

Rhetorical Punctuation in Flemish Political Communication

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Abstract

Social media has become a central platform for political communication, enabling politicians to communicate directly with citizens through concise and highly personalized messages. While previous research has extensively examined political discourse, the rhetorical role of punctuation in online political communication remains relatively underexplored. This study investigates how Flemish politicians use punctuation as a communicative resource in their social media posts and explores whether these strategies differ across political parties. It is expected that politicians employ punctuation strategically to enhance their messages and that the functions of punctuation vary across parties, reflecting different communication styles and persuasive strategies.

The study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach informed by Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA), which examines how linguistic features operate within digitally mediated communication. A purposive sample of publicly available social media posts published by Flemish politicians representing different political parties will be collected and analysed using ATLAS.ti. The analysis conceptualizes punctuation not merely as a grammatical feature, but as a rhetorical resource contributing to meaning-making in digital political discourse. Particular attention will be paid to expressive punctuation, including exclamation marks, question marks, ellipses, repeated punctuation, and other non-standard punctuation practices. Through inductive qualitative coding, these features will be examined in relation to their communicative functions, including emphasis, emotional expression, urgency, certainty, irony, audience engagement, and persuasion. The coded data will then be compared across political parties to identify recurring patterns and differences in rhetorical communication strategies.

By examining punctuation as a meaningful linguistic resource in digital political discourse, this research contributes to the fields of discourse analysis and political communication by expanding the study of online rhetoric beyond lexical and syntactic features. Furthermore, it demonstrates the value of qualitative coding in ATLAS.ti for investigating subtle linguistic phenomena that are often overlooked in quantitative analyses of social media communication. By focusing on punctuation as an integral component of digital rhetoric, the study aims to provide a framework for analysing rhetorical features in social media discourse and to offer new insights into how politicians construct persuasive messages and engage with audiences in contemporary digital environments.