

On the (Changing) Sociolinguistics of Political Language: From the Queen's Speech to Trump on Twitter

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Political speeches are one of the prime examples of texts written-to-be-spoken. Carefully crafted ahead of time for a specific occasion to convey a persuasive point of view, political speeches are performances of stance taking, persona constructing and in-group/out-group dynamics (Fairclough 1989, Chilton 2003, Hahn 2003, de Cillia and Wodak 2005, Fetzer and Bull 2012). In recent years, the critical study of the sociolinguistic factors underlying political language has increasingly focused on the performative nature of indexicality, whereby the linguistic features observed are not interpreted as reflections of standard sociolinguistic categories but are rather seen as resources to be exploited for a particular purpose (see, e.g., Eckert and Rickford 2001).

Over the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, the primary medium of public political communication has changed several times, from newspapers to broadcast media and more recently to digital media (Cook 2005, Esser and Strömbäck 2014). Throughout the twentieth century, the mediation of the political message to the electorate usually involved editing and editorializing by the media, which forced political speakers to adopt new rhetorical patterns, such as the sound bite, that were more suitable and more effective in the dominant media. Over the last twenty years, the digital revolution has increasingly empowered politicians to address the electorate directly, circumventing and undermining the control of establishment media (Hjalvard 2008, Strömbäck 2008). Consider the following to examples:

This Assembly was born of the endeavors of countless men and women from different nations who, over the centuries, have pursued the aims of the preservation of peace between nations, equality of justice for all before the law and the right of the peoples of the world to live their lives in freedom and security.

- Queen Elizabeth II, 21 Oct 1957, Address to the United Nations

Ted Cruz is totally unelectable, if he even gets to run (born in Canada). Will loose big to Hillary. Polls show I beat Hillary easily! WIN!

- Donald Trump, 31 Jan 2016, Twitter

Concurrently and partly driven by the changes in mass media, the sociolinguist landscape of Anglophone politics has been affected by shifts in two principal mechanisms affecting political communication: from policy logic to election logic, and from intellectual and rational arguments to reactionary and emotional appeals to voters' sensitivities (Hofstadter 1966, Jacoby 2009). Over

the last century, the dominant style of public political rhetoric has seemingly shifted from the written end of the linguistic spectrum toward the spoken: words and sentences are now shorter, difficult words and complex sentence structures have all but disappeared, and the language used is more simplistic, colloquial and juvenile (Lim 2012). But if political language has adapted to the requirements of media and electoral statistics, does this suggest that the politicians delivering those speeches have grown more unintelligent or linguistically less capable? No, certainly not.

In this talk, I will discuss the changing nature of political language combining methods of historical sociolinguistics, corpus linguistics, and critical discourse analysis (see, e.g., Reyes-Rodríguez 2008). Using evidence from several corpora of political speeches ranging from presidential inaugural addresses to parliamentary debates and the Twitter feeds of leading candidates in the on-going 2016 US presidential primary elections, and with the changing demographics and social variables of both the politicians and their audiences as a backdrop, I will examine diachronic trends in political language to show the sophistication behind the apparent simplicity of today's political speeches and of the rhetorical styles that preceded them.

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