



Building intimacy through linguistic choices, text structure and voices in political discourse



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A B S T R A C T

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This paper analyzes linguistic variables employed strategically in various instances of political communication to present different levels of intimacy in relation to a continuum between contextuality and formality (Heylighen and Dewaele, 2002) in political talk. Within a given situation, political actors express these choices also in relation to a broader context around their personas: the Message (Lempert and Silverstein, 2012, 2003). The linguistic variables under consideration range from concrete units such as lexical choices (i.e., “marked register usages” [Koven, 2007; Myers-Scotton, 2001], to narratives of belonging (Duranti, 2006), to textual organization and instances of intertextuality (Blackledge, 2005; Fairclough, 1992, 2003; Wodak, 2008), in particular, by means of different voices (Bakhtin, 1981) politicians bring into the here-and-now moment of discourse. The data for the analysis is obtained from different instances of political talk (speeches and debates) and different politicians (Palin, Biden, George W. Bush and Obama). The linguistic variables display different levels of formality indexing two Aristotelian modes of persuasion: Pathos and Ethos.

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1. Introduction

In this paper, I argue that the politicians’ options of distancing themselves from their audiences by evoking public and political authority (Ethos), or building intimacy with their audience (Pathos), are goals in the political agenda, created primarily through linguistic choices. Those linguistic choices are analyzed in different communicative events of political talk.

Politicians and their teams of speech writers or “spin doctors” (Wodak, 2009: 2) choose one path or another, depending on the topic, the audiences, the idiosyncrasies of the personality of the political actor’s “lingual biography” (Johnstone, 1999), and the “Message” developed around their political persona (Lempert and Silverstein, 2012). The Message can determine, for instance, the level of contextuality or formality (Heylighen and Dewaele, 2002) a political team chooses for a political actor to display on stage. Those choices reflect different levels of intimacy with the audience, represented by specific linguistic resources and representing the Aristotelian modes of persuasion Ethos or Pathos (Kennedy, 1991). This paper proposes linguistic variables in the political arena which evoke different levels of (in)formality associated with Aristotle’s modes of persuasion, in particular Ethos and Pathos.

Other studies have argued that formality versus informality “can theoretically be distinguished by linguistic features, such as choices of words, syntactic structures, semantic and pragmatic meanings, and multi-textual levels of discourse (Li et al., 2015 n. pag. Web). Reyes examined semiotic resources and linguistic variables in political speeches (Reyes, 2014). This study aims to

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expand the applicability of those variables to other instances of political talk and, at the same time, contextualize political excerpts within specific frames of formality responding to the wider context surrounding political actors: The Message.

Politicians construct political talks with two goals in mind: (1) to fit their own political agenda in the communicative event format (i.e., debate), and yet show authority and command of the topics debated (Ethos) and (2) to obtain support from the majority of the audience (middle class in the context of the U.S.) by appealing to their emotions, subjectivity and commonalities with their audiences (Pathos).

2. Data

This paper looks at different communicative events where four different U.S. political actors from two different parties interact with different social actors and audiences. Through the analysis of data, linguistic variables emerge in different settings. This study analyzes the transcripts of the speeches given by George W. Bush at Fort Benning, Georgia and Barack Obama at West Point, New York, discussing the escalation of troops in two different armed conflicts, Iraq (on January 11, 2007), and Afghanistan (on December 1, 2009).¹ And the Vice Presidential debate between Governor Sarah Palin and Senator Joe Biden held at Washington University on October 2, 2008, and moderated by Gwen Ifill.²

2.1. The political actors

George W. Bush was U.S. president from 2001 to 2008. “Mr. Bush 2000 Message was one of trusted, and trustworthy businesslike CEO Christian” (Lempert and Silverstein, 2012: 66). After the 9/11 attacks, he was considered “a war president” (Lempert and Silverstein, 2012) but “his Message in the second, 2004, round came down to the stand-tall Texas sheriff on the lawless terrain” (Lempert and Silverstein, 2012).

Barack Obama appeared in the U.S. political arena as a new orator from Illinois in 2004 at the Democratic National Convention “combining the Lincolnesque plain style and the constructional majesty of Mr. Kennedy’s lofty and lengthy periods, [his speech] was delivered in quasi-sermonesque tones—framed by Mr. Obama’s demographic [...] could only remind people of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.” (Lempert and Silverstein, 2012: 33). He was first elected president in 2008 and re-elected in 2012.

Alaska governor Sarah Palin was presented as a candidate for the vice presidency in autumn 2008. Even though she appeared at first as a new, surprise political figure, a disastrous television interview with ABC news anchor Katie Couric provoked numerous critics to point at her lack of readiness for such a high national office (Lempert and Silverstein, 2012: 39). Lempert and Silverstein described her discourse as “of long, asyntactic strings of readymades that are uttered in assembly-line sequence, with almost random, if any, connectives between them” (Lempert and Silverstein, 2012: 101).

Joe Biden Jr. was senator from Delaware from 1973 to 2009. In 2009 he became Vice President of the United States, joining President Obama in office. In his political style Biden often appeals to the middle and working class, often with narrations of belonging and life events that present him as a working class, self-made man as we will see in the following analysis.

2.2. Political communication, speeches and debates

Communicative events such as political speeches or debates are built through numerous contextual cues and indexical meanings (Cornish, 2008). As audiences, we make sense of such events, interpreting and evaluating the different nuances taking into account our “collective memory,” (Hart et al., 2005) and considering our shared beliefs (Beasley, 2004). Political discourse is a planned discourse (Ochs, 1979) or pre-planned discourse with intentionality (Capone, 2010: 2965), their team and political actors attempt to calculate (to their best) the effect and reception of the message. In this sense the question of addressivity in political communication is crucial and related to recognition (Taylor, 1994): “Political communication requires ‘recognizing’ and thereby establishing co-membership” with specific identities and its demographic realizations (i.e., age, class, sex, religion) of the diverse electorate and simultaneously excluding others (Lempert and Silverstein, 2012: 111).

Political debates are often televised and are an important part of the political campaign since they allow parties to capture the attention of the undecided electorate. Candidates are tested not only in relation to how well they can deliver their messages but also on how they (re)act to their opponents’ comments in an interactive setting where they are supposed to be good listeners and show manners, respect, patience, and remain calm. Debates normally have two or more candidates and a moderator who asks them the same question in turns and allots each candidate the same amount of time to answer the questions. The candidates alternate to answer every other question first, and often, follow-ups are allowed by the moderator. Questions are normally divided in thematic sections such as economy, foreign affairs, etc. When they are televised, the audiences not only consist of the people in the studio in the here-and-now moment of the political event, but also the mass of television audience, as well as those who watch is later through post-event audio and video clips (Lempert and Silverstein, 2012: 151).

¹ The speeches can be located at the website [PresidentialRhetoric.com](http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com) (<http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com>). Bush’s speech can be found at: <http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/01.11.07.html> Obama’s speech can be found at: <http://www.presidentialrhetoric.com/speeches/12.01.09.html>.

² The official transcript of the debate can be found at the Commission on Presidential Debates website: <http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=2008-debate-transcript-2>.

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