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The appeal to political sentiment: An analysis of Donald Trump's and Hillary Clinton's speech themes and discourse strategies in the 2016 US presidential election

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated Hillary Clinton's and Donald Trump's speeches during the 2016 presidential election to identify their sentiments and discourse themes and strategies by using machine-based methods, including computerized sentence-level sentiment analysis, structural topic modeling for themes, and *word2vec* exploration for thematic associations. The machine-based automatic analyses were also complemented by a qualitative examination of the speech data motivated by the top thematic terms identified by the automatic analyses. The results of the study revealed that Trump's speeches were significantly more negative than Clinton's. The results also provided evidence supporting many previous findings regarding Clinton's and Trump's discourse/rhetoric styles and major campaign themes produced by studies using different research methods. The results of this study might also help explain Trump's victory despite the significant more negative sentiment in his discourse.

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1. Introduction: Background and rationale

An important line of research on the 2016 US presidential election and its surprising results is the exploration of the language and discourse/rhetoric strategies used by the two main candidates, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton (e.g., Degani, 2016; Enli, 2017; Lakoff, 2017; Ott, 2017; Quam and Ryshina-Pankova, 2016; Savoy, 2017a, 2017b; Sclafani, 2018; Wang and Liu, 2017). These studies were rich in approaches, perspectives, and foci. While some of them are essentially qualitative in nature (e.g., Enli, 2017; Lakoff, 2017; Sclafani, 2018), the others are more quantitatively-oriented corpus-driven quantitative studies (e.g., Degani, 2016; Savoy, 2017a, 2017b; Wang and Liu, 2017). In terms of research foci, the qualitative studies concentrated on the critical examination of the language and discourse strategies the candidates used whereas the corpus-driven quantitative studies focused mainly on various linguistic and semantic features of the candidates' language and how these features reflected and/or affected the candidates' communication styles and campaign themes. Despite their differences in methodology, these studies have all provided interesting findings on various aspects of the candidates' use of language

and discourse during the election. One finding that is of special interest to the present study is Savoy's (2017b) discovery of a higher frequency of negative emotion words by Trump than by Clinton. While some political commentary essays have also addressed the noticeable negativity in Trump's speeches (e.g., Golshan, 2016), Savoy (2017b) appears to have been the only study that touched on this issue, but it did so in passing as the issue was not a main research question of the study. Given this fact, further research focusing on this issue, i.e., discourse sentiment, is therefore warranted because it may help not only test Savoy's (2017b) and other previous research's findings but also explore how and/or why the negativity of Trump's discourse might have helped his election victory. Against this backdrop, the present study aims to render a sentiment, discourse, and thematic examination of Trump's and Clinton's speeches during the 2016 election by using methods different from those used in the existing studies.

1.1. Review of related studies on the two candidates' speeches

1.1.1. Qualitative studies

Of the qualitative studies, Lakoff (2017) rendered a critical analysis aimed at showing how Trump's "idiosyncracies of discourse" and his victory "compromised the culture's notions of 'truth' – via a continuum from 'lie' through 'post-truth,' 'truthiness,' and 'alternative facts' to 'truth'" (p. 595). A point in her analysis

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particularly relevant to the present study is that Trump's idiosyncratic "post truth" discourse relied heavily on "appeals to emotion and personal belief" (Lakoff, 2017, p. 604). Sclafani (2018) provided a book-length sociolinguistic study of Trump's communication style and metadiscourse, focusing particularly on his political identity construction discourse. With ample examples, Sclafani (2018) demonstrated how Trump's discourse centered on creating a negative "other" through "negative stereotypes" (81) and on juxtaposing this negative "other" against a self-righteous "us." In other words, negativity figured prominently in Trump's language.

Enli's (2017) and Ott's (2017) studies focused on the candidates' use of Twitter. Enli (2017) approached it from three perspectives: the "historical development" of the use of social media in political campaigns, the "level of interaction with voters," and the level of "professionalisation" of the campaigns' use of Twitter (p. 51). One key finding of the study is that while Clinton followed the controlled and professionalized communication style, Trump exhibited a spontaneous "amateurish yet authentic style" (p. 50). Unlike Enli (2017), Ott (2017) did a case study of Trump's tweets only. Based on a close investigation of the characteristics of Trump's tweets, Ott (2017) concluded that "Twitter privileges discourse that is simple, impulsive, and uncivil" (p. 59) and that such discourse has resulted in "post truth" or "falsehoods" (66), a point also emphasized by Lakoff (2017) as noted above. It is important to note that similar findings were also reported by Kreis's (2017) study of Trump's tweets after he won the election, for the results of the latter study also show that "Trump uses an informal, direct, and provoking communication style to construct and reinforce the concept of a homogeneous people and a homeland threatened by the dangerous other" (p. 607).

1.1.2. Corpus-driven quantitative studies

The existing related corpus-driven studies have examined two common issues: (i) the level of linguistics complexity and readability of the candidates' speeches and (ii) the candidates' main themes and discourse strategies. Because linguistic complexity of the candidates' speeches is not an issue examined in the present study, it will not be reviewed. The following review thus focuses on the investigation of Clinton's and Trump's speech themes and discourse practices.

Using Systemic Functional Linguistics' (SFL) Engagement framework, Quam and Ryshina-Pankova (2016) analyzed the audience engagement strategies in the state primary election victory speeches of Trump, Clinton, and Bernie Sanders. The results of their quantification of the types of engagement strategies each candidate used show that although the extent of the use of the two main strategy categories of heteroglossic (i.e., statements admitting "the possibility of a competing truth claim") and monoglossic (i.e., statements or "bare assertions" that do not admit such possibility) was similar for the three candidates, Trump "is more prone to long strings of monoglossic statements without the interruption of a heteroglossic assertion" (Quam and Ryshina-Pankova, 2016, p. 147). More importantly, this feature in Trump's speeches "has the effect of presenting a stream of assertions that rarely recognizes or references alternative positions" (Quam and Ryshina-Pankova, 2016, p. 147). The two authors also found that Trump used few different types of engagement moves and more repetitions. However, they argued that "Trump's selection of simplistic, repetitive assertions and denials" might have helped more forcefully convey his messages and appeal to those who shared his views (Quam and Ryshina-Pankova, 2016, p. 154).

Degani (2016) examined both the language complexity levels and the main themes in the Clinton's and Trump's candidacy announcement speeches. For the analysis of the main themes,

Degani (2016) first generated a wordlist from each candidate's speeches and then identified the 30 most frequent content words. One key result from the lexical choice analysis was that while a majority of Clinton's most frequent nouns were people-related (*Americans, families, and women*), those of Trump's were names of adversary countries (*China and Mexico*) and business-related words (*money, billion, and Ford*). Such lexical choice differences, Degani (2016) argues, reveal a stark difference between Clinton's and Trump's speech themes with the former advocating for developing more social/economic equality and the latter calling for a business-oriented solution to America's problems. Furthermore, expressed in much simpler (sometimes crude) language, Trump's business-focused themes formed a "brash and self-aggrandizing" discourse, "promoting an anti-intellectual culture of fear, suspicion and conspiracy (China and Mexico are enemies), and catering to populist anger with extremist proposals (building a wall along the Mexican border)" (Degani, 2016, p. 144).

Savoy's (2017a) study investigated similar lexical and syntactic features and themes of nine candidates' (five Republicans' and four Democrats') debates during the primary election. To determine the thematic concentration of the candidates' speeches, Savoy employed Popescu's (2007, 2009) *h*-point frequency-distribution measure as well as Čech, Garabik, and Altmann's (2015) proportional thematic concentration (PTC) measure. The *h*-point refers to the point in the frequency rank of the word types in a text where the frequency of a given word type is equal to its frequency rank. The words above the *h*-point are usually functional words, but some lexical words in a text may appear above this point and these lexical words are considered "thematic words." Two important relevant findings in this study were that Trump's speeches were marked by "short sentences" and a repetition of "the same arguments with simple words" and that the pronoun *I* was Trump's second most frequently used word behind the article *the* and his "most specific" or prominent thematic term, a fact that reveals a "high intensity of his ego" (Savoy, 2017a, pp. 14–15). Employing essentially the same methodologies, Savoy (2017b) studied Trump's and Clinton's speech style and rhetoric strategies by examining and comparing their informal speeches (interviews and TV debates) and their prepared speeches at meetings/gatherings. One aspect of the study that is particularly relevant to the present study is a "semantic-based analysis" of the two candidates' words and expressions. The author used two computer-based lexical semantic analysis systems developed by Hart (1984) and Tausczik and Pennebaker (2010) respectively to help identify the major themes in the two candidates' speeches. These computer-based analysis systems group words into semantic categories, such as *affect, cognition, exclusive, human, posemo* (positive), and *negemo* (negative). One important finding from the semantic analyses is that Trump used more negative emotion words.

Drawing on Degani's (2016) and Savoy's (2017a, 2017b) studies both methodologically and thematically, Wang and Liu (2017) investigated Trump's speech style against Clinton's and Obama's by looking at their debates and campaign speeches. Besides examining the candidates' linguistic complexity, they also investigated their thematic concentrations using the *h*-point based PTC formula. Their results indicate that "Trump's speeches contain relatively more central themes in his campaign speeches," which might have helped "meet key interests of a large proportion of electorates" (Wang and Liu, 2017, p. 1). However, unlike Savoy (2017b), Wang and Liu (2017) did not conduct a semantic-based analysis and hence no sentiment analysis was conducted. It is thus clear from the above review that while the existing studies have examined various aspects of Trump's and Clinton's speech styles and discourse/rhetoric strategies and produced many important findings, Savoy (2017b) is the only study that touched on sentiment

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