

## PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF STRATEGIC INFERENCE IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE: TRUMP AND ZELENSKY

PRAGMATİK AÇIDAN STRATEJİK ÇIKARSAMA ANALİZİ: TRUMP VE ZELENSKY'NİN SİYASİ SÖYLEMLERİ

ПРАГМАТИЧЕСКИЙ АНАЛИЗ СТРАТЕГИЧЕСКИХ ИНФЕРЕНЦИЙ В ПОЛИТИЧЕСКОМ ДИСКУРСЕ: ТРАМП И ЗЕЛЕНСКИЙ

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### ABSTRACT

The paper applies pragmatic theory to investigate strategic inference in political discourse, using examples from speeches by Donald Trump and Volodymyr Zelenskyy. analysing how these leaders use pragmatic mechanisms to convey implicit meanings within distinct democratic contexts. The study applies a framework combining relevance theory, and Gricean pragmatics to explain how contextual factors guide inference in decoding these leaders' ambiguous statements, with particular attention to how institutional settings shape available pragmatic strategies based on the analysis of the transcripts from their speeches, press conferences, and social media interactions. Our findings demonstrate that Trump strategically employs indirect speech acts where declarative statements function as directives, particularly through conversational implicature enabled by phrases like "a lot of people are saying" that facilitate plausible deniability. Zelenskyy, on the other hand, uses sophisticated pronominal shifting between inclusive and exclusive "we" forms, calibrated to specific audiences and contexts. Both leaders exploit pragmatic inference to communicate strong messages to multiple audiences simultaneously while maintaining flexibility in their political positioning. This comparative analysis contributes to our understanding of how pragmatic mechanisms operate in high-stakes political communication, illuminating the complex relationship between explicit content and strategically used implicit meaning across dramatically different democratic contexts. The findings have implications for how political discourse analysis can benefit from pragmatic frameworks when examining strategic communication in contemporary democratic settings.

**Keywords:** political discourse, pragmatic strategies, relevance theory, Donald Trump, Volodymyr Zelenskyy

### ÖZ

Bu çalışma, siyasi söylemde stratejik çıkarımı incelemek amacıyla pragmatik kuramı uygulamakta ve Donald Trump ile Volodymyr Zelenskyy'nin konuşmalarından örnekler

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**Kaynak Gösterim / Citation / Цитата:**

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üzerinden, bu liderlerin örtük anlamları farklı demokratik bağlamlarda nasıl ilettiklerini analiz etmektedir. Çalışma, bağlamsal etkenlerin bu liderlerin belirsiz ifadelerini çözümlemede çıkarımı nasıl yönlendirdiğini açıklamak amacıyla **ilişkililik kuramı** ile **Grice'in pragmatik**ini birleştiren bir çerçeve kullanmaktadır. Konuşma, basın toplantıları ve sosyal medya etkileşimlerinden elde edilen transkriptlerin analizine dayanan bu araştırma, kurumsal yapıların mevcut pragmatik stratejileri nasıl şekillendirdiğine özel önem vermektedir. Bulgular, Trump'ın özellikle "birçok kişi böyle diyor" gibi ifadeler aracılığıyla muğlaklık ve inkâr edilebilirlik sağlayan dolaylı söylem biçimlerini stratejik olarak kullandığını göstermektedir. Zelenskyy ise, bağlama ve hedef kitleye göre ayarlanmış biçimde kapsayıcı ve dışlayıcı "biz" kullanımları arasında geçiş yaparak, gelişmiş zamirsel kaydırma stratejileri kullanmaktadır. Her iki lider de, güçlü mesajları aynı anda birden fazla hedef kitleye iletirken, siyasi konumlanmalarında esneklik sağlayacak biçimde pragmatik çıkarımdan faydalanmaktadır. Bu karşılaştırmalı analiz, yüksek riskli siyasi iletişimde pragmatik mekanizmaların nasıl işlediğini ortaya koymakta; açık içerik ile stratejik biçimde kullanılan örtük anlam arasındaki karmaşık ilişkiye ışık tutmaktadır. Bulgular, çağdaş demokratik ortamlarda stratejik iletişimin incelenmesinde siyasi söylem analizinin pragmatik yaklaşımlardan nasıl yararlanabileceğine dair önemli katkılar sunmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** siyasi söylem, pragmatik stratejiler, ilişkililik kuramı, Donald Trump, Volodymyr Zelenskyy

## АННОТАЦИЯ

В данной статье прагматическая теория используется для анализа стратегических инференций в политическом дискурсе на примере речей Дональда Трампа и Владимира Зеленского. Исследуется, как эти лидеры передают имплицитные смыслы в рамках различных демократических контекстов. Методология основана на объединении **теории релевантности** и **грайсовской прагматики** с целью объяснения того, как контекстуальные факторы направляют процессы интерпретации двусмысленных высказываний политиков. Особое внимание уделяется тому, как институциональная среда влияет на выбор доступных прагматических стратегий, на основе анализа стенограмм их речей, пресс-конференций и взаимодействий в социальных сетях. Результаты показывают, что Трамп стратегически использует косвенные речевые акты, в которых декларативные высказывания функционируют как директивы, особенно за счёт разговорных импликатур с фразами вроде «многие говорят», что позволяет сохранить возможность правдоподобного отрицания. Зеленский, напротив, демонстрирует сложные механизмы переключения между инклюзивным и эксклюзивным "мы", адаптируя их под конкретные аудитории и ситуации. Оба лидера используют прагматические инференции для передачи сильных посланий различным целевым группам одновременно, при этом сохраняя гибкость своей политической позиции. Сравнительный анализ способствует лучшему пониманию того, как прагматические механизмы функционируют в условиях высоко рискованной политической коммуникации, освещая сложную взаимосвязь между явным содержанием и стратегически используемым имплицитным смыслом в разных демократических условиях. Результаты имеют значение для политической лингвистики и подтверждают эффективность применения прагматических подходов к анализу стратегической коммуникации в современных демократиях.

**Ключевые слова:** политический дискурс, прагматические стратегии, теория релевантности, Дональд Трамп, Владимир Зеленский

## Introduction

The modern world today is characterized by a universal interest in political discourse, as it has a significant impact on the manipulation and monitoring of public opinion. The interest of scholars from various fields in the study of political discourse is so great that it has become the subject of interdisciplinary research. Among these fields, linguistic research holds particular importance, which can also be explained by the intrinsic need of linguistic theory itself, as it has always shown interest in the real-life applications of language systems at different stages of its development. Today, the study of political discourse is considered a social demand.

The increasing prominence of political communication in media has intensified scholarly attention on how language shapes political reality. Political discourse operates not merely as a vehicle for information transmission but as a sophisticated mechanism for constructing social identities, establishing power relations, and influencing collective decision-making processes. The strategic deployment of language by political actors creates complex webs of explicit statements and implicit meanings that warrant critical examination.

The pragmatic dimension of political discourse—concerning how contextual factors influence meaning and interpretation—has emerged as a particularly fertile ground for analysis. By examining the gap between what is literally said and what is pragmatically communicated, researchers can uncover the subtle ways in which politicians navigate competing demands: the need to appear straightforward and honest while simultaneously advancing potentially controversial agendas, maintaining plausible deniability, and appealing to diverse constituencies with potentially conflicting interests.

This pragmatic approach draws on foundational work in linguistics, particularly Grice's Cooperative Principle and conversational maxims (1975), but extends these frameworks to account for the strategic imperatives unique to political communication according to the Relevance Theory developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson (1986). While everyday conversation typically presupposes cooperation between speakers, political discourse often involves calculated implicatures, strategic ambiguity, and deliberate flouting of conversational norms to achieve particular rhetorical effects.

Our research is conducted within the framework of the anthropocentric-communicative paradigm, against the backdrop of intersubjectivity and interaction. Examining the realization of communicative intentions and strategies allows us to determine the extent to which politicians adhere to the principles of communicative cooperation and whether the deliberate violation of conversational maxims by politicians can be regarded as a tactic driven by institutional-functional factors.

By analyzing instances of strategic inference in political discourse, this study aims to illuminate not only how meaning is constructed and negotiated in political contexts but also how these linguistic practices reflect and reinforce broader sociopolitical dynamics. The findings show that by carefully constructing statements that trigger intended interpretations without explicitly stating them, politicians can navigate controversial topics and sensitive issues while avoiding direct accountability. This approach exploits listeners' natural cognitive processes and pragmatic understanding, allowing politicians to effectively frame discussions, direct narrative development, and maintain positive image in public debates without making clear statements.

## Discussion

One of the most key issues in contemporary linguistics is related to the development of communicative linguistics. While up until now, linguistic thought has primarily focused on language as a system of signs, at the modern stage, the central subject of linguistics has

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become the human being, viewed from a linguistic perspective. In other words, the focus has shifted from the system used by humans to humans themselves. The emphasis has shifted from the system used by humans to understanding. Everything depends on how a person understands the language. This means that the subject of study in communicative linguistics is "language as a system in action" (Lebanidze, 1998). Communication is an act, a process that is defined as a universal form or component of human activity. If we believe a human is as a socio-biological entity, one of their defining characteristics is active engagement, directed on the one hand toward the world and on the other toward other individuals. When action is discussed as a constitutive feature of humanity, it is understood as both human activity in relation to the world and human activity in relation to others—interaction.

This shift toward understanding language as action and communication naturally led to deeper exploration of how meaning is conveyed beyond literal expressions. Central to this development was the emergence of pragmatics as a field concerned with language use in context and the implicit meanings that arise during communication. One of the most significant contributions to this area has been the concept of implicature, which addresses how speakers communicate more than what is explicitly stated.

Unlike many other issues in pragmatics, implicature does not have an extensive or long-standing history. The theory of implicature was introduced by Paul Grice in a series of lectures he delivered at Harvard University in 1967, only part of which has been published (Grice 1975, 1978).

Grice first introduced the term "implicature" to denote a meaning that arises from a sentence without logically adding extra meaning to the words themselves. This term refers to a relationship between two statements, where the truth of one suggests the truth of the other. Grice's verbal meaning analysis has been revised and refined numerous times in attempts to clarify speaker intention. Scholars such as Stalnaker (1968), Schiffrin (1987), and Blakemore (2002) among others, have explored this topic, often opposing Grice's views. However, we believe that the counterarguments were not strong enough to undermine Grice's interpretation of implicature. The concept of implicature serves as a bridge between communicators.

It is worth noting that simplifying semantic content and structure does not imply a reduction in the challenges associated with the communication. Implicature enables the construction of semantics based on simple logical principles. Indeed, if we take pragmatic implicature into account, we can see that the radical difference between logical and natural languages becomes significantly blurred.

Moreover, implicature is an essential concept in studying the fundamental functions of language. For instance, interjections such as *well*, *by the way*, *at least*, and others require precise definition within semantic theory, just like any other word in the English language. However, when determining their meaning, it becomes evident that a pragmatic mechanism—namely, implicature—is necessary.

The term "**inference**" in linguistics has been widely used in various contexts. The term "inference" has much older origins than its specialized use in linguistics. The concept of inference has been fundamental to logic and philosophy since ancient times.

The Latin word "inferentia" (from which we get "inference") was used in classical logic, with roots tracing back to Aristotle's work on syllogisms and deductive reasoning in the 4th century BCE. While Aristotle didn't use the exact term "inference" (he wrote in Greek), he extensively described the process of drawing conclusions from premises.

The formal Latin term "inferentia" gained prominence in medieval scholastic philosophy and logic. Scholars like Thomas Aquinas in the 13th century used forms of the

Latin verb "inferre" (to bring in, to conclude, to infer) in discussions of logical reasoning (Fuhrmann, 1998).

But its systematic study in pragmatics is often associated with **H.P. Grice**. Grice introduced the concept of **conversational implicature** in his 1975 paper "*Logic and Conversation*," where he explained how listeners infer unstated meanings based on conversational maxims.

Although implicature and inference are often used interchangeably, there is a difference between them. Inference is the process of drawing conclusions from available information and is derived from context and implicature. In other words, implicature is the intended meaning conveyed by the speaker, while inference is the meaning interpreted by the listener. As Vonk and Noordman stated an inference is defined as the information that is not expressed explicitly by the text but is derived on the basis of the listener's knowledge and is encoded in the mental representation of the text. Inferencing is considered as a central component in discourse understanding. (Vonk, W., Noordman, L.G.M., 2001).

There are several factors that make inferences a crucial area of study in language comprehension. An inference refers to information that is not directly stated in the text but can be inferred from it based on the reader's or listener's background knowledge, and is integrated into the mental representation of the text. In this article, the concept of inference is limited to the extraction of implicit information during natural language processing. These inferences are different from logical deductions made in reasoning and problem-solving such as the logical. Logic focuses on evaluating the validity of arguments in reasoning. While listeners and readers do make logical deductions, and some inferences can be viewed as logical, everyday language use is not typically about assessing the validity of reasoning arguments (ibid).

Inference plays a crucial role in understanding language as it allows individuals to interpret meanings, intentions, and implicature beyond the literal words spoken or written. According to Grice (1957, 1989), pragmatic inference typically refers to the listener's interpretation of the speaker's intended meaning. In this framework, any inferences made by the listener that were not intended by the speaker are considered outside the scope of the Gricean approach (Clark, 2009).

In 1969, Searle significantly revised Grice's theory and integrated it into his own speech act theory (Searle 1975).

Grice's theory of implicature is a theory about how people use language. It develops conversational maxims—general principles that underpin the cooperative and effective use of language—and presents the cooperative principle, which consists of the following maxims:

1. **The Maxim of Cooperation**
  - Provide information as requested.
2. **The Maxim of Quality**
  - Contribute to the conversation by telling the truth.
  - Do not say what you know to be false.
  - Do not say something for which you lack adequate evidence.
3. **The Maxim of Quantity**
  - Be as informative as necessary for the given moment in the conversation.
  - Do not provide more information than is required.
4. **The Maxim of Relevance**
  - Be relevant and contribute appropriately to the conversation.
5. **The Maxim of Manner**
  - Be clear, explicit, and easily understood.

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- Avoid ambiguity.
- Avoid vagueness.
- Be specific.
- Be precise.

As we can see, these maxims outline what is required for communication to be as productive, rational, and cooperative as possible. In other words, communicators should be honest, clear, and as informative as needed.

However, when examining the nature of communication from this perspective, one might feel a sense of contradiction. These maxims depict a philosophical ideal, yet in reality, people do not always follow them strictly in everyday conversations. But Grice's perspective is quite different—his argument is not that people always adhere to these principles in daily speech, but rather that when they violate them, it is done deliberately and purposefully.

Linguistic interest in these maxims arises from their role in the comprehension process, which extends beyond the purely semantic content of a sentence or utterance. These assumptions, according to Grice, form what is known as **conversational implicature**—a concept that contrasts with **logical implicature**, **entailment**, and **logical consequence**, which derive purely from formal logic or semantic content. Implicature is not a semantic presupposition; rather, it is an assumption based on both the explicit content of what is said and certain fundamental axioms about the inherently cooperative nature of verbal communication.

In the process of speech acts, the speaker conveys a certain portion of information implicitly to the listener. This process is particularly significant when the primary meaning of the speech act is concentrated at the implicit level. Researchers express two opposing views on the transmission of implicit information. Specifically, Grice's followers argue that, as we have seen, implicit transmission occurs when the speaker, for certain reasons, does not wish or is unable to express their message explicitly. However, some researchers believe that the reason for implicit communication is not the speaker's desire to convey a message indirectly but rather the inherent limitation of language in expressing information with absolute precision.

We, however, agree with J. Searle's perspective that language has the capacity to express everything accurately. Additionally, we would emphasize that the speaker consciously chooses the method of conveying information, and if they prefer to communicate implicitly, this inherently implies that they assume the listener will be able to correctly interpret the intended meaning (Searle 1975:17).

According to Paul Grice, when conversational principles are violated, a competent listener may draw several possible conclusions:

- a) The speaker is not participating in the observance of the maxims.
- b) The speaker deliberately violates the maxims. In most cases, the violation of the maxim of quality is motivated by an intention to deceive.
- c) The speaker intends to follow the maxims of cooperation but fails to do so. For example, they may use technical terms in front of an audience, thereby violating the maxim of manner.
- d) The speaker likely intends to follow the principles of cooperation but evidently violates them.

In 1986 Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson developed the Relevance Theory that explains how people understand each other during conversations. Unlike Grice's approach, which was primarily concerned with how speakers convey meaning, Relevance Theory focuses on the cognitive processes by which hearers interpret utterances. It suggests that humans automatically aim to maximize relevance due to the way our cognitive systems have

evolved—we pay attention to what seems most relevant to us and process it in a way that maximizes cognitive effects while minimizing processing effort.

This cognitive perspective has significant implications for pragmatics. It explains how listeners are able to select the appropriate context for interpretation, resolve ambiguities, and recover implicit content without requiring speakers to follow a set of maxims. Instead, interpretation is guided by the search for relevance, with hearers following a path of least effort until their expectations of relevance are satisfied.

Relevance Theory has been particularly useful in explaining phenomena such as metaphor, irony, and loose talk, which were somewhat problematic under Grice's account. Rather than treating these as violations of maxims that generate implicatures, Relevance Theory treats them as natural outcomes of the relevance-guided comprehension process.

The theory has two main principles:

1. The Cognitive Principle: Human minds naturally seek relevance - we try to gain the most cognitive benefits while spending the least mental effort.
2. The Communicative Principle: When someone communicates with you, they're creating an expectation that their message is relevant enough to be worth your attention.

In everyday conversation, this means speakers don't need to say everything explicitly. Instead, they provide enough clues for listeners to figure out the intended meaning based on context. For example, a mother and child are leaving the house on a cold winter morning. As they're about to step outside, the mother simply says: "Your ears."

Despite being just two words with no verb or explicit instruction, the child immediately understands s/he should put on their hat or earmuffs.

Thus, Relevance Theory helps explain how we understand indirect meanings, metaphors, irony, and other non-literal communication that goes beyond the exact words being used (Sperber, D., & Wilson, D. 1986).

This cognitive approach to communication provides a valuable framework for analyzing not only everyday interactions but also more complex and strategic forms of discourse. Nowhere is this more evident than in political communication, where speakers carefully craft messages to achieve specific objectives while maintaining plausible deniability. The principles that govern ordinary inferential communication become powerful tools for persuasion and manipulation when deployed with deliberate intent in political contexts.

## Findings

Strategic inference in political discourse refers to the deliberate use of implied meanings, indirect communication, and pragmatic strategies to influence public perception, avoid accountability, and maintain political credibility. Politicians often rely on inference to shape narratives, persuade audiences, and manage face-threatening situations while avoiding explicit statements that could be used against them.

Let's see some examples from Remarks by President Trump and President Zelenskyy Before Bilateral Meeting | New York, NY  
<https://www.congress.gov/116/meeting/house/110331/documents/HMKP-116-JU00-20191211-SD1364.pdf>

*"And he's made me more famous, and I've made him more famous... he's got a great reputation. He's very, very strongly looking into all sorts of corruption and some of the problems they've had over the years."*

This exchange demonstrates the art of strategic inference in high-stakes diplomatic communication. By praising Zelenskyy's anti-corruption efforts while emphasizing his "great

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reputation" for investigating "problems they've had over the years," Trump creates a rhetorical environment where the expected continuation of such investigations is strongly implied. The statement carries a dual message: public praise for Zelenskyy coupled with an unstated expectation that these investigations should continue in directions favorable to Trump's interests.

What makes this example particularly noteworthy is how it establishes Trump's desires without formulating them as direct requests. The reference to Zelenskyy "very, very strongly looking into all sorts of corruption" functions as both a compliment and a soft directive, creating political pressure through implication rather than command. This approach maintains plausible deniability while still communicating expectations.

In discussions about international support for Ukraine, Trump stated: *"The United States helps Ukraine, but I think that other countries should help Ukraine much more than they're doing — Germany, France, the European Union nations... They have to feel a little bit guilty about it because they don't do what they should be doing."*

This statement exemplifies how strategic inference can establish unstated conditions and leverage points in diplomatic relationships. Without explicitly declaring that U.S. support depends on Zelenskyy securing greater European contributions, Trump creates this understanding through contextual implication. By highlighting the inadequacy of European support and suggesting they "should feel guilty," Trump positions himself as Ukraine's advocate while simultaneously establishing criteria for his continued support.

The inference works by creating a logical connection between two propositions: European nations are not contributing fairly, and Trump is concerned about this imbalance. The unstated conclusion—that Zelenskyy should pressure European leaders to increase their support as a condition for continued U.S. assistance—emerges naturally without requiring explicit articulation, shielding Trump from accusations of establishing a transactional relationship.

During public remarks about Ukraine, Trump asserted: *"When Biden's son walks away with millions of dollars from Ukraine, and he knows nothing, and they're paying him millions of dollars, that's corruption."*

This statement demonstrates how strategic inference can direct attention toward specific targets without making explicit requests for action. By labeling the Biden case as "corruption" in conversations with Ukrainian leadership, Trump establishes a moral framework that implies an expectation of investigation without directly requesting one. The characterization of the situation as definitively corrupt suggests that any leader serious about fighting corruption would naturally investigate such matters.

The power of this approach lies in how it converts what might be seen as a politically motivated request into an ostensibly principled stance against corruption. The inference creates political pressure while maintaining the appearance of simply stating factual observations, allowing Trump to pursue politically advantageous investigations while presenting them as matters of objective concern.

In discussing territorial issues, Trump noted: *"If you remember, you lost Crimea during a different administration, not during the Trump administration."*

This seemingly straightforward historical observation carries significant strategic inference regarding future U.S.-Ukraine relations. Without explicitly promising more robust support for Ukraine's territorial claims, Trump creates a contrast between his administration and Obama's, implying that Ukraine would receive stronger backing under his leadership. The statement functions as an unstated conditional: greater cooperation with Trump's priorities could result in more favorable treatment regarding Ukraine's territorial disputes.



The inference works by activating historical context that both parties understand, creating expectations about future behavior without making commitments that could prove politically costly. This approach allows Trump to suggest potential benefits of cooperation while maintaining flexibility in his actual policy positions.

In responding to earlier discussions about visiting Washington, Zelenskyy remarked: *"And I want to thank you for the invitation to Washington... You invited me. But I think — I'm sorry, but I think you forgot to tell me the date."*

This example demonstrates that strategic inference is employed not only by more powerful parties but also by those seeking to exert influence from positions of relative disadvantage. Zelenskyy's comment blends gratitude with a gentle reminder, using humor to mask what is essentially pressure for Trump to fulfill a promised White House meeting. By framing the absence of a specific date as a mere oversight ("you forgot"), Zelenskyy maintains diplomatic courtesy while still clearly communicating his expectations.

The effectiveness of this approach lies in how it allows Zelenskyy to advocate for his interests without appearing demanding or unappreciative of U.S. support. Through strategic inference, he reminds Trump of an unfulfilled commitment while preserving the appearance of positive relations—a crucial balance for a leader dependent on continued U.S. support.

### Conclusion

Based on the examples provided, several generalized conclusions can be drawn about how Relevance Theory and conversational implicature function in political discourse:

- **Implied Requests Without Directness:** In political discourse, speakers like Trump frequently make statements that appear informative but function as requests. By mentioning "looking into corruption" without directly asking for investigations, the speaker relies on the listener to infer the intended action based on optimal relevance.
- **Conditional Support Through Implication:** The examples demonstrate how support can be presented as conditional without explicitly stating a quid pro quo. Statements about others not doing enough create implicatures about expected reciprocity that the hearer can easily process.
- **Topic Introduction as Action Prompt:** Bringing up specific subjects (like Biden and "corruption") in high-level conversations creates strong contextual implications that these topics require attention or action, without explicitly requesting that action.
- **Temporal Comparisons as Incentives:** References to past administrations' failures function as implicatures suggesting that cooperation now would yield better outcomes, creating incentives for compliance without making explicit promises.
- **Politeness Strategies in Power Imbalances:** As seen in Zelenskyy's response, those with less power often use gentle implicatures to make requests or express expectations while maintaining face and avoiding appearing demanding.
- **Efficiency of Indirect Communication:** These examples show how implicature often achieves communicative goals more efficiently than direct statements would, particularly when explicit requests might be problematic or inappropriate.

These patterns demonstrate how Relevance Theory explains the cognitive mechanisms that make indirect communication both efficient and effective in sensitive political contexts, where explicit statements might create vulnerability or accountability issues.

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In other words, Strategic inference in political discourse is a powerful tool that enables politicians to influence audiences while minimizing direct responsibility for their words. By leveraging cognitive and pragmatic principles, they shape perceptions, frame debates, and maintain political control without making overtly controversial statements.

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