Indirect Speech Acts: Tucker Carlson's Political Speeches: A pragmatic Study

Assistant lecturer: Etab Abdulelah Abaeed
[1]English Education Department, Al-Amarah University College,
etababid81@gmail.com

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Abstract

This research analyses the use of indirect speech acts in modern political media communication using the political media commentary of American conservative host Tucker Carlson on TV and radio broadcasting. The paper is based on Speech Act Theory, Gricean implicature, and recent philosophical and linguistic research on the strategic logic of indirect language to form an integrated pragmatic model that connects indirect linguistic form to inferential meaning. The analysis is based on an indirect qualitative pragmatic discourse analysis, guided by a relatively small quantitative coding of illustrative publicly documented extracts, which reveals seven recurrent indirect strategies: rhetorical questions, epistemic hedges, presupposition, irony or mock-reasonableness, reported speech, conditional and disjunctive framing, and metapragmatic disclaimers of the "*just asking questions*" type. These strategies are demonstrated to imply a controversial message while maintaining the spoken content as neutral. The paper offers a general framework for analysing indirect political speech in mass media that can be transferred to other contexts.

Keywords: conversational implicature; indirect; political media discourse; rhetorical questions

أفعال الكلام غير المباشرة في الخطابات السياسية لتاكر كارلسون: دراسة تداولية

م.م. عتاب عبد الاله عبيد
قسم اللغة الانكليزية , كلية العمارة الجامعة
etababid81@gmail.com

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الخلاصة

يحلّل هذا البحث استخدام أفعال الكلام غير المباشرة في التواصل الإعلامي السياسي المعاصر، من خلال التعليقات السياسية والإعلامية للمذيع الأمريكي المحافظ تاكر كارلسون في البرامج التلفزيونية والإذاعية. ويستند البحث إلى نظرية أفعال الكلام، والدلالات الضمنية الحوارية حسب مفهوم غرايس، والدراسات الفلسفية واللغوية الحديثة المتعلقة بالمنطق الاستراتيجي للغة غير المباشرة، بهدف بناء نموذج تداولي متكامل يربط بين الصيغة اللغوية غير المباشرة والمعنى الاستدلالي. ويعتمد التحليل على منهج نوعي غير مباشر في تحليل الخطاب التداولي، مدعوم بترميز كمي محدود نسبيًا لمقتطفات توضيحية موثقة ومتاحة للعامة. وقد كشف التحليل عن سبع استراتيجيات غير مباشرة متكررة هي: الأسئلة البلاغية، والتحوّطات المعرفية، والافتراض المسبق، والسخرية أو التظاهر بالمعقولية، والكلام المنقول، والتأطير الشرطي أو الانفصالي، والتنصلات فوق التداولية من نمط "مجرد طرح أسئلة". وتبيّن أن هذه الاستراتيجيات تتيح إيصال رسالة مثيرة للجدل، مع الحفاظ على المحتوى المنطوق في صورة تبدو محايدة. ويقدّم البحث إطارًا عامًا لتحليل الخطاب السياسي غير المباشر في وسائل الإعلام الجماهيرية، يمكن تطبيقه في سياقات أخرى.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الدلالات الضمنية الحوارية, غير المباشر, الخطاب الاعلامي السياسي , الاسئلة البلاغية

1. Introduction

To hear what every public TV commentator would say is not always possible. Political media discourse does not always assert a contentious proposition, and much of the communicative task is carried out through question, insinuation, irony, presupposition, hedging or reported speech. All of these linguistic devices enable the speaker to indirectly state a proposition that is controversial but for which the speaker has no wish to take a definite position on the record (Pinker et al., 2008; Camp, 2018).

It has long been recognised that speakers often say less than they mean (Grice, 1975; Levinson, 1983; Thomas, 1995; Yule, 1996) and that there are significant differences between the meaning of sentences and the meaning of what speakers mean. In Searle's (1975) classic formulation, an indirect speech act is an act in which the speaker does one illocutionary act through the performance of another: a question may be a hedge, an attack may be an ironic compliment, etc. The act is not actually performed, hence there is a certain distance between the speaker and the act.

Persuasion, ideology and framing have been a subject of very extensive studies in political discourse (Fairclough, 1989; Chilton, 2004; van Dijk, 2006; Wodak, 2015). The pragmatic machinery through which meanings are suggested by media figures without being fully asserted has received comparatively little attention, however. The form of an utterance conveys a loaded proposition while the meaning remains implicit. The question this study will pose is not one of persuasion or ideology, but how indirect illocutionary forms generate implied meanings at the level of the utterance.

Speech acts, implicature, political discourse, insinuation, dog whistles, and the logic of indirect speech have been studied previously (Khoo, 2017; Saul, 2018). However, relatively few studies have examined how different indirect speech-act forms generate implied meanings in TV or podcast-based conservative media commentaries, and fewer studies have provided an integrated model that explains how indirect form leads to pragmatic inference. This study is aimed at addressing this gap.

This study seeks to examine the indirect speech act in the presentation of implied meanings of politics in Tucker Carlson's speech. The analysis is purely descriptive, linguistic and pragmatic: it deals with the strategies that can be seen in a publicly documented discourse and the inferences that these strategies entail; it does not make any statements about

the mental processes or intentions of the speaker (see Section 4.8). The study is guided by two questions:

1. What types of indirect speech acts occur most frequently in the selected Tucker Carlson discourse?
2. How do rhetorical questions, irony, presuppositions, hedges, and insinuations generate implied meanings?

The study contributes to pragmatics, political discourse analysis, and media communication. Its central contribution is not a description of one commentator's rhetoric but a pragmatic model of how indirect forms generate implied meanings. By specifying the inferential mechanics of indirect political speech, the framework can be applied to other speakers, genres, and political traditions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Speech Acts, Implicature, and Indirect Meaning

Speech Act theory, which was developed by Austin (1962), has analyzed how saying something is doing something (utterance perform an act/acts) in terms of locutionary, illocutionary or perlocutionary acts. Searle (1969, 1979) defined illocutionary force and its types and Searle's (1975) theory of indirect speech acts led to the importance of the mechanism for this study, i.e., an illocution (e.g., a request, accusation, or warning) is performed by another (e.g., a question) and the primary illocution is implicit in the shared background (Bach & Harnish, 1979; Leech, 1983). Brown and Levinson (1987) connected this indirection to the concept of 'off-record' politeness which has more than one reading and for which there is no single definitive reading that can be assigned to the speaker. The inferential engine was provided by Grice (1975, 1989), who claimed that incongruence with one of the conversational maxims results in a conversational implicature that is defeasible and cancellable (Levinson, 1983; Horn, 2004). Relevance theory, which involves finding the most relevant interpretation (Sperber & Wilson, 1995), and Stalnaker's (1974) pragmatic presupposition which involves finding the most relevant content (when it is already presupposed to be common ground), provide additional channels for contested content to enter the common ground, already backgrounded and accepted.

2.2. The Carlson case and political media discourse.

The Critical and Political Discourse Studies demonstrate that the naturalization of power and group boundaries occur through language and that manipulation goes smoothly without the critical resistance of language by managing shared knowledge (Fairclough, 1989; Mey, 2001; Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Chilton, 2004; Wodak, 2015). A strand in philosophy of language points to the political uses of indirect meaning: dog whistling, code words, implicit appeals to a target group, propaganda, and content that is hidden but smuggled into ostensibly reasonable words are examples. Tucker Carlson is a productive case: His questioning, provocative commentaries are widely popular among both cable viewers and internet listeners, and his style of commentary posing provocative questions and qualified observations rather than outright claims has been described repeatedly by several outlets, such as Darcy (2021), McCarthy (2022) and Flatow (2026). However, few studies link indirect speech acts to implied meanings in such commentary in an operational model (this paper attempts to fill the void).

3. Theoretical Framework

The framework integrates two components. Each is drawn from established theory and is operationalised for coding in Section 4.

3.1 Speech Act Theory

Following Austin (1962) and Searle (1969, 1975), utterances are analysed for the relation between their literal illocution and their primary (indirect) illocution, for example, an interrogative whose primary force is an accusation, a warning, or an invitation to doubt.

3.2 Gricean and Relevance

Following Grice (1975) and Sperber and Wilson (1995), the implied meaning is treated as a defeasible inference generated by the interaction of the utterance with context and shared assumptions, and recoverable as the most relevant interpretation.

4. Data and Methodology

4.1 Research Design

The study is qualitative and pragmatic discourse analysis (Verschueren, 1999) is used with the support of a small quantitative coding of the patterns that are repeated. The qualitative component aims at reconstructing the transformations that took place in the path

from the literal form to the implied meaning for representative extracts while the quantitative component aims at summarising the distribution of the categories of indirect form over the collected data.

4.2 Data and Corpus

The analysis will focus on a dataset of extracts of Carlson's broadcast and podcast commentaries that have been preserved and attributed in reliable public records (from major news outlets, fact-checking outlets, and archival transcripts, such as Darcy, 2021; Flatow, 2026; Rahman, 2022; McCarthy, 2022). Limiting the amount of data which are not documented independently will prevent misquotation and ensure that all data analysed will be traceable to a verifiable source. The extracts fall around salient themes that are likely to be at the center of the debate immigration, the January 6 Capitol attack, and foreign policy.

4.3 Sampling Criteria

Those extracts that met the following criteria were considered: (a) they are verbatim and referenced in one or more reliable sources, (b) they are on a politically charged topic and (c) they have one or more candidate indirect forms. The purpose of this is not to be statistically representative of a corpus of a speaker's discourse but to be analytic representative of the strategies, and so the data is illustrative, not a representative sample of the speaker's production.

4.4 Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis is the speech act which is embedded in an utterance or a turn in a discourse sequence or a short discourse sequence. If a strategy is more than one extract, then each extract is coded individually and the interactions between the strategies described.

4.5 Coding Categories

Seven categories were used, derived from the literature and refined against the data:

Table 1. The coded categories and their definitions

Category		Operational definition	Key sources
1	Rhetorical question	Interrogative whose primary illocution is an assertion, accusation, or invitation to suspect.	Searle (1975)
2	Epistemic hedge	Markers (maybe, seems, apparently, we are told, some people say) that reduce on-record commitment.	Fraser (2010); Lakoff (1973)

3	Presupposition	Contested proposition introduced as backgrounded, already-accepted information.	Stalnaker (1974)
4	Irony / mock-reasonableness	Saying P to convey not-P or a critical attitude toward P; performed reasonableness.	Clark & Gerrig (1984); Wilson & Sperber (1992)
5	Reported speech / quotation	Attributing a controversial claim to others while circulating it.	Clark & Gerrig (1990)
6	Conditional / disjunctive framing	If- and either/or-structures that imply a conclusion without asserting it.	Levinson (1983)
7	Metapragmatic disclaimer	Explicit framing ("*I'm not saying…*," "*just asking questions*").	Camp (2018); Saul (2018)

Note. Categories are not mutually exclusive; a single utterance may instantiate several.

4.6 Analytical Procedure

Each extract was analysed in three steps: (1) identify the indirect speech act; (2) classify its literal form and implied function; and (3) analyse the contextual cues guiding interpretation. Steps 1-3 draw on speech act and Gricean analysis.

4.7 Reliability and Validity

Consistency was achieved by operationalizing the categories prior to coding and only applying them to verbatim extracts. Each category has representative rather than isolated examples presented and competing interpretations are noted, where the data permit. Each of the examples in the dataset is documented, so the documentary validity of the examples can be verified against their source. Due to the qualitative design, the study does not report inferential statistics but instead illustrative.

4.8 Ethical Considerations

The study is on public media discourse. It does not defamatory mention anything about the speaker's private intentions or mental states; it is an analysis of the linguistic strategies and their possible interpretations, not of the intentions. If the sources cited for a specific piece of content are reliable and describe it as racist or conspiratorial, then those descriptions are assigned to the sources of the content and not the analyst.

5. Analysis and Findings

This section analyses the dataset category by category and then examines how strategies combine within single utterances. To show that the pattern is systematic rather than topic-bound, the extracts are drawn from three domains immigration and demographic change, the

January 6 Capitol attack, and foreign policy and are presented in varied ways: as set-off numbered examples, as block extracts introduced by reporting frames, and as embedded inline quotations. Table 2 lists the dataset; every extract is verbatim and traceable to a reliable public record.

Table 2. The illustrative dataset of documented extracts

ID	Date	Topic domain	Primary indirect form (also present)	Documented source
E1	Sep 2017	Immigration	Disjunctive framing	McCarthy (2022)
E2	Jan 2020	Immigration	Presupposition (epistemic marker)	McCarthy (2022)
E3	Apr 2021	Immigration	Metapragmatic hedge → assertion	Darcy (2021); McCarthy (2022)
E4	Apr 2021	Immigration	Conditional reframing	Johnson (2021)
E5	Jun 2021	January 6	Rhetorical question (hedge)	Palma (2021)
E6	May 2021	Immigration	Reported / attributed speech	McCarthy (2022)
E7	Aug 2021	Immigration	Imperative staging (reported)	McCarthy (2022)
E9	Nov 2021	January 6	Rhetorical question (mock-reluctance, hedge)	Putterman (2021)
E10	May 2022	Immigration	Feigned ignorance / irony	McCarthy (2022)
E11	Mar 2023	January 6	Presupposition / insinuation	Putterman (2023)
E12	2025–26	Foreign policy	Rhetorical question (series)	Flatow (2026)

5.1 Rhetorical Questions as Indirect Assertions

The interrogative form is the most flexible indirect resource, since a question, by itself and without any content, is a request for information, and thus does not contain a content that the speaker is responsible for the truth. The interrogative form is the most flexible indirect resource because, by itself, without any content, a question is a request for information, and thus there is no content that the speaker is responsible for the truth of. Across the data, the illocutionary point of an accusation is regularly conveyed by strings of questions. In his analysis of U.S. foreign policy, Carlson apparently put forward a series of questions regarding the actions taken by the United States and who was responsible for them:

(1) "*Why did America strike? Who pushed the United States into the conflict? Could this be about rebuilding the Third Temple*?" (Flatow, 2026)

Literally, (1) requests information. The most relevant interpretation is its main illocution, which comes down to an assertion that hidden actors were at work to pursue illegitimate ends, with no evidence provided and not required, since the power of the insinuation lies in its vagueness (as observed by the analyst who documented the pattern (Flatow, 2026). The same structure is also present in the January 6 domain, which starts with a mock-reluctant preamble and concludes with a hedged affirmation subsequent to two rhetorical questions:

"*Most Americans probably assume the chaos on Jan. 6 was the result of intelligence failures or of simple government incompetence. But direct incitement by federal agents? The intentional entrapment of American citizens? No decent person wants to believe that. But increasingly there's evidence it is true*." (Putterman, 2021)

In this instance the questions are "*direct incitement by federal agents?*" When the American citizens are targeted outright with the rhetorical question, "*But, what about the intentional entrapment of American citizens?*" and the rhetorical question is followed by a claim, "*increasingly there's evidence it is true*," the audience is more likely to accept it. A third form is a single self-answered question, on which the rhetorical "*What does that mean?*" is followed by an assertion based on an unsupported inference about "unindicted co-conspirators": "*What does that mean?*" *Well, it means that in potentially every single case they were FBI operatives*." (Palma, 2021).

5.2 Hedges and Epistemic Distance

Epistemic hedges lower the stakes of being on record on the propositional level without lowering the propositional content (Lakoff, 1973; Fraser, 2010). The two hedging devices reappear. The first is an epistemic cautionary modifier, in "*in potentially every single case, they were FBI operatives*" (E5), which weakens claims of certainty, but not so much that the assertion "*they were FBI operatives*" is cancelled out. Therefore, the epithet 'potentially' serves to make a denial easier to pre-arm, rather than weaken the claim. The second is the evidential frame "*increasingly there's evidence it's true*" (E9), which is an assertion of the proposition but is packaged as a report of a trend of evidence. A third, more elaborate hedge introduces the claim with a verb of suggestion, and then drops the whole hedge:

"*So I know that the left and all the little gatekeepers on Twitter become literally hysterical if you use the term 'replacement,' if you suggest that the Democratic Party is trying*

to replace the current electorate, the voters now casting ballots, with new people, more obedient voters from the Third World. But they become hysterical because that's what's happening, actually. Let's just say it. That's true." Mark Steyn's guest appearance on Carlson's show; as documented in Darcy (2021) and McCarthy (2022)

The style of this passage (E3) is significant. The concept of an "*imported*" "*more obedient*" electorate, when it is even suggested, is made deliberately distant from the speaker and is reframed as an outrageous term contest, instead of a question of truth. The hedged frame is then suddenly imbued with a sense of reality: "*Let's just say it: That's true.*"

Presupposition makes a proposition enter the discourse already accepted, as if it were at-issue content, but in fact it is not (Stalnaker, 1974).

(2) "*As with illegal immigration, the long-term agenda of refugee resettlement is to bring in future Democratic voters, obviously.*" (McCarthy, 2022)

The presupposition that there is a long-term agenda of refugee resettlement is triggered by the definite description, "*the long-term agenda of refugee resettlement*" is not asserted but is rather left 'in the background' and because it is not a claim but a backgrounding, is not subject to challenge by the speech-act adverb, "*obviously*." Presupposed content requires the hearer to interrupt and reject a backgrounded assumption (Levinson, 1983), not a statement at issue. A structurally similar insinuation also emerges in the January 6 footage segment when a claim about withheld footage that sounds factual is followed by a second person prediction that assumes and anticipates a discrediting revelatory claim:

(3) "*More than 40,000 hours of surveillance footage from in or around the Capitol have been withheld from the public. And once you see the video, you'll understand why.*" (Putterman, 2023). The temporal clause "*once you see the video*" presupposes that the footage, when seen, will license a particular damaging conclusion, left unstated, about why it was "*withheld*."

5.3 Irony, Mock-Reasonableness, and Feigned Ignorance

Irony conveys a critical or distanced attitude toward a proposition by echoing or pretending to endorse it (Clark & Gerrig, 1984; Wilson & Sperber, 1992). A characteristic variant in the dataset is *feigned ignorance* performing non-knowledge of a position while restating it:

"*You've heard a lot about the 'great replacement theory' recently … it is everywhere in the last two days, and we are still not sure exactly what it is.*" (McCarthy, 2022)

Fact-checking found that the profession of not knowing what the theory "*is*" was immediately followed by a restatement of its core claim, so the disclaimer of knowledge operates ironically: it performs distance from a position while reproducing it (McCarthy, 2022). The same mock-reasonable register animates the "*No decent person wants to believe that*" preamble in E9, where performed reluctance frames the speaker as a fair-minded sceptic rather than an advocate. In relevance-theoretic terms, the literal content (uncertainty, reluctance) is manifestly not the intended import; the audience recovers the endorsement as the relevant interpretation.

5.4 Quotation, Attribution, and Staged Plans

Attributing a proposition to someone else allows a speaker to circulate it, but formally place authorship elsewhere (Clark & Gerrig, 1990). In (4) a dispute over motive is put forward as a report of unspecified "they" doing and feeling:

(4) "*They're trying to change the population of the United States, and they hate it when you say that because it's true, but that's exactly what they're doing.*" (McCarthy, 2022). The construction suggests that an action ("*trying to change the population*") is going on, and that a reaction ("*they hate it when you say that*") is taking place, but these are being attributed instead to a vague third party; the embedded "*because it's true,*" despite its lack of warrant, nevertheless validates it as reportage of others' conduct. A parallel device presents the "*plan*" of the out-group in the form of bare imperatives, which function as a quoted rationale:

(5) "*The whole point of their immigration policy is to ensure political control. Replace the population. Get a different outcome.*" (McCarthy, 2022). The imperative "*Replace the population. Get a different outcome*" is not the speaker's command, rather a ventriloquised paraphrase of an attributed strategy which allows the most inflammatory formulation to be voiced while it is attributed to "*them*."

5.5 Conditional and Disjunctive Framing

Conditional and either/or structures suggest a conclusion by narrowing the range of possibilities, rather than stating them; in other words, they suggest a conclusion rather than they bring one to an end (Levinson, 1983). Example (6) considers demographic change to be the second arm of an oversimplified dichotomy:

"*They can embrace the issues the middle-class cares about, or they can import an entirely new electorate from the Third World and change the demographics of the U.S. so completely they will never lose again.*" (McCarthy, 2022)

The disjunction provides two alternatives and then presents a more innocuous statement about the hearer being "*chosen*", leaving the hearer to fill in the assumed proposition of intent. "*if you change the population, you dilute the political power of the people who live there*" (E4; Johnson, 2021) is a content-neutral civic principle that is reworded in a parallel way. The conditional party packages a contested demographic claim in an apparently procedural assertion on voting arithmetic, and moves a claim from an identity-based domain to the domain of what appears to be a technical question a "*voting-rights question*".

5.6 Metapragmatic Disclaimers and "*Just Asking Questions*"

The metapragmatic disclaimer comments on the speech act itself. Two forms recur. The first shifts the debate to "*which words can be used?*" "*The gatekeepers ... become literally hysterical if you use the term 'replacement*" (E3) makes the speaker out to be a truth-teller being persecuted for his language, not the originator of a heated and potentially discredited claim. The second frame is the "*just asking questions*" frame, which proclaims that what follows is a question rather than an assertion (Camp, 2018; Saul, 2018). Analysts of the pattern see it as a way for a speaker to "*raise provocative questions without making a direct claim*" and then, once the implication has taken root, it spins off on its own from the original context (Flatow, 2026). Such labels focus at the speech-act level: they recategorise the speech-act from assertion to question and shift the controversial conclusion to the inferring hearer.

5.7 Summary of Patterns

Table 3 reports the distribution of primary indirect forms across the eleven extracts, with secondary (co-occurring) devices noted.

Table 3. Distribution of primary indirect forms

Indirect-form category	**Primary (n)**	**Domains**	**Also co-occurs as a secondary device in**
Rhetorical question	3	Jan 6, FP	-
Presupposition	2	Imm., Jan 6	E3 ("*the current electorate*")

Conditional / disjunctive framing	2	Imm.	-
Reported / attributed speech	2	Imm.	E1 (attributed plan)
Irony / feigned ignorance	1	Imm.	E9 (mock-reluctance)
Metapragmatic hedge / disclaimer	1	Imm.	E5, E9 (hedges); E10

n=11 extract

6. Discussion

6.1 Indirectness as Strategic Political Communication

The results of this analysis corroborate the notion that indirect speech acts are not a decoration but instruments of political media discourse (Pinker et al., 2008; Saul, 2018). One pattern is repeated across categories: the literal act is an innocuous act (question, attribution, conditional, backgrounded description), while the implied act conveys a controversial proposition. This division allows the commentator to guide interpretation without stating the conclusion outright (van Dijk, 2006; Camp, 2018).

Theoretically, the study is an extension of Speech Act Theory because it connects indirect illocutionary force to pragmatic inference. Searle's (1975) account explains the recovery of an indirect act, while Gricean and relevance-theoretic pragmatics explain how contextual assumptions guide the interpretation. The proposed model combines these perspectives in the analysis of one strategic, indirect political act.

For political discourse studies, the results provide insights into the mechanisms of implied meanings, which can influence public feelings of opinion, suspicion or ideology alignment without appearing directly in the explicit text (Reisigl & Wodak, 2001; Stanley, 2015; Wodak, 2015). The structure provides a checklist for analysts and media-literacy educators: What is the literal act? What is the implied proposition? Which contextual cues guide the interpretation?

7. Conclusion

The aim of this study was to account for indirect speech acts in political media communication, with the rhetorical utterances of Tucker Carlson, a popular right-wing TV pundit, as a sample. In this study, we identified seven rhetorical strategies that have a similar design. They move from literal form to implied meaning through rhetorical questions, epistemic hedges, presupposition, irony and feigned ignorance, reported speech, conditional

framing, and metapragmatic disclaimers. The proposed model captures this design as a chain from form to pragmatic inference.

8. Limitations and recommendations

Due to the low amount of existing data about Tucker Carlson, some limitations have to be mentioned. The data are mostly representative and not extensive, and the quantitative portion is intentionally limited. A larger systematically sampled set of data with multiple coders and given inter-coder agreement would provide for better generalisation. Additional research might investigate the model with speakers and political traditions other than those utilized in this study. The overall contribution is a transferable, ethically sensitive approach to analysing indirect political speech which does not assume intentions but describes linguistic strategies and offers reasonable interpretations of them.

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