



# A Pragma-Dialectical Approach to the Discourse Functionality of Presentational Devices in County Assembly Debates in Kenya

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## Abstract

Politicians employ emotive rhetoric in parliamentary debates as a strategic communicative tool in order to appeal to audiences for purposes of agenda-setting and ideological positioning. Discussants in the Nairobi County Assembly overwhelm their audience by using language that appeals to their emotions in order to make the audience empathise with them. Therefore, this paper aimed to examine the functionality of presentational devices in the County Assembly Debates using the pragma-dialectical approach. A descriptive case study design was used with qualitative approaches to allow a deeper inquiry into the phenomenon of debates using data from online archival Hansard records of Nairobi County Assembly. The study systematically sampled 48 debate transcripts of the print version of the Hansard from a total target population of 132 debates from February to November 2023. The study then purposively sampled 20 debates, which consisted of motions of the Nairobi County Assembly for analysis. Public documents from the Nairobi County assembly registry, consisting of schedules of the sectoral committees and the Standing Orders of the assembly, were collected from the website. Qualitative data were analysed with speech acts forming the unit of analysis. The data were subjected to analysis using the criteria recommended in the pragma-dialectical theory. The study established that discussants used strategic manoeuvres deliberately and more often at the beginning of the debate to persuade the antagonists to agree to their standpoints. The study was useful in identifying cultural and traditional applications of strategic manoeuvres peculiar to language use in African settings.

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## Introduction

Parliamentarians in Nairobi county assembly debates employ emotive rhetoric as a strategic communicative tool in order to appeal to audiences for purposes of agenda-setting and



ideological positioning during parliamentary debates. The pragma-dialectical theory was used to assess the qualities of reasonableness and the efficacy of the discussions in attempting to convince discussants to agree with the speaker's standpoints. Poppel (2021) observes that discussants in debates employ presentational devices, which are one art of strategic manoeuvres to convince the antagonists to agree with their standpoints by creating moves and countermoves in a reasonable and efficient way. The standpoint is the discussion point in the debate that is expressed by a discussant for which one seeks concurrence to enable one to conclude a debate by resolving a difference of opinion on the merits.

#### *Use of presentational devices in debates*

Presentation devices refer to the choices of style that a discussant makes while designing the moves that the discussant feels are critical to verbalise their contributions (Tseronis, 2009). Politicians use emotive language to convey a message, persuade constituents, or trigger a reaction from the antagonists (Kondratenko et al., 2020). Jorke (2014) notes that deliberative processes are social practices where reason is not the exclusive instrument of persuasion, and that emotions, attitudes and preferences of participants are equally crucial to the effectiveness of the deliberative processes, just like the arguments presented. In debates in Nairobi County Assembly, discussants employ presentational devices in order to justify the acceptability of their standpoints and resolve the differences of opinion on the merits. The presentational devices consist of person deixis, proverbs, biblical allusion and metaphors as tools which evoke emotions.

**Proverbs:** Every culture and language have its own proverbs, which belong to the popular culture and tradition of their language (Al-Khanaifisawy, 2023). Proverbs are generally defined as "a well-known phrases or sentence that give advice or says something that is generally true" (Oxford Learner's Dictionary, 2015). Mieder (2004) notes that proverbs are used as emotive language tools to obtain concurrence from an audience in support of arguments.

**Person deixis:** The relationship between language and context can best be exemplified by the use of deixis (Levinson, 1983). Deixis refers to a set of expressions whose interpretation depends on the context in which they appear (Al-Hindawi & Saffah, 2021). According to Helmbrecht (2002), speakers employ the use of pronouns in conversations to include the hearers in their requests in order to minimise social distance between a speaker and the hearer. Such a gesture minimises the risk of loss of face on the side of the hearer and gives the feeling of inclusion of parties in the expected activity (Helmbrecht, 2002).

**Metaphors:** Lakoff and Johnson (1980) observe that our ordinary conceptual system, in terms of which we both think and act, is metaphorical in nature. The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another. In conceptual metaphors, relations are drawn through a systematic set of correspondences between two domains of experience, that is, a source domain and a target domain. The correspondences in this paper have been drawn between the abstract concept of a debate and the corresponding experiences.

#### **Methodology**

The aim of this paper was to examine the discourse functionality of presentational devices in parliamentary debates using the pragma-dialectical theory. The study specifically determined the presentational devices employed by discussants in Nairobi County assembly debates for a period of ten months between February to November in the year 2023. A descriptive case study design



was used in the study. Qualitative approaches were used to allow a deeper enquiry into the phenomenon of debates in real-life contexts using data from online archival materials of the Nairobi County Assembly. The study targeted 48 debate transcripts of the print version of the *Hansard* that were collected from sittings of the Nairobi County Assembly. Additionally, public documents from the County Assembly registry, consisting of schedules of the sectoral committees of the assembly, were collected from the websites of the assembly. Purposive sampling was employed to obtain a list of complete debates from each of the thematic areas selected from the sectoral committees of the assembly. Simple random sampling was used to select 20 debates out of the 48 debate transcripts for analysis. Qualitative data were analysed with simple and complex speech acts forming the units of analysis using the critical discussion method as the analytical tool. This data consisted of permutations, deletions, additions and substitutions of debate transcripts that were relevant to the analysis. Internal validity was provided in the use of the pragma-dialectical theory through which the study conducted an objective evaluation of the data. Reliability of the findings was observed by anchoring the study in the pragma-dialectical approach, which serves as a heuristic tool for evaluating discourse in speeches and related debates.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Despite the fact that MCAs have other avenues of resolving debates, such as calling for a division to determine the direction of bills, findings of the current study established that such county assembly representatives rarely used division as a way of resolving differences of opinion. Instead, protagonists of the positive standpoint always sought to persuade the antagonist by presenting their arguments using rhetorical means in order to effectively express their positive standpoints.

In this section the study examines the use of presentational devices as one of the designs that a discussant uses to qualify the arguments that they employ either in defence of a standpoint or to refute the positive standpoint expressed by the protagonist. This section considers use of proverbs, metaphors, and deixis as presentational tools used in resolving a difference of opinion on the merits of the debated issues.

#### **1. Use of proverbs**

It was revealed that discussants use proverbs in debates at the pre-confrontation stage as a way of gaining concurrence with the audience. An analysis of proverbs in debate texts is provided in the examples below;

##### **Example 1A**

PI: *If you accomplish something good with hard work, the labour passes quickly, but the good endures.*

This proverb is used by the rapporteur at the confrontation stage of the debate on establishment of ad hoc committee on local revenue collection system to support the discussant's standpoint. The discussant uses the proverb to illustrate the virtues of hard work. The proverb contends that one should be committed to a good course if they are to be respected. This proverb resonates with African tradition which dignifies hard work and frowns upon laziness. The proverb also encourages the audience to follow in the footsteps of the protagonist by reciprocating their actions depending on the actions of the protagonist.



Cristancho and Vining (2004) note that the most influential mental representations of the natural world are moral beliefs about the correctness and incorrectness of our actions toward it. The social norm of reciprocity is the expectation that people will respond to each other in similar ways by responding to gifts and kindnesses from others with similar benevolence of their own, and responding to harmful, hurtful acts from others with either indifference or some form of retaliation (Kim *et al*, 2022). The protagonist, in lobbying for the members of the county assembly to support the motion on establishing the investigative committee alludes to the fact that the actions of the discussants should be in support of the standpoint.

#### Example 1B

PI: *If you do something shameful in pursuit of pleasure, the pleasure passes quickly, but the shame endures.*

This proverb is used to further illustrate the vanity of pursuing short term gains at the expense of making long term but steady progress. In the debate on establishment of ad hoc committee on revenue collection system, the discussant persuades the audience to delay rolling out finances to the regions but embark on reforming the revenue collection system through the investigative mechanisms of a committee of the assembly. The protagonist wins the attention of the audience by showing the importance of delaying immediate gratification for long term gain which will be achieved after revamping the revenue collection system. African traditions heap praise on one being patient and not being too fast or in a hurry to do things because of the belief that things which are hurried do not last. African communities consider patience a virtue among members of the community.

#### Example 1C

PI: *If you cannot make money, make a name; that name one day will make you good money.*

This proverb has been employed by the discussant, who is the mover of the motion supporting the establishment of an ad hoc committee to investigate the local revenue collection system of the Nairobi County government. The proverb is used with a view to persuade the audience to agree with the positive standpoint by employing emotive language that catches the attention of the audience. The use of proverbs establishes rapport and solidarity between the protagonist of the standpoint and members of the county assembly.

#### Example 1D

PI: Hon. Speaker, another philosopher said, *it does not matter how slow you go, as long as you do not stop*

The discussant uses the proverb while presenting the standpoint to support the establishment of programmes and policies for child-headed households. The antagonist in the debate expresses concern that such programmes and policies take long to commence, yet there is a proliferation of street families. The protagonist uses the proverb to emphasise the importance of perseverance and continuous effort in achieving goals, highlighting that even small, incremental progress is valuable as long as one maintains forward momentum and doesn't give up. The proverb is meant to persuade the hearers to agree to supporting the



standpoint on establishing policies and programs because they will ultimately be helpful to the society.

From the examples cited above it is revealed that proverbs are used by discussants to seek the attention of members of the county assembly on the debates being discussed. The proverbs register in the cognition of the discussants because they relate to experiences that they have had in their lives. It is therefore expected that discussants would use such proverbs to persuade the hearers to agree with their standpoints. This would ultimately resolve the difference of opinion on the merits. Proverbs are also used as a mark of societal values, beliefs and wisdom across different communities. The use of the proverb in the debate context shows the shared values, beliefs and wisdom across communities. The discussant PI presents evidence of prior commitments, especially PI's religious background and beliefs as a basis of PI's commitment. These commitments logically lead to a desirable conclusion.

#### Example 1E

**PI:** I came across a quote which says, *A hungry stomach, an empty wallet, and a broken heart can teach you great lessons of life.*

The statement "A hungry stomach, an empty wallet and a broken heart can teach you great lessons of life" utilises an argumentation scheme based on generalisation from experience. This scheme connects the experiences of hardship (hunger, poverty, heartbreak) to the conclusion that these experiences are valuable teachers. It is essentially saying that because these specific difficult situations often lead to learning, they can be generally considered as valuable sources of wisdom.

This quote relates to the discussant's argumentation during the motion on policy and programmes on child-headed households, in which the discussant empathises with the plight of children living in the streets and the challenges that they face. Some of these challenges are the lack of shelter, inadequate food and lack of other basic amenities that families would generally enjoy. The discussant uses the proverb to encourage the listening members of the county assembly to support the development of policies and programmes for child-headed households.

#### Example 1F

**PI:** Hon. Speaker, it is said, *it is not the size of the dog in the fight, it is the size of the fight in the dog.*

The phrase draws a comparison between a physical contest of a fight and a more abstract contest of life's challenges. It highlights the fact that success is not only determined by the inherent physical characteristics of an object but by the strength of one's inner qualities. The discussant PI at the beginning of the motion on establishment of the ad hoc committee to investigate the county revenue collection system shows his readiness to confront adversity.



## **2. Use of person deixis**

The study reveals that the use of person deixis, specifically the strategic use of first-person personal pronouns in county assembly debates, is useful in the construction of institutional identities.

### **Example 2A**

*DKM: This Committee is supposed to do justice not only for the Assembly but also for the residents of Nairobi County. We will summon the people that need to be summoned without fear or favour*

In the example 2A, the discussant DKM moves to support the standpoint for the establishment of the ad hoc committee to investigate the county revenue collection system. The discussant uses the first-person plural pronoun 'We' as a strategy to persuade the hearers to support one's argument on establishing the ad hoc committee.

By using the first-person plural pronoun, the discussant seeks to persuade fellow discussants on both sides of the political divide in the county assembly to support the discussant's argument. The 'we' pronoun serves an inclusive purpose in the utterance since discussants in debates in the county assembly can be identified as a social group with a defined social identity. In African settings, belonging to a social group, whether it is a tribe, clan or village is important for purposes of social relations. Many discussants belong to closely knit families which are considered important for both political and social survival. The membership to the group thus offers some safety and protection which forms part of the cultural and social development of the individual. The social closeness of members to a group makes it easier to request for favours from the hearer.

### **Example 2B**

*PI: Let us not reason with our emotions on this; let us reason with the interests of Nairobians.*

The discussant refers to the people who the ad hoc committee that was established to investigate the local revenue collection system will invite. The discussant promises that they will do a fair job. The discussant expresses solidarity with the audience by the use of inclusive second-person plural pronoun word 'us' to gain acceptability of one's standpoint, and thus resolve the difference of opinion between the discussant and the audience.

### **Example 2C**

*PI: Allow me to stop there and ask my colleagues that it is not us; Our mothers in hospitals need money to buy medicines*

The debate above is on the Finance Bill in which the discussant presents a positive standpoint in support of passing the Finance Bill. However, the antagonists express doubt in the budget appropriations for the health sector which the discussants observe has not been adequately funded. In the example 2C given above, the discussant presenting the positive standpoint uses second-person plural personal pronoun to register solidarity with the audience as a way of gaining acceptability of the positive standpoint, and thus resolving the difference of opinion on the merits. The protagonist refers to 'us' also to identify with



all the discussants in the assembly with whom the protagonist considers part of one's social group and whom the speaker wishes to identify with.

### **3. Biblical Allusion**

Example 3A

PI: Just like Jesus Christ came from heaven to save the world, someone somewhere has to stand in the gap of men who cannot speak, and we are the ones.

The discussant who presents the positive standpoint that there is a need to establish membership of the ad hoc committee, compares his role of defending the membership of the ad hoc committee to that of Jesus Christ. The use of the abstract concept of advocacy by the discussant is compared to physically standing in a space, thus emphasising the idea of filling a critical space or intervening on behalf of others. The discussant compares himself to Jesus Christ who sacrificed His life for the sake of saving the whole world from sin. The discussant uses the biblical allusion to create emotions among audience to support the course the discussant has taken. Supporting the motion means supporting a good course. Supporting the motion for the establishment of an ad hoc committee to investigate the revenue collection system also implies saving the whole county from losses of revenue. This will impact losses of revenue, which could negatively affect the provision of critical services to the public. The discussant alludes to the fact that once the investigations are over, the revenue system will support functions of the county by generating more revenue for the county and sealing loopholes that cause loss of revenue. The discussant hopes that the use of the rhetorical device will make the standpoint acceptable and resolve the difference of opinion on the merits.

Example 3B

In the excerpt below, PI is referring to the debate on establishing an ad hoc committee to investigate the revenue collection.

*PI: In the mountain of Patmos, a disciple was told to recant Jesus Christ, but he said, 'What do you want to do to me? You want to go and throw me there?'*

The reference to the mountain of Patmos and a disciple being told to recant Jesus Christ alludes to the biblical story of the apostle John on the island of Patmos. The rhetorical device is used here to draw parallels between the disciple's courage and the speaker's own stance. The listeners in the assembly are thus being challenged to pass resolutions that will benefit the public. The presentational device is used to emphasise the importance of always doing what is right even in tough circumstances. It further upholds the virtue of bravery and being reliable in matters of public interest.

### **4. Metaphor**

Metaphors were analysed conceptually by a systematic mapping of the conceptual experiences of the source domain to the target domain. This was done to appeal to the shared societal beliefs and values as shown in the examples below.



Example 4A

**Debate is a PROCESS**

*MM: Hon Speaker, as we speak, we have already passed that stage.*

The text by the discussant refers to the motion on establishing the membership of ad hoc committee to investigate the revenue collection system. The discussant is opposed to amending the membership of the ad hoc committee and refers to that stage of constituting the ad hoc committee as having passed. In referring to it as a stage, the discussant seeks to persuade the audience of the stages in debating according to the house rules, and that one of the stages has been passed and there is no need of revisiting it. Debates are conceptually referred to as products of a process which passes through a number of stages. The discussant justifies the fact that reverting to earlier stages of the process is counterproductive to concluding the debate. The argument supports the standpoint ad enables the positive standpoint to stand.

Example 4B

**Debate is a JOURNEY**

When we think of debate being a journey, we construe of a debate as having destinations and paths (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Kovecses, 2002). In analysing the metaphor of debate as a JOURNEY, the target domain (Debate) and source domain (JOURNEY) are systematically mapped to reflect the correspondences of the two domains. The discussants engaged in a debate are compared to travellers in a journey, since they toil on a daily basis generating bills and motions for debate in the assembly. The assembly becomes the means through which discussants arrive at a common goal of resolving a difference of opinion on the merits as compared to a journey which has a final destination. Just like a journey has obstacles and impediments along the way, debates can equally generate obstacles in terms of moves and counter moves of the discussants before the resolution of a difference of opinion on merits. Finally, in a journey, a decision has to be made about which way to go. This compares with debates where decisions have to be made after the motion has been discussed. These decisions generate bills, and finally an act of the assembly which becomes law. Table 2 presents instances of the Debate is a JOURNEY metaphor.

*Table 1: Conceptual mappings of the metaphors of Debate is a JOURNEY*

No.	Metaphor
4B1	PI: Hon. Speaker, it has been a <i>journey</i> to understand where the servers of our revenue systems are.
4B2	DKM: I cannot <i>move</i> an amendment. I expect it to come from members and dispense it before the plenary so that we can put a question.
4B3	KO: Let us <i>narrow</i> our debate on this special ad hoc committee.
4B4	PI: It has been a <i>journey</i> to understand where the servers of our revenue system are.
4B5	PI: We have been <i>slow</i> , but we have not stopped because the issue of revenue in this county is wanting.



PI: Hon. Speaker, it has been a journey to understand where the servers of our revenue system are.

The discussant introduces the motion on establishing the ad hoc committee to investigate the revenue collection system. The discussant notes that there have been many meetings held to discuss the matter of the revenue of the county. There have also been many queries from other discussants on this revenue collection system. The discussant observes that, 'this motion has brought a lot of interest across the country...'.

Example 4C

### **Debate is WAR**

This is an example of a structural metaphor where the discussions taking place in debating chambers between the protagonist and antagonist are interpreted in terms of war. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) observe that partial characteristics from the domain of war to that of the debate are transferred to the debate target domain by identifying the characteristics that can be mapped on the debate phenomenon. Debaters can be compared to adversaries with each of the discussants trying to win the debate on merits or win their opponent's control. The antagonist tries to resist by presenting counter moves, while the protagonist persists by presenting moves that can skew the debate on one's side. Where weapons such as guns, bombs and machetes would be used by adversaries in war, debaters use presentational devices to disarm their antagonists and justify the acceptability of their standpoints or arguments. Finally, one discussant wins the battle. The study identified five metaphors accounting for Debate is WAR as listed in Table 2;

*Table 2: Conceptual mappings of the metaphors of Debate is WAR*

No.	Metaphor
4C1	PI: I am <i>pursuing</i> this motion not for monetary gain as people want to put it.
4C2	MO: We are the <i>protectors</i> of this constitution, the Standing Orders and the Statutes of the Law
4C3	We are unable to fulfil the desires of few individuals to <i>destroy</i> the purpose of this motion
4C4	I have not slept since yesterday. I was <i>wrestling</i> between what is right and what is wrong....
4C5	PI: As the mover of the motion, I will not care, but I will <i>guard</i> the independence of the specific offices.

In the metaphors presented in Table 2, the concept of WAR is related to 'pursuing' in Example 4C1, protectors in Example 4C2, destroy in Example 4C3, wrestling in Example 4C4, and guard in Example 4C5. All the lexical choices in the examples in Table 2 above are an indication of how discussants have to struggle or put in effort to justify the acceptability of their standpoints and arguments.



Example 4D

**Debate is a BUILDING**

*PI: This is a house of debate. Let us debate constructively with a lot of humility and respect.*

The speaker compares the assembly to a physical building or structure. The metaphor therefore suggests that the assembly is a place where ideas are discussed, built upon and shaped much like happens with a physical house which serves a certain function. This metaphor helps convey the idea that the assembly is a dedicated space for debate and discussion where decisions are made. The assembly as a house of discussion has its own rules, traditions and norms.

The speaker uses inclusive language to create a sense of unity and shared responsibility among discussants, encouraging collective participation in order to obtain common good. The essence of practicing humility and respect is in order to maintain a positive and considerate tone during debates. The debating chamber is compared to a house where motions are building blocks through which democracy is developed.

The metaphor of a building can be a powerful tool for understanding and structuring a debate. In this analogy, the roof represents the central idea or argument, the pillars are the supporting reasons and evidence, and the foundation is the solid base of data, examples, and expert opinions that uphold the entire structure.

*Table 3: Conceptual mappings of the metaphors of Debate is a BUILDING*

No.	Metaphor
4D1	PI: Secondly, Hon Speaker the house is a <i>full house</i> . It is great to see the Third assembly to capacity. That shows our debate is getting to another level.
4D2	SM: Allow me to go straight to the point and say this, that if the county government can work and support the <i>structures</i> on the ground, what do I mean?
4D3	NN: On the converse where we do not have the <i>structures</i> and regulations in place to ensure that this is being done, then we see that we are being robbed ....

In the examples provided in Table 3, different concepts are used to refer to Debate is a building. They include concepts such as ‘house’ in Example 4D1, ‘structures’ in Examples 4D2 and 4D3.

Example 4E

**Debate is a GAME**

Debate, while seemingly a contest of ideas, can be effectively understood and analysed through the lens of game theory. It is a structured activity with defined rules governing turn taking, time allocations, and topic setting. The rules shape the field of play and further influence the strategies employed by discussants. Discussants like players in a game arrive at decisions based on the strengths of their arguments and those of their antagonist. They decide the arguments to present and the strategies they employ to present such strategies, with a view to resolving a difference of opinion on the merits. The final outcome of a debate



just like in a play is determined by the evaluation of the arguments presented. Discussants employ strategies that maximise their chances of success based on the perceived preferences or criteria of the evaluator. Table 4 below presents the Debate is a GAME metaphor:

*Table 4: Conceptual mappings of the metaphors of Debate is a GAME*

No.	Metaphor
4E1	AG: We want them to give this house an opportunity to discuss that report as it comes so that it does not come with <i>hidden agendas</i> .
4E2	SO: Let it be made clear today that once the Whips have been given the authority to bring the list, just like the coaches who prepare the <i>list of the players</i> who are going to <i>play</i> , we must respect that.
4E3	SO: I am certain that the people who have been <i>selected</i> to this committee are men and women of integrity.

The metaphors in the Table 4 have been used to compare different concepts related to 'Debate is GAME'. They are 'hidden agendas' in Example 4E1, 'just like the coaches who prepare a list of players' in Example 4E2, and 'selected' in Example 4E3.

### **Conclusion**

The findings reveal that discussants strategically manoeuvre by employing deictic pronouns to appeal to the audience in debates in Nairobi County assembly. The study further established that discussants employed proverbs, biblical allusion and metaphors in debates in the Nairobi County assembly, especially at the confrontation stage of the debate. This is an indication that discussants design their entry point of debates in the best possible way that minimises anticipated doubt from the antagonists. The use of strategic manoeuvring in debates supports standpoints through argumentation in debates in Nairobi County assembly. The strategic manoeuvres function as tools to evoke emotions in members of the county assembly, support reasoning in debates, and persuade discussants to agree to the standpoints of the protagonist, thus resolve a difference of opinion on the merits. Strategic manoeuvring also functions as a tool to express solidarity and social inclusion among discussants, illustrate social identity and shared values, value systems and beliefs that a social group endears the listeners to, in order to hold the social fabric. These values and value systems consist of shared customs and traditions of the people. These shared customs consist of respect for each other, religiosity, and solidarity values which are common shared knowledge of members of the group.

The study established that discussants employed presentational devices deliberately and more often at the beginning of the debate to persuade the antagonists to agree to their standpoints. The study was useful in identifying cultural and traditional application of presentational devices peculiar to language use in African settings. Furthermore, new



argumentative practices from the county assembly level, a population not earlier studied, provided new insights into deliberative strategies in the political genre.

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