of the Battle Hymn (T2) elevates a contemporary culture war into a righteous, quasi-holy struggle. Most strategically, the reference to Martin Luther King, Jr. (T2) attempts to co-opt a figurehead of the civil rights movement, reframing his message to align with a conservative, preservationist view of history. This is a classic populist strategy: claiming to be the true inheritor of a national symbol that the elites have supposedly misinterpreted or betrayed.

Finally, Trump also employed reference to media, celebrity, and business worlds. A defining feature of Trump's discourse is his reliance on an intertextual archive of celebrity, business, and popular media. First, he cites a long, anecdotal story praising the genius of Elon Musk, culminating in the assertion, (7) "Can the United States do it? Other than you?"; "No, nobody can do that." I said, "That's why I love you, Elon." (T3). In addition, he uses personal shout-outs to sports figures Dana White (UFC) and Bryson DeChambeau (golf), framing them as friends and part of his movement. (T3) Another example is an implicit reference to his reality TV persona when he dismisses traditional politicians as all talk and no action, a central theme of *The Apprentice*. (T1)

These references establish Trump's authority due to professional achievements and notoriety rather than political or ideological authority. The anecdote of Tesla and SpaceX owner Elon Musk (T3) offers a contemporary parable: An anti-establishment billionaire genius gets the job the government fails to do. This epitomizes the belief that non-establishment players are better than the political class. By surrounding himself with figures from the worlds of business and sports entertainment, he projects an identity as a pragmatic deal-maker and a celebrity who operates outside the staid conventions of Washington D.C.

4.1.2 Constitutive intertextuality

Trump's interdiscursivity is a performance in itself, consciously rejecting the formal genre of political oratory. His style is a hybrid of reality television, talk radio, and the corporate branding pitch, designed to signal authenticity and opposition to the polished jargon of the political elite.

First, Trump's speeches are saturated with the language of branding, marketing, and superlative claims, framing his presidency as a corporate turnaround project for America, Inc.

(8) For instance, in his inaugural address, the repeated, parallel slogans: "We Will Make America Strong Again... Wealthy Again... Proud Again... Safe Again... Great Again" function as a brand promise. The two simple rules are presented as a corporate mantra: "Buy American and Hire American." (T1)

(9) The speech (T2) is replete with superlatives that brand America as a premium product: the greatest Americans, the most magnificent country, the most just and exceptional nation ever to exist on Earth.

(10) Besides, political success is framed as a market victory, describing his movement as “the greatest political movement of all time” and noting his wife has the “number one bestselling book in the country.” (T3)

This business and marketing discourse simplifies complex political issues into a binary of winning and losing, success and failure. The repetition of slogans (T1, T3) functions like a commercial jingle, prioritizing brand recall over policy substance. Trump’s language of superlatives and branding constructs his leadership identity as a celebrity CEO, uniquely qualified to restore the nation’s lost greatness.

The genre of Trump’s speeches, particularly T3, breaks from traditional political oratory by adopting a simple, repetitive, and often rambling conversational style that signals a rejection of the political establishment:

(11) The speech (T1) uses simple, direct, and declarative sentences that create an aggressive, action-oriented tone: “The time for empty talk is over. Now arrives the hour of action”.

(12) The speech at Mount Rushmore directly attacks the language of his opponents, creating a clear us vs. them discursive frame: “We want free and open debate, not speech codes and cancel culture”. (T2)

(13) The victory text itself has a very digressive, nonlinear structure, full of personal asides (Is this crazy?), (T3) direct address to his friends, and rambling anecdotes.

Such a rhetorical strategy is actually a performance of anti-establishment authenticity. The extemporaneous, unconventional quality of (T3) is not in itself a flaw in his structure but rather a key part of his rhetorical strategy: he is telling his followers that he is not scripted, not filtered, and hence more authentic than more traditional, teleprompter-dependent politicians.

4.2 General Secretary Tô Lâm’s intertextual strategies

4.2.1 Manifest intertextuality

Manifest intertextuality is the key way to situate the Vietnamese General Secretary’s discourse in relation to other sources of authority. This technique works to justify current policies and align them with the country’s core values and ideologies, heroic history, and the decisions made by the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV).

Table 3.

Statistics on the use of Manifest intertextuality in Lâm’s speeches

No.	Discursive Strategy	L1	L2	L3	Total	Example
1	Quotation of ideological canons	3	12	8	23	“lời dạy của Bác, ...của Chủ tịch Hồ Chí Minh” (Uncle Ho’s/ President Ho Chi Minh’s teachings)
2	Allusion to the national-historical narrative	2	14	10	26	“40 năm đổi mới” (40 years of reform), “kháng chiến chống thực dân” (the war against colonialism), “tinh thần của Cách mạng tháng Tám” (spirit of August Revolution)
3	Citation of official Party documents	2	3	3	8	“Kết luận 21 của Ban Chấp hành Trung ương Đảng” (Conclusion 21 of the Central Committee of the Party)

INTERTEXTUAL STRATEGIES IN AMERICAN AND VIETNAMESE POLITICIANS' DISCOURSE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DONALD TRUMP AND TÔ LÂM'S SPEECHES

No.	Discursive Strategy	L1	L2	L3	Total	Example
	Total	7	29	21	57	

One of the most straightforward intertextual exercises is referencing core ideological texts and, most importantly, the works and morals of Ho Chi Minh. This is universal because, as the following demonstrates, this is perceived as the highest form of legitimation:

(14) *Phải luôn ghi nhớ lời dạy của Bác: “Đối với địch, phải cương quyết, khôn khéo.”*
[We must always bear in mind Uncle Ho’s teaching: “Towards the enemy, be resolute and clever.”] (L1)

(15) *Chúng ta phải thấm nhuần lời dạy của Bác Hồ về “cần, kiệm, liêm, chính, chí công vô tư” trong cuộc đấu tranh này.* *[We must imbibe Uncle Ho’s teaching on “diligence, frugality, integrity, righteousness, and impartiality” in this struggle.]* (L2)

(16) *Chân lý “Không có gì quý hơn độc lập, tự do” của Chủ tịch Hồ Chí Minh sẽ mãi mãi soi đường cho dân tộc ta.* *[President Ho Chi Minh’s belief that “Nothing is more precious than independence and freedom” will forever illuminate the path for our nation.]* (L3)

Politically speaking, quoting Ho Chi Minh’s words and teachings acts like a custom where people recite master texts to renew their inner sanctum and reinforce the reality (Lucius, 2009). The loyalty of the ideal performs a social construction of the leader as a devoted guardian whose authentic alignment does not come from personal charm, but from a proper citational fluency and manipulation of the texts.

The second sub-type, allusion to the national-historical narrative, involves alluding to pivotal moments in Vietnam’s revolutionary history, thereby tapping into a shared reservoir of national memory to frame contemporary challenges.

(17) *Chúng ta phải rút ra bài học từ các chiến dịch trấn áp phản cách mạng trong quá khứ để làm thất bại mọi âm mưu của các thế lực thù địch.* *[We must draw lessons from past counter-revolutionary suppression campaigns to defeat all plots of hostile forces.]* (L1)

(18) *Toàn Đảng phải phát huy tinh thần của Cách mạng tháng Tám, tạo ra một khí thế mới để xây dựng Đảng ta ngày càng trong sạch, vững mạnh.* *[The entire Party must promote the spirit of the August Revolution, creating a new impetus to build our Party to be ever more pure and strong.]* (L2)

(19) *Với tinh thần Điện Biên Phủ, chúng ta phải vượt qua mọi thách thức để giành thắng lợi mới trên mặt trận kinh tế.* *[With the spirit of Điện Biên Phủ, we must overcome all challenges to win a new victory on the economic front.]* (L3)

This strategy historicizes contemporary policy, elevating transient issues into episodes within a timeless national struggle. The historical archive referenced is canonical, state-sanctioned, and unambiguous – the Revolution (L2), Điện Biên Phủ (L3) – reinforcing the official state narrative of heroic struggle and inevitable victory.

The final form of manifest intertextuality in Tô Lâm’s speeches involves the explicit citation of codified bureaucratic texts, grounding the leader’s directives in the Party’s most recent collective decisions. For example,

(20) *Lực lượng Công an nhân dân phải là lực lượng nòng cốt trong việc thực hiện các mục tiêu về an ninh quốc gia đã được nêu rõ trong Nghị quyết Đại hội XIII của Đảng.*

[The People's Public Security forces must be the core force in implementing the national security objectives clearly stated in the Resolution of the 13th Party Congress.] (L1)

(21) Cần phải thực hiện nghiêm túc Kết luận 21 của Ban Chấp hành Trung ương về xây dựng, chỉnh đốn Đảng và hệ thống chính trị. [It is necessary to seriously implement Conclusion 21 of the Central Committee on the building and rectification of the Party and political system.] (L2)

(22) Chúng ta quyết tâm thực hiện thắng lợi các mục tiêu của Chiến lược phát triển kinh tế - xã hội 10 năm 2021-2030, xây dựng đất nước phồn vinh, hạnh phúc. [We are determined to successfully realize the goals of the 10-year Socio-Economic Development Strategy 2021-2030, building a prosperous and happy country.] (L3)

This practice constructs what can be termed bureaucratic legitimacy, where authority is derived from adherence to institutional process. The citation of a specific resolution (L1, L2, L3) is an appeal to a logic of formal-rational authority, demonstrating that policy is the outcome of a collective, deliberative process. A citation of Conclusion 21 (L2) is meaningful only to an audience that accepts the Party's internal process as the ultimate source of political legitimacy, a stark contrast to a populist leader whose legitimacy is often measured by crowd size or polling data.

4.2.2 Constitutive intertextuality

Constitutive intertextuality is evident in how the speeches are uniformly shaped by the formal, bureaucratic-political discourse of the CPV. In Tô Lâm's speeches, he applies appropriation of the bureaucratic and diplomatic lexicon. This subtype is characterized by the wholesale adoption of the specialized vocabulary and formulaic expressions that define the Party's official way of speaking.

(23) Nhiệm vụ hàng đầu là kiên quyết đấu tranh với các thế lực thù địch, bảo vệ vững chắc an ninh quốc gia và trật tự, an toàn xã hội. [The primary task is to resolutely struggle against hostile forces, firmly protecting national security and social order and safety.] (L1)

(24) Phải ngăn chặn triệt để sự suy thoái về tư tưởng chính trị, đạo đức, lối sống, và các biểu hiện tự diễn biến, tự chuyển hóa trong nội bộ. [We must thoroughly prevent the degradation of political ideology, morality, and lifestyle, and the manifestations of self-evolution and self-transformation internally.] (L2)

(25) Việt Nam kiên trì đường lối đối ngoại độc lập, tự chủ, đa dạng hóa, đa phương hóa, phát huy hiệu quả chính sách ngoại giao cây tre. [Vietnam persists in its foreign policy of independence, self-reliance, diversification, and multilateralization, effectively promoting the policy of bamboo diplomacy.] (L3)

Over time, these different official words have been put together to form a closed discursive enclosure. Command of such discourse lets one become a member of the closed circle of the ruling class and, within that circle, lets one prove allegiance to the key ideologies of the system (Nguyen, 2023). Words like tự diễn biến (self-evolution) (L2) are not mere explanations. They are ideologically intent on promoting a certain way of looking at the world. The more layered metaphor chính sách ngoại giao cây tre (bamboo diplomacy) (L3) is designed for the foreign policy elite. In the end, Tô Lâm's discourse is constructed from the institution's language, marking him as its primary manager and the gatekeeper of acceptable political thought.

4.3 A comparison between intertextual strategies of the two leaders

The preceding analyses provide the foundation for a direct comparative analysis of the two leaders. While the findings reveal a crucial similarity in the fundamental purpose of their intertextual strategies, the methods, archives, and ultimate goals diverge completely, illustrating two antithetical models of political legitimization.

4.3.1 Similarities

At a more basic level, the intertextual strategies that both Donald Trump and Tô Lâm embraced, despite seeming so very different, functioned for one and the same fundamental purpose: to create and validate their political authority. This common goal arises in three specific ways: legitimizing claims through higher authority, building a powerful national narrative, and creating a particular leadership persona.

First, in terms of grounding claims in a higher authority, both leaders stick their policies and statements to a source of authority that is accepted as foundational and legitimate by their target audience. This strategy elevates their claims beyond personal opinion, framing them as the logical extension of a revered tradition.

The authority of Donald Trump is predicated on the heroic heritage of the founding fathers of America, as well as the idealized past of the nation. By identifying himself with the contemporary counterpart of the founding fathers, he lays claim to their moral and historical authority. For instance, in his Mount Rushmore address, he says: (25) “Here tonight, before the eyes of our forefathers, Americans declare again, as we did 244 years ago: that we will not be tyrannized, we will not be demeaned, and we will not be intimidated”. In this instance, he is speaking on behalf of himself, but also on behalf of the founding fathers of the nation.

Tô Lâm’s authority is based on the impeccable moral and ideological precepts of Ho Chi Minh, as well as the collective will of the Communist Party. Through quotation of these sources, his actions are justified within the context of the implementation of the national ideology. For instance, to legitimize the anti-corruption campaign, he states, (15) “Chúng ta phải thấm nhuần lời dạy của Bác Hồ về cần, kiệm, liêm, chính, chí công vô tư...” [We must be imbued with Uncle Ho’s teaching on diligence, frugality, integrity, righteousness, and impartiality...]. (L2) This frames the policy not as his own, but as a moral imperative from the nation’s founding father.

Second, in terms of building a compelling national narrative, both leaders use references to construct a powerful story about the nation, its past, its present state of crisis, and the future destiny they will guide it toward. This narrative provides a coherent framework for their political project and mobilizes their audience.

Donald Trump builds a narrative of a once-great nation brought to ruin (American carnage) by a corrupt, self-serving establishment. His story is one of decline and promised restoration, with himself as the singular hero. In his Inaugural Address, he states, (26) “For too long, a small group in our nation’s Capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost... That all changes – starting right here, and right now.” (T1)

Similarly, Tô Lâm builds a narrative of continuous revolutionary struggle, where Vietnam has always overcome immense challenges through unity and discipline. His story is one of enduring resilience, framing modern problems as the next chapter in this heroic saga. Example: To motivate economic efforts, he invokes a historic victory: (19) “Với tinh thần Điện Biên Phủ, chúng ta phải vượt qua mọi thách thức để giành thắng lợi mới trên mặt trận kinh tế.” [With the spirit of Điện Biên Phủ, we must overcome all challenges to win a new victory on the economic front]. (L3)

Finally, regarding forging a specific leadership identity, the selection of the references the leader makes is an aspect of identity creation. The leader is what he refers, and his image is molded depending on the requirements of his political model.

Donald Trump portrays his identity as a successful, anti-establishment outsider on his comparisons with other geniuses from the business and celebrity sectors, casting himself as a man of action amongst a group of ineffectual politicians. For instance, his long, admiring anecdote about Elon Musk serves to align himself with a figure of innovation and success, culminating in the personal affirmation, “That’s why I love you, Elon, that.” (T3)

Likewise, Tô Lâm forges his identity as a disciplined, loyal servant of the Party by consistently citing its official resolutions and procedures. This constructs his persona as an executor of the collective will, not a charismatic individual. When addressing the security forces, he grounds his directive in Party authority: (20) “Lực lượng Công an nhân dân phải là lực lượng nòng cốt trong việc thực hiện các mục tiêu... đã được nêu rõ trong Nghị quyết Đại hội XIII của Đảng” [The People’s Public Security forces must be the core force in implementing the objectives... clearly stated in the Resolution of the 13th Party Congress]. (L1)

4.3.2 Differences

While Donald Trump and Tô Lâm share the same goal, achieving legitimacy, their strategies significantly differ. The following comparison focuses on three dimensions: how each leader constructs his model of legitimacy, what source each uses for evidence, and what the ultimate goals of the rhetoric are.

In terms of models of legitimacy, the two leaders draw on roots that are very different to claim authority. Donald Trump leans on a Populist Disrupter frame: a personal, magnetic, combative charm that presents him as the lone champion of “the people” against a corrupt system. He stages this identity, for example in his Inaugural Address, where he promises to “transfer power from Washington, D.C. and give it back to you, the American People” (T1). However, General Secretary Tô Lâm adopts an Institutional Guardian approach. His authority is impersonal and procedural, with its basis in long-standing service within the Communist Party. The reference to internal documents like “Kết luận 21 của Ban Chấp hành Trung ương về xây dựng, chỉnh đốn Đảng...” (Conclusion 21 of the Central Committee on building and rectifying the Party) (L2) underlines his legitimacy. Highlighting such material is an act of submitting to the party’s institutional hierarchy – a sign that his power is not personal but conferred through adherence to the Party’s collective, codified will.

Regarding the nature of the archive, every leader draws on his or her own archive of material, for each brings his or her specific sense of what counts as legitimate. Trump reaches for a capacious, highly porous intertextual archive: access to mass media, celebrity pull, and a vague but emotionally overheated storytelling about American history. His archive fuses popular culture with entrepreneurial border myths and commercial entertainment paradigms. By contrast, Tô Lâm keeps a closed, tightly curated ideological archive made up of formal texts and officially approved Party resolutions, directed at a more selective crowd. The book’s specialized jargon like tự diễn biến (self-evolution), tự chuyển hoá (self-transformation) serves as a discreet beacon: it protects the ideological orthodoxy while signaling that he commands the institution’s discourse. This rigid delimitation of the archive works as a tool of power, which in practice amounts to silencing narratives not immediately associated with institutions, and to excluding voices from the realm of political debate that could be considered grassroots or dissident.

Finally, in terms of rhetorical goals, the leaders’ intertextual strategies serve opposite rhetorical goals. Trump’s goal is disruption; his narrative is one of a failed present that must be overthrown to restore a glorious past. His famous slogan from the Inaugural Address (T1), “Together, We Will Make America

Great Again,” encapsulates this project. The word Again creates a powerful narrative of decline, implying the failure of the current establishment and positioning him as the singular hero needed to enact a radical break. In contrast, Tô Lâm’s goal is continuity. His narrative is one of a stable system methodically progressing. His reference to a bureaucratic long-term plan (L3), the “Chiến lược phát triển kinh tế - xã hội 10 năm 2021-2030...” [10-year Socio-Economic Development Strategy 2021-2030...], signals a commitment to impersonal, predictable governance. It is the language of methodical stability, assuring the audience that the future is not a radical break but a planned continuation of the present course.

5. DISCUSSION

The results both validate and refine existing literature within these two fields. First, a review of the existing literature with respect to the analysis of the rhetoric of Donald Trump reveals a clear correspondence to the current scholarly perspective. The identification of the open, eclectic, and populist archive reveals a clear correspondence to the existing scholarly literature with respect to the unique rhetorical input provided by the president. For example, the references to the idealized past (T1, T2) reveal a clear correspondence to the existing scholarly literature with respect to the concept of “nostalgia” as revealed by the works of Homolar & Scholz (2019), as well as the work by Harsin (2018) with respect to the aesthetic turn of nostalgia within populism. The presentation style (T3), as well as the references to celebrity and the corporate world (T3), reveal a clear validation with respect to the existence of the president’s media persona, as revealed by the works of Kreiss (2016). The review of the existing literature reveals that each element tested within this analysis is individually considered within the existing scholarly works; thus, the contribution of this work is to reveal the manner in which these elements combine cohesively to reveal a characteristic form of celebrity populist authority.

At the same time, the findings with respect to the speeches of General Secretary Tô Lâm open new perspectives for the existing scholarly literature with respect to the political discourse in Vietnam. The analysis of his closed, unitary, and institutional archive confirms the importance of the canonical historical and ideological archive of the CPV with respect to the legitimation of their governance, which was first revealed by Womack (2006). The permanent reference to the moral teachings of Ho Chi Minh (L2), which was analyzed in detail by Duiker (2000). In addition, the legitimation of the governance of the CPV with respect to the restoration of their collective identity, which was analyzed by Nguyen (2023), is revealed in the latter. Although the existing scholarly literature contains comparative linguistic analyses with respect to certain aspects, such as metaphors (Nguyễn, 2020), the present investigation makes a new contribution to this problem by exploring the entire intertextual archive and its use by the current leaders with respect to the identity of the institutional guardians.

Finally, in juxtaposing these two leaders, the question of what their strategies mean in terms of divergent political cultures and ideologies is tackled in the study through the research question. The two strategies indeed present two differing logics of legitimation: while Trump’s strategies are based on the realities of a post-truth political context (Stuckey, 2017), Tô Lâm’s strategies index a political culture in which hierarchy, discipline, and ideology triumphs, in which the expression of those values in terms of the mastery of institutional language will index the very notion of legitimacy.

6. CONCLUSION

This comparative analysis argues that intertextuality is not a purely rhetorical tool but a basic mechanism of the construction of two contradictory narratives concerning political power: the populist disruptor and the institutional guardian. The primary conclusion of the work is that the legitimacy of Donald Trump is based on an open, multi-sourced, and media-driven archive, and the same applies to his personal brand and oppositional politics against the system. The opposite is the case regarding the

legitimacy of General Secretary Tô Lâm, who has his basis in a closed and coherent archive that legitimates his impersonalistic function and the prevailing regime.

Theoretically, the first contribution of this paper is to highlight the issue of applying Western-centric models of discourse analysis universally. By putting the two leaders in a comparative context of reference, and by anchoring the theoretical framework in both English and non-English linguistic traditions, the paper shows how the political function of language is deeply rooted in a specific cultural context. The discourse of Trump is an expression of the crisis of institutional legitimation in a polarized democracy, in which the populist nostalgia of the past substitutes traditional political language, while the discourse of Tô Lâm represents the logic of legitimation in a one-party system, where the control of official and ideological language is the highest priority in the construction of legitimation. The more profound theoretical implication of the two discourses is the need to take into account the institutional discourse of populism in order to understand the populist discourse, and vice versa.

Though the research has reached its goals, this paper still possesses some limitations. Firstly, with regard to corpus scope, this analysis was conducted on a limited corpus, including three key speeches by each leader. Thus, the conclusions cannot fully reflect the full spectrum of their rhetorical strategies in other diverse contexts such as interviews, debates, or social media statements. The second limitation is that of translation. Although the analysis was conducted based on the original Vietnamese text, translating cited examples into English for an international audience implies at least some loss or partial failure to fully convey cultural implications and subtle rhetorical nuances of the original text. Layers of meaning and culturally specific associations, which are obvious to the native audience, may be obscured or reduced to simplification when translated, impeding the reader from a full appreciation of the rhetorical power of the discourse.

Based on these limitations, some directions for future research could be put forward in order to expand and deepen the findings of the article. First, future studies should expand the corpus both in size and genre, not only analyzing official speeches but also adding other forms of discourse such as interviews, debates, or statements on social networks to gain a fuller picture. Furthermore, one of the important steps would be the reception studies in order to investigate how the intertextual references of the two leaders are perceived and interpreted by different public groups in the United States and Vietnam; therefore, it will explain the actual effectiveness of these rhetorical strategies. On a larger scale, the comparative model of populist disruptors and institutional defenders developed in this study can be applied to examine other pairs of leaders from different political systems, which will help test the usefulness of the model and contribute to the construction of a more comprehensive and solid theory of comparative intertextual rhetoric on a global level.

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INTERTEXTUAL STRATEGIES IN AMERICAN AND VIETNAMESE POLITICIANS' DISCOURSE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DONALD TRUMP AND TÔ LÂM'S SPEECHES

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INTERTEXTUAL STRATEGIES IN AMERICAN AND VIETNAMESE POLITICIANS' DISCOURSE: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF DONALD TRUMP AND TÔ LÂM'S SPEECHES

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