



Original article

The Rhetoric of Silence in Iraqi Political Discourse: A Critical Discourse Analysis

¹ Ayat Emad Jasim , ² Prof. Dr. Hashim A. M. Alhusseini 

Dept. of English, College of Education for Human Sciences, Wasit University, Iraq

ABSTRACT

Within Iraq's consociational power-sharing system, direct attribution carries factional consequences, making silence a central communicative strategy. Although there is increasing interest in the study of political discourse, the literature lacks examination of how silence is ideologically constructed within consociational power-sharing systems, particularly in the Iraqi context. Thus, the present study aims to examine how Iraqi politicians use ideological rhetorical strategies to construct silence. The study adopts a CDA approach as an analytical framework, based on van Dijk's (2006) ideological-rhetorical strategies to analyse six extracts selected from interviews with six Iraqi political figures. The findings indicate that silence is constructed systematically by the political actors through a variety of ideological rhetorical strategies that function to disperse agency, defer accountability, and protect factional interests without explicit attribution. Collectively, these strategies construct distinct forms of silence including non-naming silence and procedural silence, confirming that silence in Iraqi political discourse is a structurally conditioned practice rather than an individual stylistic choice.

*Correspondence author:
ayatemadjassim@gmail.com
hilewi@uowasit.edu.iq

Received: 19 July 2026
Accepted: 26 July 2026
Published: 25 August 2026

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.31185/wjfh.Vol22.Iss3/Pt3.2192>



1812-0512 /© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Wasit Journal for Humanities Sciences, Wasit University. This is an open access article under the CC BY-NC-ND license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>).

Cite:

Al-Obaidi, A. E. J., & Alhusseini, H. A. M. (2026). The Rhetoric of Silence in Iraqi Political Discourse: A Critical Discourse Analysis. Wasit Journal for Human Sciences, 22(3/Pt3).
<https://doi.org/10.31185/wjfh.Vol22.Iss3/Pt3.2192>

Keywords: silence, the rhetoric of silence, ideological-rhetorical strategies, critical discourse analysis

بلاغة الصمت في الخطاب السياسي العراقي: تحليل خطاب نقدي

آيات عماد جاسم أمين العبيدي¹، ا.د. هاشم عليوي محمد الحسيني²
جامعة واسط – كلية التربية والعلوم الانسانية – قسم اللغة الإنجليزية 2-1

المستخلص

في ظل نظام تقاسم السلطة التوافقي في العراق، يترتب على الإسناد المباشر للمسؤولية تبعات فصائلية، مما يجعل الصمت استراتيجية تواصلية محورية. وعلى الرغم من تزايد الاهتمام بدراسة الخطاب السياسي، فإن الأدبيات تقتصر إلى دراسات تتناول الكيفية التي يُبنى بها الصمت أيديولوجياً في ظل أنظمة تقاسم السلطة التوافقية، ولا سيما في السياق العراقي. لذلك، تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى الكشف عن الكيفية التي يوظف بها السياسيون العراقيون الاستراتيجيات الأيديولوجية البلاغية لبناء الصمت. وتعتمد الدراسة منهج التحليل النقدي للخطاب إطاراً تحليلياً، مستندةً إلى الاستراتيجيات الأيديولوجية البلاغية التي طرحها فان دايك (٢٠٠٦)، من خلال تحليل ستة مقتطفات مختارة من مقابلات مع ست شخصيات سياسية عراقية. وتشير النتائج إلى أن الصمت يُبنى بصورة منهجية من قبل الفاعلين السياسيين عبر مجموعة متنوعة من الاستراتيجيات الأيديولوجية البلاغية التي تؤدي وظائف تتمثل في تشتيت الفاعلية، وتأجيل المساءلة، وحماية المصالح الفصائلية من دون إسناد صريح للمسؤولية. وتؤدي هذه الاستراتيجيات، مجتمعةً، إلى بناء أشكال مميزة من الصمت، منها صمت عدم التسمية والصمت الإجرائي، بما يؤكد أن الصمت في الخطاب السياسي العراقي يمثل ممارسة مشروطة بنيوياً، وليس مجرد خيار أسلوبية فردي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصمت، الصمت البلاغي، استراتيجيات الخطابة الأيديولوجية، تحليل الخطاب النقدي

1.Introduction

Political discourse is inherently shaped by the ideological interests of those who produce it. Van Dijk (2002) argued that "whatever a politician says is a form of political discourse; and whatever anybody says with a political aim (to influence the political process, e.g., decision making, policies) is also a form of political discourse" (p.225). In this regard, Alhusseini & Zeidan (2024, p. 630) stated that "Politicians often invoke laws or principles previously established to legitimise their arguments." In Iraq, the 2003 US-led invasion and the subsequent collapse of the Ba'athist regime inaugurated a period of profound political restructuring, in which a power-sharing system based on ethno-sectarian quotas known as the Muhasasa, i.e., Iraq's sectarian power-sharing system, became the organising principle of governance (Bremer & McConnell, 2006; Tripp, 2007). This system produced a political environment characterised by delicate balances and fragile compromises, in which direct speech carries factional consequences and silence becomes a strategic communicative resource.

In this context, silence is not an absence of speech but a deliberate rhetorical practice. Beard (2000) emphasised that analysing political language is necessary interpreting of how power is gained, maintained, and exercised, observing that what is not said can be more ideologically important than what is explicitly mentioned. Obeng (1997) also argued that silence is a rhetorical choice firmly rooted in political communication, and that politicians systematically prefer obscurity,

ambiguity, and obliqueness precisely because of the inherently contentious character of political life.

Although there is increasing interest in the study of political discourse, the literature lacks examination of how silence is ideologically constructed within consociational power-sharing systems, particularly in the Iraqi context. Silence has been treated either as a rhetorical phenomenon or as a pragmatic strategy, but the specific linguistic mechanisms by which it is constructed and maintained in politically constrained environments remain underexplored. This gap highlights the need for a systematic investigation of the ideological construction of silence in Iraqi political discourse. Therefore, the aim of the present study is to investigate the ways in which the Iraqi politicians construct silence through an ideological-rhetorical strategy, using van Dijk's (2006) ideological-rhetorical strategies as its analytical framework.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of Silence

Glenn (2004) claimed that silence is not merely the lack of communication but can function as a form of communication. Bao (2023) argued that among all the non-verbal categories, the conceptualisation of silence is one of the most enigmatic. Silence is malleable and can only have relative, not absolute, meanings. Researchers have long recognised that the wider concept of silence does include sound and language, although the literal meaning of this concept refers to the absence or inaudibility of sound or words. Guerrero (1994) emphasised that silence takes on several characteristics such as ideational, mnemonic, textual, instructional, evaluative, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. These functions demonstrate that silence may operate as an integral part of communicative processes rather than merely the absence of speech. Klieber (2021) noted that silence is experienced in everyday situations and may convey peripheral meanings depending on the communicative context.

2.2 The Rhetoric of Silence

Aristotle (1991) characterised rhetoric as the skill of identifying all potential methods of persuasion in a specific situation. In this regard, Mejdoub (2019) illustrated that rhetoric is frequently perceived as the art of persuasion. It may also be interpreted as the misuse of words to manipulate fallacious arguments, disseminate half-truths, insinuate erroneous concepts, evoke emotions, and thus distort judgment and fool the audience. In this context, Behnam and Nosratzadegan (2014) illustrated that some people believe that silence is communicative, while others believe that it is non-communicative. There is a distinction between non-communicative silence and communicative silence. The latter was referred to as rhetorical silence. This type of silence is sometimes referred to as an active means, since it is selected by the speaker to deliver his or her message. Rhetorical silence is intentional and significant, serving as a unique strategy to highlight specific issues. Brummett (1980) characterised rhetorical silence as a deliberate choice, especially "when an individual has a compelling reason to speak, yet refrains" (p. 289).

2.3 Silence in Political Discourse

Van Dijk (2002) asserted that political discourse is defined by context rather than by text or structure. Van Dijk (1997) argued that political discourse is determined by who speaks to whom, on what occasion, and with what intentions, rather than the topic or manner. Wilson (1990) suggested that political discourse analysis seeks to identify how language is used to achieve specific political effects. Bremer and McConnell (2006) explained that following the United States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, a new political system was established, including a new constitution in 2005. Following the fall of Baghdad, its political system shifted to a parliamentary and multi-party structure. Iraqi ethno-sectarian factions agreed to govern through power-sharing to protect the rights of all Iraqis. The Iraqi constitution of 2005 established a new administrative structure based on the separation of power principle, with Sunni presidents and Kurdish and Shia deputies (Tripp, 2007).

Obeng (1997) asserted that silence is not simply a lack of speech, but a deliberate rhetorical decision firmly rooted in political communication. He contended that any theory of political communication must consider verbal silence as a fundamental aspect. Moreover, he claimed that politicians prefer silence, obscurity, ambiguity, and obliqueness in their communication because of the inherently deceptive and perilous character of politics, particularly regarding the influence of rhetoric. Politicians use silence in a variety of political events, such as presidential addresses, debates, and press conferences. Furko and Abuczki (2014) emphasised that silence is a salient characteristic of political talk, especially in interviews where direct answers are habitually avoided. The strategic benefits of this silence are well-reported: it assists politicians to escape crises, save face, minimise risk, further careers, and safeguard the parties and governments that they represent (Obeng, 1997).

3. Critical Discourse Analysis

Fairclough (1992) asserted that CDA is an approach aimed at exploring the relationship between language and social structures, including power, social roles, and identity. According to van Dijk (2001), CDA is concerned with understanding how social power, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted through written texts and spoken discourse in various social and political contexts. Widdowson (2004) emphasised that CDA seeks to understand how power abuse is communicated linguistically and how language is employed to distort reality. Wodak (2001) stated that CDA is closely associated with the study of language manipulation. It examines how people in authority use language to manipulate and control others. He defined CDA as the study of how language and manipulative discursive practices contribute to social injustice. Language "is a communicative and interactional practice, in which a manipulator exercises control over other people, usually against their will or against their best interests" (Van Dijk, 2006, pp. 360-361, as cited in Al-Husseini, 2020, p. 498).

3.1 Van Dijk's (2006) Ideological-Rhetorical Strategies

Van Dijk (1998) asserted that ideologies serve as the foundational framework for social representations among group members, facilitating the interpretation of events and guiding interactions. These ideologies shape individuals' perceptions of in-groups and out-groups, resulting in systematic polarisation in speech. Van Dijk (2006) proposed that speakers often depict

their own group favourably while characterising the opposing group unfavourably. Van Dijk (1998) emphasised that this polarisation is referred to as the ideological square, which instructs speakers to highlight our positive attributes, underscore their negative attributes, downplay our negative attributes and diminish their positive attributes. This approach positions discourse as a battleground for ideological conflict, illustrating how domination and inequality are perpetuated through linguistic and rhetorical selections (Van Dijk, 2006).

Van Dijk's (2006) encompassed forty-one ideological-rhetorical strategies, the present study applies them selectively rather than exhaustively. Only those strategies evidenced in the data are analysed, as the data itself determines which elements of the model are analytically relevant to revealing the construction of rhetorical silence in Iraqi political discourse. Therefore, only the strategies that directly contributed to addressing the research questions were included in the analysis. Accordingly, the following strategies are adopted in the analysis:

1. Vagueness: It means that texts use unclear language that does not have a clear meaning like "few", "a lot", "a lot", "thing", "high", "low," etc.
2. Implication: It means that speakers cannot say everything they know or believe. A lot of discourse is implied. The viewer has to use what they already know to conclude.
3. Reasonableness: A technique that speakers use to show that their arguments are not only sound, but also logical and make sense. This strategy works especially well when the case makes it sound like the speaker is biased or not making sense.
4. Disclaimer: Means that the speaker is trying to keep face by talking about his good qualities first and then focusing on the bad qualities of the other group.
5. Victimisation: Indicates that discussions around something are defined by the dichotomy of ingroups and outgroups. For instance, immigrants are seen as the outgroup, with their negative attributes accentuated; individuals may retell traumatic accounts regarding marginalised citizen. The ingroup is portrayed as the victim.
6. Consensus: Is used to claim or insist on consensus across parties or across the country.
7. Negative other-presentation: It means that speakers put people into two groups, the in-group and the out-group. That is why Van Dijk (2006) asserted that grouping is not value-free, but imbued with an ideologically based application of norms and values. The out-group is always talked about negatively.
8. Positive Self-Presentation: This means that people talk about the good things about their group, country, party, etc., both in groups and one-on-one.
9. Populism: This is a way for politicians to get more votes by stating their views and plans. "The basic strategy is to claim that 'the people' (or 'everybody') does not support further immigration" (Van Dijk, 2006, p. 738).
10. History as Lesson: A popular way to make an argument in which the present situation is compared to events that happened in the past, usually to help the reader understand or solve a problem.
11. Number Game: It means that speakers stress objectivity by using data to make a point. For instance, the number of new refugees is kept in check in news stories.
12. Generalisation: The speaker tends to make generalisations instead of examples or illustrations.

13. Categorisation: Where speakers and writers tend to put people into groups based on their political and religious beliefs, attitudes, and other similar things.

14. Authority: Authorities like experts, global groups, leaders, and others are used by the speaker to back up their ideas and claims.

4. Research Questions

The present study intends to answer the following questions:

1. What are the strategies used in the Iraqi political discourse?
2. How do Iraqi politicians utilise silence to articulate their stances and intentions?

5. Methodology

Research methodology defines the nature of any study. The two main types of research are quantitative and qualitative. According to Morse (2016), quantitative methods involve gathering and examining numeric information to measure behaviours, opinions, attitudes, and other variables to allow the extrapolation of findings to larger populations. In contrast, Creswell (2017) mentioned that qualitative research involves collecting and analysing non-numeric data (e.g., interviews, video, audio, photos) to gain insights into ideas, find the essence of a phenomenon, and find the perspectives or experiences of a particular issue.

Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) asserted that the purpose of integrating methods is to gain a better understanding of the research issues. Accordingly, the present study adopts a mixed-methods approach. The qualitative component involves a close linguistic analysis of the selected Iraqi political extracts to examine how rhetorical silence is constructed within the CDA framework. This is supported by a quantitative count of the identified ideological-rhetorical strategies. Collectively, they provide a more comprehensive understanding of rhetorical silence as a communicative strategy within the Iraqi system.

The extracts were selected from interviews broadcast on official and widely recognised media platforms, including Reuters, Kurdistan TV, and CNN. These outlets were selected because they provide reliable transcripts and verifiable records of political speech. Regarding the translation, most of the selected interviews are conducted in Arabic, for which official translations are available on the same platforms. Two exceptions are noted: the interviews with Ayad Allawi and Jalal Talabani, who delivered their statements directly in English. The interview with Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani was accessed through the Arabic translation available on the APT YouTube channel. In all cases, the translated versions used in this study are those officially available through the stated sources, ensuring consistency and verifiability across the dataset.

The selection of political figures is further motivated by specific representational considerations. The six political figures are selected to ensure institutional and temporal diversity across the operational span of the Muhasasa system. Ayad Allawi (Prime Minister) and Jalal Talabani (President of Iraq) represent the early transitional phase. Saleh Al-Mutlaq (Deputy Prime Minister) and Masoud Barzani (President of the Kurdistan Region) represent the mid-phase at cabinet and regional levels respectively. Vian Dakhil represents parliamentary minority discourse, while Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani (Prime Minister) represents the most contemporary phase of governance. Together, they cover a broad institutional and temporal spectrum without overlap. The extracts are selected according to the following criteria: (1) the data were chosen from

interviews with Iraqi political figures occupying formal positions inside the post-2003 political system. (2) they reflect varied political positions across different components of the Muhasasa system, ensuring discursive diversity rather than representational uniformity. (3) Spanning 2006-2025, the data show that these mechanisms are not individually motivated decisions but rather permanent, system-conditioned communicative practice.

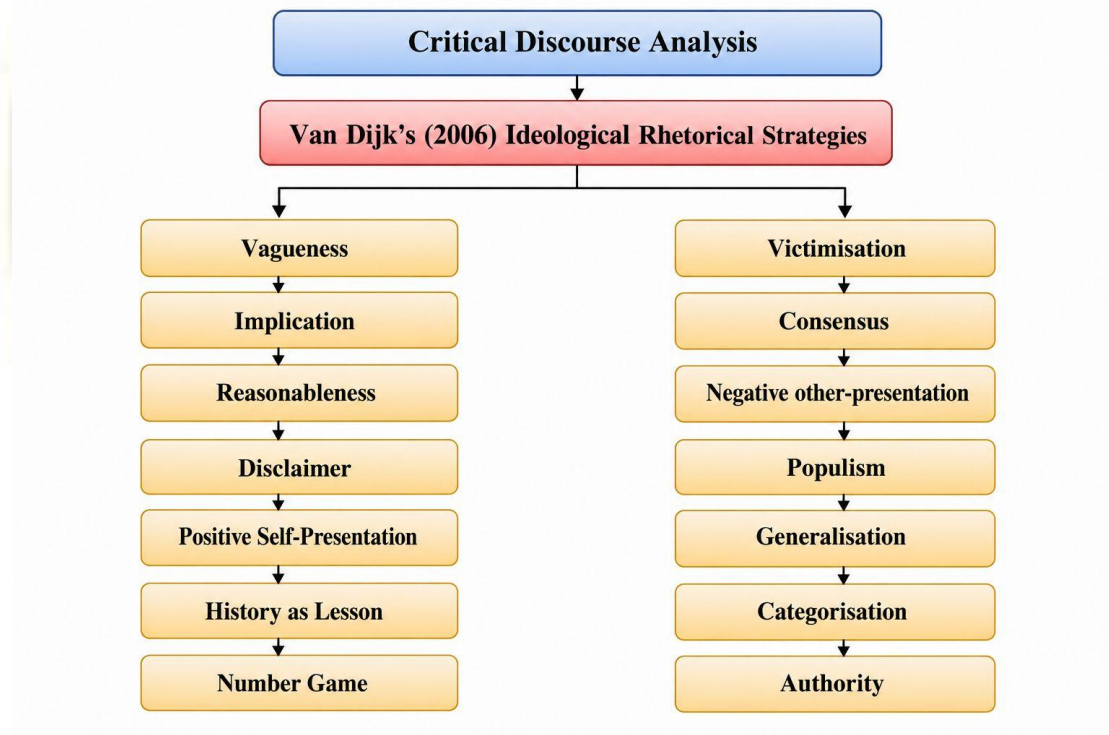
5.1 Procedures of Data Analysis

To put forward a systematic analysis, the researcher followed a set of steps for data analysis, which are summarised as follows:

1. Identifying the selected Iraqi political extracts and organising them in numbered extracts according to their institutional and political contexts within the Iraqi power-sharing structure.
2. Examining the selected extracts ideologically based on van Dijk's (2006) ideological-rhetorical strategies.
3. Discussing the findings to formulate concluding insights.
4. Providing conclusions for the study based on the analysis.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework of the Study based on van Dijk's (2006) Ideological-Rhetorical Strategies.



Note: Prepared by the researchers based on the framework of the study.

6. Data Analysis

6.1 Analysis of Extract (1): Ayad Allawi

This extract is drawn from an interview with former Iraqi Interim Prime Minister Ayad Allawi on the CNN programme, published on 26 August 2007. Titled *"Interview With Ayad Allawi; Interview*

With Bill Richardson." During the interview, Blitzer asked Allawi: "Why have you lost all your confidence in the prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki?" (CNN, 2007, para. 1). Allawi asserted: I lost my confidence, Wolf, really, in the process which is ongoing in Iraq, which is based on sectarianism. It's based on supporting militias to take the rule of law in their hands, to get away from assertive regional politics. ... Unless the government decides to embark on a course of national unity or national reconciliation, on getting away from sectarianism, which is crushing the Iraqi people, it's very difficult to rejoin the government. ... It's not the person, Wolf, it's the system -- the system of running the government on sectarian basis, the system of running the government on non-reconciliation with the various groups in Iraq. ... I am not doubting whether he's a good guy or not a good guy. But I am doubting the system of militias, of sectarianism... I am not seeing that we are getting closer to having an assertive foreign policy, which would not allow Iran to intervene in Iraqi affairs. (CNN, 2007, paras. 1,3,5,8)

According to van Dijk's (2006) ideological-rhetorical strategies, the extract begins with the reasonableness strategy. The sentence "I am not doubting whether he's a good guy or not a good guy" introduces the speaker as fair-minded, before any structural criticism, thereby avoiding the impression of a personal political attack. The disclaimer strategy is present in the sentence "It's not the person, Wolf, it's the system," which explicitly removes any blame from the individual, and then transfers it to "the system of running the government on a sectarian basis." The implication of naming a coalition partner would be factional, so it would be better to use a more general term, such as the system. Vagueness is embodied in the sentence "supporting militias to take the rule of law in their hands," in which the discourse foregrounds illegality, but at the same time, backgrounds agency. Wrongdoing is semantically enhanced, but responsibility is textually indeterminate. The statement creates a regulated form of charge whereby the presence of political malpractice is brought into view without being linked to specific individuals. Importantly, the silence here is rhetorically strong because it is grammatically invisible: the sentence is still syntactically complete even though there is no explicit agent. Rather than eliminating accountability, the discourse spreads responsibility within an unnamed political arena, thereby escaping the partisan effects of overt charges in the weak Iraqi power-sharing system.

The implication strategy allows saying what cannot be said directly: mentioning foreign policies that should 'not allow Iran to intervene in Iraqi affairs' assumes that such interference already exists and suggests a current failure to prevent it. Iran is explicitly named, but domestic actors who might enable such influence remain implicit, establishing a selective asymmetry that externalises responsibility and internal silence. The presupposition strategy embedded in "would not allow" is particularly telling, as it frames the policy in the conditional; the speaker does not state a failure but creates an implication with political force that is not bound by a direct assertion.

The consensus strategy is manifested through references to "national unity" and "national reconciliation" that can hardly be publicly challenged by actors, giving the impression that the speaker's stance serves the national interest. The discourse creates a political agenda where failure by the government is framed as self-evident, the participation under the existing conditions as unsustainable, and the speaker as a reform-minded statesman instead of a sectarian player, none of which mention a single person in charge of the crisis. The rhetorical strength of these strategies

is that, when they are put forward as a matter of national interest, any disagreement with the speaker's position is repackaged as dissent from reconciliation itself, thereby silencing any possible counter-argument.

6.2 Analysis of Extract (2): Saleh Al-Mutlaq

This extract is drawn from a transcript of an interview with Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Saleh Al-Mutlaq on CNN and published on 26 May 2015. Titled "*Iraqi army conduct in Ramadi surprised all of us.*" Al-Mutlaq stated:

أولاً، لا ينبغي حل الجيش العراقي، وقد قام الأمريكيون بحل الجيش العراقي. ثم قلنا بما أنكم قد قررتم بالفعل حل الجيش العراقي، فعليكم الآن بناء جيش وطني، ليس طائفياً، بل جيش محترف. لكن لسوء الحظ، تم بناء الجيش بطريقة أدخلت فيها الميليشيات، كما أنه لم يتم بناؤه على أساس وطني، بل على أساس طائفي. للأسف، لم يكن الانسحاب مسؤولاً. لذا كان الاحتلال خاطئاً، وكان الانسحاب خاطئاً أيضاً. كلاهما خطوتان خاطئتان، أدت إلى ما نحن عليه الآن. علينا الآن أن نتحرك فوراً.

First, you should not dissolve the Iraqi army, and the Americans did dissolve the Iraqi army. And then, we said since you have already decided to dissolve the Iraqi army, now you have to build a national army, which is not sectarian, which is a professional army. But unfortunately, the army was built in a way that the militias entered it, and also it was not built on a national basis, but on a sectarian one. Unfortunately, the withdrawal was not in a responsible way. So the occupation was wrong, and the withdrawal was wrong also. Both of them are wrong steps that led to where we are now. Now we have to act immediately. (CNN, 2015, paras. 1-5)

Based on van Dijk's (2006) ideological-rhetorical strategies, the extract opens with the negative other-presentation strategy, which is most evident in the statement 'the Americans did dissolve the Iraqi army.' This explicitness organises the narrative in a way that foregrounds the external cause while neglecting subsequent internal control of the institution by avoiding reference to domestic developments, thereby creating a non-naming silence.

This move is reinforced through the history-as-lesson strategy. The dissolution of the army is given as the first mistake from which subsequent failures emerge, especially in the statement that the army "was not built on a national basis, but on a sectarian one." The narrative constructs a causal trajectory that begins with the external decision and culminates in the institution's present condition, in which the pattern of procedural silence extends to the actors responsible for these developments.

The positive self-presentation strategy appears in the statement "we said... you have to build a national army, which is not sectarian, which is a professional army." Here the speaker places himself within a group that recognises the right institutional path. The formulation establishes a contrast between those associated with the idea of a 'national' and 'professional' army and those whose actions ultimately resulted in the creation of a sectarian structure. However, the pronoun "we" is not defined. Its referent may be a political bloc, the broader Iraqi political class, or political actors in general. This vagueness allows the speaker to assert correctness and legitimacy without defining the boundaries of the group that claims them, thereby establishing a form of non-naming silence that spreads responsibility among actors.

The vagueness strategy operates in the sentences "the army was built in a way that the militias were entered in it" and "it was not built on a national basis, but on a sectarian one." The institutional restructuring processes are described, and the agents of these are syntactically missing. The discourse thereby offers a tangible definition of a sectarian army shaped by militias, though not of the political actors who facilitated this change, thereby making it an apparent exemplification of procedural silence. The discourse is a two-fold political agenda, in which it externalises the responsibility to foreign actors, while domestic agency is strategically obscured. This helps the speaker appear critical without blaming internal actors, thereby maintaining political prudence within the Iraqi system of power-sharing.

The negative other-presentation of American policy does not simply assign blame outward; it performs a secondary function of ideological protection for unnamed domestic actors. By establishing the Americans as the originating cause, the history-as-lesson strategy creates a causal chain in which subsequent Iraqi decisions appear as responses to an external mistake rather than as independent political choices. The agents who constructed the sectarian army, combined the militias, and controlled the institutional reorganisation are not ideologically visible, not because they are unknown, but because the discourse has already determined that the tale started elsewhere. This is an advanced use of vagueness not as a lack of detail, but as the strategic placement of detail to draw attention away from the other.

6.3 Analysis of Extract (3): Masoud Barzani

This extract is drawn from an interview with Masoud Barzani, President of the Kurdistan Region, conducted by Reuters and published on 6 July 2017. Titled "*Interview: Iraqi Kurdish leader says no turning back on independence bid.*" Barzani stated:

لقد انتظرنا لمدة 14 عامًا وناقشنا هذه الشراكة، ولكن قيل لنا دائمًا أن الوقت غير مناسب وأن التوقيت غير مقبول، لذا فإن سؤالي هو: متى يكون الوقت المناسب؟ علينا تصحيح تاريخ سوء معاملة شعبنا، وأولئك الذين يقولون إن الاستقلال ليس جيدًا، سؤالنا لهم هو: إذا لم يكن جيدًا لنا، فلماذا هو جيد لكم؟ إن شرعية الشعب أكبر من شرعية أي من الأحزاب السياسية أو أي من التدخلات الخارجية. لا أعتقد أن أحداً يستطيع الوقوف في وجه موجة شعب كردستان العارمة حين يقرر مصيره. ربما ستكون هناك بعض المحاولات لإحباطها... سنبدل قصارى جهدنا لمنع حدوث ذلك. لقد حذرتكم من أنه إذا لم تكن لديكم هذه الخطة السياسية، فسوف ينقلب الوضع رأساً على عقب.

For 14 years we have been waiting, and we have been discussing this partnership, but we have always been told it's not a good time and it's not acceptable timing, so my question is, when is the right time? ... We have to rectify the history of mistreatment of our people, and those who are saying that independence is not good, our question to them is, if it's not good for us, why is it good for you? ... The legitimacy of the people is bigger than the legitimacy of any of the political parties or any of the external interventions. I don't think anybody can stand against the big wave of the people of Kurdistan when they decide their destiny. Maybe there will be some attempts to foil (it)... We will do our best not to let that happen. ... I warned that if you are not going to have this political plan, the situation will reverse. (Reuters, 2017, paras. 13-15)

According to van Dijk's (2006) ideological-rhetorical strategies, the victimisation strategy predominates in the opening statements of "for 14 years we have been waiting" and "the history of mistreatment of our people," which creates a collective subject characterised by long-term

resentment and historical injustice. The speaker gains moral authority by prefiguring a story of agony and endurance, before the political case of independence. Meanwhile, the negative other-presentation strategy is introduced by mentioning actors who have repeatedly insisted that 'it is not a good time.' These actors are never directly named, and the charge of obstruction can be spread without directly challenging certain political adversaries.

The populism strategy operates in the statement "the legitimacy of the people is bigger than the legitimacy of any of the political parties or any of the external interventions" positions popular will as the ultimate political authority, overriding both domestic institutions and international actors. By framing the referendum as the expression of an overwhelming collective will, the discourse elevates the issue beyond procedural debate. At the same time, the opposition is introduced in abstract expressions such as "political parties" and "external interventions." The vagueness of these expressions enables the challenge to cover a broad spectrum of possible opponents and avoids direct naming of the opponents. This reasoning is further supported by the mention of the big wave of the people of Kurdistan when they choose their own fate, in which independence is portrayed as an overwhelming popular movement rather than a contested political stance, thereby muting the voice of internal dissent.

The implication strategy operates in the closing warning "I warned if you are not going to have this political plan, the situation will reverse." The statement addresses an unnamed 'you,' refers to an unspecified 'political plan,' and threatens an undefined 'reverse.' This layered ambiguity enables the warning to work on a variety of audiences without specifying the consequences. By doing so, the discourse keeps the possible opponents under pressure without obligating the speaker to a well-laid course of action. The speaker's agenda is to coerce those opposed to Kurdish independence by insinuating that there might be political instability if the demand is not met, but not to threaten.

6.4 Analysis of Extract (4): Vian Dakhil

This extract is drawn from a speech by Vian Dakhil, an Iraqi MP and spokesperson for the Kurdistan Democratic Party parliamentary faction, held in Duhok on 29 April 2025. Titled *"Kurdish MP Vian Dakhil Slams Iraqi Parliament for Ignoring Yazidis: 'Our Case Means Nothing to Them.'*" Dakhil asserted:

في البرلمان العراقي، لا يعطى اليزيديين أي اهتمام - تعتبر قضيتنا غير مهمة. ... كان العديد من النواب مرتبكين وسألوا، ما هو اليزيديين؟ لم يسمعو عنا من قبل. لا يهم ما إذا كنت تعرف من هم اليزيديين. ما يهم هو الحقوق التي منحناها لهم، كحكومة، كدولة. ... لقد طرحنا أسئلتنا على بغداد مرات لا تحصى، وفي كل مرة لا نتلقى أي إجابات حقيقية. ... كل ما تبقى هو تنفيذه - إعادة بناء المنازل، وضمان الأمن، وإعادة النازحين إلى مدنهم. لكن بغداد تواصل تهमيش قضيتنا، وتعامل المعاناة اليزيدية على أنها هامشية.

In the Iraqi Parliament, Yazidis are not given any attention; our issue is considered unimportant. ... Many MPs were confused and asked, what is a Yazidi? They had never even heard of us. ... It doesn't matter whether you know who the Yazidis are. What matters is what rights you, as a government, as a state, have granted them. ... We have posed our questions to Baghdad countless times, and each time we receive no real answers. ... All that remains is to carry it out — rebuild homes, ensure security, and return the displaced to their towns. But Baghdad continues to sideline our case, treating Yazidi suffering as peripheral. (Kurdistan24, 2025, paras. 3–6).

Drawing on van Dijk's (2006) ideological-rhetorical strategies, the extract starts with the victimisation strategy, evident in the statements "Yazidis are not given any attention — our issue is considered unimportant" and "Baghdad continues to sideline our case, treating Yazidi suffering as peripheral" establish the Yazidi community as a group subjected to institutional marginalisation. At the same time, the passive form "our issue is considered unimportant" leaves the actors responsible for this judgement unnamed, thereby producing non-naming silence. This formulation allows the speaker to reveal institutional negligence without directly identifying particular parliamentary actors in the power-sharing structure.

The negative other-presentation strategy is evident in the statement "many MPs were confused and asked, 'What is a Yazidi?' They had never even heard of us." In this case, the unnamed MPs are symbolic figures of institutional ignorance. Although the sentence implies that there are identifiable individuals, the discourse withholds their identities, so the criticism targets the institution as a whole rather than any individual. This construction thus perpetuates non-naming silence in which the accusation is distributed at the institutional level, and individual responsibility is linguistically distributed. Such formulations enable the speaker to reveal structural negligence without directly attacking certain legislators.

In the sentence "All that remains is to carry it out — rebuild homes, ensure security, and return the displaced to their towns," the vagueness strategy is employed. Although the statement lists concrete activities, the actors who are expected to carry them out are not specified. This formulation generates a form of silence because the expected activity is concrete, but the actor that is expected to achieve the desired outcomes is not stated. Such a construction enables the speaker to emphasise the responsibility of the government without explicitly accusing any ministries or political figures.

6.5 Analysis of Extract (5): Jalal Talabani

This extract is drawn from an interview with Jalal Talabani, President of Iraq, broadcast on CNN Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer, published on 24 September 2006. Talabani asserted:

In the times of Saddam Hussein, hundreds of thousands of innocent Iraqi people were buried in mass graves which we've discovered... . Now we have in Iraq only one problem, which is the problem of security. But if you look at the other side of Iraqi people's life, you'll see much progress and development. ... But it's not worse than the past. Months ago, you had daily in Baghdad between 10 and 15 car bombs. Now you have two to three to four. Still, though, there are assassinations continuing. But less than it was months ago. ... As Sunni and Shias, now we are going to see that the national reconciliation is going forward. Yes, there are Sunnis and Shias which argument about forming a committee to amend mandate of constitution... and national unity government headed by Nouri al-Maliki is going well, which is representing all Iraqi people. (CNN, 2006, paras. 63-71)

According to van Dijk's (2006) ideological-rhetorical strategies, the history-as-lesson strategy dominates the opening sentence "in the times of Saddam Hussein, hundreds of thousands of Iraqi innocent people were buried in mass graves," which establishes a historical baseline against which the present is measured. Ideologically, this move is important not because it tells us anything about the past but because it suppresses independent evaluation of the present. By making the previous

regime the reference point for evaluation, the speaker displaces any independent evaluation of the present failures of governance, thereby creating a benchmark silence that shields present actors from similar evaluation.

The number game strategy structures the statistical comparison "months ago, you had daily in Baghdad between 10 to 15 car bombs. Now you have two to three to four." The use of particular numbers constructs an appearance of ideological objectivity whereby the speaker seems to recognise the crisis sincerely, but the numbers themselves shift the focus away from the absolute level of the current violence to its relative decrease. Ideologically, this strategy constructs a narrative of measurable progress while producing procedural silence about what the residual figures represent and what governance failures sustain them.

The vagueness strategy is used in statements such as 'national reconciliation is going forward' and 'much progress and development.' Both expressions refer to positive outcomes without specifying their content, timing, and actors, thus leading to silence on generalisation and critical examination.

The consensus strategy operates in "national unity government... representing all Iraqi people," the power-sharing arrangement is introduced as universally representative, silencing any recognition of contentious representation or marginalised groups in the Muhasasa system.

The positive self-presentation strategy is implemented by the speaker, who endorses the view that the government 'is going well.' Talabani, as President of Iraq, carries institutional authority in his endorsement, but the vagueness strategy also ensures that this endorsement cannot be falsified; no criteria are provided by which to evaluate whether something is going well or not. The speaker's agenda is to present the post-2003 political order as a relative improvement over the previous one by contrasting it with the past, thereby safeguarding the legitimacy of the power-sharing system without addressing its structural inadequacies.

6.6 Analysis of Extract (6): Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani

This extract is drawn from an interview published by Reuters, an international news agency, with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani. The interview was conducted in Baghdad and was published on 3 November 2025. Titled "*Iraq can only disarm factions once U.S. withdraws, prime minister says.*" Al-Sudani asserted:

سوف يكون هناك برنامج واضح لإنهاء أي مظاهر للسلح خارج مؤسسات الدولة، وهذا هو مطلب الجميع. كل القوى السياسية تتحدث به، ليس فقط البعض. هذا اتفاق سياسي أنه ننهي أي مظاهر وجود قد تعطي انطباع أن هناك نوع من الاحتلال نوع من التواجد غير الشرعي. حتى ينتهي مبرر أنه أنت تملك سلاح خارج مؤسسات الدولة. أمامك مؤسسات أمنية أما تدخل لهذه المؤسسات الأمنية وتخرط فيها أو تذهب للعمل السياسي. لن نسمح لأي طرف بزج العراق في أتون الصراعات والحروب.

(APT-NEWS, 2025, 1:22–2:13)

There will definitely be a clear programme to eliminate all forms of weaponry outside the state institutions; this is everyone's demand. All political forces are discussing this, not just some. This is a political agreement to end any manifestations of presence that could give the impression of occupation or illegal existence. Once that justification ends, there will no longer be any reason for anyone to hold weapons outside the framework of the state. There are official security institutions; either you join them, or you pursue political work. ... We will not allow any party to drag Iraq into the furnace of conflicts and wars. (Reuters, 2025, paras. 1-4)

Based on van Dijk's (2006) ideological-rhetorical strategies, the extract opens with the vagueness strategy in "a clear programme" and "all forms of weaponry" are not defined, so neither the programme nor the actors are specified. This vagueness allows the speaker to invoke a broad commitment and avoid the explicit attribution of responsibility, thereby creating non-naming silence. The consensus strategy operates in the sentence "this is everyone's demand," where generalisation overrides ideological differences and offers the stance as a common one. Additionally, it shifts the speaker's responsibility to a group and avoids individual responsibility. A similar pattern appears in the sentence "all political forces are discussing this, not just some." The main strategy in this case is the consensus strategy, which presents the problem as something common to all rather than a point of contention. This strategy is reinforced by the generalisation strategy "all" and the vagueness strategy "political forces." The phrase "not just some" operates through the implication strategy, presupposing unnamed actors. Ideologically, this disperses agency and shields the speaker from direct attribution of blame. The discourse appeals to legality by saying that "this is a political agreement," making the action a shared decision, not an individual one.

The vagueness strategy is reused with expressions such as "manifestations of presence," "the impression of occupation or illegal existence," and "once that justification ends," which are intentionally vague. This vagueness enforces silence regarding agency and enforcement, enabling the speaker to manage responsibility without incurring a definite attribution or action. In the discourse "there are official security institutions; either you join them, or you pursue political work." The categorisation strategy forms a legitimate in-group in accordance with the state and an implicitly illegitimate out-group that is outside the state. At the same time, the statement maintains procedural silence, because no enforcement mechanisms are specified. This allows the speaker to suggest incorporation into state institutions as the only legitimate way, without engaging in a head-on conflict with the actors concerned.

Finally, "we will not allow any party to drag Iraq into the furnace of conflicts and wars" exemplifies the authority strategy, which positions the speaker as an authoritative protector of national stability. This authority strategy is supported by the positive self-presentation strategy, as the pronoun "we" constructs the speaker as part of a legitimate governing in-group and naturalises authority as a collective function. At the same time, non-naming silence is achieved through "any party," which generalises the blame and does not target any specific actors. This silence is part of the speaker's political agenda, as it allows for deterrence and control and, indirectly, indicates a threat to specific actors without directly attributing responsibility to any particular actors.

Table 1

Frequency of van Dijk's (2006) Ideological-Rhetorical Strategies in the analysis of Iraqi Political Discourse

Critical Discourse Analysis	Frequency
Van Dijk's (2006) Ideological-Rhetorical Strategies	
Vagueness	7
Negative Other-Presentation	4
Consensus	4
Positive Self-Presentation	3
History-as-Lesson	3
Implication	3
Victimisation	2
Disclaimer	1
Populism	1
Number Game	1
Generalisation	1
Categorisation	1
Authority	1
Reasonableness	1

Note. Prepared by the researchers based on the analysis.

Van Dijk's (2006) ideological-rhetorical strategies reveal that the vagueness strategy (7) emerges as the most frequent strategy, suggesting that the concealment of agency is a central mechanism through which rhetorical silence is constructed. Wrongdoing is often made visible, while the actors associated with it remain unnamed. The negative other-presentation strategy (4) ranks second, indicating that criticism is frequently directed towards an implied or indirectly referenced other rather than an explicitly identified actor. The consensus strategy (4) and the victimisation strategy (2) also occur repeatedly. While the consensus strategy frames positions as collectively shared, victimisation foregrounds suffering and marginalisation. In both cases, attention is shifted away from individual responsibility, contributing to the diffusion of accountability. The positive self-presentation strategy (3) and the history-as-lesson strategy (3) appear to support the broader tendency to legitimise particular positions while avoiding direct engagement with specific actors. The other strategies, such as implication, disclaimer, and populism, contribute to the indirect

communication of criticism or evaluation. The least frequent strategies: the number game, the generalisation, the categorisation, the authority, and the reasonableness occur in more context-specific situations. Despite their lower frequency, they remain consistent with the broader pattern observed across the dataset, namely the communication of evaluation, criticism, or political positioning without explicit naming.

7. Conclusions

1. The findings show that the political discourse of Iraq does not use the ideological-rhetorical strategies randomly. Rather, it systematically privileges strategies that obscure agency, diffuse accountability, and avoid explicit attribution, indicating that rhetorical silence is constructed through patterned ideological choices rather than isolated linguistic devices.
2. The analysis reveals that Iraqi politicians do not express their political stance by being silent, but rather by using strategic indirectness as a way to criticise, evaluate, and position politically without explicitly naming the source. By doing so, silence is a way of balancing political communication with structural constraints of the Muhasasa system.
3. The current study examines the rhetoric of silence in Iraqi political discourse, adopting CDA as an analytical framework informed by van Dijk's (2006) ideological-rhetorical strategies. The analysis shows that silence is not a communicative absence but an ideological practice that is shaped by the structural constraints of the Iraqi system of power-sharing.
4. The discourse of the selected political figures is found to construct silence through a range of ideological-rhetorical strategies that collectively function to disperse agency, defer accountability, and protect factional interests without explicit attribution.
5. These findings indicate that silence in Iraqi politics functions not as an individual stylistic tendency but as a structurally conditioned and strategically deployed instrument of communication in a system of power-sharing. The conclusion is confirmed by the frequent recourse to vague terms, consensus and implication by politicians in various institutional roles and across time. While their political agendas vary, they always use indirect rhetorical strategies to control politically charged strategies, to evade direct responsibility. This recurring pattern shows that rhetorical silence is not simply a matter of personal choice, but a product of the communicative constraints of the consociational power-sharing system in Iraq. In this context, where explicit speech may generate political consequences, silence becomes central rather than peripheral to the production of political meaning.

6. Accordingly, any serious understanding of Iraqi political communication cannot be based on surface-level interpretations of what is explicitly stated but rather requires critical analytical approaches capable of uncovering what the discourse is systematically organised to obscure or leave unsaid.

7. Future studies may apply this analytical framework to other forms of Iraqi political communication, including parliamentary debates and official state speeches, or use it for comparative analysis of other consociational systems across the region.

References

- Alhusseini, H.A.M. & Zeidan, A.H. (2024). The concept of hijab in selected political speeches: A critical discourse analysis. *Wasit Journal for Human Sciences*, 20(4/1), 634-610. <https://doi.org/10.31185/wjfh.Vol20.Iss4.602>
- Aristotle. (1991). *On rhetoric*. Oxford University Press.
- APT. (2025, November 3). *Iraq can only disarm factions once US withdraws, Prime Minister Shia Al-Sudani warns* [Video]. YouTube. https://youtu.be/tA924NBn_cU?si=QcBUqAuS9tYrd4Fm
- Bao, D. (2023). The multiple meanings of silence in social psychology. *Environment & Social Psychology*, 8(3),. <https://doi.org/10.54517/esp.v8i3.2058>
- Beard, A. (2000). *The language of politics*. Routledge.
- Behnam, B., & Nosratzadegan, N. (2014). A discourse study of rhetorical silence in Persian & English literature. *International Journal of Academic Research in Progressive Education & Development*, 3(4), 119–128. <https://doi.org/10.6007/IJARPED/v3-i4/1199>
- Bremer, L.P. & McConnell, M. (2006). *My year in Iraq: The struggle to build a future of hope*. Simon & Schuster.
- Brummett, B. (1980). Towards a theory of silence as a political strategy. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 66, 289–303.
- CNN. (2006, September 24). *Interview with Jalal Talabani; Interview with Hamid Karzai* [TV interview transcript]. CNN Late Edition. <https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/le/date/2006-09-24/segment/01>
- CNN. (2007, August 26). *Interview with Ayad Allawi and Bill Richardson* [Transcript]. CNN Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer. <https://transcripts.cnn.com/show/le/date/2007-08-26/segment/01>
- CNN. (2015, May 26). *Iraqi army conduct in Ramadi 'surprised all of us,' deputy prime minister says* [Interview]. <https://edition.cnn.com/2015/05/25/world/iraq-amanpour-pleitgen-mutlaq>
- Creswell, J.W. (2017). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Sage Publications.

- Creswell, J.W. & Plano Clark, V.L. (2007). *Designing & conducting mixed methods research*. Sage Publications.
- De Guerrero, M.C. (1994). Form & functions of inner speech in adult second language learning. In J.P. Lantolf & G. Appel (Eds.), *Vygotskian approaches to second language research* (pp. 83–116). Ablex.
- Fairclough, N. (1992). *Discourse & social change*. Polity Press.
- Furkó, P. & Abuczki, Á. (2014). English discourse markers in mediatised political interviews. *Brno Studies in English*, 40(1), 45–64.
- Glenn, C. (2004). *Unspoken: A rhetoric of silence*. Southern Illinois University Press.
- Klieber, A. (2021). *Your silence speaks volumes: Silent implicature & its political significance* [Doctoral Dissertation]. The University of Sheffield.
- Kurdistan24. (2025, April 29). *Iraq's parliament approves new government amid political tensions*. <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/837700>
- Mejdoub, R. (2019). Rhetoric demystified. *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, 52, 69–76. <https://doi.org/10.36331/rehs.v52iA.620>
- Morse, J.M. (2016). *Mixed method design: Principles and procedures*. Routledge.
- Obeng, S.G. (1997). Language & politics: Indirectness in political discourse. *Discourse & Society*, 8(1), 49–83.
- Reuters. (2017, July 6). *Interview: Iraqi Kurdish leader says no turning back on independence bid*. <https://www.reuters.com/>
- Reuters. (2025, November 3). *Iraq can only disarm factions once U.S. withdraws, prime minister says* [Video interview]. Reuters Connect. <https://www.reutersconnect.com/item/iraq-can-only-disarm-factions-once-us-withdraws-prime-minister>
- Tripp, C. (2007). *A history of Iraq*. Cambridge University Press.
- Van Dijk, T.A. (1997). What is political discourse analysis? In J. Blommaert & C. Bulcaen (Eds.), *Political linguistics* (pp. 11–52). John Benjamins.
- Van Dijk, T.A. (1998). *Ideology: A multidisciplinary approach*. Sage Publications.
- Van Dijk, T.A. (2000). *Ideology and discourse: A multidisciplinary introduction*. Ariel.
- Van Dijk, T.A. (2001). Critical discourse analysis. In D. Tannen, D. Schiffrin, & H. E. Hamilton (Eds.), *Handbook of discourse analysis* (pp. 352–371). Blackwell.
- Van Dijk, T.A. (2002). Political discourse & political cognition. In P. A. Chilton & C. Schäffner (Eds.), *Politics as text and talk: Analytic approaches to political discourse* (pp. 203–237). John Benjamins.
- Van Dijk, T.A. (2006). Politics, ideology, & discourse. In *Encyclopedia of language & linguistics* (pp. 728–740). Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B0-08-044854-2/00722-7>
- Widdowson, H.G. (2004). *Text, context, pretext: Critical issues in discourse analysis*. Blackwell.
- Wilson, J. (1990). *Politically speaking: The pragmatic analysis of political language*. Basil Blackwell.
- Wodak, R. (2001). The discourse-historical approach. In R. Wodak & M. Meyer (Eds.), *Methods of critical discourse analysis* (pp. 63–95). Sage Publications.