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## An analysis of President Donald Trump's use of language

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Is Trump's unique brand of presidential oratory deliberate and strategic, is it the disjointed output of a disordered mind, or is it something else?

Like him or hate him, President Donald Trump is a unique politician because he doesn't speak like one. In many ways, he's used language to create a brand for himself; one that leverages a feeling of strength, a sense of determination, and an impression that he can get the job done.

Sedensky (2017) points out that Trump's is "a brand of presidential oratory not previously recorded; different from what the public [has] come to expect".

Now, is this deliberate and strategic, or are Trump's explosive noun phrases, self-interruptions, departures from the theme, flashes of memory and side remarks symptomatic of a person with a concentration problem?

Let's look at six of the linguistic devices commonly used in Trumpian speech: hyperbole, repetition and intensifiers; directness; sentence fragments; digressions and segues; grade level; and sales talk.

For or against?
On the one hand, Barton Swaim, one-time speechwriter for former South Carolina Governor Mark Sanford, points out (in Schmitt, 2015) that Trumpian speeches are characterised by broken sentences and bizarre asides.

They're not sustained arguments but rather a mishmash of disjointed statements that don't combine into something greater. Are these the output, as many journalists, academics and scientists suggest, of a disordered mind?

On the other hand, a dissection of Trumpian speech patterns suggests that the unusual way he speaks has its roots in oral culture (Golshan, 2016). He rallies his audiences through impassioned, targeted conversation, even if this is one-sided and usually doesn't follow a clear narrative arc.

Dan Libit, CNBC analyst (quoted in Lakoff, 2017), expresses his belief that Trump is careful and strategic in his use of language, using unique 'tics' like intensifiers, fragments and sales talk to connect with his audience.

1. Hyperbole, repetition and intensifiers
Hyperbole means exaggeration; intensifiers are adverbs used to give force or emphasis, like 'really', 'extremely', 'enormously', etc. To Trump, things are terrible or incredible; best or worst. He uses phrases like "very, very" and "many, many", as well as the rare "super-duper" (Inzaurralde, 2017).

Then, when Trump wants to make a point, he makes it multiple times. But why? Is there "method in what others may portray as his madness" (Inzaurralde, 2017)? Perhaps. Because repetition has important functions. It's used for emphasis, to express solidarity with or validation of another person's point of view, to link ideas in discourse, and to aid in memory. Repetition, including Trumpian favourite "you know?", also builds up trust with a listener.

When Trump refers to Hillary Clinton as "crooked" or cites terrorists as "radical Muslims", he's strengthening those associations through repetition. Trump doesn't repeat phrases accidentally, says Liberman (in Golshan, 2016); "for the most part, he's providing emphasis".

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## 2. Directness

As a billionaire real estate mogul born and raised in New York, Trump has a casual tone and is known for straight talk. He's spoken of ripping up trade deals, he's criticised allies, and he's praised enemies. This is "rhetoric that rarely pierces mainstream political discourse in the US," says McClay (2017).

Moreover, Trump has expressed unapologetic criticism of opponents, religious groups, developing countries, the disabled and women (Schmitt, 2015), in ways that were unacceptable for those who went before him.

How does he get away with it? Trump spins negativity instead of defending against it. If he's accused of racism, he says he's pro-security. If he's accused of sexism, he says he rejects imposed political correctness. Whatever the issue, Trumpian speech puts things into terms that are kinder to his brand.

## 3. Sentence fragments

Fragmented sentences are natural and common in everyday speech, regardless of language and the speaker's geographical origin, social class or educational background. Here's a sample of Trumpian fragments:

"And in 19 — and I will tell you this, and I said it very strongly, years ago, I said — and I love the military, and I want to have the strongest military that we've ever had, and we need it more now than ever."

Why do Trump's fragmented sentences stand out so much? Because they're uncommon in formal public speeches, which are usually written, rehearsed, and read more or less verbatim from a teleprompter. Trump doesn't do things that way. He appears as more relatable because he speaks the way we all do.

What's more, says Lakoff (2017), Trump often starts a sentence and allows his followers to finish the sentence in their minds. They feel empathy and intimacy, an acceptance of what's being said, and good feeling towards him – and this is an unconscious, automatic reaction. Here's a 2018 example:

"We've created associations, millions of people are joining associations. Millions. That were formerly in Obamacare or didn't have insurance. Or didn't have health care. Millions of people. That's gonna be a big bill, you watch. It could be as high as 50 percent of the people. You watch. So that's a big thing."

When Trump's listeners finish his sentences for him, they're able to fill the blanks with sentiments that resonate with them (Inzaurralde, 2017):

"... there is no collusion between certainly myself and my campaign, but I can always speak for myself — and the Russians, zero."

## 4. Digressions and segues

Does Trump stay 'on topic'? "So far as I can discern," says Lakoff (2017), "he is always on topic, but you have to understand what his topic is."

Trumpian dialect is known for sudden switches of theme. Indeed, his frequency of divergence is unusual, says Liberman (in Golshan, 2016), in that he goes off topic far more often than the average person:

"Look, having nuclear – my uncle was a great professor and scientist and engineer, Dr John Trump at MIT; good genes, very good genes, OK, very smart, the Wharton School of Finance, very good, very smart..."

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But topic change in the middle of a sentence is something we all do in conversation, explains Jennifer Sclafani, associate teaching professor in Georgetown University's Linguistics Department; "It's just unusual to hear it from a president…in a public, formal context" (in Inzaurralde, 2017.)

Kristin Kobes Du Mez, a Calvin College historian who's done a comparative study of Trump and Hillary Clinton's speaking styles, agrees that Trumpian speech is "full of non sequiturs" (in Golshan, 2016). They're not actually written to be read; they're written to be spoken, and their apparent incoherence stems from the difference between written and spoken language:

"I didn't wait long. I didn't wait long. I didn't wait long. I wanted to make sure, unlike most politicians, that what I said was correct. Not make a quick statement. The statement I made on Saturday, the first statement, was a fine statement…"

5. Grade level
Trump is known for simple phrases like "Make America great again", "Build the wall", and even short standard words like "win", "sad", and "great."

In an analysis of the spoken content that made up Trump's first 30 000 words in office, he was found to be speaking at a Grade 4 level (Gordon, 2018).

Compare this to President Obama who communicated at a Grade 9 level, and President George W Bush who reached a Grade 7 level.

Specifically, says Expert System (2018), Trump uses an average of 17 words per sentence – a feature similar to Bush at 18 words per sentence – while Obama used longer sentences. The syntactical structure used by Trump makes his speeches easy to read and understand (by high school learners), as were Bush's, while Obama's were more fit for college graduates. Linguistically speaking, Trump's grade level shows a relatively poor performance. But researchers say that the way he speaks mirrors average conversations and may have wooed voters into supporting his campaign.

In terms of oral rhetoric, explains Sedensky (2017), "you want a simpler grade level. That's a more effective way to communicate." King (2017, in NPR) agrees: "Trump's linguistic tics are quite functional in social context."
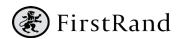
6. Sales talk
David Beaver, linguist at the University of Texas, says Trump mirrors the tactics of advertisers, going with emotional persuasion over rationality. He relies on graphic imagery stirred by vivid words, and language that is more typical of salespeople than statesmen (Inzaurralde, 2017).

Many of Trump's most famous catchphrases – like "Believe me" and "Many people are saying" – are versions of tried-and-tested verbal sales techniques.

Lakoff (2017) explains, for instance, that when Trump says "Believe me," he's using a principle known as 'justified belief' to suggest that he has the requisite expertise and insights for the subsequent belief to be true. This implication is powerful because it shapes the listener's unconsciousness.

"Many people are saying" often comes right before Trump says something baseless. This makes it sound more trustworthy to listeners than just stating the baseless claim, because Trump is implying that he has direct experience with what he's talking about. At a fundamental level, Lakoff says (2018), people are more inclined to believe things that seem to have been shared.

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In conclusion

Is Trump studying cognitive science? How does he know this stuff? Well, he has 50 years of experience as a salesman. He's also loudly contemptuous of the entire genre of political speech-making: "Everybody falls asleep, listening to the same old stuff, the same old lies" (Walsh, 2015), so he veers away from the 'old' rules of statesmanlike rhetoric in favour of his own unique methods.

Combine this experience, contempt and uniqueness with followers who believe that Trump's not the same sort of bad, dumb and dishonest as other politicians, and you have a recipe for spinning disjointed output into a new brand of presidential oratory – which is what I believe Trump has done…
…almost without realising it.

I don't agree with Golshan, Litbit, Beaver and Lakoff, cited above, that Trumpian speech is deliberate and strategic. I also suspect that Trump exhibits a clear reduction in linguistic sophistication over time, opting for simpler word choices and sentence structure in the last two years.

But I don't doubt for a moment that Trump can make his speech look and sound entirely purposeful. Even after the fact. (And that his fans will lap it up.)