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FROM AUTHORITY TO PROXIMITY: THE DISCURSIVE CONSTRUCTION OF PRESIDENTIAL ETHOS IN EMMANUEL MACRON'S CRISIS COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

This study examines the discursive construction of presidential ethos in Emmanuel Macron's crisis communication, focusing on the linguistic and rhetorical strategies through which political authority, responsibility, and solidarity are articulated. Drawing on theories of discursive ethos, political argumentation, and enunciative subjectivity, the study investigates how first-person pronouns, collective references, modal expressions, evaluative language, and the attribution of responsibility contribute to the construction of presidential identity. The research adopts a qualitative comparative discourse-analytical approach to selected presidential addresses delivered in distinct political and international crisis contexts. Particular attention is paid to the relationship between the representation of the president as a decisive institutional leader and his positioning as a representative of the national community. Rather than treating ethos as a fixed personal characteristic, the study conceptualizes it as a context-dependent discursive construction negotiated through linguistic choices and representations of political actors. By examining the interaction between authority and proximity, the research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of presidential ethos in contemporary French political discourse.

Keywords: Discursive ethos; political discourse; presidential communication; Emmanuel Macron; enunciative strategies; crisis communication; political identity.

Introduction

Аннотация

В настоящем исследовании рассматривается дискурсивное конструирование президентского этоса в кризисной коммуникации Эмманюэля Макрона. Основное внимание уделяется лингвистическим и риторическим стратегиям, посредством которых выражаются политический авторитет, ответственность и солидарность. Опираясь на теории дискурсивного этоса, политической аргументации и энонциативной субъективности, исследование направлено на выявление роли личных местоимений первого лица, коллективных референций, модальных выражений, оценочной лексики и

способов атрибуции ответственности в конструировании президентской идентичности. В работе применяется качественный сравнительно-дискурсивный анализ избранных президентских обращений, произнесённых в различных контекстах политических и международных кризисов. Особое внимание уделяется взаимосвязи между репрезентацией президента в качестве решительного институционального лидера и его позиционированием как представителя национального сообщества. Этос рассматривается не как неизменная личностная характеристика, а как контекстуально обусловленный дискурсивный конструкт, формирующийся посредством языкового выбора и способов репрезентации политических акторов. Исследование направлено на углубление понимания президентского этоса в современном французском политическом дискурсе посредством анализа взаимодействия категорий авторитета и близости.

Ключевые слова: дискурсивный этос; политический дискурс; президентская коммуникация; Эмманюэль Макрон; энонциативные стратегии; кризисная коммуникация; политическая идентичность.

Language plays a fundamental role in the construction and legitimisation of political authority. Political leaders use discourse not only to communicate information but also to explain decisions, establish relationships with citizens, define collective identities, and influence interpretations of political events. These functions become particularly important during periods of uncertainty, when political institutions face challenges and public expectations concerning leadership, accountability, and stability become more pronounced.

Political discourse is therefore not simply a neutral reflection of political reality. It is a communicative practice through which political actors interpret events, construct arguments, attribute responsibility, and present particular images of themselves and others. Presidential speeches are especially significant in this regard because they combine the institutional authority of the office with the personal responsibility of the speaker. Through linguistic and rhetorical choices, a president can present himself as a decisive leader, a responsible decision-maker, a representative of national unity, or a defender of collective interests.

One of the central concepts for examining these processes is *ethos*. Traditionally associated with classical rhetoric, ethos refers to the image of the speaker that contributes to the persuasive force of discourse. Contemporary discourse studies extend this understanding by considering how the speaker's identity is constructed through linguistic choices, argumentative strategies, institutional expectations, and the communicative context. From this perspective, ethos is not merely a reflection of personal character but a discursive construction that develops through interaction between the speaker, the message, and the audience.

French presidential discourse provides a productive context for investigating this phenomenon. The French presidency occupies a prominent institutional and symbolic position, and presidential addresses frequently connect political decisions with national identity, constitutional responsibility, and collective objectives. At the same time, presidents must negotiate potentially conflicting expectations: they are expected to demonstrate authority while

remaining responsive to citizens, defend institutional continuity while acknowledging political disagreement, and exercise leadership while promoting collective participation.

Emmanuel Macron's presidential communication offers an important case for examining these tensions. His addresses during periods of domestic political instability and international insecurity demonstrate how presidential discourse can combine individual agency, institutional legitimacy, and appeals to collective responsibility. Although these communicative situations differ in their immediate objectives, both require the president to interpret uncertainty and establish a credible position from which political action can be justified.

The present study examines two official presidential addresses. The first is Macron's address of 5 December 2024, delivered following the censure of Michel Barnier's government and the resulting institutional crisis. The second is his address of 5 March 2025 concerning international security, the war in Ukraine, and European defence. The speeches provide a basis for comparing the construction of presidential ethos in domestic political and international security contexts.

The central aim of the article is to investigate how Emmanuel Macron constructs presidential ethos through linguistic and rhetorical strategies in crisis communication. The analysis focuses on the relationship between institutional authority, personal responsibility, and collective proximity. It addresses three principal questions: how presidential authority and responsibility are represented linguistically; how personal pronouns and modal expressions construct relationships between the president and political communities; and how the discursive representation of leadership changes according to the type of crisis being addressed.

The article argues that presidential ethos is best understood as a context-dependent configuration of discursive resources. Authority and proximity are not necessarily opposing qualities. Rather, they can reinforce one another when the president presents individual leadership as serving collective interests and represents political action as a shared responsibility.

The concept of ethos originates in Aristotle's rhetorical theory, in which the credibility of the speaker constitutes one of the principal means of persuasion alongside logical argumentation and emotional appeal. In political communication, this relationship is particularly important because the persuasive force of an argument depends partly on the image of the person presenting it. Claims about security, institutional responsibility, or national unity may acquire different significance depending on whether the speaker is represented as competent, credible, responsible, or attentive to public concerns.

Contemporary discourse analysis has developed the concept of ethos beyond the idea of credibility as a personal characteristic. Maingueneau (1999) emphasises the relationship between ethos and the organisation of discourse, demonstrating that the speaker's image emerges through the manner in which discourse is produced and interpreted. Ethos is therefore inseparable from the communicative situation and the expectations associated with a particular discourse genre.

This approach is especially relevant to presidential communication. A president addressing a domestic political crisis may emphasise constitutional responsibility, institutional stability, and the capacity to make difficult decisions. In an international security address, the same speaker may foreground strategic competence, vigilance, and solidarity with European partners. These

representations do not necessarily indicate contradictory identities. Instead, they illustrate how different dimensions of presidential ethos can become prominent in response to specific communicative demands.

Amossy's (1999) work on ethos and argumentation further demonstrates that the speaker's image is closely connected to the persuasive organisation of discourse. Political leaders construct ethos through the arguments they advance, the values they invoke, and the ways in which they position themselves in relation to audiences and opponents. The representation of the speaker is consequently inseparable from the interpretation of political events and the justification of particular decisions.

Charaudeau (2005) provides an additional framework for understanding political ethos through the concepts of legitimacy, credibility, and identification. Political actors must establish the grounds for their authority while simultaneously presenting themselves as representatives of a broader community. Credibility concerns the image of a speaker as competent and trustworthy, whereas identification involves the construction of relationships through shared values, collective experiences, and common objectives.

These dimensions may complement one another, but they can also create tensions. Strong institutional authority can project decisiveness while producing an impression of distance from citizens. Conversely, an emphasis on solidarity and proximity may encourage identification while requiring additional demonstrations of competence and decision-making capacity. Presidential ethos can therefore be analysed as a negotiation between the authority associated with political office and the relationships established through discourse.

The linguistic study of enunciation provides a further basis for this analysis. Benveniste (1971) demonstrates that subjectivity is expressed through the relationship between language and the act of speaking. Personal pronouns are particularly relevant because their interpretation depends on the participants and circumstances of communication. In political discourse, the first-person singular pronoun *je* may foreground individual agency and responsibility, while *nous* can construct a collective subject whose scope varies according to context. The second-person pronoun *vous* can establish direct relations between the speaker and the audience.

These pronouns do not possess fixed political meanings. The pronoun *nous* may refer to the government, the French nation, European countries, or a wider political community. Its interpretation therefore requires attention to the surrounding discourse and the identity of the groups being included. Similarly, *je* can express personal commitment, institutional authority, or a claim to individual leadership. The analysis of pronouns must consequently consider their grammatical form, referential scope, and argumentative function.

Modality is equally important in political communication. Expressions of necessity, obligation, possibility, and intention allow speakers to frame political decisions as optional, desirable, unavoidable, or collectively required. Constructions such as *nous devons*, *il faut*, and *je veux* can contribute to representations of decisiveness and responsibility, although their functions depend on the arguments in which they occur.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives provide a framework for examining ethos as a dynamic relationship between linguistic choices, political argumentation, institutional identity, and collective identification. The present study applies this framework to Macron's crisis

communication, focusing on how presidential authority is constructed in relation to responsibility, solidarity, and the representation of shared political interests.

The study employs a qualitative comparative discourse-analytical approach. This method is appropriate because the objective is to interpret the functions of linguistic and rhetorical resources within their communicative contexts rather than to measure isolated words without considering their textual significance.

The research corpus consists of two presidential addresses published on the official website of the French presidency. The first is the address delivered on 5 December 2024, following the censure of Michel Barnier's government. The second is the address delivered on 5 March 2025 concerning the international security situation and European defence.

The texts were selected because they represent different crisis contexts while sharing the institutional genre of the presidential address. The December speech foregrounds domestic political responsibility, parliamentary disagreement, and institutional continuity. The March speech focuses on international security, the war in Ukraine, and the strategic responsibilities of France and its European partners. Their comparison makes it possible to examine how presidential ethos is adapted to different political circumstances.

The analysis concentrates on four interconnected categories: the construction of institutional authority and personal responsibility; the use of personal pronouns and collective references; the role of modality and evaluative language; and the representation of national and European identity. These categories are treated as related analytical dimensions rather than mutually exclusive classifications, since a single expression may contribute simultaneously to several aspects of ethos.

The procedure involves examining the overall argumentative structure of each speech, identifying relevant linguistic expressions, interpreting their functions within the surrounding discourse, and comparing the resulting patterns across the two texts. The analysis uses the official English versions for the passages presented in English, while French expressions are retained where their grammatical or rhetorical properties are central to the argument.

The study is qualitative and interpretative. It does not claim to provide exhaustive corpus statistics or experimental evidence of audience reception. Its conclusions concern the discursive representations identified in the selected texts and should not automatically be generalised to Macron's entire presidential communication.

One of the most significant features of Macron's address of 5 December 2024 is the explicit acknowledgement of personal responsibility for a controversial political decision. Discussing the dissolution of the National Assembly, Macron states: "*C'est un fait et c'est ma responsabilité*" ("It is a fact and it is my responsibility").

The expression *ma responsabilité* directly associates the speaker with the consequences of his decision. Rather than presenting the political situation exclusively as an impersonal institutional event, Macron identifies himself as an agent who must respond to its consequences. This formulation contributes to the construction of a responsible-leader ethos by making personal accountability an explicit component of the presidential image.

However, the statement does not constitute an unconditional acceptance of responsibility for every aspect of the subsequent political crisis. Its significance emerges through the surrounding argument, in which Macron acknowledges criticism while defending the decision as a means

of returning political choice to voters. The discourse therefore combines an acknowledgement of responsibility with the justification of presidential agency.

A related pattern appears in the formulation: "*Si j'ai toujours assumé toutes mes responsabilités [...] je n'assumerai jamais l'irresponsabilité des autres*." The contrast between *mes responsabilités* and *l'irresponsabilité des autres* establishes a distinction between the president's self-representation and the conduct attributed to other political actors.

This contrastive structure serves two functions. It reinforces the image of the president as someone who accepts responsibility for his own decisions, while simultaneously presenting certain opposing political actions as irresponsible. Responsibility becomes both a quality claimed by the speaker and a criterion through which the conduct of political opponents is evaluated.

Such a strategy illustrates the relationship between ethos and argumentation. The president's image is constructed not only through explicit statements about himself but also through the distinctions he establishes between his own actions and those of others. As Charaudeau (2005) suggests, political credibility and legitimacy are closely related to the ways in which political actors position themselves within competing interpretations of events.

The analysis nevertheless distinguishes between the president's self-presentation and the objective evaluation of his political conduct. The speech demonstrates an attempt to construct an ethos of accountability; it does not independently establish whether the audience accepts this representation.

The alternation between *je* and *nous* is central to the construction of presidential identity in both speeches. The first-person singular foregrounds individual agency, particularly when Macron refers to decisions, commitments, and the exercise of presidential responsibilities. Such constructions establish the president as an identifiable institutional actor capable of making decisions and assuming responsibility for them.

In the December 2024 address, this individual agency is complemented by collective references to national achievements. Discussing the reconstruction of Notre-Dame de Paris and the organisation of the Olympic and Paralympic Games, Macron states: "*Et bien nous l'avons fait*" ("Well, we did it").

The pronoun *nous* constructs a collective agent whose identity extends beyond the president himself. The achievement is represented as the result of coordinated efforts involving public institutions, workers, volunteers, and other participants. Rather than claiming exclusive authorship, the president positions himself within a broader national community capable of accomplishing shared objectives.

This collective framing also performs an argumentative function. Past achievements become evidence of the nation's capacity to overcome present difficulties. By recalling successful collective action, the speech supports a broader narrative in which political obstacles can be overcome through determination, coordination, and a clear direction.

A comparable but contextually different use of collective agency appears in the March 2025 address: "*Nous devons faire des choix pour l'Ukraine et pour la sécurité des Français et des Européens sans tarder*." The construction *nous devons* represents decision-making as a collective obligation connected with French and European security.

In this context, *nous* extends beyond the immediate national community towards a broader European political framework. The collective subject is associated with the responsibility to respond to international uncertainty and to consider the strategic consequences of political inaction.

The comparison illustrates that the meaning of *nous* depends on the political situation. In the domestic address, it helps construct a narrative of national achievement and unity. In the international address, it contributes to the representation of shared security responsibilities. In both cases, the pronoun connects presidential leadership to a collective identity.

The interaction between *je* and *nous* therefore reveals an important feature of presidential ethos. Individual agency allows the president to present himself as responsible and decisive, while collective agency situates presidential action within a broader community. This relationship enables the discourse to combine institutional authority with identification and solidarity.

Direct address contributes to the relational dimension of presidential ethos. Expressions such as *Françaises, Français* and *mes chers compatriotes* establish the French population as the intended audience of the presidential message. The latter formulation combines national identification with an explicit expression of relational proximity.

In the December 2024 address, direct communication with citizens is particularly important because the speech concerns institutional instability and political disagreement. The president does not merely describe events; he addresses citizens as members of the political community whose decisions and expectations form part of the surrounding democratic context.

The pronoun *vous* helps establish this relationship by positioning the audience as the direct recipient of explanation and justification. Citizens are represented not simply as passive observers of institutional developments but as participants in the political process.

A similar strategy appears in the March 2025 address, which opens by acknowledging public concern: "*Vous êtes en effet légitimement inquiets devant les évènements historiques en cours qui bouleversent l'ordre mondial*." The phrase *légitimement inquiets* recognises that concern about the international situation is understandable within the circumstances described.

This acknowledgement contributes to an ethos of attentiveness. The president presents himself as recognising the audience's concerns before moving towards the justification of political action. The statement also establishes the interpretative framework for subsequent references to security, defence, and European coordination.

Direct address therefore performs more than a formal communicative function. It helps construct a relationship in which citizens are treated as relevant participants in the political situation. However, the presence of such strategies does not establish that citizens actually feel close to the president or accept his interpretation of events. The analysis identifies projected proximity rather than measured public reception.

Modal expressions play a significant role in the construction of political authority because they frame actions in terms of necessity, obligation, intention, or possibility. In crisis communication, these linguistic forms can help present political decisions as responses to urgent circumstances rather than as purely discretionary choices.

In the March 2025 address, the construction *nous devons faire des choix* expresses necessity and places decision-making within a framework of collective responsibility. The president

presents the international situation as requiring a response and connects that response to the security of France and Europe.

The formulation contributes to an ethos of decisiveness by establishing a relationship between the interpretation of the situation and the proposed course of action. The president appears as a leader capable of identifying a challenge and articulating the need for a collective response.

A related pattern appears in the December 2024 address: "*Nous ne pouvons nous permettre ni les divisions ni l'immobilisme*" ("We cannot afford either divisions or inaction"). The negative modal construction frames division and political immobility as unacceptable within the argument developed by the speaker.

The statement establishes a contrast between collective action and the consequences attributed to political fragmentation. Rather than simply expressing a preference for unity, Macron presents unity and action as necessary conditions for responding to the situation.

This construction also narrows the range of positions represented as politically appropriate. Continued disagreement is evaluated negatively in the context of the president's argument, while coordinated action is associated with responsible leadership.

Nevertheless, modality should not be interpreted as proof that a particular decision is objectively necessary. Its function in the present analysis is to demonstrate how the speaker linguistically constructs necessity and commitment. The persuasive force of these expressions depends on the wider argument, the institutional position of the speaker, and the audience's interpretation.

The comparison suggests that modal language supports different dimensions of presidential ethos across the two contexts. In the domestic crisis address, it contributes to the representation of institutional continuity and the rejection of political immobility. In the international address, it supports the presentation of security policy and European coordination as collective responsibilities.

Political ethos is also constructed through the evaluation of other actors. Expressions of responsibility, irresponsibility, order, and disorder allow the speaker to distinguish between conduct presented as legitimate and conduct represented as problematic.

In the December 2024 address, Macron's reference to *l'irresponsabilité des autres* establishes a contrast between his own claimed acceptance of responsibility and the actions attributed to political opponents. The expression contributes to an ethos of seriousness and accountability while simultaneously discrediting alternative political positions.

References to *le désordre* reinforce this contrast by associating certain parliamentary actions with institutional instability. The president's self-representation as a defender of continuity is strengthened through the negative evaluation of conduct presented as contributing to disorder. This is an example of contrastive ethos construction: the speaker's image is established partly through the representation of an alternative political identity. The strategy is significant because political credibility is frequently negotiated through competing interpretations of responsibility and legitimacy.

The March 2025 address employs a different evaluative framework. Rather than concentrating primarily on domestic parliamentary opponents, the speech foregrounds international insecurity and the challenges facing European states. The representation of external threats

establishes the context in which stronger defence capabilities and coordinated action are presented as necessary.

The comparison reveals that evaluative language is sensitive to the nature of the crisis. In domestic political communication, it helps distinguish the president from opposing political actors. In international security communication, it contributes to defining the threat environment and legitimising collective strategic action.

In both cases, evaluation participates in the construction of presidential authority. However, the researcher must distinguish between the speaker's interpretation of political events and independently established facts. Discourse analysis examines how evaluations are produced and what functions they perform; it does not automatically validate the political claims contained in the speech.

Collective identity constitutes another important dimension of presidential ethos. In the December 2024 address, references to Notre-Dame de Paris and the Olympic and Paralympic Games establish a narrative of national achievement. These examples are used to demonstrate that France possesses the capacity to overcome difficulties when a clear objective is combined with collective effort.

The argument connects specific achievements to a broader representation of national capability. By recalling successful projects, the president constructs a narrative in which the nation's previous accomplishments become a resource for interpreting present difficulties.

The emphasis on collective contribution is particularly significant. Achievements are associated not only with political leadership but also with the work of numerous individuals. This allows the president to claim a role in establishing direction while recognising the contributions of a broader community.

In the March 2025 address, collective identification extends beyond France to encompass Europe. Macron states: "*L'avenir de l'Europe ne peut se décider à Washington ou à Moscou*" ("Europe's future cannot be decided in Washington or Moscow").

The formulation constructs European political agency by presenting Europe's future as a matter that should be determined through European decision-making rather than imposed by external powers. The modal construction *ne peut se décider* frames external determination as incompatible with the political autonomy defended in the speech.

This contributes to an ethos of strategic leadership. Macron presents himself as a political actor advocating the capacity of European countries to make decisions concerning their own security and future. European identity becomes a basis for collective responsibility rather than merely a geographical or cultural reference.

The comparison between the two speeches reveals related forms of collective identification. The December address foregrounds national unity and the capacity of France to achieve shared objectives, while the March address situates French political responsibility within a broader European security framework.

In both cases, collective identity helps connect presidential authority to the interests of a wider political community. Leadership is represented as meaningful not only because the president possesses institutional power but also because he claims to articulate shared objectives and coordinate responses to common challenges.

The analysis demonstrates that presidential ethos cannot be reduced to a single quality such as credibility, decisiveness, or solidarity. It emerges through the interaction of individual agency, institutional responsibility, direct address, evaluative language, and collective identification.

In the December 2024 address, Macron's ethos is closely associated with accountability, institutional continuity, and the evaluation of parliamentary conduct. The first-person singular foregrounds presidential agency, while collective references connect political leadership to national achievements and the capacity for coordinated action.

In the March 2025 address, presidential ethos is constructed through the interpretation of international security risks, expressions of collective necessity, and appeals to European strategic autonomy. The president presents leadership as a capacity to identify threats and articulate a coordinated response.

These differences indicate that the discursive construction of presidential identity changes according to the communicative situation. Domestic political instability requires the president to explain controversial decisions and position himself in relation to competing political actors. International insecurity requires him to define collective interests, articulate strategic priorities, and present a framework for coordinated action.

Authority and proximity are therefore best understood as complementary but potentially tension-filled dimensions of presidential ethos. Authority allows the president to present himself as a responsible decision-maker, whereas proximity connects presidential action with citizens and collective values. Their interaction enables the discourse to represent individual leadership as serving broader political interests.

The alternation between *je* and *nous* is particularly revealing in this respect. Individual agency establishes the president as a decision-maker, while collective agency connects his actions to the nation or Europe. Direct address strengthens the relationship with the audience, and modal expressions frame collective action as a responsibility arising from the circumstances described.

These patterns support the view that presidential ethos is a dynamic discursive construction rather than a fixed personal characteristic. Its representation depends on linguistic choices, argumentative strategies, institutional expectations, and the political context in which communication takes place.

This study has examined the discursive construction of presidential ethos in Emmanuel Macron's crisis communication through a qualitative comparison of two official presidential addresses delivered in December 2024 and March 2025. The analysis has focused on the relationship between institutional authority, personal responsibility, collective proximity, modality, evaluative language, and political identity.

The findings indicate that presidential ethos is constructed through the interaction of several discursive resources. Explicit references to personal responsibility contribute to the representation of accountability, while the contrastive evaluation of political opponents allows the speaker to defend his own position and challenge alternative interpretations of events. Personal pronouns organise the relationship between individual presidential agency and collective political responsibility, while direct address helps establish a communicative relationship with citizens.

Modal expressions contribute to the representation of decisive leadership by framing political action as necessary or collectively required. References to national achievements and European security further demonstrate how collective identity can support presidential legitimacy and connect individual leadership to broader political objectives.

The comparison also reveals differences between domestic and international crisis communication. In the December 2024 address, institutional continuity, accountability, and the evaluation of parliamentary conduct are particularly prominent. In the March 2025 address, the emphasis shifts towards international security, European solidarity, and strategic autonomy. These differences suggest that presidential ethos is context-sensitive and adapts to the specific demands of each communicative situation.

The principal contribution of the study lies in its examination of authority and proximity as interconnected dimensions of presidential ethos. Macron's speeches demonstrate how the president can represent himself as an individual decision-maker while simultaneously presenting political action as serving collective interests. This relationship provides a useful analytical perspective for investigating leadership in contemporary French political discourse.

The study is limited by its focus on two speeches and its qualitative methodology. Further research could examine a larger corpus of presidential addresses, compare Macron's discourse with that of other French presidents, and investigate how media coverage and public responses contribute to the reception of presidential ethos. Such work would help distinguish between the image projected through discourse and the image attributed to political leaders by different audiences.

In conclusion, the analysis demonstrates that presidential ethos in crisis communication is constructed through the interaction of linguistic choices, political argumentation, institutional responsibility, and collective identification. Examining these relationships contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how political leadership is represented and legitimised in French presidential discourse.

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