

“They’re killing us!” - Critical Discourse Analysis of Donald Trump’s Tweets

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Abstract

This article focuses on the linguistic aspects of Trump’s political discourse, as reflected in some of his tweets targeted at specific countries, political groups and immigrants, posted on Twitter between 2015 and 2019. A qualitative research design, using a descriptive and interpretative analysis, has been applied in this study, which is part of a broader research on Trump’s discourse. The underlying theoretical framework is the one provided by Norman Fairclough’s 3-dimensional model of discourse. The current study, thus, aims to critically explore both the main linguistic features present in the corpus analysed and the ideological aspects possibly associated with Trump’s selection of linguistic means. One of the underlying considerations in this research endeavour is that the ideological standpoint is a particularly important one, since presidential discourses are typically molded by their authors’ status and authority. It is hoped that this work will make a contribution to the field of Critical Discourse Analysis applied to political discourse, in the current period.

Keywords: *Critical Discourse Analysis; Political Discourse; Fairclough’s 3-Dimensional Model; Illegal Immigrants; Linguistic Features.*

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1. Introduction

Digital and social media today play a critical role in politics; thus, most politicians use these channels to spread their views and inspire more people to pay attention to what they consider salient topics and aspects (Bartlett, 2014). A study by Greenwood, Perrin, and Duggan (2016) shows that social media platforms like Twitter are heavily utilized by the general population. According to KhosraviNik and Unger (2016), the average individual is using web-based platforms to exchange both verbal and visual communication daily, and the flow of political power has changed as a result. Political discourse research, therefore, aims

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to investigate the speakers' thoughts through an in-depth analysis of language aspects, including semantics, syntax, style, and rhetoric (Arief, 2014). Identifying the ideological slant of the writer can be a crucial part of identifying the writer's purpose. Additionally, this approach is often used in political debate, where power is the currency of ideas and a fight for it is a struggle to transform those ideas into reality (Bayram, 2010). In today's political campaigns, Twitter has become a popular tool due to the liberty of expression it offers, which allows politicians, political parties, journalists, and the general public to share their personal political views and thoughts. They do this in order to help support a specific issue (Jessica, 2017). A consideration of the power of language and the influence of Twitter has attracted academia and the literary community to examine how language and communication are evolving nowadays. Therefore, a study of language used in political communication, on social media, is particularly important (Carter, 2015).

Donald Trump's manner of purposefully using Twitter has piqued people's interest. According to Liu (2017) and Razak et al. (2019), President Trump has had more than 80 million Twitter followers, as well as more than 30 million Facebook fans and followers on other social media platforms. According to Kreis (2017), he took to using Twitter to speak directly to his followers during his 2015 campaign, being effective in getting enormous audiences through a friendly and conversational linguistic style in his tweets.

Why have I chosen Donald Trump for this research? First and foremost, he is a well-known global leader. Secondly, the President of the United States serves as the most powerful leader in the world. Thirdly, this study aims to make a contribution to the existing literature on political discourse via social media, in the current period. Why CDA? According to Wodak and Meyer (2009), CDA can be truly instrumental "in de-mystifying ideologies and power by way of systematic and reproducible research of semiotic material (written, spoken, or visual)". With little attention, these linguistic tactics have a significant impact on the audience (Fowler, 2013). So, CDA is in the process of discovering what they say, and what impact it has on the public. In other words, this form of study is supposed to reveal the ideological underpinnings of language. As mentioned also above, the point of departure is Norman Fairclough's concept on political discourses, considering that the practices and decisions made inside political discourses are action-oriented and, therefore, it is motivating to try to

disentangle the ambiguity surrounding the politicians' decisions (Fairclough cited by Martin, 2013).

2. Theoretical framework and literature review

The goal of Critical Discourse Analysis is to uncover how language contributes to and maintains unequal power relations. To be a critical discourse analyst is not only about being analytical. It attempts to determine the link between language and other social strata characteristics. This includes: (a) the ways in which language deals with power and authority in society; (b) the ways in which language serves ideology; (c) the ways in which language accommodates identities. In this case, the theory will be applied to analyze Trump's tweets to learn about his communication strategies and beliefs through employing language. This study utilizes Norman Fairclough's (1989, 2000, 2010) approach to CDA, which focuses on the role of language in social power structures. Fairclough's interest in language goes beyond helping discover the many ways in which it is used in day-to-day conversations, his focus is on investigating the ways language forms identity and represents ideology and authority.

That is the concept of discourse as a social practice, which states that (a) a language is an integral element of society, (b) a social process is a language, (c) society determines language.

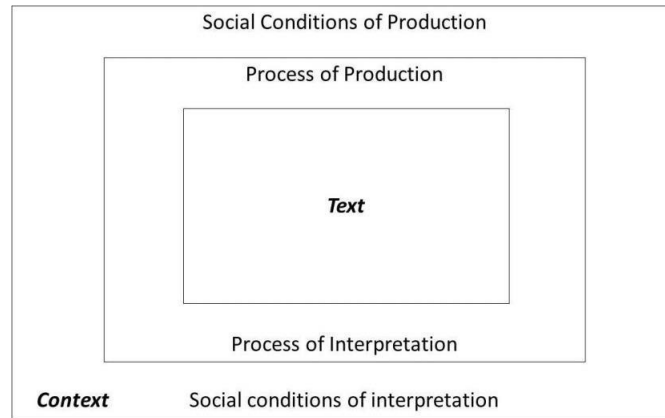


Figure 1. Fairclough's 3-dimensional model

Political discourse analysis may be seen as an examination of how various methods of challenging political supremacy are implemented, reproduced, and misused. Norman Fairclough's (1992) findings suggest that political discourse analysis is concerned with the spread of economic, social, and political inequalities created by various facets of political dominance. Thus, conversation around political issues always begins when political players such as politicians are identified.

According to Hussein (2016), for instance, who analysed the political discourse of the Egyptian president, political speeches contain their unique traits and politicians employ language skillfully to reach their intended purposes. According to his observations, the speech of the Egyptian president included numerous semantic phenomena, including figures of speech, repetition, synonymy, and collocation, all used to bring about distinct political ideologies.

Studies on Donald Trump's discourse have also revealed the interrelatedness between his use of language, his political beliefs and attitudes towards different members of society or political opponents. Ahmadian and Paulhuss (2016), who analysed Donald Trump's tweets, focusing on his communication style, have found that he communicates in a manner that has characteristics of grandiosity, informality, and dynamism. Anderson's (2017) further investigations revealed the strength of Trump's presidency, and focused on Trump's position as the most powerful man in the United States. At the same time, analysts consider that on the U.S. political scene, Donald Trump has normalized blatantly insulting speech by targeting his critics, political opponents, and anyone who opposed his policies both domestically and internationally. This approach to communication has had ripple effects on America's image and international relations. However, in an interview with *The New York Times*, Pollack (2017) stated that Trump's bullying policy was very clear because his approach could be summed up in the terms "America First" or "Making America Great Again". As a result, Trump's idea of America was well defined, and his goals with regard to international relations were also crystal clear. According to Shafer (2017), the study's results showed that Trump employed political incorrectness in an attempt to bolster white supremacist viewpoints while concealing overt forms of racism. Also, an academic study recently presented by Darweesh and Abdullah (2016) found that Trump's views on women were backed up by his ideology and that such ideologies are deeply established in language and therefore

impossible to modify, making Trump's statements on women unfair and inequitable.

More recent studies help us situate Trump's rhetoric in a broader context of growing "incivility in American politics", an increase in "unpleasant and offensive" political argumentation and an upward trend of heated rhetoric initiated by political elites (Richey & Taylor, 2021). McIntosh and Mendoza-Denton (2020) analyse "The Trump era as a linguistic emergency" in detail, investigating how different facets of language use contribute to fracturing American society. They also help us contextualise Trump's tweets within his overall communication repertoire and underlying ideology. Kowalski (2019) looks into the evolution of the Trump phenomenon ("Trumpism"), while McMurry (2019) analyses the distinctive features of Trump's discourse, for which he uses the term "Trumpolect".

Against the backdrop of these evolving trends in political communication in the current period, the focus of this study will be on Trump's linguistic preferences and possibly related ideology, as reflected in a corpus of tweets, as detailed below.

3. Methodological approach and Corpus

In order to conduct this study, a qualitative research methodology was utilized, in an attempt to understand the text, regarding both its discursive and its social practices. Since Trump's Twitter account was blocked by Twitter in January 2021, "The complete List of Trump's Twitter Insults (2015-2021)" published in *The New York Times* (Quealy, 2021) has been used as a source for the corpus to be analysed. The NYT list registers the verbal attacks Trump posted on Twitter, which ranged from when he announced his candidacy in June 2015 until January 2021, when Twitter blocked him from using their service. The tweets in the NYT list are grouped alphabetically according to topics addressed (e.g. "fake news", "illegal immigration", "mail-in voting"), key persons (e.g. Joe Biden, Hilary Clinton, Robert Mueller, congressmen, judges, journalists, comedians, etc.), institutions, organisations or groups of representative institutions (e.g. NASA, The New York Times, the mainstream media), US cities and states, countries (e.g. China, El Salvador, Iran, Mexico, etc.), all those targeted by Trump's insults.

For the purpose of this study, I selected the tweets grouped under the headings “Mexico”, “U.S.-Mexico border” and “illegal immigration”. The corpus comprises 50 tweets that were posted on Twitter between June 2015 and July 2019. For easier reference, the tweets were grouped into three subcorpora, ordered chronologically within each of them, and coded, as follows:

- the “Mexico” subcorpus – with 20 tweets, ranging from M1 (posted on 30 June 2015) to M20 (2 June 2019); several tweets in this subcorpus actually also include references to El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras;
- the “Southern border” subcorpus – with 9 tweets, ranging from SB1 (posted on 3rd July 2015) to SB9 (posted on 1st June 2019); in addition to these, there are more than 10 tweets in the “Mexico” subcorpus that address also “the Wall” on the U.S.-Mexico border;
- the “Illegal Immigration” subcorpus – with 21 tweets, ranging from II1 (posted on 11 August 2015) to II21 (posted on 15 July 2019).

The tweets in the corpus will be explored using Critical Discourse Analysis and Fairclough's 3-dimensional model. Textual information and the main linguistic features will be examined, with a view to identifying recurrent ideas and attitudes, as expressed through lexical elements, grammar structures, or rhetorical patterns.

4. Findings and Discussion

This part starts by highlighting and examining the most striking linguistic features that appear in the three subcorpora. It is hoped that the findings of this analysis will help explore the ideological underpinnings of Trump's tweets.

4.1 Predominant lexis

In all the three subcorpora there is an abundance of lexis with negative meaning. Examples of **adjectives** include:

“totally corrupt” (M3/13.07.2015), with reference to the Mexican government;

“very dangerous” (M6/16.01.2018; SB5/5.01.2019), with reference to the Southern border;

“absolutely disgraceful” (M2/3.07.2015), regarding the situation at the U.S.-Mexico border;
“horrible” (II4/29.12.2017), regarding “Chain Migration”;
“ridiculous” (II4/29.12.2017), with reference to the “Lottery System”, or (in tweet II15/30.03.2019), with reference to the Democrat supported “asylum system”;
“weak and very stupid” (II15/30.03.2019), *“weak, ineffective and dangerous”* (II18/30.04.2019), with reference to the “Democrat inspired immigration laws”; further adjectives used in association with immigration laws and the immigration policy supported by Trump’s political opponents, the Democrats, included: *bad, dumb, totally flawed and broken, horrendous, outdated, very unfair.*

Some of these adjectives (*bad, dumb, ridiculous, stupid, unfair, weak*) are also included in Andersen’s (2018) list, compiled on the basis of a large corpus of thousands of tweets. As it can be noticed, even in our small-scale corpus, numerous adjectives are accompanied by intensifiers (*absolutely, totally, very*), for an added emphasis and a stronger impact.

Similarly, most of the **nouns** referring to Mexico, to illegal immigrants and the effects of their entering the U.S., have negative meaning, as illustrated below:

“abuser” (M19/2.06.2019), with reference to Mexico;
“Animals” (II7/18.05.2018), with reference to the “MS 13 Gang Members”;
“assault on our country” (...), *“invasion of our Country by Drug Dealers Cartels Human Traffickers”* (M19/2.06.2019; punctuation marks missing in the original);
“crime and killing machine” (II1/11.08.2015); also *“CRIME!”* (II11/27.07.2019), both equated with “illegal immigration”;
“criminals”, “killers”, with reference to undocumented immigrants coming through the Southern border;
“a complete and total disaster” (II12/31.07.2018), with reference to “immigration laws and border security”;
“Illegal Immigration, Drugs and Crime” (II19/10.06.2019; initial capitals in the original); *“massive crime and drugs”* (II20/6.07.2019), both phrases equated with the “Open Borders” supported by the Democrats;

Emphasis of the negative meaning of the above nouns is added through adjectives such as “*complete*”, “*total*”, “*massive*”, as well as through capitalization of the initials or of the entire word, through repetition, as in “*CRIMECRIMECRIME!*” (II11/27.07.2019). Amplification of the negative aspects is achieved through the use of the Present Perfect and by emphatically specifying the time span, e.g. “*for decades*”, “*for years*”, both of them recurrent phrases throughout the three subcorpora.

Examples of **verbs** with negative meaning or negative connotations in the given context include *to pour into*, *infest*, *invade*, *kill*, *meander*, *refuse*, as illustrated through the following excerpts:

“*pour into and infest our Country*” (II8/19.06.2018), with reference to illegal immigrants; “*massive inflow of drugs pouring into our country*” (SB2/16.01.2018);

“*They’re killing us at the border and they’re killing us on jobs and trade.*” (M1/30.06.2015), with reference to illegal immigrants coming through the Southern border;

“*allowing millions of people to easily meander through their country and INVADE the U.S.*” (M18/1.06.2019), with reference to the immigrants from countries at Mexico’s Southern border, migrating through Mexico and entering the U.S. through the U.S.-Mexico border;

“*Mexico (...) refuses to help with illegal immigration & drugs!*” (SB7/18.03.2019).

The intended impact of the negative meaning of these verbs is increased e.g. through repetition and the use of the present continuous (as in M1/30.06.2015), through the concatenation of verbs with a negative meaning or connotation (“*pour into and infest*”), as well as through intertextuality, with the same or similar phrases recurring frequently across the corpus of tweets on the same topic.

In contrast to the above verbs, associated with other countries’ or political opponents’ ill intentions or wrong doing, there are a number of verbs and nouns with positive meaning (in the tweet author’s view), expressing his determination to take action or his imposition on others to act in a manner that he considers beneficial for the U.S., as illustrated through the tweet excerpts below:

“*We will BUILD THE WALL!*” (M5/22.06.2017)

“*Will speak to Mexico!*” (II9/22.06.2018)

"Immigration must be based on merit – we need people who will help Make America Great Again!" (II10/24.06.2018)

"(...) we must have a great WALL to help protect us, and to help stop the massive inflow of drugs pouring into our country!" (SB2/16.01.2018);

"Congress must act now to change our weak and ineffective immigration laws. Must build a Wall." (SB4/4.05.2018)

"Time for them to finally do what must be done!" (M17/31.05.2019), with reference to Mexico.

The modals *"will"* (as in M5 or II10 above) or *"must"* (as in SB2 above) help amplify the author's expression of determination to act in a certain direction. Similarly, the modal *"must"* (as in SB4 or M17) adds strength to the obligation to act imposed on others (e.g. the Congress or Mexico). Additional emphasis is achieved through capitalization and punctuation.

What also needs to be mentioned is that the above examples, which may seem benign through the choice of some positive language, are only tweet excerpts. If analysed within the discursive context in which they appear, it becomes obvious that they serve rhetorical purposes of argumentation based on contrasts. There are plenty of such contrasts in our corpus, building on the good vs bad dichotomy, or *"we"* (i.e. the U.S.) vs *"they"* (Mexico, Honduras, El Salvador), or *"I"* (Trump) vs his political opponents (the Democrats). A frequently recurring contrast refers to the benefits Mexico and other countries are getting (or *"taking"*) from the U.S. versus their ill intentions and lack of desirable action (*"doing nothing"*, *"doing very little close to nothing"*), as illustrated below:

"... billions of dollars gets brought into Mexico through the border. We get the killers, drugs and crime, they get the money!" (M4/13.07.2015)

"Likewise, Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador have taken our money for years, and do Nothing." (M11/29.03.2019)

"They have ALL been taking U.S. money for years, and doing ABSOLUTELY NOTHING for us..." (M13/2.04.2019).

4.2 Rhetorical preferences

Repetition is one of the outstanding features of Trump's rhetoric. There are numerous examples of repetitions throughout our corpus of tweets, e.g. in the *"Mexico"* and *"Southern border"* subcorpora, with reference to Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador:

“do nothing”, “do absolutely nothing”, “do very little”, “doing very little, if not NOTHING”, “doing nothing for the United States but taking our money”, “have taken our money for years, and do Nothing”;
“They are all talk and no action” (M11/29.03.2019);
“We need the Wall”, “build a wall”, “a great wall”.

As it is to be expected, in the *“illegal immigration”* corpus there are obsessively many mentions of the *“outdated immigration laws”, “ineffective immigration laws”, “bad immigration laws”,* etc., with special reference to Trump’s political opponents, the Democrats.

Further characteristic features of Trump’s rhetorical repertoire include **metaphoric** formulations, such as: *“they are killing us on jobs & trade” (M1), “I will stop their cash cow” (M8), “we must stop the crime and killing machine” (II1).*

One of the most striking features of Trump’s rhetoric, and possibly also one of his favourites, is the purposeful use of the **hyperbole**. E.g.

“Mexico was ranked the second deadliest country in the world” (M5/22.06.2017);
“Our Southern Border is under siege” (SB4/4.05.2018).

Irony is also present in various forms, in combination with contrasts, repetition, metaphors, as in the following example: *“We get the killers, drugs, & crime, they get the money”.* (M4/13.07.2015), or a combination of irony and rhetorical questions: *“Are the Drug Lords Cartels & Coyotes really running Mexico? We will soon find out!”* (M18/1.06.2017)

A short perusal of the linguistic features in Trump’s tweets reveals that he uses the same or very similar insulting language also vis-à-vis other members of society: politicians, judges, individuals, journalists, etc. This is important because some of these features are typical of Trump’s use of language and attitude, they are not directed only to a certain group. In this study, however, the findings revealed that Trump frequently used insulting language to address those whom he believed to be undocumented immigrants and the first cause of an increasing crime rate in the U.S.A.

4.3 Beliefs and attitudes intertwined with linguistic choices

The analysis of the tweet corpus selected for this study has revealed Donald Trump’s preference for specific linguistic elements that reflect his strong beliefs and his attitude towards countries (such as Mexico,

Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador), towards immigrants coming from these countries, as well as towards members of the American society, his political opponents, the Democrats. For example, the terms used for describing Mexican immigrants as *criminals*, *cartels*, *drug dealers*, *coyotes* express his deep displeasure with the phenomenon of illegal immigration across the border with Mexico. On the one hand, the language chosen (e.g. *horrible*, *killers*, *dangerous*) to characterise the undocumented immigrants reflects his deeply engrained belief that they are the main source for the spread of crime in the U.S. and, on the other, it serves the purpose of instilling these ideas into the mindset of the American electorate. Furthermore, the recurrent reference to the costs involved (*"we lose so much money with them"*, ... *"have taken our money for years"*, *"They have ALL been taking U.S. money for years"*), induces the idea of a causal relationship between the increased number of immigrants and the economic situation in the U.S.

A special place within Trump's rhetoric is held by the expression of positive feelings, combined with the use of the first person singular personal pronoun (*I*), to appeal to the goodwill of a segment of population, before introducing an argument in favour of a tough action to be taken, as illustrated in the following tweet: *"I love the Mexican people, but Mexico is not our friend. They're killing us at the border and they're killing us on jobs and trade. FIGHT!"* (M1/30.06.2015). Worthwhile noticing is the interplay between the first person singular (associated with positive attitude), the third person (associated with negative actions), the inclusive first person plural (suffering from the negative actions of the others), and the second person plural (implicitly included in the imperative *"FIGHT!"*).

A further example, again in the first person singular, refers to disappointment with Mexico's attitude and lack of action: *"I am very disappointed that Mexico is doing virtually nothing to stop illegal immigrants from coming to our Southern Border where everyone knows that because of the Democrats, our Immigration Laws are totally flawed & broken."* (M15/21.05.2019). Despite its brevity, this discourse sample also integrates blaming of a country (Mexico) with disapproval of the author's political opponents (the Democrats), who are blamed for the *"flawed"* Immigration Laws. In addition, *"everyone knows"* has an inclusive role, appealing to the public, as if assuming that it is obvious for *"everyone"* to share the same view and to be on the tweet author's side.

Several examples, illustrative of Trump's assertive style, include the formulation of threats to punish those who continue to refuse to act according to expectations:

"They must stop the big drug and people flows, or I will stop their cash cow. NAFTA. NEED WALL!" (M8 and SB3/1.04.2018)

"Word is that a new Caravan is forming in Honduras and they are doing nothing about it. We will be cutting off all aid the these 3 countries – taking advantage of U.S. for years!" (M10/ 28.12.2019)

"Mexico is wrong and I will soon be giving a response!" (M16/2.05.2019)

As it can be noticed, the forceful use of modals such as *"must"* and *"will"* is complemented by instances of vague source attribution (*Word is that a new Caravan is forming in Honduras...*), possibly with a view to enhancing the credibility of the argumentation. This feature of Trump's discourse has been signaled also by Andersen (2018).

There are numerous occurrences of the first person pronouns both in the singular and the plural, in combination with the modal verb *"will"*, expressing determination to take action. *"I"* is also meant to stress Trump's authority and political will, as well as to suggest his power of implementing the intended action, e.g. *"I will build the wall"*, *"I will stop their cash cow"*. Inclusive *"We"* is meant to bring in the audience, allowing him to more fully identify with "the people." His goal is to pass on everything to the citizens of the United States. This may suggest the belief that oneness and solidarity among the people is powerful and serves a collective cause, e.g., *"we want action not talk"*, *"we are tired of incompetent politicians"*.

The analysis of the corpus of tweets selected for this study has revealed a number of linguistic features typical of the author's style, reflecting his beliefs and attitudes vis-à-vis certain countries and illegal immigrants. According to the tweets analysed, the immigrants are considered responsible for causing trouble in the U.S., for increasing the level of criminality and drug trafficking, as well as for invading the labour market, leaving many Americans without jobs. Trump used a trending topic to discuss his views on Immigration, building on the general concern related to the Southern border and the border crisis.

5. Concluding remarks

The study has attempted to explore Trump's usage of lexis and rhetorical patterns to describe illegal immigrants and the effects of illegal

immigration on the United States. Following Norman Fairclough's methodology, the study used the CDA theory to examine the data. While looking at the range of linguistic traits that Donald Trump employed in his tweets, the study found that he used a variety of these characteristics, such as metaphors, repetition, hyperbole, as well as a selection of modal verbs. According to the study, Trump used the term "we" frequently while referencing the unity of his people. Additionally, Trump often spoke about his determination to shape the future policy regarding the immigrants and minorities. According to the study, Trump used harsh and insulting terms to describe immigrants. Additionally, he used plain language to convince more Americans of the correctness of his political approach. Even when the President uses punctuation, like in an exclamation point, it is meant to convey emotion.

As mentioned at the beginning, this study is only part of a broader research. Even if small scale, our investigation has hopefully shed some light on the interplay between Trump's linguistic choices and his underlying beliefs and attitudes, which have led to the closure of his Twitter account in January 2021.

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