
PRESUPPOSITION AND POWER: A PRAGMATIC ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL SPEECH ACTS IN MARK ZUCKERBERG'S U.S. SENATE TESTIMONY

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ABSTRACT

This study emerges from the growing tension between state institutions and global technology corporations within the sphere of digital democracy, particularly when issues of online child protection are debated in contemporary media-mediated public spaces. In this context, language no longer functions merely as a communicative tool, rather, it operates as a strategic instrument that shapes public perception, distributes responsibility, and reproduces power relations. This research aims to analyze how presupposition functions as a pragmatic mechanism in constructing and negotiating power during the U.S. Senate hearing entitled Big Tech and the Online Child Sexual Exploitation Crisis (January 31, 2024), with a focus on Mark Zuckerberg's testimony. The study employs a descriptive qualitative approach using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The data were obtained through documentary analysis of the official hearing transcript, verified against video recordings, with the unit of analysis consisting of senators' and the CEO's utterances. The analysis was conducted through a thematic-linguistic procedure involving the identification of presupposition triggers, the classification of speech acts, and the interpretation of power strategies. The findings reveal three dominant patterns: (1) the construction of culpability assumptions by legislative authorities, (2) defensive legitimation strategies employed by the corporate actor, and (3) structural asymmetry within the interactional format that constrains the space for response. This study contributes to strengthening the integration between pragmatics and power studies in the context of digital media and offers implications for the development of critical literacy and public communication policy in the era of global platforms.

Keywords: *Presupposition, Political Speech Acts, Mark Zuckerberg Testimony, Pragmatic Analysis.*

INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary digital era, media plays a central role in shaping public opinion and political direction. Digital platforms and social media algorithms not only amplify opinion polarization but also disseminate populist narratives, influence public perceptions of political institutions, and facilitate trial by media within digital public spaces. This phenomenon indicates that political communication operates not solely through explicit content but also through implicatures and presuppositions embedded in political utterances (Masia, 2020; Tu, 2022). Presupposition assumptions treated as already accepted within an utterance functions as a strategic instrument for influencing public opinion and constructing legitimacy. Tu (2022) explains that “fictitious pragmatic presupposition ... transfers non-mutual knowledge that is disputed, unacceptable or at least unknown to the hearer, allowing speakers to embed contested ideological positions as if they were taken for granted within political discourse.” In political contexts, presupposition enables actors to implant specific assumptions as background truths accepted by the audience, thereby facilitating ideological framing and discourse control (Silaban et al., 2025).

In addition to presupposition, speech acts play a crucial role in asserting power strategies. Gurevich (2022) emphasizes that “expressive speech acts ... perform evaluative functions, revealing attitudes and emotions while shaping audience perception of speaker authority and legitimacy.” Political speech, therefore, often foregrounds attitudinal expression and strategic information reinforcement, functioning as a means of ideological legitimation (Wibowo & Sholihah, 2025).

Previous studies have highlighted the relationship between presupposition and ideological construction in political discourse. Kozlova (2021) demonstrates that presupposition “counteracts manipulation in media discourse” and shapes audience interpretation of political messages. Thus, presupposition constitutes not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a mechanism for shaping audience perception and supporting specific political agendas. This phenomenon becomes increasingly relevant within contemporary digital media environments. Andriani et al. (2025) and Marquez (2025) demonstrate that media can amplify the effects of presupposition, contributing to trial by media in public perception. Social media algorithms personalize content based on user preferences, reinforce selective bias, and weaken the legitimacy of political opponents or institutions, thereby contributing to the erosion of public trust (Afrouzi, 2021; Masia, 2020; Kameswari, Sravani & Mamidi, 2020).

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) emphasizes the dialectical relationship between micro-linguistic structures and broader socio-political structures. Ato (2025) argues that CDA enables researchers to examine how language functions to assert power, construct legitimacy, and control public narratives. Consequently, CDA is particularly relevant for analyzing presupposition and speech acts within political and corporate power contexts. Despite extensive research on presupposition in political discourse, a significant gap remains: few studies integrate presupposition analysis with issues of digital democratic stability, opinion polarization, and the erosion of public trust driven by populist narratives (Ozyumenko & Larina, 2021). This study addresses that gap by focusing on the interaction between presupposition, speech acts, and power strategies within digital media and formal political speech.

Literature Review

Language, Power, And Political Discourse

In political discourse studies, language is conceptualized as a mechanism for the distribution and negotiation of power. Institutional actors employ linguistic strategies to frame responsibility, construct legitimacy, and shape ideological positioning. Van Dijk (2021) emphasizes that discourse control constitutes a primary form of social control in

modern societies, particularly within digitally mediated environments. This perspective is crucial for understanding the dynamics of confrontation and negotiation in high-profile legislative hearings involving technology corporations. Within investigative settings, corporate witnesses frequently deploy defensive linguistic strategies to mitigate responsibility. Recent scholarship indicates that hedging and presupposition often co-occur in institutional discourse as mechanisms of strategic ambiguity. Craig and Amernic (2023) argue that corporate language in public hearings is highly calculated, serving reputational management and legal positioning. This observation is particularly evident in the testimony of technology CEOs, where discursive choices reflect both institutional vulnerability and strategic resilience. Legislative hearings are inherently asymmetrical interactions. Senators possess institutional authority, agenda-setting power, and control over turn-taking structures. Heritage and Clayman (2022) demonstrate that the question–answer format systematically advantages interrogators by constraining the scope of witness responses. This structural asymmetry significantly shapes pragmatic strategies, particularly when corporate actors attempt to defend institutional legitimacy under public scrutiny. In the era of global platforms, technology companies operate under intensifying regulatory pressure. Gorwa (2022) observes that platform governance discourse has evolved into a site of rhetorical contestation between regulators and corporations. Senate hearings, therefore, function not merely as oversight mechanisms but as arenas of discursive negotiation concerning digital accountability, public safety, and legal immunity.

Presupposition Theory: Stalnaker And Levinson

Presupposition explains how implicit assumptions are embedded within utterances and guide audience interpretation. Stalnaker (1974) conceptualizes presupposition as background knowledge assumed to be true for successful communication. Communication proceeds effectively only when interlocutors share sufficient common ground. Levinson (1983) further elaborates this concept by identifying presupposition triggers, including definite descriptions, factive verbs, iteratives, and cleft constructions, which systematically embed assumptions within discourse. In contemporary pragmatics, presupposition is understood not only as a semantic phenomenon but also as an inferential and cognitive mechanism. Schwarz (2021) explains that presupposition functions as an efficiency device in discourse processing, allowing interlocutors to construct meaning without explicit elaboration. Recent psychopragmatic research demonstrates that presuppositions are often processed automatically and can persist in audience cognition even when the embedded claims are contested (Domaneschi et al., 2021). This cognitive durability enhances their persuasive force in political and institutional communication. Moreover, presupposition operates rhetorically in modern political discourse. Macagno (2024) argues that presupposition functions as a powerful argumentative device because audiences tend to accept backgrounded assumptions without critical scrutiny. Terkourafi (2022) highlights the methodological importance of identifying presupposition triggers to systematically map how implicit assumptions structure political texts. In interrogative contexts, presupposition frequently functions as a mechanism of coercive framing. De Fina (2023) notes that yes/no and wh-questions can embed assumptions of wrongdoing, thereby constraining the respondent’s discursive options. Within legislative hearings broadcast to broad publics, such presuppositions acquire amplified ideological and symbolic power.

Speech Act Theory: Searle And Gurevich

Speech act theory provides a framework for analyzing how utterances perform social actions beyond propositional meaning. Searle (1969) classifies speech acts into five primary categories: representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declaratives. Each category produces distinct social effects, particularly within institutional settings. In parliamentary hearings, questions often function as implicit directives or accusations rather

than neutral requests for information. Ilie (2021) demonstrates that speech acts in institutional discourse are strategically oriented toward ideological positioning and power negotiation. Accordingly, interrogative utterances may perform moral evaluation and institutional pressure simultaneously. Gurevich (2022) expands the analysis by emphasizing expressive speech acts, which reveal attitudes and emotional stances while shaping audience perceptions of authority and legitimacy. In the context of corporate testimony, expressive and representative acts frequently intersect. A CEO may simultaneously present factual claims and construct an ethical persona committed to public safety. The integration of presupposition analysis with speech act theory therefore enables a comprehensive interpretation of how micro-linguistic choices enact broader social strategies, including domination, defense, and responsibility shifting.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA): Fairclough And Van Dijk

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) conceptualizes language as social practice embedded in relations of power and ideology. Fairclough (1995) proposes a three-dimensional framework encompassing textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. Van Dijk (2008) further emphasizes the cognitive dimension of discourse, highlighting how shared mental models mediate the relationship between language and social dominance. CDA is particularly relevant for examining interactions between political regulators and corporate actors. Wodak and Meyer (2022) stress that CDA seeks to uncover how discourse structures reproduce social inequality and institutional dominance. Within the context of U.S. Senate hearings, CDA enables the analysis of how linguistic structures—such as presupposition and speech acts interact with institutional authority, legal frameworks, and media amplification. Through this lens, presupposition is not merely a linguistic phenomenon but a mechanism for shaping ideological narratives and reinforcing institutional hierarchies. The interaction between senators and corporate executives thus becomes a discursive site where macro-structures of regulation and economic power are negotiated through micro-linguistic strategies.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a descriptive qualitative approach grounded in Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to investigate the relationship between micro-linguistic structures particularly presupposition and macro-level power configurations in political corporate interaction. The research design integrates pragmatic analysis with discourse-critical interpretation to capture both structural and contextual dimensions of language use. The data were obtained through purposive sampling from the official transcript of the U.S. Senate hearing entitled Big Tech and the Online Child Sexual Exploitation Crisis (January 31, 2024). The analysis focuses specifically on the testimony of Mark Zuckerberg as a representative of a global technology corporation confronting state regulatory authority. This event was selected due to its high public visibility and explicit engagement with issues of digital accountability and child protection. Data collection was conducted through documentary analysis. The official transcript served as the primary corpus, and it was cross-verified with official video recordings to ensure contextual accuracy. This verification process enabled attention to situational elements such as intonation, interactional timing, and audience reaction, thereby strengthening interpretive credibility. Data analysis follows the Pragmatic Analysis Model: (a) identification of presupposition triggers based on Stalnaker (1974) and Levinson (1983) such as definite descriptions, factive verbs, and iteratives; (b) classification of speech acts according to Searle (1969) into representative, directive, commissive, expressive, or declarative; and (c) analysis of the correlation between presupposition and power strategies of domination, defense, or legitimization with manual coding for thematic pattern visualization. The validity of the data is ensured thru credibility (diligence in analysis

and cross-checking), confirmability (objective analysis based on public sources), and ethics (presenting complete quotes without distortion of meaning). Data credibility was ensured through sustained analytical engagement and cross-verification with publicly available sources. Confirmability was maintained by grounding interpretations strictly in documented utterances. Ethical considerations were addressed by presenting quotations in full and avoiding distortion of meaning. Because the data derive from publicly accessible institutional proceedings, no confidential information was involved.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Constructed Presuppositions of Culpability

The analysis reveals that senators systematically embedded presuppositions of institutional culpability within interrogative structures. These presuppositions were realized through factive verbs (e.g., “*you knew*,” “*you allowed*”), definite descriptions (“*the harm*,” “*the victims*”), and temporal iteratives (“*again*,” “*for years*”), which implicitly framed the corporation as repeatedly negligent. From a pragmatic perspective, these linguistic triggers functioned as backgrounded assumptions that constrained Zuckerberg’s discursive options. In accordance with Stalnaker’s (1974) conception of common ground, the senators treated corporate responsibility as already established, thereby shifting the burden of rebuttal onto the witness. The yes/no interrogative format further intensified this effect, as it reduced complex regulatory issues into binary moral propositions.

Within a Critical Discourse Analysis framework, this strategy reflects institutional domination enacted through discursive control. The authority to formulate questions—and thus to embed presuppositions—constitutes symbolic power. By embedding assumptions within interrogatives, senators effectively constructed a narrative of prior wrongdoing before evidentiary debate unfolded. This finding aligns with van Dijk’s (2008) argument that discourse structures reproduce ideological positioning through implicit framing. Moreover, the repeated use of presuppositional triggers created cumulative rhetorical pressure. The audience, including media viewers, encountered a discursive environment in which corporate accountability was presupposed rather than debated. This demonstrates how presupposition operates not merely as a linguistic device but as an instrument of public moral positioning.

Defensive Legitimation through Iterative Presupposition

In response to accusatory framing, Zuckerberg employed defensive legitimation strategies characterized by iterative and factive constructions. Expressions such as “*we have invested*,” “*we continue to improve*,” and “*we have built systems*” presuppose ongoing commitment and prior corrective action. These utterances function simultaneously as representative and expressive speech acts. From the standpoint of speech act theory (Searle, 1969), these statements primarily operate as representatives asserting factual claims. However, they also carry expressive force by signaling ethical concern and institutional responsibility. Gurevich’s (2022) framework helps illuminate this dual function: the CEO’s testimony was not merely informational but performative, constructing an image of corporate accountability.

Pragmatically, the iterative presuppositions (“*continue*,” “*further*,” “*again*”) imply sustained effort, thereby reframing the narrative from negligence to progressive reform. Rather than directly negating the senators’ presuppositions, Zuckerberg frequently redirected the common ground toward improvement and investment. This strategy reflects defensive discursive adaptation within a structurally asymmetrical setting. From a CDA perspective, this pattern illustrates legitimation through technocratic discourse. By foregrounding procedural measures, safety mechanisms, and quantitative investments, the testimony shifts attention from moral culpability to managerial competence. The corporation is thus positioned as a responsible actor navigating complex technological challenges rather than as a passive enabler of harm.

Interrogative Speech Acts as Moral Accusation

A significant finding concerns the multifunctionality of interrogative speech acts. Although grammatically structured as questions, many utterances performed directive and accusatory functions. For example, questions that presupposed knowledge of harm simultaneously demanded acknowledgment and confession. Ilie’s (2021) analysis of parliamentary discourse suggests that institutional questions often function as moral evaluations rather than neutral information-seeking

acts. The data confirm this pattern. Senators' interrogatives frequently embedded evaluative presuppositions that transformed questioning into symbolic censure.

This multifunctionality demonstrates how speech acts operate within layered pragmatic contexts. The illocutionary force extended beyond inquiry to public accountability performance. Given the televised and widely circulated nature of the hearing, interrogatives served both immediate institutional purposes and broader public messaging objectives. Such usage reinforces the understanding that speech acts in political settings are inseparable from audience design. The senators' utterances were oriented not only toward the witness but also toward constituents, advocacy groups, and media outlets. Thus, interrogative speech acts became instruments of reputational positioning within the digital public sphere.

Structural Power Asymmetry and Discursive Constraint

The hearing's institutional format created a pronounced structural asymmetry. Senators controlled topic initiation, time allocation, and turn-taking. This asymmetry significantly limited Zuckerberg's ability to challenge embedded presuppositions. From a discourse-structural perspective, the question-answer format privileges the interrogator's framing power. Heritage and Clayman (2022) argue that such institutional encounters systematically constrain witnesses' discursive autonomy. The findings corroborate this observation: attempts to recontextualize issues were frequently interrupted or redirected toward the original presupposed frame.

Within CDA, this asymmetry exemplifies how macro-level institutional authority manifests through micro-level interactional control. Language becomes a site where regulatory authority is enacted and corporate actors are positioned defensively. The asymmetry is not merely procedural; it is ideological, shaping how responsibility is distributed and interpreted by public audiences. Furthermore, media amplification intensifies this imbalance. Extracted clips and headline summaries often reproduce presuppositional frames without contextual elaboration, thereby reinforcing initial accusatory narratives. In digitally mediated environments, such framing effects may persist beyond the hearing itself, influencing broader public perception of platform governance.

Presupposition as Ideological Negotiation

The cumulative analysis indicates that presupposition operates as a mechanism of ideological negotiation between state regulators and corporate leadership. Senators employ presupposition to assert moral authority and regulatory legitimacy, while the CEO uses presupposition to construct institutional responsibility and forward-looking reform. This interaction illustrates a dialectical process: domination through embedded assumptions is countered by legitimation through iterative commitment. Rather than a simple confrontation, the hearing represents a discursive struggle over narrative ownership.

Importantly, presupposition proves resistant to direct refutation. Because presuppositions function as backgrounded assumptions, challenging them requires meta-discursive intervention—an option structurally constrained in institutional hearings. Consequently, much of the ideological negotiation occurs indirectly, through reframing rather than explicit denial. The findings therefore extend contemporary pragmatic scholarship by demonstrating how presupposition interacts dynamically with speech acts and institutional authority. In digitally mediated democracies, such interactions shape not only immediate accountability discourse but also long-term narratives of technological governance and public trust.

Synthesis of Findings

Across the dataset, three dominant patterns emerge:

1. Constructed assumptions of culpability embedded within interrogative presuppositions.
2. Defensive legitimation strategies enacted through iterative and factive constructions.
3. Structural asymmetry that privileges legislative framing and constrains corporate response.

Together, these patterns confirm that language functions as a strategic resource in high-stakes political-corporate encounters. Presupposition is not merely a semantic phenomenon; it is a pragmatic and ideological instrument shaping how responsibility, authority, and legitimacy are publicly negotiated.

Discussion

The analysis of Mark Zuckerberg's testimony in the U.S. Senate hearing reveals systematic patterns in the deployment of presupposition and speech acts that reflect broader dynamics of institutional power and ideological negotiation. The findings are organized into four interrelated

dimensions: (1) presuppositional construction of culpability, (2) defensive legitimation strategies, (3) multifunctionality of interrogative speech acts, and (4) structural asymmetry in discursive interaction.

1. Presuppositional Construction of Culpability

The data demonstrate that senators strategically embedded presuppositions of corporate responsibility within interrogative structures. These presuppositions were realized through factive verbs (e.g., “knew,” “allowed”), definite descriptions (“the harm,” “the victims”), and temporal iteratives (“again,” “for years”). Such linguistic triggers functioned to background assumptions of negligence or prior awareness, thereby framing culpability as an established premise rather than a contested claim. In pragmatic terms, these constructions constrained the respondent’s discursive options. Because presuppositions operate as taken-for-granted information within the common ground, Zuckerberg was compelled either to accept the implied responsibility or to challenge the presuppositional basis itself—an action that is interactionally costly within institutional hearings. Consequently, much of the exchange unfolded within a discursive environment in which corporate accountability was implicitly presupposed. The cumulative effect of repeated presuppositions intensified rhetorical pressure. Rather than isolated linguistic instances, the pattern constituted a sustained framing strategy that positioned the corporation as morally and institutionally accountable before detailed evidentiary discussion occurred.

2. Defensive Legitimation through Iterative and Factive Constructions

In response to presupposed accusations, Zuckerberg adopted a defensive legitimation strategy characterized by iterative expressions (“we continue,” “we have invested,” “we are improving”) and factive constructions emphasizing prior corrective action. These utterances functioned primarily as representative speech acts asserting factual commitments, yet they also carried expressive force by projecting ethical responsibility and institutional concern. The iterative dimension is particularly significant. By emphasizing continuity and progress, the testimony reframed the narrative from negligence to reform. Rather than directly rejecting senators’ presuppositions, Zuckerberg frequently shifted the focus toward technological safeguards, financial investments, and collaborative initiatives. This reframing strategy allowed the corporation to maintain alignment with the moral seriousness of the issue while avoiding explicit admission of liability. The findings indicate that presupposition operates not only as a mechanism of accusation but also as a tool of self-legitimation. Iterative presuppositions embedded in corporate responses construct a background assumption of ongoing commitment, thereby counterbalancing accusatory framing.

4. Interrogative Speech Acts as Moral and Institutional Pressure

A third finding concerns the multifunctional nature of interrogative speech acts. Although grammatically structured as questions, many utterances functioned pragmatically as directives, moral evaluations, or demands for acknowledgment. Yes/no questions frequently embedded assumptions of wrongdoing, effectively narrowing the respondent’s discursive space. These interrogatives performed dual roles: they sought information while simultaneously signaling institutional authority and public accountability. The illocutionary force extended beyond inquiry to symbolic censure. Within the televised and widely disseminated context of the hearing, such speech acts were oriented not only toward the witness but also toward broader public audiences. This multifunctionality underscores the strategic nature of speech acts in institutional settings. Questions operated as instruments of ideological positioning, reinforcing the senators’ regulatory authority and moral stance while compelling corporate defense.

5. Structural Asymmetry and Discursive Constraint

The interactional format of the hearing created a pronounced structural asymmetry. Senators controlled turn allocation, topic initiation, and time constraints, thereby shaping the discursive trajectory. This institutional structure amplified the power of presupposition by limiting opportunities for meta-discursive clarification or reframing. Attempts to expand contextual explanations were frequently redirected back to the presupposed frame embedded in the original question. The asymmetry was therefore not merely procedural but ideological, as it privileged legislative framing over corporate narrative construction. Moreover, the public and media-mediated nature of the hearing intensified the impact of this asymmetry. Extracted statements and headline summaries often reproduced presuppositional frames, reinforcing accusatory interpretations in the broader digital public sphere.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that presupposition and speech acts function as strategic mechanisms of power negotiation within high-stakes political–corporate encounters. The analysis identifies four central findings: (1) the systematic construction of culpability through interrogative presuppositions, (2) defensive legitimation strategies enacted through iterative and factive constructions, (3) the multifunctionality of interrogative speech acts as instruments of moral pressure, and (4) structural asymmetry that privileges legislative framing and constrains corporate response. The findings confirm that presupposition extends beyond semantic backgrounding to operate as a pragmatic and ideological instrument. In the Senate hearing context, presuppositions structured the common ground in ways that prefigured responsibility, shaped audience interpretation, and distributed discursive authority. Corporate responses, in turn, utilized presupposition to construct narratives of reform and sustained commitment, illustrating the dialectical nature of discursive power.

From a theoretical standpoint, the study contributes to the integration of presupposition theory, speech act analysis, and Critical Discourse Analysis by demonstrating how micro-linguistic mechanisms interact with macro-institutional power structures. It advances pragmatic scholarship by situating presupposition within dynamic processes of ideological negotiation rather than treating it as a static semantic phenomenon. From a practical perspective, the findings underscore the importance of critical linguistic awareness in digitally mediated democracies. Legislative hearings are not merely sites of information exchange but arenas in which legitimacy, accountability, and moral authority are discursively constructed. Understanding how presupposition shapes these processes is essential for scholars, policymakers, and media audiences seeking to evaluate institutional communication critically. Future research may extend this analysis by comparing multiple corporate testimonies, incorporating quantitative corpus methods, or examining cross-national regulatory contexts. Such studies would further illuminate how language mediates the evolving relationship between state authority and global technology corporations in contemporary digital governance.

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