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"It's not the lie that bothers me, it's the insult to my intelligence that I find offensive": An investigation into the use of lies and insults in political discourse during the 2024 UK General Election on the basis of the BBC 7-party debate

Abstract: In the mid 2010s political discourse was subject to a downward spiral as lies and insults have become prevalent firstly as a consequence of the Brexit Referendum in the UK and then the election of Donald Trump as President of the USA. This spiral in the UK theoretically came to an end with the demise of Boris Johnson as Prime Minister, and the return to 'grown up' politics promised by Rishi Sunak and Jeremy Hunt among others. Thus, the 2024 UK General Election seemed to offer the perfect opportunity to assess the extent to which the dishonesty and insult that characterised the populist Johnson's premiership had fallen out of fashion.

The paper analyses the BBC's seven-party debate, which took place on June 7th, 2024, using the methodology of political discourse analysis to investigate the extent to which representatives of the seven main parties competing in the election campaign were prepared to resort to lies and insult as part of their rhetorical arsenal. The results indicate that the Conservatives and Remain were particularly prone to the deployment of both lies and insults, but, somewhat surprisingly, the Scottish National Party were equally liable to slip in the odd embellishment of the truth.

Keywords: Political Discourse Analysis, lies, insult, 2024 UK General Election

1. Introduction

On 16 June, 2016, just seven days before the Brexit Referendum, MP Joe Cox was savagely murdered outside a library in Birstall, West Yorkshire, while campaigning to remain in the EU. Her murderer was a white-supremacist neo-

Nazi, Thomas Mair, who was allegedly emboldened by the level of hatred that had entered into mainstream political discourse during the referendum campaign. This campaign was blighted by acrimonious, spiteful and discriminatory claims made primarily by those campaigning for Brexit (Carr, et al., 2020).

On 6 January 2021 a mob of far-right activists stormed the Capitol building in Washington DC in order to disrupt the Congressional hearing which was in the process of confirming the results of the electoral college from the previous year's general election, and thus formalising the presidency of Joe Biden. At midday on that same day, Trump had addressed a crowd at the Ellipse park in central DC in which he said "[…] if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore." It was claimed during the subsequent Impeachment proceedings that Trump's language had been deliberately toned to incite the crowd to violent action, and that he had a history of using inflammatory language when making public pronouncements.

In an article of 24 January, 2021 the Washington Post Fact Checker published the final total of President Trump's alleged mistruths, uttered while in office. The total was a staggering 30,573 false or misleading claims made over the course of his four-year term of office (Washington Post, 24/01/2021). In his book, The Art of the Deal, Trump himself refers to this as 'truthful hyperbole', in which he claims he is prone to a justified exaggeration of facts for impact purposes. Regardless of the intention, we have entered an age of post-truth in political discourse in which lying has become a normalised tool of political discourse.

The above examples all help to strengthen the case for the continued detailed analysis of political discourse. With this in mind, the following paper has been written with the intention of analysing a single event from the 2024 UK General Election - The 7-party BBC Election Debate of June 7, 2024. The debate was one of the first significant televised campaign events held, featuring representatives of the main parties, both national and regional, and thus provides a fascinating opportunity to analyse the speech of representatives of all the main political parties in Britain.[1] It is intended to analyse two key aspect of the performance of each participant: the extent to which they lie and; the extent to which they attempt to be offensive towards other participants.

These aspects have been chosen specifically because they are a normalised part of the rhetoric - whether spoken or written, of President Trump and it is important to ascertain the extent to which they have become embedded in British political discourse. When an outlier such as Boris Johnson lied during the Party-gate Scandal, this was considered a reigning offence and he was thought to be an outlier. A general election campaign provides the perfect foundation for more detailed analysis of the

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[1] No representatives of parties from Northern Ireland were invited to participate. Therefore, besides references to the UK General Election, I will stick to using Britain and British, which also reads a little easier.

broad section of political parties to determine the extent to which lying and insult have become standard weapons in the arsenal of the political rhetor.

The analysis is based on the core elements of Critical Discourse Analysis, more specifically Political Discourse Analysis, and Frame Analysis, especially its application in terms of News Discourse Analysis. The following paper has been divided into a brief overview of the relevant literature in order to provide a solid context for the research. This section also includes a presentation of the basic concepts of lying and insult in order to ensure consistency in analysis during the data collection stage. The following section provides a detailed description of the methods and procedures involved in the research. The third section details the results while the final section engages in a discussion of the significance of the results, along with recommendations for future research.

Ultimately, this work is intended to demonstrate the extent to which lying and insult have become common practice for UK politicians, and also the extent to which it may be possible to discern than some parties are more inclined to utilise such tools than others.

2. Methodology and research questions

The analysis leans heavily on the methodology of Critical Discourse Analysis, especially the brach pertaining to Political Discourse Analysis, as propounded by Fairclough and Fairclough (2012), with its focus on argumentation and the legitimacy of utterances. However, the main aim of the article is not to analyse the strengths and validity of arguments put forward, rather the usage of lies and insults, and in order to allow a relatively objective investigation,[2] it is necessary to establish a clear definition of lie and insult that can be applied systematically from hereon in.

With lying, the simplest starting point is a classic dictionary definition, with the OED defining a lie as 'a false statement made with intent to deceive' (https://www. oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=lie retrieved on 18 October, 2024). This simple definition does, however, contain two specific issues that must be addressed, the first of which being the question of intent. It is, of course, almost impossible to establish the intent of a speaker, as only they will truly understand the reasons why they say something, and also the extent to which they are pre-informed. It is, of course, entirely within the realms of plausibility that someone, especially a

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[2] The issue of subjectivity in Discourse Analysis is well documented (see, for example, Glynos, et al, 2009; Gee, 2011; Van Dijk, 2015). However, it is also essential to accept the fact that a certain level of subjectivity is inevitable in any form of discourse analysis as the researcher is bound to apply their own knowledge of the world and preconceptions when conducting their investigation. Thus, I shall be adopting the position taken by Rey (2018) that subjectivity need not be an obstacle to the effective analysis of human processes, especially when it is recognised as such and steps are taken to mitigate effectively against this.

politician, who has been briefed in advance of an appearance, may not be aware that what they are saying is not accurate. This, after all, was the first line of defence adopted by Boris Johnson when defending his misleading of Parliament during the Party-gate scandal: he informed Parliament that his officials had advised him that no parties had taken place, and it was only when photographic evidence emerged to the contrary that he was forced into a contrite apology. The second issue is that this definition lacks nuance, and fails to take into account such practices as distortion, obfuscation or the deliberate misapplication of a context (Galasiński, 2018). We shall assume herewithin that such tools as misleading or distortion of the truth, whether deliberate or otherwise, are sufficient to 'disrupt the pursuit of the goal of inquiry' (Stokke, 2016: 83). Therefore, in the context of this study, a lie shall be assumed to be a statement containing information that is demonstrably either false, misleading, or used in a manner contrary to its original context.

Further, it is also necessary to differentiate between statements pertaining to past or present states of affairs and achievements, and future intentions. In this case it is possible to measure the accuracy of a statement pertaining to the present through confrontation with a verifiable source. When making claims about the future, however wild the claim may be, the veracity of the statement remains a matter of conjecture and, as a consequence, cannot be verified. So in the present work I will be treating a lie as a statements pertaining to the past or present that can be independently verified and, regardless of the potential intention of the speaker, has the potential to prevent a correct understanding of the actual state of affairs of a given topic.

One more area that will be considered as a lie is when the speaker, deliberately or otherwise, fails to provide at least a partial answer to the debate question posed, either from the audience member or the moderator. This tangentiality is a deliberate tactic in political discourse and is intended either to avoid answering a question directly for fear that the truthful answer is unpalatable, or to slip in a pre-prepared message that is part of the campaign narrative and, while having nothing in common with the thread of the question, will include a sound bite or other piece of information that is a part of the election narrative. In this case, as the decision to avoid directly answering a question is hardly accidental in nature, such obfuscation will be categorised as a lie.

Moving on to the second item of analysis, the insult, this shall be treated as suggested by Leong (2022) as a structure 'intended to generate backward-looking negative inferences from the decoder' (Leong, 2022: 1). It is important to note here that, especially in an age of extreme sensitivity, 'insults may be generated by any linguistic expression whatsoever' (Milić, 2018: 539). Therefore, it is important in this case to focus not so much on personal slights, which have the theoretical potential to insult any decoder, but rather on something that can be recognised objectively as an utterance intended to cause offence, while often being disguised as a part of normal speech (see Watt, et al., 2013 for a discussion of the use of insults in neutrally-worded utterances). In this case, I would like to return to the aforementioned position taken

by Milić, who suggests that 'a linguistic act counts as an insult only if it is recognised as demeaning when addressed at A [the target] by the standard of the relevant social group." (Milić, 2018: 548) In this case, it is possible to ascribe certain labels to a potential based upon accepted social norms, rather than rely purely on the intention of the speaker or the understanding of the decoder. It is also important to differentiate between insults and slanders, wherein the latter is an untruth intended to undermine or harm a reputation rather than generate the negative inference of the former. In this study slanders will be treated within the category of lies given their use to occlude or prevent the decoder from understanding the actual state of affairs. Another form of insult that will be included is an interruption, especially when it is intended to prevent the current speaker from delivering their intended message effectively. This is especially important in the debate under investigation herewithin as the BBC moderator makes it clear from the beginning that all participants should observe the norms of turn taking, and respect the other participants during respective rounds of turn taking. Even if the interjections were delivered more as humorous asides rather than determined efforts to take control of the discussion or derail the narrative of the speaker whose turn it was, the interruption will be included.

The debate was uploaded to YouTube on June 8, 2024, the day after the debate took place. It was selected for analysis because, unlike other televised events throughout the campaign, all major parties were represented by significant figures (see Table 1 for details). The debates was hosted and moderated by presenter and journalist Mishal Husain who, as well as ensuring that candidates were attentive to the norms of turn taking and being punctual with the length of their responses, was also being fed information by a backroom team of fact checkers and was tasked with calling out flagrant examples of dishonesty.

Table 1. Details of the debate participants

Party	Representative	Sex	Position	MP at time of debate
Conservative	Penny Mordaunt	F	Leader of the House of Commons	yes
Labour	Angela Rayner	F	Deputy Leader of the Labour Party	yes
Liberal Democrat	Daisy Cooper	F	Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrats	yes
Scottish National Party	Stephen Flynn	M	Leader of the SNP in the House of Commons	yes
Reform UK	Nigel Farage	M	Party Leader	no
Plaid Cymru	Rhun ap Iorwerth	M	Party Leader	no
Greens	Carla Denyer	F	Party Co-Leader	No

The debate was transcribed,[3] verified for accuracy by rechecking and then subject to multiple readings in order to identify all potential insults and lies. On each

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[3] The full transcript of the debate can be made available from the author upon reasonable request.

reading the results were compared and any discrepancies subject to verification. Any debatable utterances were subject to multiple analyses in order to determine their suitability for inclusion.

The research project has been conducted in order to address three main questions:

1. To what extent have lies and insults become normalised in British political discourse?
2. Is there a tendency for any particular parties to lie more than others?
3. Is there a tendency for any particular parties to resort more frequently to the use of insults?

3. Results and Discussion

The initial results have been tabulated for ease of analysis (see Table 2).

Table 2. Total number or utterances recorded per party

Party	Lies	Oblique response	Insults	No of times target of insult	Interruptions made	No of times interrupted
Conservative	15	5	13	26	15	5
Labour	3	3	5	15	3	18
Liberal Democrat	1	2	3	1	2	1
Scottish National Party	9	3	11	1	6	4
Reform UK	6	2	12	11	7	7
Plaid Cymru	3	3	9	2	5	2
Greens	1	4	5	2	2	3
TOTAL	38	22	58	58	40	40

The levels of dishonesty varied from candidate to candidate, with Mordaunt being the most prolific liar, making false or misleading claims on 15 occasions and not answering the question directly on a further 5 occasions. The next most dishonest was Flynn, who lied on 9 occasions and avoided a direct answer to the question on three occasions. The final place on the podium was reserved for Farage, who lied 6 times and twice provided an answer that had nothing to do with the question posed. The remaining four candidates lied sporadically, with Denyer being particularly guilty of oblique responses, providing four in total.

When it comes to levelling insults at other candidates, again, Mordaunt was the most abrasive participant, using 13 during the course of the debate. Second was Farage with 12 insults and third was Flynn with 11. Iorwerth was also liberal with his use of insults, clocking up 9 during the course of the debate. In terms of the target, again, Mordaunt was the most insulted, either directly or as the

representative of the Conservatives with 26 insults being levelled against her during the debate, The second popular target was Rayner and the Labour Party, being insulted 15 times and Farage and Reform UK were third with 11. The remaining participants managed to avoid the majority of flack, being insulted only once or twice throughout the debate.

The least courteous debater was Mordaunt, who interrupted other speakers on 15 occasions, with Farage coming second in this metric on 7 interruptions, while Flynn attempted six times to speak out of turn. On one occasion Flynn attempted to justify his interjection as a necessary right of reply, and this utterance has duly been removed from consideration. Interestingly, Rayner was the most targeted speaker, being interrupted a total of 18 times, while Farage was interrupted 7 times and Mordaunt 5 times.

When it comes to an analysis of the lies told by the participants, the majority were pre-prepared statistics which had clearly been prepared to wound a specific party. In the case of Penny Mordaunt, she used an attack line against Labour that their manifesto pledges would cause the average household tax bill to rise by £2,000 per year. This line had first been wheeled out two days previously by Rishi Sunak (the Prime Minister) in a head-to-head debate with Leader of the Opposition Kier Starmer. The claim, amplified by Mordaunt on five separate occasions, was purportedly calculated by Treasury Officials. This was not the case and one day before the 7-way debate the Treasury had issued a statement refuting Conservative claims. Furthermore, the Institute for Fiscal Studies had also issued a statement indicating that the methodology of the Conservative party was flawed and that the real cost of the Labour manifesto was likely to be significantly lower. Despite this background, Mordaunt wheeled out the claim, most notably in a question about how each of the parties proposed to bring about substantive change for the common people. After making a number of fallacious claims about recent Conservative economic achievements (higher growth than the USA and lower inflation rates than the Euro Zone),[4] Mordaunt went on the attack and stated boldly that "We have got to cut taxes and we have got to alleviate burdens on business. Angela Rayner and the Labour Party, Kier Starmer confirmed this earlier this week, they are going to put up your taxes by £2,000. Yes, £2,000 per working household." Despite Rayner attempting to interject, shouting twice in the background that Mordaunt was lying, Mordaunt states the figure twice more before the moderator intervenes to point out the questionable basis of the statistics. What is fascinating about this particular incident is that after Husein's interjection, Mordaunt states brazenly that "I am standing by that figure. It's the Treasury's costings and Labour's own numbers.'

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[4] US GDP grew by an average of 3.5% between August 2021 and May 2024, while the UK economy grew by just 2.1% over the same period according to data provided by the International Monetary Fund and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development. In terms of inflation, both the Eurozone and the UK had inflation figures of 2.4% for the month of May 2024, failing to support the notion of outperformance.

This tactic is reminiscent of the claim made by Vote Leave during the Brexit Referendum that leaving the Eu would allow the UK Government to spend £350m per week on the NHS as a Brexit dividend. This figure was widely refuted but, once the claim was made, the figure stuck and regardless of its veracity, the public were inclined to believe it. The Conservative claim was similarly disingenuous, but it was clear that the tactic, having worked well previously, was worth repeating.

It was not only Mordaunt, however, who was to make such a baseless claim and present it as gospel truth. Flynn made a statement about the fact that Labour were preparing £18bn in public spending cuts which they were failing to make public for fear of alienating voters. This claim was made on four occasions (as well as an even more exaggerated claim about £40bn of cuts), but no attempt was made to substantiate this claim. Investigation into the potential source of this claim by BBC Verify indicated that while Labour may be obliged to cut some public services to allow increased spending in other areas (most notably the NHS, Social Care and Defence), there was no way of determining a concrete figure, which is what Flynn attempted to do when discussing a number of issues. Flynn, during a question on whether it was better to drive economic growth or invest in a green economy, made a further claim that Labour's plans to close down the Oil and Gas sectors would cost Scotland 100,000 jobs in the short term. This was an interesting claim as an investigation conducted by Robert Gordon University in 2023 stated that over the course of the decade from 2025-2035, the total UK workforce in this sector would suffer from a 17% decline in the worst-case scenario as resources began to dwindle and alternate sources of energy came online (Energy Transition Institute, 2023). The motivation for Flynn to make such attacks was the worrying polling data that suggested his party, SNP, losing a significant number of seats to Labour in the election, potentially relegating them to the second party in Scotland. Thus, by discrediting his rival, Flynn was hopeful to ward off this threat.

Farage was also prone to the amplification of spurious information, especially on his main topic of interest, immigration. During a question on this topic he made the claim that 50% of all visa applications to the UK were the dependants of people applying for work or student visas. Data from the UK Home Office indicated that in 2023 there were a total of 1.3 million visas granted for collective work, study and family dependants, of which 81,000 were the latter. This gives a total of 7% of all visas granted for residency purposes, a figure far lower than Farage's claim.

During his pitch on immigration, Farage made a claim that rents have risen by between 20 and 30% over the previous four years, and that such rises are a direct result of immigration, a statement that Carla Denyer immediately indicated was dishonest. This utterance, however, demonstrates the difficulty of investigating lies in political speech. While there were significant inflationary pressures between 2021 and the end of 2023, there is also another distinct factor which should be taken into consideration. During the same three-year period the number of new houses completed in the UK was just under 500,000. At the same time, net migration figures

stood at almost 3,000,000 this means there were six migrants entering the UK for every new home built, and a major driver of inflation is low supply. In this instance, while the migration figures may not be directly causal as Government policy was to cap the number of new houses to ensure a buoyant property market, it is difficult not to see that the increase demand caused by a large increase in the population would not have exacerbated the inflation caused by already low supply. Thus, in this case, the statement by Farage, despite being labelled as a lie by Denyer, is not included in our figures here as it cannot be proven to be detached from the truth.

One of the most oblique answers was actually given by Rayner, who, when asked to talk about how to control migration, decided to discuss the Conservative's initiative to ship illegal migrants to Rwanda. While the scheme had attracted significant press coverage since it was first mooted in 2022 by then Prime Minister, Boris Johnson. It had not actually led to a single successful deportation flight but was still being touted by Sunak as a flagship policy to stop illegal boats crossing the English Channel. This problem, however, was not the focus of the question as the questioner was asking about how to bring down levels of legal migration, which were thought to be placing an intolerable strain on public services. The likely reason for Rayner's obfuscation here was that the Labour Party did not have a concrete plan to deal with migration as they felt it was essential for the British economy not to cap the number of migrants to allow the government to maintain low labour costs in sectors such as social care for the elderly.

The most offensive speaker was Mordaunt, whose primary target was Rayner and Labour, who she referred to on a number of occasions either as 'she' or 'that lot'. The term 'she' may not be superficially offensive, but can be implied as an offence when the object is in the room as it indicates that the person is present, but not a part of the conversation and is thus a form of belittlement. 'That lot' is also disparaging, and disrespectful in terms of referring to a recognised and respected organisation - such as the Labour Party. Flynn was the only speaker to directly insult a fellow participant in an explicit fashion, referring to Farage as 'the snake-oil salesman who delivered Brexit. Farage was the most creative insulter, coming up with 'Blair without the flair' to refer to Starmer and 'Rishi Slippery Sunak' to refer to the Prime Minister. The most controversial offence uttered by Farage was also aimed at the Prime Minister. During the first question connected with the topic of national defence, the debate came round to the scandal caused by the PM leaving the 80th anniversary celebrations of the Normandy Landings in 1944, and the offence this had caused, especially to veterans. Farage stated that 'If his [Sunak's] instinct was the same as the British people, he would never have contemplated for a moment not being there for the big international ceremony and it shows how disconnected he is with the people of this country.' This utterance was immediately seized upon as racist (Sunak is of Indian heritage) by Conservative commentators, and that Farage was seeking to use divisive politics to create tension and hostility towards the Conservatives because of the ethnicity of their leader.

One offensive term that was rejected was the word Tory as a synonym of Conservative. Even though its etymological roots derive from a slang Irish term for a highwayman, and was used pejoratively for much of the 19th century. However, in current political reporting, Tory is often used by the press as a shorthand form for Conservative, and is Sven used by the Conservatives themselves, for example the branding of the annual Tory Party Conference. As a consequence, even if the tone of the speaker may have implied a certain level of hostility towards the Conservatives, as was frequently the case when Flynn was speaking, it has not been included because the term has undergone a clearly ameliorative shift.

Finally, it is clear that the Conservatives were the prime target, with either Mordaunt or her party being insulted on 26 occasions. This is primarily because, as the incumbent party, the other participants were clear to undermine the Conservative's position of authority. Labour were also a significant target, although this was frequently Mordaunt trying to tarnish her main rival. What is interesting here is that Mordaunt did not engage Farage in a bout of goading and disparagement. This would be explained best as a part of the Conservative policy during the campaign of trying to avoid legitimising Reform UK by including them in the debate. It was felt that the best way to deal with the threat to vote share posed by Farage was to ignore him, thus denying him the opportunity to gain traction with the public.

4. Conclusions

This paper was prepared as part of a broader study into current trends in political communication. Its main focus was to investigate levels of dishonesty and insult in Political speech in the context of the UK General Election of 2024. During the 90 minute televised debate there were a total of 38 clear lies uttered by the seven candidates, with the Conservatives being the most dishonest. There were a further 22 oblique responses to questions, which were more evenly distributed among the seven participants, such is the nature of political discourse that it is more important to get a specific message across than it is to directly answer a question. The least dishonest participants were Denyer and Cooper with one lie each, although the Liberal Democrat was less prone to obfuscation. This means that there were a total of 50 dishonest acts during the course of the debate, which is a depressingly high figure given that politicians are supposed to set the tone for the public to follow. There were 58 insults deployed in total, with a further 40 clear interjections (a further five were made off camera with it being impossible to identify the speaker). Again, it was Mordaunt who was the most frequent insulter, although she was closely followed by Flynn and Farage. Barring Farage's slight against the Prime Minister, none of the insults were shocking or aggressive in nature, although it is still worrying that politicians, through their attempts to undermine their opponents, can be seen to legitimise such behaviour.

Overall, the findings indicate that political speech, especially during an election campaign when every word uttered is subject to great scrutiny, is prone to debasement through the excessive use of lies and insults. This study, admittedly, only focusses on a single hustings event, and thus general conclusions should not be drawn. It is important to compare this debate with others throughout the campaign, and from previous campaigns, to start to generate a clearer understanding of patterns and trends, and to determine the extent to which this debate is an outlier, or represents the norm. Also, it would be of great interest to confront the results of an investigation into British political speech with those from other nations to compare general levels of honesty and integrity across the global political spectrum. Finally, and somewhat romantically, it would be ideal if such research could help to moderate the tone of political debates, which would be possible if the general field could gain traction and consequent amplification.

Ultimately, bearing in mind the old English cliche about only children and fools telling the truth, it would appear that the seven politicians on display in the BBC 7-party debate were neither.

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