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ILLEISM IN THE ALBANIAN POLITICAL DISCOURSE – THE CASE OF THE OPPOSITION LEADER SALI BERISHA

Illeism is a third-person self-reference forms for representing the views of someone else, creating illusion of a speaker linguistically and thematically who is trying to distance themselves in the narrative. The substitute first-person reference with third-person reference may have a bearing on the relationship of speaker to the addressee and may indicate the attributes of the speaker (conveyed either through describing them or through rendering them to particular category). The use of illeism implies an embellishment of the perception of someone’s reputation in public perception and thereby contributes to the action(s) a speaker is employing through their talk. This paper aims to apply discourse analysis approach to analyse the use of illeism in politic discourse of some of Albanian politic leaders in public speech and media. The study explores political discourse of opposition leader S. Berisha qualitatively to highlight the implication of illeism (through linguistic signifiers) which influences the actions that the speaker takes through discourse.

Keywords: Illeism, discourse analysis, political discourse, third-person reference

1. INTRODUCTION

Speaking about oneself in the third person, known as *illeism*, might seem self-indulgent, however, recent research suggests that this age-old rhetorical device a peculiarity of the powerful leaders, but also an efficient tool for enhancing decision-

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making, emotional regulation and leadership communication. It can be said that the pronouns act as reference to enable listeners or readers to identify something clearly in spoken or written language (Alek et al.,2020)

Illeism originates from the Latin word *ille*, meaning “he” or “that man,” referring to oneself in the third person. In terms of personal reference, speakers commonly refer to themselves mainly via first-person narrative forms, such as “*I think*” or “*in my opinion*”. First mentioned by S.T.Coleridge (McKusick, 1992), English poet, philosopher and literary critic, illeism has been used as a mark of excessive use of the personal pronouns *I* and *you*, through which the interests of other people are given priority over one’s own interests. However, illeism is the type of self-reference where individuals use a third-person narrative form as reference to themselves (Carrington, 2017; Elledge, 2017). In its most technical sense, illeism is a reference to the “redundant use of the third-person personal pronoun” (Pei & Geynor,1954). Illeism is understood in its more commonly accepted sense as a “reference to oneself in the third-person, either by the third person pronoun (*he, she*) or by name or label” (Garner, 2003, p.899). When we refer to ourselves in the third person, we create a sort of mental space between our immediate emotions and our analytical selves.

Every political action is prepared, accompanied controlled and influenced by language (Chilton & Shafner, 1997). Language itself has political implications and, if used as a sign of solidarity with the rest of society, can be an important tool for establishing political content, economic or social discrimination (Koseriu 1987). Chilton and Schaffner (2002) start on the premise that politics is largely language. However, politics is defined, there is a linguistic, discursive and communicative dimension, generally only partially acknowledged, if at all, by practitioners and theorists (Chilton 2004). According to Van Dijk (2003), an informal conversation of a politician with her friends does not count as a political discourse: the discourse must be produced by the speaker in her professional role of a politician and in an institutional setting and in a more oriented action the discourse is political when it accomplishes a political act in a political institution, such as governing, legislation, electoral campaigning, and so on. Individuals interact through discourse, and institutions produce types of discourse with specific characteristics. Political discourse has its own characteristics, including the use of specific vocabulary, structure, and the realization of the discourse. Persuading people is the main goal of political discourse that stimulates the recipient to take certain actions.

Throughout human history, a series of influential political figures have been characterized by the power of public communication. The famously Caesar’s chronicle “*Commentaries on the Gallic War*”, written about the war of occupation of Gaul, as an account written entirely in the third person to provide an objective description of the nine years spent by Caesar in the Gallic Wars, not only solidified the Caesar place in history, but also demonstrated a new habit with profound implications for

the public speech (Reid 2025). In the writing of Julius Caesar, it can be observed the author's tendency to objectify himself and to position himself as an observer, not as a protagonist of the historical events he describes (Nistea & Anghel 2018). He can be considered the first politician to have used illeism as a linguistic device for self-reference.

Aristotle points out perhaps the most essential quality of the spoken word—its unique suitability to capture the emotional character of a situation with only a few words or gestures, and to do so in such a way that powerfully brings an audience together through shared experience (Crick, 2014). It is a phenomenon studied in daily conversations implementation (Billon, 2017) and in literature as a stylistic device (Bär, 2016; Nordlund, 2017; Schupak, 2019). The use of illeism is related with narcissism as some public figures, more often with politicians (Chilton, 2017; Hirsch & Craig, 2017). As a result, *illeism* can be a calculating device to provide a perception of the speaker trying to distance themselves in the narrative.

A speaker's decision to refer to himself or herself by using the third-person singular pronoun (*he/she*) instead of the first-person singular personal pronoun (*I*) is influenced by several factors. This deictic point to its location in relation to personal context as the use of language to "position" narratives in political discourse (Chilton 2004, p.56). This practice can be observed especially in politics, where self-referentiality is disguised by such means. Illeism has also been used by great figures in history, especially by statesmen with overdeveloped egos, such as dictators, copied by leaders and politicians throughout time (Nistea & Anghel 2018). Referring to oneself in the third person singular may be an attempt by politicians to provide the illusion of self-objectification, presenting one's own achievements and failures from an outside perspective.

Used for different reasons, illeism is a linguistic phenomenon that is gaining increasing importance. Illeism as a linguistic phenomenon, found in both cultured and everyday language is too little debated, compared to the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis, although it is just as interesting. Illeism or speaking in the third person is often used with the aim of exercising supremacy, but it also has a role of depersonalization or objectification, the role being to observe one's own actions from the outside. Therefore, illeism is widely used, both by politicians and by public celebrities, to emphasize their importance, as well as a way of reflecting on one's own person and character. In many Western cultures, excessive use of illeism might be seen as pompous or self-aggrandizing depending from cultural context.

According to Dhrimo et al. (1986), the grammar of the Albanian language describes the category of personal pronouns as a set of 1st (the person that speaks), 2nd (the person spoken to) and 3rd (what/who is spoken about) person pronouns. The first-person *unë/ne* (I/we) and second-person *ti/ju* (you) pronouns are fundamentally deictic or exophoric. They are shifters, meaning their referent changes strictly according to

the speaker and listener roles in the immediate speech event. In contrast, the third-person pronoun *ai/ajo; ata/ato* (he/she/it/they) presents a challenge due to its dual nature: it functions as both an anaphor and, in specific contexts, a deictic element. This duality makes its strict classification problematic. When the third-person pronoun acts as a shifter, referring to someone or something outside the established linguistic text, but present in the context of utterance, it takes on the attributes of a demonstrative pronoun (*si ky /kjo; kwtā /kēto* “that” or “those”). In these exophoric uses, the third-person pronoun necessarily requires additional clarification to successfully establish reference. This clarification is provided by:

1. A co-referential nominal phrase: Explicitly naming the person or object it points to.
2. A subordinate determiner phrase: A phrase that restricts and identifies the referent.

The following paper aim to evaluate the various ways illeism is employed in the political discourse of Albanian opposite leader Sali Berisha for specific purposes and address the unique character of his illeism.

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study used a qualitative research model with a dialectical approach to understand the role of self-reference through linguistic devices that shape perceptions of political image. By critically examining specific examples of political discourse, the study explored how the use of third-person self-reference in political and public discourse shapes public perceptions and contributes to the cultivation of a positive or negative image. Through qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis, the paper aims to highlight the dynamics of politicians' image construction and the implications of image representation in specific political contexts.

Data Collection

To evaluate the different ways in which S. Berisha uses illeism in political discourse to address his unique political profile, his speeches on TV talk shows and public speech posts on social media (Facebook) were selected. The selected speeches cover the period 2023-2024, when the Special Court of First Instance for Corruption and Organized Crime had placed former Prime Minister Sali Berisha under house arrest, ordering him not to leave his apartment and not to communicate with people other than those with whom he lived. This period was characterized by intensive public communication of leader in meetings of DP structures, in talk shows and from the balcony of his house. The corpus was selected from four talk shows on *prime time* in National Albanian TV (Top story- Top Channel 1; Opinion- Klan 4; A Show - Syri

Tv 1); public speeches for militants and DP structures (3), from press conferences (2) and from news in media (public media RTSH, Syri TV). The main criteria of this selection were the third person use for the self-reference and the different contexts of these uses.

Data Analysis

Through a content-based qualitative analysis of speeches and public statements, the research has identified some of the linguistics strategies and tools used to construct a strong and powerful image of the opposite leader. This approach focused on the linguistic tools of self-reference, semantic content, and grammatical structure employed in political communication of S. Berisha. The selected fragments of his speeches are analysed from the pragmatic point of view, evidencing the use of linguistic shifters related to illeism.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Although each context has peculiar characteristics, politicians' communication is generally guided by three main goals that may be found across contexts: (1) presenting a positive image of themselves and their party, (2) presenting a negative image of opposing parties, and (3) trying to gain consensus. This means that on the one hand, politicians try to define themselves, to make clear what their political views are and how they differ from other politicians' views. On the other hand, they aim to extend the boundaries of their party to include as many people as possible. In a highly polarized political community like Albania, language helps politicians in the difficult task of holding their group together and at the same time trying to expand the boundaries of this group. In the communicative contexts discussing below, it is necessary to consider how politicians (in our case the leader of Albanian opposite), defend their image when interviewed and how they use political discourse to define and depict social categories in order to gain consensus. The strong image of the opposite is broken be.

In linguistics, "shifters" refer to words, like personal pronouns, whose meaning changes depending on who is speaking. The concept of shifters demonstrates how powerful certain words and grammatical forms can be for switching the perspectives of speaker in rapport with the audience. The distanced self-talk might operate through a similar mechanism, producing a virtual automatic shift in perspective requiring minimal effort. While it might appear to project grandeur, research indicates it may have significant psychological value, particularly for fostering self-distancing, this technique creates a cognitive "space" between people and their emotions or decisions, creating the aureole of the victim and the punisher and the same time.

Shifting from the first-person "*I*" to the second-person "*you*" or third person "*he*" or "*she*" provides a mechanism for gaining emotional distance and this distanced

self-talk is a psychological hack embedded in the fabric of human language with diverse benefits (Cross, 2021, p.69). In the context of political discourse, the use of self – reference in third person lead to a tendency to overestimate media influence on others and underestimate media influence on oneself (Catellani, 2004).

Political discourse often emphasizes “our good things,” emphasizes “their bad things” reducing the emphasis on “our bad things” reducing the emphasis on “their good things”. In Sali Berisha’s rhetoric, this picture is reversed.

1. Illeism as self-motivation

When Albanian DP leader, S. Berisha uses illeism, he is essentially creating a mental avatar of himself. This can be incredibly useful for gaining a fresh perspective on his thoughts and actions. It’s like having a conversation with himself, but instead of the usual internal monologue, he is chatting with the name. This distance can help him see situations more clearly and make more tough decisions. He answers the journalist’s question “*Who will lead the Democratic Party*”:

“Sali Berisha will lead it even from the depths of every cell (prison).

The Democrats will be led by Sali Berisha.”;

“I guarantee that tomorrow in free elections Sali Berisha will win twice as many votes as Edi Rama.”,

using as subject his name and surname evaluating himself as leader and winner. This use generalises his figure as eternal leader, despite his failures.

2. Illeism as a rhetorical device to persuade the audience

By referring to himself in the third person, reinforced by other grammatical devices, he potentially enhances the memory and understanding of personal experiences as a superiority complex. On the other hand, he also uses it as a technique to deceive the audience so that his promises and achievements appear clearer in the eyes of the electorate.

“Sali Berisha himself, in 2012, requested this standard...”.

The construction of the subject *noun/adjective + personal pronoun* emphasizes his role in a process in which (according to him) he was the initiator.

“Sali Berisha is the person who has requested that Article 70 of the Constitution be total approved.”

The same meaning is expressed by the syntactic construction of subject *noun/adjective + predicative determiner* in the example above

3. *Illeism as rhetorical technique to persuade himself*

Politicians sometimes use this technique as a rhetorical device to see themselves as invincible. As one of the characteristics of S. Berisha's speech, public speeches of this period are enriched with deictics (self-reference using the name, personal pronouns), which, despite being in different person, refers the same individual.

"Madam, sir, madam, excellence, honourable, and whatever title or function you hold, before you repeat this lie, these accusations about Sali Berisha, check your pockets. I am Sali Berisha. With the power of truth, I am never defeated."

He identifies himself by name and surname setting apart from others (*madam, sir, madam, excellence, honourable, and whatever title or function you hold*). After this he addressed himself on a pedestal, referring in the first person.

In the example above:

*"The end of Sali Berisha?! They've been repeating it since 1997";
"Sali Berisha never gives up defending the ideals of freedom, opposition and the program of the Democratic Party.*

1 Not at home, or 2 in a cell or on 3 an island, but I am telling you here that even if they take 4 me to the Moon, I will find a way to be an opposition and stand for the truth."

he sees himself as a politician that is proved in many battles and never gives up in every circumstances. He passes from the self-reference by name/surname as invincible to the first-person identification to exercise his will despite barriers using ascending enumeration to make more dramatic his situation. Creating the image of victim and triumphant at the same time he develops self-confidence.

4. *Illeism as device to exercise supremacy*

As a politician with weight in Albanian political life for 35 years, he identifies himself with the supreme leader of today's opposite. His name represents the opposite leader (not only DP leader) who is being fought by the state, the justice structures, and international conspiracists:

"Today, Edi Rama, Rilindja, Skapi, Soros and all the enemies of Albanian democracy are rubbing their hands waiting for Sali Berisha's arrest. They say this is the end of Sali Berisha, the end of the opposite."
 by using the determinants in the syntagms, *the end of Sali Berisha = the end of the opposite.*

He uses illeism or third-person reference in order to exercise supremacy and also to depersonalize other actors and factors:

*"This is not a battle for the opposition, although de facto largest opposite party has had its symbol stolen and **his leader** arrested."*
*"....is there a free person today who does not accept that the majority of democrats have chosen **Sali Berisha** as **their leader, as leader of the Democratic Party?**"*

by using deictics as possessive pronouns at third person (*his, their*), and as always, the name/surname. Speaking of himself in the third person he never hesitates to flaunt his superiority over his peers, using illeism as a method of indirectly placing attention on oneself through duplication to emphasize the importance of his position.

5. Illeism as device to be "popular"

In political science, the politician's identification with the crowd, or "the people," is a strategic tool used to gain support and legitimacy. S. Berisha manifests this identification using self-reference in third person. By using *the name + the first personal pronoun*, he tries to make the crowd to identify with him, and afterwards, he rises above the crowd by identifying himself by the name/surname:

*"I and each of you have two Constitutions ... **Sali Berisha** will accept and do only what is in your interest, in the interest of the democrats, in the interest of pluralism, in the interest of Albania."*

In the example below he uses the plural first of the possessive (*our*) and personal pronoun (*we*) to put himself in the crowd, without forgetting to self-distance through deictic *I* and above all using illeism by name/surname.

*"Our supreme constitution is our conscience. It is divine, it is earthly. We obey her, just like God, and therefore I guarantee you that **Sali Berisha** will accept and do only what is in your interest, in the interest of democrats, in the interest of pluralism, in the interest of Albania."*

By using illeism to emphasize the authoritative position from the perspective of the audience, the image of the politician tends to be more acceptable and to provide the long-life leader.

Rhetoric as expressed by politics and politics as expressed by rhetoric create recognizable patterns accounting for what is thinkable and what is actually thought, permitting a reconstruction of a "figurative self-portrait", or even "political ontology",

with the respective “laws of inclusion and exclusion” constitutive for the manner of speaking and thinking typical for politicians or parties (Załęska, 2012). S. Berisha’s illeism, presented through examples, constitutes a typical model of authoritarian rhetoric, which does not accept failure, one of the dominant models in Albanian politics.

4. CONCLUSION

The distance created between the speaker and the self-reference allows emphasis of the speaker by presenting him from the perspective of the audience. Political discourse is an expression of the entire complex of relationships between people, society and the state. The use of illeism in politic discourse could potentially be understood simply as an expression of the individual’s importance, but often we can understand that it can serve as tool to impress the crowd, to be above it and to be part of it as infallible, invincible leader. People want their politicians to be humble, but politicians want to be strong and powerful. As a result, politicians use certain patterns of public speaking to adapt to the demands of their electors and at the same time to be above them.

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**ILEIZAM U ALBANSKOM POLITIČKOM DISKURSU – SLUČAJ
OPOZICIONOG LIDERA SALIJA BERIŠE**

Rezime

Ileizam je upotreba trećeg lica za samoreferencu, oblik izražavanja kojim govornik predstavlja sopstvene stavove iz perspektive drugog, stvarajući time iluziju o govorniku koji se, na jezičkom i tematskom planu, pokušava distancirati u narativu. Zamenjivanje prvog trećim licem može uticati na odnos između govornika i sagovornika, i ukazivati na osobine govornika — bilo kroz njihov opis, bilo kroz njihovo svrstavanje u određenu kategoriju. Upotreba ileizma često podrazumeva stilizaciju i pojačavanje, čime doprinosi značenju i delovanju samog govora, kao i ugledu govornika javnosti.

Cilj ovog rada je da upotrebi ileizma u političkom diskursu pojedinih albanskih političkih lidera u javnim govorima i medijima pristupi iz perspektive analize diskursa. Kvalitativnom analizom političkog diskursa opozicionog lidera Salija Beriše istražuju se implikacije ileizma (izražene kroz jezičke markere) koje utiču na delovanje koje govornik ostvaruje kroz diskurs.

Ključne reči: ileizam, analiza diskursa, politički diskurs, referenca u trećem licu