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SYMBOL SPEAK IN POLITICAL DISCOURSE.
CAMPAIGNING THROUGH LOADED WORDS

Introduction

Heading towards the world of 4.0 web, with ChatGPT-5, 'perfectly real' deepfakes and industry 5.0 with Artificial Superintelligence, automation, robotic technology and Internet of Bodies, whilst recently facing a global pandemic and ongoing global armed conflicts that enabled the possibility of abrupt economic, societal, geopolitical, environmental and technological reworking(s), mankind, as it does quit feel an Orwellian twinge, must forthwith equip itself with, up until yesterday, sci-fi deemed skills (as visual and digital literacy). The abundance of information is extremely overwhelming, both online and offline. The Infodemic is further perpetuated through buzzwords [Pei 1973: 2] that are becoming daily leitmotifs: *post-truth*, *fake news*, *new normal*, *great reset*, *climate change*. The latter, is an interesting one. Merely a few years ago, everyone was not talking about 'climate change', yet of 'global warming'. Both are instances of verbal-with-visual symbolspeak based on the loaded semiotic lexicon used when framing this environmental issue and how it is received, perceived and interpreted by the public. And this is one small example of why in order to face the future, one must always consider the (recent) past.

Doublespeak, either verbal or visual, otherwise Symbolspeak, has become a prominent element for social control and tailoring political agendas with demonstrated capacity for affecting citizenship political decision-making. The potential of linguistic manipulation to trigger (unconscious) reactions, actions thus social practices, proves to be an intriguing dynamic to explore and remains highly relevant for America's (and perhaps Romania's) political and social reality when it comes to dealing with global affecting and contested legacies of presidential elections in the world's greatest democracy.

This paper predominantly focuses on linguistic manipulation in the 2020 First American Presidential Debate. Specifically, its exploitation by

Republican and Democrat presidential candidates in the 2020 American electoral context, with the aim of advancing political agendas, facilitating a one-sided interpretation of issues and events, past, present and future, reifying and recontextualizing preferred world view(s) and version(s) of reality.

Conceptualization of Symbolspeak

When looking at the complex nature of (visual) political communication, a number of different operationalisable theoretical frameworks are suitable to facilitate an approach to this category of multimodal texts. Expediently, the most popular path to approach the political genre of Presidential Campaign Discourse is that of political discourse analysis which would, undoubtedly, trigger fruitful discussions. However, in this paper, the questioning of political action viewpoint only plays a supporting role to the identification and analysis of misleading political linguistic representations. It is a lexical-semantic method to approach solely linguistic manipulation by verbal Symbolspeak, then, which will serve as analytical framework for this paper, and which will be the next centre of attention after the conceptualization of verbal and visual Symbolspeak in this section. For better orientation, the following part is divided into three segments. The first segment will illustrate proposed categories, after a brief detailing of this this concept. The following segment will deal with the characteristics of the proposed cataloging of loaded language and loaded images.

Doublespeak (verbal and visual, or Symbolspeak) is an exasperating American 1972 coined term as it effects cognitive dissonance and incongruity, thus language pollution. Doublespeak and Symbolspeak are labels attached to a phenomenon that even the ancient Greeks forefronted as THE perennial problem with politics, i.e. the sophistic, beguiling, duplicitous, deceiving, slovenly, stale, parroting language (and visuals).

Defined as language which pretends to communicate but really does not, the word 'doublespeak' comes from the fusion of two terms that Orwell used in his novel *Nineteen-Eighty-Four, newspeak* and *doublethink* [Gibson and Lutz 1991: 18]. Newspeak's underpinning is elucidated in the novel's appendix [Orwell 2021: 329-343]. *Newspeak* is the vague, euphemistic, restrictive language used in the fictional "superstate", Oceania, designed by its totalitarian government to spread the *Ingsoc* (Newspeak term for English socialism) political propaganda, to gradually replace *Oldspeak* (Standard

English) by the year 2050 [Orwell 2021: 329]. The underlying aim was the suppression of diverging thought, by creating new words and new meanings and disposing of every word that was not representative for the members of the party, or in Syme's words, "Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought?" [Orwell 2021: 56]. The complementary take on *doublespeak* is Orwell's newspeak title *doublethink*, or *reality control* [Orwell 2021: 37] in plain *oldspeak*. *Doublethink* is the type of reasoning that can hold "two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them" [Orwell 2021: 235].

Integrating the visual aspect along, Roy Fox advances Symbolspeak as:

> The use of symbols to distort reality *slightly* to mislead *a little bit* (and sometimes, even to lie); although it involves language and other symbols, its main component is the image, for it, too, is a symbol – an abstraction of reality selected and crafted by someone else; convincing yet intrinsically ambiguous, this two-faced nature of images, then, makes symbolspeak a camouflaged beast in a dense jungle. [Fox 1994:69]

Altogether, the current work propose the following interpretation of symbolspeak: as deliberate distortion of reality designed via manipulation of language and other symbols. Specifically, the concept of symbolspeak proves to be an integrated manipulative tool for deception and illegitimate persuasion in multimodal communication. Fundamental to double/symbolspeak is the incongruity between word/image and facts, between what is said/shown or left unsaid/unshown and what really is, between the word/image and referent, seem and be, between the primary function of language/image, i.e. communication and what double/symbolspeak does, namely mislead, distort, deceive, inflate, circumvent, obfuscate [Lutz 1996: 4; Rutledge 1994: 205; Fox 1994:69]. Brushing upon Fox's [1994] four levels of symbolspeak, this paper furthers symbolspeak as an umbrella concept for verbal symbolspeak drawn from the theoretical and analytical inquiry of a broader doctoral research through which I intend to examine the extent to which political discourse 2.0 tends to exploit verbal and visual symbolspeak in presidential campaign digital-based multimodal texts such as presidential debates and presidential campaign advertisements.

Briefly put, Fox Roy categorizes symbolspeak as verbal, verbal-with-visual, visual-with-verbal and visual. The former, entails relatively "imageless" language, one semiotic mode based on the semiotic resource of

verbal language, spoken or written, not dominated by external or physical images, but rather on mental images/imagistic processes involved in the coding and the decoding of a message. Or, as Fox's sums it up,

> "language that *appears* to be devoid of images may in fact rely on them heavily, both in the creation of the message and in our understanding of it" [1994:71].

Precisely, both abstract and concrete verbal language as metaphors, similes, and propositional, even numerical statements, the later exemplified with an outright verifiable Ronald Reagan lie (verbal symbolspeak) regarding the 23,000 full-time employees General Motors hired for handling government red tape, in total contradiction to General Motor's official statement according to which "only 4,900 of its employees accomplished all of its paperwork" [Lutz 1989; Fox 1994: 71].

Next, verbal-with-visual symbolspeak is, as Fox suggests, language laced with carefully selected, supercharged (verbal) imagery or 'zingers', 'sound bites' as in "If you don't believe me, just *read my lips.*", either "You're no Jack Kennedy!" (72). These rapid and sudden messages "can instantly evoke multiple scenes in the minds of listeners" (72) whilst eluding their deeper meanings.

Loaded Language

The present article proposes a lexical approach towards loaded language on the lines of verbal and verbal-with-visual symbolspeak. In doing so, the following categories are the main constituents of lingual symbolspeak.

This discussion outlines that linguistic Symbolspeak conveys messages experienced as "unadultered" language, only through reading or hearing, thus devoid of external or physical images, music or sound, nonetheless heavily relying upon carefully selected, supercharged verbal imagery. Accordingly, the three types of verbal and verbal-with-visual symbolspeak [Fox 1994, Fill 2007, Reich 2013] are hidden bias, purr and snarl words and euphemisms based on their respective expressivity and connotations. Moreover, euphemisms are identified as higher doublespeak forms comprising of basic units of doublespeak such as a biased word or a purr/snarl word. Specifically, a biased or a purr/snarl word is constituent of a compound or a phrase, and that as a structure can be catalogued as euphemism [Reich 2013: 168].

To begin with, hidden bias is evaluated as a pattern of favorable or unfavorable idiosyncratic expressing (synonymous in terms of the objective fact, antonyms in the attitude towards the fact) [Bolinger 1980: 71]. Coupled with the fact that words can imply a positive or a negative attitude and evaluate reality in a particular way, and thus manipulate people's perception of reality (76), adjectives, verbs, nouns (*epithets, syllogisms*) and the respective outcome of their use serve as verbal forms of symbolspeak. The former are most prone to hidden bias because each adjective represents some quality, but this quality is not always the same: there can be 'more' or 'less' of it and thus it can be perceived as 'better' or 'worse', as with the adjective *young (handsome, attractive, inexperienced)*. Sequential, nouns are less prone to hidden bias than adjectives, nonetheless, when used in a function which resembles adjectives, i.e. they can still be compared for degree: *I didn't think he was so dumb! (adjective) and I didn't think he was such a dumbbell! (noun)* [Bolinger 1980: 77]. What is more, the associative meaning can be inferred from collocations which most often go with the noun: *proud father, scared rabbit* (78). Lastly, despite the fact that verbs are even less prone to bias than adjectives and nouns, there are special kinds of verbs that mark actions which are automatically viewed as positive or negative. Expressly, the bias consists of the speaker's description of a fact as either good or bad: *succeed x fail, build x destroy* (80).

Secondly, Hayakawa's argument that snarl-words and purr-words are "direct expressions of approval or disapproval, or simply, judgments" [1949: 44-46] is potently supported by Leech's [1981] consideration of certain

> "expressions by which the speaker is simply capitalizing on their unfavorable/favorable connotations in order to give forceful expression to his/her own hostility/amity" [1981: 18; 44].

In addition, Whyte [2003] coined his own version of this language choice as 'hooray words' for terms that have

> "a socially positive connotation and almost automatically arouses a sense of approval in an audience" [in Partington and Taylor 2013: 29],

and 'boo words' for the one that have

> "a negative connotation and automatically arouses a sense of disapproval in the hearer" [29].

Resultantly, *communist, fascist* may be designed as snarl-words whilst *democratic, freedom, human rights, patriotic, equality* as purr-words, *or* 'Pavlovian dogwhistles'.

Last but not least, a euphemism, "when used to mislead and deceive, it becomes doublespeak" [Lutz 1990: 3]. For instance, war becomes *Police Action* and bombs, *force packages*. As explained by Williams [1957: 200], whilst reinforcing abstraction by the process of widening of meaning (along with metaphorical transfer and semantic shift), semantic euphemism is created when a general word is used in detriment to a specific word. Consequently, the uncooperative mitigation is directly propositional to the number of words used in the euphemistic expression as the specific negative feature of the original word, desired to be avoided, either is lost in the word, or at least the hearer does not make a direct connection to this feature. The more words used into which the specific feature is being spread, the softer the impact. Williams [1957: 200] exemplifies the phenomenon of creating euphemistic symbolspeak by comparing three expressions: *feces x solid human waste x that material of a nonfluid, non-gaseous nature which is the by-product of metabolic and digestive processes in higher order primates.*

Methodology and methods

Double/Symbolspeak as concept subsumes various namings and general definitions which pervades it a unique freedom to be analyzed using a variety of approaches and frameworks. What this paper ultimately seeks is to disclose the manner in which *communicative rationality* [1] breaks down verbally by identifying and analyzing linguistic symbolspeak representations in American Campaign Discourse such as the 2020 First Republican and Democrat Presidential Debate. The corpus of presidential debates from which the selection was made is freely available on the Internet. One of the main sites that offer fairly comprehensive collections of American campaign messages is *The Commission on Presidential Debates* official website.

Based on lexical evaluative language as envisaged by Partington and Tayor [2018] which "expresses the opinion, attitude and point of view of a speaker or a writer" by content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives) that have evaluation as part, often most, of their meaning, and evaluation, both overt and covert, as "the indication of whether the speaker thinks that something is good or bad" [Thompson 1996: 65; Hunston 2004: 157], in the sense that is either favourable or unfavourable in an undetermined number of wider senses (*profitable, enjoyable, healthy* or *wasteful, painful, unhealthy*), it follows

that evaluation by language choice plays a quintessential role in analyzing linguistic symbolspeak. When saying the 'same' thing is possible via many potential ways, choice of vocabulary is a sign of eloquence, yet, when used with manipulative intentions, it become dangerous. As such, when referring to a used car as pre-owned or experienced car, their denotational meaning (the basic meaning) is roughly the same, however, they differ radically in the evaluation or the connotational meaning they express. Now, imagine the lexical effects, both cognitive and non-cognitive, when the Pentagon negated an *invasion* by disguising mitigation via the lexical choice of *predown vertical insertion.* Due to the fact that this common binary distinction between denotation and connotation is a far more complex issue, since at least Lipka [1992], Lyons [1977] and Leech [1990] distinguish between different approaches to meaning, an initial dive into linguistic symbolspeak employs as methods of analysis denotative and connotative communicative values.

Method of Analysis – Denotative Meaning *(Oxford Dictionary and Thinkmap Visual Thesaurus)*
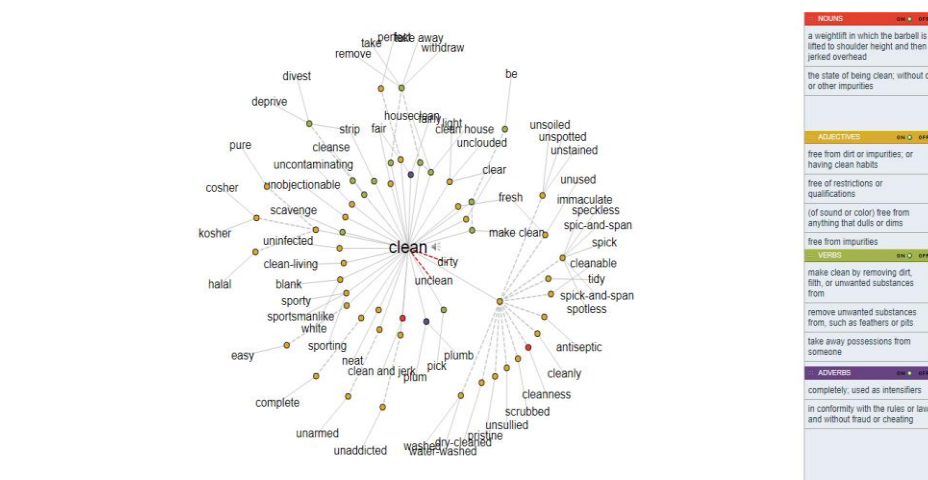
Method of Analysis – Connotative Meaning

According to Partington and Taylor [2018: 25], the best way to investigate how words are actually used, hence the connotations of a word is by employing a large corpus or collections of texts/corpora such as the largest currently available corpus of American English with more than 1 billion words (1990 – 2024), namely *the Corpus of Contemporary American English* [COCA]. Seconded by Stubbs [1996: 172], or the other way around, who

considers that the associations and connotations a word has are shown by characteristic collocations which occur with the word.

Findings

Example of the Use of Hidden Bias in the 2020 1st American Presidential Debate

Topic: *Environment / Climate Change*

Donald Trump:

"I want crystal **clean** water and air. I want beautiful clean air. We have now the lowest carbon. If you look at our numbers right now, we are doing phenomenally. But I haven't destroyed our businesses. Our businesses aren't put out of commission. If you look at the Paris Accord, it was a disaster from our standpoint. And people are actually very happy about what's going on, because our businesses are doing well. As far as the fires are concerned, you need forest management. In addition to everything else, the forest floors are loaded up with trees, dead trees that are years old and they're like tinder and leaves and everything else. You drop a cigarette in there the whole forest burns down. You've got to have forest management."

Joe Biden:

"... we're going to be in a position where we can create hard, hard, good jobs by making sure the environment is **clean**, and we all are in better shape. We spend billions of dollars now, billions of dollars, on floods, hurricanes, rising seas. We're in real trouble. Look what's happened just in the Midwest with these storms that come through and wipe out entire sections and counties in Iowa. They didn't happen before. They're because of global warming. We make up 15% of the world's problem. We in fact, but the rest of the world, we've got to get them to come along. That's why we have to get back into, back into the Paris Accord."

Example of *the Use of Hidden Bias. Analysis*

CLEAN

denotative meaning	evaluation	antonyms	collocates (COCA)
1. free from dirt, marks, or stains	positive	dirty, polluted, used	good, dry, fresh, nice, safe, new, healthy
a) free from pollutants or unpleasant substances	positive		

(ex. clean air/water)			
b) not causing pollution (ex. clean fuel/energy)	positive		

Trump uses the word in relation to the natural environment advancing better management (air, water, forests management) as a practical solution thus framing against the Paris Accord [COP 21, 2015].

Biden uses the word also in relation to the natural environment however referencing to clean industry (business/industrial environment), to future 'good' jobs contingent on (clean) (coal) technology and (clean) sources of energy, hence framing his 'green activist' stance for the Paris Accord [COP 21, 2015], namely the Green New Deal.

Any of these can be clean as such. But simply by stating that it is clean and implying that it is also *good, safe, healthy, and new, any objections are eliminated.* It is not very probable that the candidate(s) would support new investments in dirty coal technology or want to use dirty domestic sources.

Example of the Use of Purr and Snarl Words in the 2020 1st American Presidential Debate

Purr Words

Democracy – it is endangered and we must fight for it;
Freedom/Liberty - something the United States regard highly and is worth spreading around the globe;
Peace - The United States should keep the peace in various parts of the world or at least should be active in helping keep the peace;
American Dream - owning one's own home, having one's own business and employing people, of having good education and thus having the chance to be successful;

Snarl Words

Referring to past and present extremist/terrorist and hate groups/movements/organizations: *KKK*; *Proud Boys*; *White militias*; *Antifa*; *White supremacists*; *Radical left (Democrats)*; *Left wing extremist group*.

Example of the Use of Euphemisms in the 2020 1ˢᵗ American Presidential Debate

CLIMATE CHANGE vs GLOBAL WARMING

2020: Donald Trump Joe Biden	euphemism component	frequency
climate change	widening	o
total		o

2020: Joe Biden	euphemism component	frequency
global warming	widening	1
total		1

Joe Biden prefers the term *global warming* to *climate change* which he does not use at all. Donald Trump uses neither of them. On the one hand, *warming* means "the process of becoming warmer; a rising temperature". On the other hand, *change* has two important meanings: the *first meaning* is rather *general*: "an event that occurs when something passes from one state to another" whereas the *second meaning*, "a difference that is usually pleasant", laces this instance of political verbal-with-visual symbolspeak with favorable framed nuances towards a manipulative unconscious perception of climate change as a unmitigated phenomenon.

Poole [2006: 42-43] especially highlights that 'global warming' sounds sinister and menacing as it may conjure a picture of red-hot planet Earth, swathed in hellfire. Conversely, 'climate change' is

"what happens when you go on holiday, or switch on the air-conditioner at home or the 'climate control' in your sports-utility vehicle".

Also of notice is that 'climate change' is rather neutral in terms of the direction or quality of any possible change.

"It might get warmer, but then again it might get cooler, avoiding droughts; or rainier, which would be nice for the garden; or we might just have a picturesque dusting of snow every Christmas".

Reasonably, *global warming* is used by Joe Biden who is a big supporter of green politics.

Towards a conclusion

The above consideration on Symbolspeak merely intends to do justice to the incredible amounts of theory and research on the topic of multimodal manipulation. Although deceptive language whose purpose of use is to manipulate people's perception of reality and hence influence their political opinions has been investigated by an extensive number of scholars throughout the last five decades, the visual aspect of this phenomenon in multimodal digital political environments is still rather unclear and the knowledge of this subject is to a large degree fragmented. The present study represents an attempt to consolidate different approaches towards such loaded language and loaded images, generally termed Symbolspeak.

The American case, and specifically its state of being a polarized and divisive society, remains a characteristic feature of the republic owing to a certain extent to the pervasiveness of symbol manipulation and symbol manipulators in politics and society, and their consistent use in order to further political agendas and mobilize voters. At the same time, while struggling with legacies of the (recent) past hardly makes America unique, it is the continuation of Symbolspeak, propagated largely by politicians, global corporate conglomerates and radical individuals and groups, that prevents the facilitation of an open and safe space for dialogue, which is crucial in creating a more clean future that is built around critically and carefully *learning from the past* rather than obsessively fixating on it. Decoding and disclosing Symbolspeak can play a significant role in the process since this can be utilized to motivate us in questioning meanings that are often left unchecked and consider alternatives and scenarios of how we want our society to look while learning from the past rather than making it our present.

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NOTES:

[1]. "Communicative rationality means that we seek a mutual understanding of something together, such as discussing different priorities or problems. In doing so we believe the other to be truthful and use a language that is comprehensible and can contribute to an agreement achieved through communication" (Ledin and Machin 2020: 25).

LES SYMBOLES DANS LE DISCOURS POLITIQUE.
FAIRE CAMPAGNE AVEC DES MOTS LOURDS DE SENS

Résumé: Cet article met en avant une étude du symbolisme du langage utilisé dans le discours politique. Le symbolisme, ou la déformation délibérée de la réalité par la manipulation du langage (visuel) et d'autres symboles, est une production sémiotique omniprésente dans les environnements multimodaux de création de sens tels que les messages des campagnes électorales sous la forme de débats présidentiels. Sur la base d'une conceptualisation détaillée du symbolisme linguistique polarisant, le présent article explore la manière dont les candidats républicains et démocrates tendent à exploiter le substrat symbolisme-langage en utilisant un lexique sémiotique biaisé lors du premier débat présidentiel américain en 2020. Une perspective lexico-sémantique est employée pour identifier, analyser les représentations du symbolisme verbal et exposer la légitimation d'idéologies, de valeurs ou de stéréotypes camouflés reflétés dans les structures socioculturelles.

Mots-clés: *langage-symbole, lexique sémiotique biaisé, débats présidentiels, analyse lexico-sémantique.*

Abstract: This paper brings to the fore the investigation on symbolspeak in political discourse. Symbolspeak, or deliberate distortion of reality designed via manipulation of (visual) language and other symbols, is a ubiquitous semiotic production in multimodal meaning making environments such as Electoral Campaign Messages subgenre of presidential debates. Following a fine-grained conceptualization of symbolspeak via loaded or biased language, the current work explores the extent to which Republican and Democrat candidates tend to exploit the symbolspeak sub-strategy of loaded semiotic lexicon in the 2020 1st American Presidential Debate. A lexical-semantic perspective is employed to identify, analyze linguistic symbolspeak representations and expose the legitimation of hidden ideologies, values or stereotypes reflected on sociocultural structures.

Keywords: *symbolspeak, loaded semiotic lexicon, presidential debates, lexical-semantic analysis.*