

THE “US” VERSUS “THEM” DICHOTOMY: A CASE STUDY OF DONALD TRUMP’S RHETORIC

Rossitsa Hristova

Abstract

This case study explores the use of “Us” versus “Them” dichotomy as a strategy for framing and shaping public opinion in the rhetoric used by Donald Trump in articles published in The New Yorker Magazine. The fact-finding is held by a qualitative research method, particularly textual analysis. Taking into consideration the global rise of nationalism, respectively populist rhetoric, the research attempts to find a correlation between political representation and language. Related to the latter, it aims to analyse focal linguistic features such as inclusive and exclusive pronouns, metaphors, analogies and oppositions. Hence, language is used to create and enhance distinction between an in-group (us) and out-group (them). The findings of the analysis show that the language features function in a way to establish identity, solidarity and not least – opposition, in order to achieve the ultimate goal, that is to say, shaping opinion and attracting support by the in-group and respectively weakening and marginalising the out-group. This research endeavours to prove the strength of the dichotomy “Us versus Them” as a powerful tool for constructing social identities and relationships through language so as to form social dynamics, and shape the political discourse in order to evoke collective action.

Keywords: *in-group, out-group, deixis, metaphor, rhetoric, populism, social identity, political discourse.*

Introduction

This paper aims to analyse the “Us versus Them” dichotomy in publications in the US magazine *The New Yorker*, reviewed from a linguistic perspective. It will also discuss the effects it has as based on rhetorical and philosophical principles since they are strongly correlated with language. From a linguistic perspective, this dichotomy is determined by a discursive strategy as the language is used to create and enhance a distinction between an in-group (us) and out-group (them). It is further defined by specific linguistic choices such as deictic pronouns and words, vocabulary and rhetorical structures because they function in a way to establish identity, solidarity and not least opposition. The ultimate goal of such rhetoric and language used by politicians, inevitably cited by the media, is to draw boundaries, emphasise inclusion and exclusion, therefore creating social cohesion within the group, and marginalising the out-group. The objectives of the research are focused on analysis of linguistic devices - deictic pronouns, lexical choices, rhetorical structures and metaphors in six articles published in *The New Yorker* for the period of May-July 2024. In consequence, I will attempt to explore the use of the aforementioned linguistic devices using the qualitative research method, particularly textual analysis.

For the purposes of the research, I will first elaborate on the definitions of the key terms used thereof. To begin with, one significant language feature is the use of deixis. The literature identifies three deictic categories - personal deixis (I, you, we), also termed deictic pronouns and are broadly referred to as personal pronouns, spatial deixis (this, that, here, there) and temporal deixis (now, today, yesterday). What will be examined in this research is mainly the first category because it provides grounds for distinction between a given group (the in-group) and the opposing one (the outgroup). Levinson (1983:54) accentuates the role of context. Following Lyons (1977) and Fillmore (1977), he introduces two new categories – social deixis, which is the encoding of social distinctions relative of the participant role, a social relationship be-

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tween the speaker and the addressee/s. In addition to that, the discourse deixis is the encoding of reference to portions of the unfolding discourse in which the utterance is located (Levinson, 1983).

Another term that is crucial to the present analysis is the use of metaphors. There are quite a few definitions of what a metaphor is, as the first one is probably the well-established dictionary definition, which reads:

“a word or phrase used to describe somebody/something else, in a way that is different from its normal use, in order to show that the two things have the same qualities and to make the description more powerful, for example *She has a heart of stone*; the use of such words and phrases” (<https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/>)

Additionally, the analysis of metaphors would not be concise without quoting Lakoff, who has been studying them since the 1980s, when he first published the book “Metaphors We Live by”, co-authoring it with Mark Johnson; “The essence of metaphors is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 5).

Firstly, the present study will survey the use of inclusive pronouns, namely “I”, “we”, “us” and “our” versus the exclusive pronouns “they”, “them”, and “their”, and the way the former position the sender of the message and the latter the recipient, be it in the in-group or in the out-group. Secondly, it will attempt to explore the way lexical choices are made in order to frame the in-group in the most positive way. These are specific words and phrases used to present the in-group in the most favourable light possible. Such examples could be the frequent use of “patriots”, “defenders” and so on. On the contrary, there are some specific words that frame and create a negative image of the out-group.

What will be reviewed next is the use of metaphors that convey meaning to words like “war”, “battle”, or “fight” in order to describe the relationship between the in-group and out-group and form interaction as a struggle

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for survival and dominance. Not least of importance, the research will briefly outline the contrasts and binary oppositions, e.g. “freedom versus tyranny”, used to simplify complex situations and make it easier for the audience to align with one side.

Summing up, this research endeavours to prove the strength of the dichotomy “Us versus Them” as a powerful tool for constructing social identities and relationships through language forming social dynamics, shaping the political discourse in order to evoke collective action. Understanding the dichotomy from a linguistic perspective appears to be of significant importance as of how to benefit from language in order to unite or divide, manipulate perceptions, exploit beliefs and ultimately include or exclude. As Van Dijk puts it: “[...] if the Others are ethnically or racially different from Us – but also on a nationalist or xenophobic ideology that aims to defend ‘our’ nation (and its language, customs and culture) against the arrival and large-scale settlement of any strangers. It is precisely through such public discourses as editorials that these kinds of ideologies are expressed and persuasively propagated among readers and hence reproduced in everyday life” (Van Dijk, 2011, p. 7)

The use of language for political purposes is not a new concept. On the contrary, it has existed since Aristotle who provided the foundation for understanding political persuasion in his “Rhetoric”, introducing the notions of ethos (credibility), pathos (emotion), and logos (logic). Even today, modern political communication still exploits these rhetorical strategies in order to mobilise support, influence and shape public opinion.

In his seminal essay, “Politics and the English Language” (1946), George Orwell places emphasis upon how “Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind”. Orwell’s critique remains relevant in understanding how vague and euphemistic language can obscure reality and manipulate public perception.

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Literature Review and Analysis

The present study focuses on the analysis of six articles published in the US magazine The New Yorker. There are a few arguments in favour of the choice of the media and the political figure - subject of this study. First of all, The New Yorker has maintained the reputation of a serious and credible media since its establishment in 1925. Since then, readers have had the opportunity to enjoy objective materials, witty commentaries, financial, economic and political analyses. Contrary to what its name suggests, it is not focused mainly on the region of New York but discusses and publishes materials of both national and international significance. In addition to that, The New Yorker is ranked 18th of 1108 media by Scimagomedia¹.

Another point to note in relation to the choice of Donald Trump as the political figure subject to the articles in this research is that he uses dichotomies in his public speaking, which are automatically transferred and communicated by the media when covering and reporting his public appearance. Furthermore, he is able to masterly shape and twist public opinion by showing his belonging to the in-group that represents the US people. The use of pronouns “we” and “our” versus “them” and “their” as well as the frequent use of binary oppositions, metaphors and analogies provide grounds for researching how the abovementioned linguistic devices can “create echo chambers and filter bubbles, reinforcing pre-existing beliefs and polarizing political discourse” (Sunstain, 2017, pp. 59-65).

The six articles have been selected to be topically different. However, the textual analysis shows the use of dichotomy and metaphors in each one of them. The article entitled “Donald Trump Did This” written by Susan B. Glasser with subheading *On abortion, Arizona, and the 2024 Presidential election* reports Trump’s attitude and opinion that has been changed to suit the voters. The author cites him as follows, “I was able to kill Roe v. Wade”, which of course is supposed to be some kind of metaphorical speaking or a way to attract attention. Furthermore, the citation continues: “I did it and I am proud to have

¹ SCImago Media Rankings. (2024). *SCImago Media Rankings: Global media ranking by digital reputation*. Retrieved from <https://www.scimagomedia.com/>

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done it”, and “Nobody else was going to get that done but me”. Such rhetoric implies strong leadership and definitely belonging to the in-group. The use of inclusive and exclusive pronouns can be clearly noticed. At the same time, such political speaking draws a boundary between the in-group and the out-group, i.e. the opponents who take the opposite view: “Did I mention that Democrats are the radical ones because they support abortion”. What should be taken into account here is the linguistic framing as Lakoff (2004) in “Don’t Think of an Elephant!” discusses how political language frames issues in ways that shape how people think about them. Framing is a critical tool in political communication, as it helps to establish the context and meaning of issues. For instance, terms like “pro-life” versus “anti-abortion”, which is exactly the case here, evoke different values and emotions.

The same tendency appears in the second article entitled “Fighting Trump on the Beaches” written by the same author, with a subheading *Biden’s fiery D Day speech in Normandy warns against the ex-President’s isolationism, while Trump is back home, targeting “the enemy within”*. Although it is focused on Biden’s speech before veterans, there are quite a few quotations of Trump himself. What can be clearly observed is the use of binary oppositions that could help him consolidate his position within the in-group. Hence, he creates explicit distinction and a sense of belonging to the group. The article reports: “His opponent [Trump] is an admirer of Putin, and, reportedly, of Hitler even. Trump truly supports neither Ukraine nor NATO” and goes further on: “He routinely calls his enemies ‘vermin’ and ‘human scum’, echoing Hitler’s language”. Although it more or less expresses the author’s opinion, again there is this binary opposition, metaphorical meaning, and even propaganda, masterfully disguised, as the primary goal is probably to consolidate voters and gather the electorate that shares those patriotic values. It is not Hitler that would evoke negativism when being compared to him, but this binary opposition rather evokes the boomerang effect among his supporters².

² Oxford Reference. (n.d.). *Hitler analogy*. In *Oxford Reference Online*. Retrieved April 23, 2025, from <https://shorturl.at/GGgnv>

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The third selected article “Inside the Trump Plan for 2025” written by Jonathan Blitzer, with a subheading *A network of well-funded far-right activists is preparing for the former President’s return to the White House*, is an outline of Trump’s intentions for a glamorous comeback. Yet again, it is a strategy at the core of which lies opposition and dichotomy. In “Language and Power” Fairclough (2001) uses Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to explore how language shapes and is shaped by power dynamics. CDA examines how political discourse constructs social identities and relationships, and how it legitimizes power. The article exemplifies this: “Mark Meadows, Trump’s former chief of staff, stood in front of an archway fringed with palm trees and warmed up the crowd with jokes about the deep state” and further reports: “The left tried to drag America further into a dark future of totalitarianism, chaotic elections, and cultural decay, C.P.I.’s leaders wrote”.

The article entitled “Project Trump” reviews and discusses foreign policy, mainly the ongoing conflicts in Ukraine and The Gaza Strip. While there is no mention of the Israeli conflict, Trump openly justifies the actions of President Putin. The article reads: “In a single clause in a sentence explaining how Trump’s ‘unpredictability’ will somehow lead to a negotiated settlement with Russia, O’Brien asserts that future lethal aid to Ukraine would come not from the United States but entirely from Europe. (Europe, are you listening?)”.

Chilton (2004) examines the language used in the justification of war, showing how metaphors, euphemisms, and narratives are employed to gain public support for military actions. Terms like “collateral damage” and “axis of evil” exemplify this practice. The same examples are valid in this article, since one more example of the latter can be the following: “When he does mention the rest of the world, it is often in telling asides - about his great relationships with strongmen such as Xi Jinping and Vladimir Putin, say, or how he will miraculously end the war in Ukraine in twenty-four hours”.

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Some commentators believe that it is a lost cause to even try to tackle the propaganda, which is all around us, especially with the already established popularity of the social media and dissemination of fake news. However, the article entitled “The Bronx Cheers Mostly for Trump” published in The New Yorker print edition of the June 3, 2024, issue, with the headline “Among the Hats” follows the story of a woman with a sign that said “Warning: Trump Hates You” and (on the other side) “Warning: Trump Is a Nazi”, accented with a red swastika. She was amongst the crowd of Trump’s supporters who, in turn, were wearing hats and T-shirts in his support, most of which stamped with the already clichéd slogan “Make America Great Again”. The woman did not belong to the in-group and ultimately was cast out of the event that, as the article implies, was purely populist. The rise of populism has brought new attention to political language. In “The Global Rise of Populism” Moffitt (2016) discusses how populists use language to create an “us versus them” dichotomy and as reconstructing and reshaping this device they simplify complex issues and appeal to emotions rather than rationality, which is exactly the case of the story.

The last article headlined “Why Can’t we Stop arguing whether Trump Is a Fascist” outlines “scholars debate what the F-word conceals and what it reveals” and summarises significant publications and analyses by established scholars on Trump’s fascist attitudes and rhetoric, as well as on their impact on society and the extent to which they are perceived as normal: “Even in its original form, fascism represented a bunch of conflicting impulses bound together ‘a beehive of contradictions’, in Eco’s words. (Some have claimed that Trumpism is too devoid of consistent ideological content to be mapped onto any previous movement; others have countered that its fluidity makes it more like fascism, not less.)”.

Conclusion

The findings of the analysis of the six articles show how the use of metaphorical language and dichotomy can

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shape public opinion and become a powerful tool for political communication. As Lakoff & Johnson (2003, p. 3) put it, “Our concepts structure what we perceive how we get around in the world, and how we relate to the other people”. Nowadays it has been exploited more than ever before. Perhaps, it is due to the rise of nationalism and the increase of populist public speaking. What is more, “Our conceptual system is highly metaphorical” (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003, p. 6) and whoever masters the use of metaphors would benefit from it.

From a linguistic perspective, the use of “Us versus them” dichotomy is not a new or unique strategy particular for a certain region or country. It has become a tool used globally in any political environment, not to mention the rising power of nationalism, respectively populism, which relies heavily on the distinction between the in-group and out-group of a given society.

Some focal linguistic features such as inclusive and exclusive pronouns, specific phrases termed as lexical choices, contrasts, binary oppositions, and metaphors are commonly exploited in political image making and rhetoric.

Corpus

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