

MAGA: An (Extra-) Linguistic Analysis of Donald Trump's Speeches in the 2016 US Presidential Campaign

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Abstract

The article deals with the election of Donald Trump as the 45th President of the United States and aims to point out the linguistic and non-linguistic factors that led to the victory. The election results came as a surprise to a large proportion of the world, but looking back, it was intriguing to analyse whether the reasons for his victory had been present in his speeches, and whether his triumph could have been predicted using discourse analysis.

Keywords: Donald Trump, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, rhetoric, semiotics of fashion

The aim of the present article is to show that even though Donald Trump's speeches seemed to be oversimplified, as well as not well prepared, he was heavily criticised and ridiculed during the campaign for his use of language. These factors may have been the reason why he managed to win. His accent, style, register, rhetoric devices, body language and outfits all served the purpose of helping him to political power by conveying the notion of being authentic and an outsider to the political sphere.

The examined speeches of the President were the following: *Announcing Candidacy for President (Announcement Speech)* in New York City, 16 June, 2015; *Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland (Accepting Nomination)*, Ohio, July 21, 2016; *Remarks in New York City Accepting Election as the 45th President of the United States (Accepting Presidency)* delivered on November 9, 2016. Along with watching the speeches online on *YouTube*, the transcripts of the above texts were retrieved from the website of *The American Presidency Project*™, except for the *Announcement Speech*, where I used the transcript provided by *time.com*.

My original assumption was that by finding elements consistently used in the texts and in their deliverance with these I could prove that Trump was an authentic personality using the same language and always acting in the same manner. Donald Trump had been a household name for decades before the 2016 Presidential Election, which meant that his voters had already been familiar with him through his media appearances.

In my research I focused on those aspects that are significant in order to convey one's identity. In Trump's case these were: his nationality, being a straight talking New Yorker, his identity as a businessman and an outsider to politics, as well as the notion that he was one of the people.

In each speech I examined the following: Donald Trump's outfit and its significance, the setting, the audience, the readability and the structure of the text, the topics mentioned, style, lexis, how

he expressed his identity as an American and businessman, his vocabulary focusing on pronoun use, adjectives and most frequently used words, accent, code switching, rhetoric devices and his body language and used quantitative research methods to compare the readability, lexis, pronoun use and style of the speeches.

Readability was calculated on *readable.com*, using the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, which provides insight on the difficulty of the text and what grade level it would be suitable for. The result was that the first and third texts were aimed at just above grade fourth level, while the second text was aimed at grade eight level.

The all-inclusive analysis of Donald Trump's speeches incorporate the fields of discourse analysis, rhetoric, sociolinguistics and semiotics. The focus on the semiotics of fashion and body language is the novelty of my thesis, which shows that through the choice of topics, words, accent, structure of texts, style, outfit and body language Trump had successfully built up the rhetoric of being an American patriot, the political outsider, the average citizen, and the successful businessman.

However, due to the limited length of the presentation delivered on 15 October 2019 and the current article, some topics and aspects, which would have in themselves taken up the whole length, were left out focusing only on the main concepts of the analysis, key terms, research methods and main findings.

Before moving on to the findings, first, the concept of *discourse analysis* has to be introduced. In the *Introduction of The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis* James Paul Gee and Michael Handford define discourse analysis as the study of language in use usually above the sentence level, even though a single sentence or utterance can be analysed in certain cases (Gee & Handford, 2012). In my thesis I applied discourse analysis as my intention was to examine the context, the structure, the topics, the style, the rhetoric devices, the lexis and syntax used by the candidate to show how he was able to connect to his voters by expressing his own identity.

The second key field to be introduced here is *sociolinguistics* that developed in the 1950s in order to bring together the perspectives of linguists and sociologists to define the role of language in society and address the social context of linguistic diversity. (Romaine, 2000).

For my study the most relevant aspects of sociolinguistics are *accent* and *code switching* to show how Mr. Trump was able to connect to white working-class voters as they provided the majority of his voters. According to the *Harvard Business Review Ideacast* of 18 November 2016, one of the key reasons Democrats lost the election was that among Democrats there had not been a focus on the white working class. Trump, on the other hand, was successful in using their blunt language (through his accent) and channelling their anger.

Accents represent varieties in pronunciation (phonetics and phonology) and tell us which country or part of the country the speaker comes from. Based on the research analysing Donald Trump's and Bernie Sander's accent carried out at the University of Texas, in 2016, it can be concluded that both had been using the New York accent, characterised by dropping of the *r*-sound in words like *park* and *war*, as well as the distinctive pronunciation of the vowel in words like *thought*, *caught*, and *daughter* (Bohmann, et al., 2016).

By using his own New York accent and by the consistent word choices, for example, repeating the same extreme adjectives, using simple words and blunt language in his speeches, he was

able to convince people that he was genuine and just as ordinary as anybody else. He spoke differently from politicians and highlighted this fact.

The New York accent is often prized for its aggressiveness which has been noted by researchers in linguistics. Trump's accent became heavier when he was delivering speeches in front of New York crowds (Bohmann, et al., 2016). This could be considered *code switching*, but as he never abandoned it or exchanged it to another one this phenomenon did not cause any harm.

Code switching may occur in all multilingual and monolingual communities when speakers switch among languages or varieties of the different languages that they are able to use, or a speaker may use a different variation of the language depending on the circumstances. The choice is not arbitrary, and through the selection of one language over another or one variety of the same language over another, speakers display what may be called 'acts of identity', choosing the groups with whom they wish to identify (Romaine, 2000). In connection with presidential campaign speeches, the topic of code switching has a great significance. Earlier candidates and presidents were accused of code switching in their speeches, and their opponents tried to use this as a weapon against them to undermine their credibility. The absence of code switching played an important part. Using his own New York accent made him credible, even if occasionally in front of New York audiences the accent was stronger than in other cases, it did not undermine people's trust in him, unlike in the case of his opponent.

Apart from code switching, the notion of registers was introduced. Registers are the text varieties of a language associated with particular situations of use. Different types of texts have different linguistic characteristics with systematic patterns of variation that can be investigated (Biber, 2012).

Another crucial notion related to register is that of style, which can range from formal to informal depending on social context, relationship of the participants, social class, sex, age, physical environment, and topic (Romaine, 2000). The more formal a situation is the more formal style is used usually to conform to the favoured and educated norms of our society (Spolsky, 2003).

However, in certain cases a speaker may opt to consciously use a less or more formal style. This is what in sociolinguistics Spolsky calls *audience design*. The speaker chooses a level of speech according to the audience they are addressing. Analysing Donald Trump's campaign speeches, this idea was very important and in order to measure formality the number of instances when the passive voice was used was counted. The situation might have called for a more formal style, but the candidate chose to use a less formal language in order to speak to his audience.

Apart from sociolinguistics, rhetoric was another larger field involved in the study, as I looked for rhetorical devices used in Trump's campaign speeches. Rhetoric which is about discourse and persuasion has been concerned with political language use since ancient times (Keith & Lundberg, 2008). The original standpoint was that Trump used a limited range of rhetoric devices which may have been another way for him to prove that he was an outsider to politics.

The following list of rhetoric devices is based on the book written by Keith and Lundberg with additional rhetorical devices from the e-book: *A Handbook of Rhetorical Devices* by Robert A. Harris. Examples for the devices are cited from the analysed speeches. The most widespread rhetoric device used was repetition.

Repetition is a common figure in everyday speech. It might be used by repeating words or phrases or repeating sounds. It is a useful tool to make the speaker's main ideas memorable, and it also adds emotional force. An example from Trump's campaign announcement speech is, "Our country is in serious trouble. We don't have victories anymore. We used to have victories, but we don't have them."

Parallelism or parallel syntax is when the same structure is repeated as successive sentences or clauses. It adds balance, rhythm and clarity to the sentence. Any sentence element can be paralleled, any number of times (Harris, 1997). An example from the *Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio*:

We Will Make America Strong Again.
We Will Make America Proud Again.
We Will Make America Safe Again.
And We Will Make America Great Again.

Anaphora is the repetition of the same word or phrase at the beginning of successive clauses. Antistrophe repeats the endings of successive phrases. *Interlacement* combines anaphora and antistrophe by repeating phrases both at the beginning and at the ending of sentences. The above cited example from the end of the *Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio* provides an example for this, as well.

Repetition of sounds may be alliteration, when the initial sounds of successive words are repeated, for example, "illegal immigrant" or rhyme, which is the repetition of final sounds, like in "never ever".

A *rhetorical question* is a question that does not expect a literal answer. It can serve to make the audience say the obvious answer or to provoke thought:

"Last quarter, it was just announced our gross domestic product— a sign of strength, right? But not for us. It was below zero. Whoever heard of this? It's never below zero."

The second larger category of rhetoric devices is called tropes. These are key building blocks of rhetoric style because they allow the speaker to substitute indirect or less literal words for direct or more literal ones.

The most well-known trope is *metaphor*, which means carrying another meaning beyond its literal one. In his *Announcement Speech* Trump claimed that, "the U.S. has become a dumping ground for everybody else's problems." which is an example of a metaphor.

Tropes also include *metonymy*, which replaces the literal meaning commonly associated with a word, concept, or an object with another meaning. For example, "together, we will lead our party back to the White House, and we will lead our country back to safety, prosperity, and peace."

The last important trope is *synecdoche*, which is the substitution of a part of something for the whole, or the whole of something for the part as in the *Acceptance Speech*: "America will no longer settle for anything less than the best.", where America refers to the citizens of the country, which is part of the continent called North America.

Rhetoric is the art of persuasion, which according to Kenneth Burke works through the notion of identification, which is the perceived sympathy, empathy and analogy between speaker and audience. When people listen to someone and they identify with them, it is because of the same experiences that they have had (Keith & Lundberg, 2008).

At the time, the 2016 presidential election was claimed to be about emotion, not facts. People were focused on their feeling of abandonment rather than policy proposals. They felt disrespected, and wanted someone to reflect and channel that anger (Harvard Business Review, 2016). In this way, the audience was able to identify with Trump, who expressed the same emotions that they were feeling.

Trump's use of rhetoric devices was mainly limited to repetition of individual words and phrases. This provided him with the opportunity to emphasise the most important ideas in a simple form. He also repeated ideas several times in the speeches, but in a paraphrased form. Some more complex structures, like parallelism could be found especially in the *Address Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio* which was written for him.

Metaphors, metonyms and synecdoche were also used occasionally, but they were not characteristic features of the texts, while repetition could definitely be considered a signature move of the President.

Semiotics is the study of signs and the last field involved in the current study. It has been long established that there is a connection between the body, the mind and culture. The process that interlinks these is semiosis, the production and interpretation of signs (Sebeok, 2001).

Apart from verbal signs, there are numerous non-verbal signs which need examining in case of a public speaker. In my thesis I examined Donald Trump's outfit choices and body language and found that Trump's outfit choice reinforced his campaign slogan, "Make America Great Again", an allusion to Ronald Reagan's slogan from the 1980's. Just like Trump, Reagan was also an outsider to politics, and Trump's outfit choice was the style favoured by businessmen in the 1980's. The USA then economically prospered and he promised to bring this back.

Trump's characteristic campaign uniform consisted of charcoal, grey and navy suits that were boxy and presented a more traditional view of masculinity, making him look large and broad-shouldered, a bold coloured, usually red (the colour of the Republican Party) 1980s power tie, and a white shirt. The suit was usually unbuttoned, to highlight the tie (Beckwith, 2016). The blue of the suit, the red of the tie and the white of the shirt also represent the colours of the American flag and conveyed the message of being patriotic.

According to Allan and Barbara Pease, today's politicians understand that politics is about image and appearance and most high-profile politicians now have personal body language consultants to help them appear being sincere, caring, and honest (Pease, 2004). Trump's body language and outfit reinforced his campaign messages. His body language showed that he felt dominant, his facial expressions reflected his voters' and his own anger, while his hand gestures emphasised the fact that he knew what he was talking about. He was able to create a good rapport with his audience and connected to people on every level.

In a video on the BBC website body language expert Mary Civiello explained that New Yorkers in general use many hand gestures while speaking, and Donald Trump was no exception. In her opinion, Trump had not been coached on body language before the election, he used these

gestures instinctively, which may be another sign of authenticity (Taylor-Coleman & Bressanin, 2016).

Robert Phipps, another body language expert, who also studied Trump, concluded that watching him was fascinating because the thoughts that went through his head were displayed on his face, in his posture and through his hand movements (Jones, 2017).

As the focus of my thesis was to explain the linguistic factors that contributed to the success of Donald Trump, I focused on three of his speeches delivered in the course of the 2016 presidential campaign as well as his campaign slogan. The speeches were chosen based on the timeline of the campaign. My intention was to focus on those speeches that were delivered at particularly important milestones of the campaign and could be seen by millions of people as their message spoke to the whole nation.

Here, I would like to present the most frequently used words to illustrate the simple language use, especially in the third text that should have been the most important one as Trump was addressing the nation acknowledging his victory.

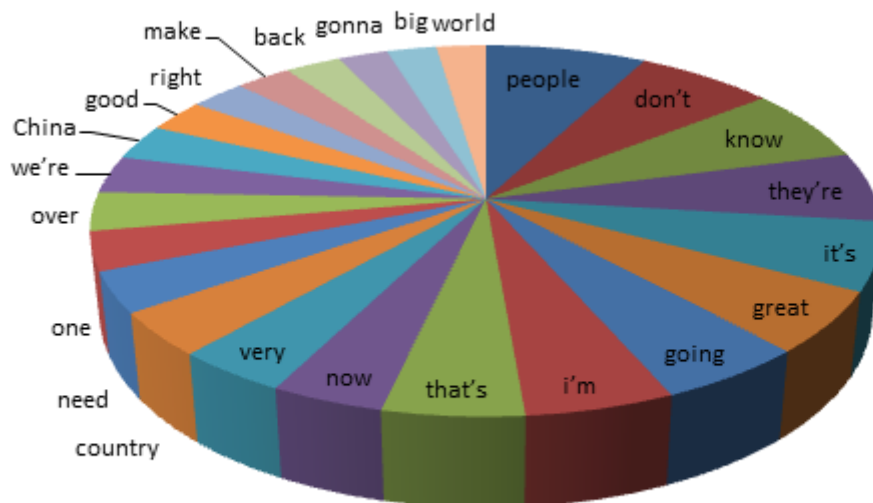


Figure 1 The Top 24 words of the Announcement Speech

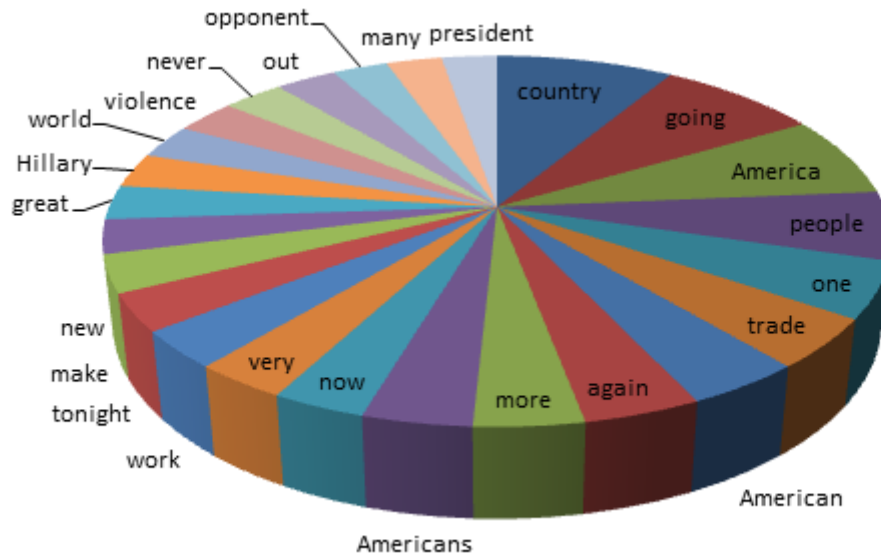


Figure 2: The top 25 words used in the Accepting Nomination Speech

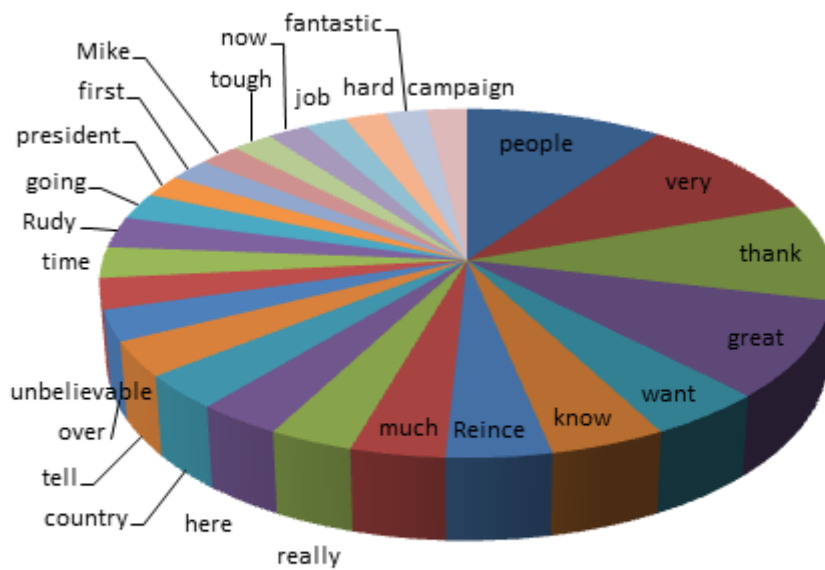


Figure 3: Remarks in New York City Accepting Election as the 45th President of the United States

In all the speeches analysed above, Trump used extreme adjectives and adverbs that include “special, great, tremendous/tremendously, unbelievable, fantastic, incredible, wonderful”. However, negative extreme adjectives, and the adjective “good” were absent in the third speech, and the word “bad” was only used once, but superlatives as “fullest, greatest, strongest, the

best” were used more often than previously. “Very” and “very, very” were used 24 times in the text. He described his own victory as a “very, very historic victory”.

Although due to the limitations of my research, this analysis could not cover all the aspects of Donald Trump’s campaign rhetoric of expressing his identity, it provided some insight into an all-inclusive study involving linguistic and extra-linguistic analysis. The President conveyed the notion of being authentic and expressed his identity with the use of language by frequently referring to his business career and his own highly successful brand. This could sound convincing to people because it made them believe that if he had managed to achieve this for himself, then he might be able to do the same for the whole nation and, “rebuild the brand of the United States”.

He appealed to the white working-class voters not only with the topics he raised, his word choices and his body language, but also with the way he dressed. He expressed ideas in a simple form, dressed like an average person, appealed to the values of the white working class and made them believe that he was the candidate who could work for their benefit.

Further studies could be carried out to compare the presidential campaign of 2020 to 2016. In the 2016 campaign Trump pledged to bring the American dream back. Now as we are approaching the next election, it is time for Americans to see how successful he has been in delivering what he promised to the nation and how he could “Make America Great Again”.

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