

## A Critical Pragmatic Study of Nastiness in Trump's Talk During the US 2020 Presidential Debates

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### **Abstract**

This study examines the notions of nastiness, conflict talk, persuasive strategies, critical pragmatics, personal attack argument and impoliteness. How words are weaponized to influence the general public and to attack the opponents personally and also attack their argumentations is a main focus in this study. Utterances are analyzed from two perspectives; once as arguments and once again as speech acts. When taken as arguments, two models are applied; Walton's Informal Logic and Aristotle's Persuasive Strategies Trinity, and when taken as speech acts, Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory is to be applied to examine the level and strategies of impoliteness in the political context. In this research, critical pragmatics proved to be a reliable tool to study political discourse; also nastiness is a necessity in the world of politics as one way to manifest power and control; it is very important to get weaponized with nastiness during conflict talk and political debates. It is the weapon that would reveal the defects of the opponent and would direct a coup de grace to the opponent. Quarrels, direct threats, swears, badmouthing, foxy questions, ironic style, loud voices, hints and association clues, monkey-playing with numbers and statistics, chaos, etc. let the inborn character of every candidate appears ostensibly.

**Keywords:** *Nastiness, critical pragmatics, persuasive strategies, argumentative strategies, impoliteness strategies.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Politics in the past twenty five years was focused on but winning. Threats of violence and display of anger became normal strategies in the political discourse. During the 2008 presidential campaign, crowds at a rally of Sarah Palin shouted '*Kill him!*' referring to Obama. The latter was shown as the devil or the anti-Christ. Moreover, when a recently-elected member of Congress affirms at an anti-Trump rally, '*We're gonna sue the mother f-----,*' it's clear that there are civic and ethical problems in the American political discourse.

The trend to incivility did not start with Trump but he might have contributed to the rise of it. Opponents of Trump were given pejorative names like 'Crazy Bernie,' 'Crooked Hillary,' and 'Lying Ted.' Rudeness and badmouthing are allowed at his propaganda. Also, meanness and incivility strategies are encouraged. Thus, Trump has provided a shelter to the angry voices of Americans. Incivility is a piece of human nature and is as old as democracy itself. The United States national politics is broadly deteriorating. Indications of democratic decline can be noticed everywhere; politicians who act worse than children on social media, the endeavor to stir calls to hate and violence, the drive to black out those with whom we disagree. Such trends make the situation aggravate.

UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet (2019) affirms that '*Politics Is Getting Nastier*'. Politics simultaneously goes past the limit in terms of respect for others. Then we have the language factor. Most politicians do not understand that the other is not an enemy, and the use of language to destroy the opponent in many ways is unsuitable.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In his book entitled 'The Abusive Personality', Dutton (2007) postulates that rage and intimate abusiveness are tightly linked to issues in the early development of human beings. Rage, according to attachment theory, is the initial reaction to attachment disruption – the sustained absence of the source of security. Politics is viewed as a '*struggle for power between those who seek to assert and maintain their power and those who seek to resist it.*' (Chilton, 2004: 3)

Van Dijk (1993) argues that power is regarded equal with influence and control. Politics requires language to be obviously expressed and convincingly presented. The American Ideology is prevailing in the American political, social and cultural systems. (Al-Hindawi & Jebur, 2019) It is a practice employed by language users to show the American lifestyle as the best in the globe. The US Presidential debate is a genre that reflects the American ideology.

David Crystal (1995: 240) sees that pragmatics refers to the study of those factors which govern people's choices of language such as their social awareness, their culture and sense of etiquette. Pragmatics focuses on how speakers employ their knowledge to convey meanings. People who study pragmatics deal with matters such as when language is used, where it is used, by whom it is used, how it is used, what is it used for, and how it gets interpreted. (Bloomer, Griffiths & Marrison, 2006: 78). Pragmatic effects refer to what is being done and the manner it is done with; whether it is done nastily, politely, clearly, effectively, etc.

During presidential debates, the dark side of language is mostly used. Language is weaponized to attack the opponent, to distort his face, to refute his arguments and to show his defects publicly. Badmouthing is a prevailing characteristic of presidential debates. Language is used in different ways, sarcastically, dubiously, interrogatively, nastily or in a foxy way to attain only triumph at the end.

To be powerful, one needs to use nasty language as a manifestation of power. It is not only politics that is getting nastier; one needs to employ badmouthing in the majority of the domains of life as it is the era of the powerful. Other people are seen as enemies and language needs to be employed to conflict with them.

*'What if the rest of the world is just a nastier place than Americans realize?'* That was the thrust of Schadow, the architect of Trump's 2017 National Security Strategy. It became ostensible for a large extent that nastiness is a global trend and a prevailing strategy that is used in the daily routines of people all around the globe.

In order for politicians to persuade people, they need to share their values and view the world in a way that favors their political agendas. Moreover, they need to master language as a means of representation.

Persuasion of the public can be attained by nasty language because one of the main persuasive strategies according to Aristotle is 'Ethos' which refers to the charisma and competence of the candidate. Charisma, according to the Merriam Webster dictionary is the personal magic of leadership arousing special popular loyalty or enthusiasm for a public figure. And as stated earlier that nastiness is deep-rooted in the American lifestyle, hence the use of badmouthing publicly would be something unique and charming for the majority of the people of USA.

A candidate can persuade the public when s/he advertises his/her background, explain competence, opinion and experience on certain topics. Furthermore, it is an ideological must for a candidate to emphasize the positive things about him/her and de-emphasize the positive things about his opponents. (Van Dijk, 2004). The medium used to destroy the image of opponents is language of course. Foul language is employed to distort the character of the opponent, hence attaining part of the ideology.

### ***ANALYTIC STRATEGIES***

The general framework of the study is based on the three analytic parameters of critical pragmatics; stance, critique and reproduction. Three sets of strategies are to be traced during the manifestation of the stance and critique. First, the argumentative strategies according to Walton's Informal Logic model; second, impoliteness strategies according to Brown and Levinson's Politeness Theory and finally, Persuasive strategies by Aristotle. The amalgamation of these theories to develop the analytical model of the study and the sequence of these strategies is put on purpose; as it is logical to have an argument first and during the argument, certain impoliteness strategies are used to reach to an end which is the persuasion of the audience and winning the elections. So, it is a three phase study.

The first phase of the study traces the argumentative strategies used by the interlocutors including first the variation of arguments; which is sub-divided into de facto or realistic argumentation, values argumentation and authority argumentation. The second type of argumentation is the multiplicity of questions. Third, pulling the legs of the opponent through questions and leading him to make mistakes and lose the argument. The fourth type of argumentation is the focalization of the debate on certain topics that may embarrass the opponent. The fifth and final type of argumentation is the personal attack, where the attack is directed to the opponent's personally rather than to his argumentation.

The de facto argumentation involves false accusation, dispraise of statistics, providing evidence through numbers, belittling of the opponent's achievements, monkey-playing with numbers, magnification of statistics, blacking out of information, deliberate concealment and the citing of some well-known events.

Values argumentation involves inspiring and supporting the nation's balance of values such as freedom, justice, democracy and social scale; guaranteeing the reservation of civic identity; impertinence of the opponent; attempting to disqualify the opponent and dismantling him from the values or presenting him as a liar.

Authority argumentation is represented in three forms; the authority of talk or being given the chance to express himself and show his competence and credibility before the audience. Second, the centrality of ego; or stating very clearly and powerfully his being a presidential candidate. Third, recalling symbolic figures and trying to find any connection or relativity with such figures. The second argumentative strategy is the multiplicity of questions, where many unexpected questions are posed to the opponent to confuse him and interrupt his communication with the audience. Succession of questions may let the opponent lose track of his ideas and lose the argument. Moreover, using a sarcastic way in posing questions stirs up the opponent and may refute him in front of the audience.

Thirdly, pulling the legs through a question, which is a main pillar in the debate as it causes embarrassment. Such a question is posed in a certain carefully-chosen moment and in the suitable context and insisting on an instant live answer. Such a question does not give the opponent any opportunity to take any maneuver or find any access. The goal is to confuse him and get his rapid response about minute issues. It is sometimes called the 'interrogative argumentation'.

Forth is the focalization of the discourse towards certain topics rather than others. Focusing on internal issues contributes in differentiating one candidate from the other. Also, the concentration on the negative repertoire of the opponent during his ex-position and on his inability to attain his promises is another way to refute him and unveil his feebleness in fulfilling the needs of the nation. Focalized discourse is a tactic mainly used to constrain the interpretation and the wording of events to particular meanings, while excluding others. (Al-Jama'wi, 2013)

Finally is the argumentum ad hominem or personal attack, where the arguer himself is criticized rather than his argument. The opponent's personal circumstances, trustworthiness or character are under attack. Personal attack is of three types; abusive, circumstantial and poisoning the well. The abusive argument focuses the attack on the bad morals and character or the truthfulness of the individual. The circumstantial criticizes his actions, affiliations or previous commitments. The charge here is 'you don't practice what you preach.' Finally, poisoning the well suggests that the attacked arguer has a hidden agenda and holding his argument for personal gain.

The second phase traces the impoliteness strategies employed by the candidates in their presidential debate. Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) suggested five types of strategies: Bald on record (BOR); Positive politeness (+P); Negative politeness (-P); A hybrid strategy where negative politeness and positive politeness are combined (-P/+P) and Off record (OR). Each one of the five strategies mentioned above is divided into classes then to sub-strategies. The sub-strategies can be easily-determined according to the style of the language used. Relative to this study is the linguistic choices that reflect nastiness or badmouthing. Under the BOR strategy there are cases of non-minimization of the face threat within which there are the cases where the speaker is powerful and doesn't fear retaliation or non-cooperation from the hearer; or because the speaker wants to be rude and doesn't care about maintaining face, thus goes far teasing and joking.

Off record utterances are essential in the indirect use of language. There are two classes under OR strategy. First, invite conversational implicatures under which the following sub-strategies come; 'give hints', 'give association clues', 'presuppose', 'understate', 'overstate', 'use tautologies', 'use contradictions', 'be ironic' and 'use metaphor and rhetorical questions'. The second class is be vague or ambiguous: violate the manner maxim; under which the following sub-strategies come; 'be ambiguous', 'be vague', 'over-generalize', 'displace H' and 'be incomplete or use ellipsis'.

The third phase of the study traces the persuasive strategies used by the candidates. The Aristotle trinity encompasses logos, ethos and pathos. Under logos come several strategies such as 'giving an example', 'using factual data and statistics', 'providing a solid and non-biased

explanation', 'citation from experts and authorities', 'quotations', 'theoretical or abstract language', 'denotative meanings or reasons', 'literal and historical analogies' and 'definitions'.

Within ethos, there exist some strategies like 'knowledge about business', 'physical appearance', 'courage', 'righteousness', 'showing reputation or credibility' and 'showing awareness of the society'.

Pathos include some strategies such as 'raising up the emotions', 'falling down the emotions', 'expressive description of people, places or events', 'vivid imagery', 'sharing personal stories', 'using emotion-laden vocabulary' and using any information that will evoke an emotional response from the audience.

## **DATA ANALYSIS**

The data to be analyzed are extracts taken from a transcribed version of the first presidential debate of Donald Trump and Joe Biden in 2020 ([www.usatoday.com](http://www.usatoday.com)). Only utterances containing explicit or implicit nastiness would be subjected to analysis. The stance would be the utterance itself and the critique is represented by the different strategies used by the debaters.

### **TRUMP**

*Joe, you had 308,000 military people die because you couldn't provide them proper health care in the military, so don't tell me about this... And if you were here, it wouldn't be 200; it would be 2 million people, because you were very late on the draw. You didn't want me to ban China, which was heavily infected. You didn't want me to ban.*

Argumentatively, both candidates provide evidence through numbers and magnification of statistics within de facto argumentation. The exchange of accusations of failure to reduce casualties and deaths because of covid-19 and in the military is the circumstantial type of personal attack strategy in which the actions and previous commitments of the opponent are criticized. Poisoning the well type is clear in the utterance 'you didn't want me to ban China' which suggests that Biden has a hidden agenda. The responses for the two-way personal attack came in the form of a tu quoque, 'you too' rejoinder or 'you are no better'. Moreover, Biden raised multiple questions which is an argumentative strategy to embarrass the opponent. Trump uses the discourse focalization strategy to steer it towards the deaths amongst military staff, and to flee the issue of life insurance. Both use the presenting of the opponent as a liar sub-strategy within value argumentation.

The use of repetition is obvious. It is within the BOR impoliteness strategy. Under logos we have the use of factual data and statistics. Within ethos, one can see the showing of awareness of the society. The use of any information that will evoke an emotional response from the audience comes under pathos.

### **TRUMP**

*Because I want to give good healthcare. Good healthcare... Yes I have put a plan. Of course I have. I'll get rid of the individual mandate which was added. That is absolutely a big thing; that was the worst part of Obamacare. The worst part of Obamacare. Well, I'll ask Joe. The individual mandate was the most unpopular aspect of Obamacare. I got rid of it.*

Pulling the legs through a question 'Well, I'll ask Joe' is one argumentative strategy employed here. Under de facto argumentation there is the belittling of the opponent's

achievements. Under value argumentation there is the attempt to disqualify the opponent and showing support to the nation's interests by rejecting the individual mandate in Obamacare. Under authority argumentation Trump shows his competence and asserts that he had a plan for life insurance. The focalization of the discourse towards the individual mandate was to show the inability of the democrats to attain their promises and unveil their feebleness in satisfying the needs of the nation. A circumstantial personal attack argumentation is employed in criticizing the previous commitments of the democrats. *'The worst part of Obamacare'* repeated twice to attract the attention of the audience. Give and ask for reason under +P; 'Well, I'll ask Joe.' nominalize -P, give association clue and the use of tautology under OR. Giving an example is logos persuasive strategy used here; showing awareness and knowledge of business is ethos; using information that will evoke emotional response from the audience is pathos.

### **TRUMP**

*Well you didn't do very well in swine flu. H1N1. A disaster.*

Under de facto argumentation, trying to belittle the opponent's achievements and citing a well-known event. Also, there is the attempt to disqualify the opponent, under value argumentation. Focalization of the discourse towards swine flu is another tactic and the circumstantial personal attack is clear here in describing the action taken by Biden as a disaster. Impoliteness strategies used here are 'S wants to be rude' within BOR; understate and be ironic under OR. Persuasively, giving an example under logos and within pathos we have the use of information evoking emotional response from the audience.

### **TRUMP**

*China ate your lunch; China ate your lunch, Joe. No wonder your son goes in and he takes out what he takes out, billions of dollars. Takes out billions of dollars to manage. He makes millions of dollars. And also, while we're at it, why is it, just out of curiosity, the mayor of Moscow's wife gave your son \$3.5 million? What did he do to deserve it? What did he do*

When China was mentioned by Biden, Trump diverted and shifted the subject to a critical issue related to Biden's son; which was a successful tactic to evade embarrassment. It is a focalization of the discourse which is one of the effective argumentative strategies during conflict talk. Also, in the utterances *'China ate your lunch'* *'Why did the mayor of Moscow's wife gave your son \$3.5 million?'* Trump poisoned the well assuming a hidden agenda with China and Russia, which is another type of personal attack argumentation. The latter question is a sort of an interrogative question, through which Biden's legs are pulled to admit the existence of a hidden agenda or personal gain; attacking in the same time the trustworthiness of the opponent.

The paper concludes that Trump has used a diversity of strategies, argumentatively, persuasively and in terms of impoliteness in the form of explicit or implicit nasty language to attain triumph in the debates. He uses personal attack as a work of art as it is his nature to be rude and aggressive.

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