

First and Last Impressions

A Critical Discourse Analysis of the 2024 Harris vs. Trump Presidential Debate

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Abstract

In this thesis I study what language strategies Kamala Harris and Donald Trump used to project authority during their entrances to the stage and in their closing statements in the presidential debate on September 10, 2024. Using Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional model I not only pin pointed the language strategies but also tied them to a larger social context to answer the question of how these strategies reflect and reinforce societal norms and power dynamics.

My main focus in the entrances was on the non-verbal aspects and in the closing statements I opted to examine the pronoun use of the candidates, partly incorporating Teun A. van Dijk's Us/Them assessment. To tie these strategies to a larger social context I used a selection of post-debate news articles.

My results indicate that while there were some similarities in how the candidates portrayed themselves as leaders, Harris' leadership persona can be seen as unorthodox for a woman in the sense that she is someone with agentic characteristics, something that is usually expected from male leaders. This is evident in both her language strategies as well as in the media coverage. In terms of pronoun use, it is evident that Harris leaned more to her personal qualifications, whereas Trump did not highlight his own accomplishments but instead wanted to paint the opposition as the enemy. The media portrayed Harris as the winner of the debate, but it is clear from the election results that being well-spoken or winning the debate is not enough. Thus, there are clear indications that Harris losing the election could be tied to her gender.

Key words: CDA, critical discourse analysis, politics, presidential debates, Kamala Harris, Donald Trump

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1 Introduction

First impressions are vital in terms of how people view others around them. Whether it be a confident pose, a firm handshake, or a well-constructed comment, the first impression someone leaves has a lasting effect. Evolutionary psychologists agree that common features, such as physical appearance, or other indicators, such as visual signals, are something that humans use to judge others they are meeting for the first time (Maurer 2016).

It could be argued that equally as important as the first impression, is the last one. If you slam the door when you leave the room or walk away from a situation stand-offishly without saying goodbye, it can leave a bad taste in the mouths of the other people who were in the situation with you.

Not only are these beginnings and endings of conversations present in the day-to-day lives of regular people, but also in the field of politics. Campaign rallies and interviews on prime-time TV are catered to the average voter. They provide insight into the person who is, supposedly, looking after them and promoting their best interest. There are many ways in which a voter and mere spectator is introduced to global politicians and world leaders. One of the most popular formats are political debates, especially presidential debates in the U.S.

For my thesis I have chosen to examine the first and last impressions of Kamala Harris and Donald Trump in the Presidential Debate, held by ABC News on September 10, 2024. More specifically I examine what language strategies, both verbal and non-verbal, Harris and Trump employ in their entrances to the stage as well as their closing statements to project authority, and how these strategies reflect and reinforce societal norms and power dynamics. To do this, I have chosen to take a multimodal critical discourse analytic approach (Kress and Bezemer (2023), following the framework of Norman Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional model, to which I apply Teun van Dijk's (2008) approaches to discourse analysis from the point of group relations.

When it comes to analysing political discourse, Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional model offers a solid framework for examining how language constructs meaning, reflects power dynamics, and connects to broader social and cultural contexts. This model consists of three unified levels of analysis: description, interpretation, and explanation. Description stage focuses on the textual level, interpretation stage on the discursive practice and explanation stage on the relationship between the interaction and the larger social context.

My reason for focusing on Harris and Trump lies in the increasing global impact of U.S. presidential elections. The leader of the United States is often perceived as a political trendsetter of sorts who has significant influence on global affairs. In recent years, U.S. elections have progressively gained international attention. This increase is exemplified by Kluver et al. (2019) in their study that takes into consideration the global viewership of the 2016 election, which they identified as an event of intense international interest. Similar patterns of worldwide engagement have been evident in the last two elections as well, which highlights that there is a relevance of examining how candidates project authority on such a prominent stage.

These two candidates offer a compelling contrast in how they construct their leadership personas. Harris, a biracial woman who made her career as a junior U.S. senator of California, and California's state attorney before serving as the first female Vice President of the United States (Holliday 2024, 140). Trump contrastively is a seasoned white man with decades of public prominence, which he gained through his reality TV-work and real estate business and later as the 45th President of America.

Donald Trump's language use has been studied extensively in linguistic research reflecting his high-profile status as a former president and a public figure for at least over thirty years. In contrast, Kamala Harris, though experienced in politics and serving as the vice president until recently, has been the subject of comparatively less linguistic analysis. This disparity is understandable given the differences in their visibility and tenure in the public spotlight. This however makes Harris and her linguistic strategies a particularly interesting subject for further exploration.

2 Background

In this section, I will first introduce the theoretical framework, as well as some key terms and concepts relevant to my research. I will then provide a brief overview of the United States presidential election process, including the two major political parties, their candidates in the most recent election, and the role of political debates as a platform for discourse.

2.1 Theoretical Background

Critical Discourse Analysis, or CDA, can be determined as a type of “discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social-power abuse and inequality are enacted, reproduced, legitimated, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context”, while simultaneously seeking “to understand, expose, and challenge social inequality” (van Dijk 2018, 466).

Shalaby (2009) states that the term discourse can be described in multiple ways, but it has typically been “used to refer to the use of language beyond the sentence level” (175). In her view it “may also be used in a broader sense to refer to a specific body of writing on a certain topic or unified by a certain goal or set of characteristics” (Shalaby 2009, 175). She goes on to say “that discourse can also be approached by defining it according to what it accomplishes in society” (Shalaby 2009, 176). To use her example, discourse can be approached through the work of Norman Fairclough.

Fairclough (2015, 57) refers to discourse as “the whole process of social interaction, of which text is just a part”. According to him, the process of social interaction includes “the *process of production*, of which the text is a product, and the *process of interpretation*, for which the text is a resource” (Fairclough 2015, 57). In his view, the different processes correlate to *text*, *interaction*, and *context* (Fairclough 2015, 58). His definition of discourse lays the foundation for his renowned three-dimensional critical discourse analytical approach.

2.1.1 Fairclough’s Three-Dimensional Model

The three-dimensional model, developed by Fairclough (2015) takes into consideration the three dimensions of discourse, which as previously established are: text, interaction, and context. The framework of Fairclough’s model distinguishes corresponding dimensions of critical discourse analysis to the forementioned dimensions of discourse (Fairclough 2015, 58–59).

The stages, or dimensions of critical discourse analysis that Fairclough (2015) established are description, interpretation, and explanation. Firstly, description is the stage which focuses on the formal properties of the text. Secondly, interaction then focuses on the relationship between the text and the interaction. Thirdly, and lastly explanation is the stage, where the focus is on the relationship between the interaction and social context. A more in-depth explanation of how the methodology is applied to my research can be found in section 3.3.

2.1.2 Van Dijk's Us/Them Assessment

For the purposes of this thesis, I opted to incorporate van Dijk's approaches to structural discourse analysis from the point of view of *ingroups* and *outgroups* to the three-dimensional model. This approach is often referred to as the Us/Them assessment. Van Dijk's (2008, 104–105) approach takes into consideration different discursive ways in which group polarization is present through the use of pronouns 'us' and 'them'.

Even though van Dijk's (2008, 105) remarks on group polarization by the use of pronouns are on racism, the same thought can also be applied to other types of discourse. It is common in political discourse to emphasize the ingroup's (our) good qualities, and similarly to the bad qualities of the outgroup (their). The use of Us/Them shows the relation between ideology and group membership and works as a strategy of inclusion and exclusion.

2.2 The U.S. Presidential Elections

Presidential elections in the United States are held every four years, with the vice president elected simultaneously. To observers outside the U.S., the campaigning process may appear extravagant, since the elaborate rallies and high-profile debates stretch over more than a year. They are not extravagant in the sense that these types of events were alien to the rest of the world, but more so that the scale and intensity with which the U.S. presidential campaigns are done stand out as particularly grandiose.

The U.S. political landscape has experienced notable shifts in leadership, that reflects an ebb-and-flow dynamic between conservative and liberal ideologies. Focusing on the past two decades, this pattern is evident in the transition from the tenure of Republican President George W. Bush to the election of Democratic President Barack Obama, both of whom served two terms. Subsequently, the presidency saw two single-term leaders: Republican Donald

Trump and Democrat Joe Biden. Most recently, Trump has returned to office after succeeding Biden, proving yet again the fluctuating nature of American political preferences.

It is important to note that the United States elects its president and vice president through the Electoral College system, rather than by a national popular vote. Established in the U.S. Constitution, the Electoral College is a process in which voters cast ballots for electors representing their state. These electors then make the final decision in choosing the president and vice president of the United States (Warf 2009). A candidate needs the vote of at least 270 electors, which is more than half of all electors, to win the presidential election (*ibid.*). In practice, this means that a candidate must win the popular vote on the state level, but not on the federal level.

2.2.1 The Parties and Their Candidates in the 2024 Presidential Election

The United States has a two-party system. While alternative parties exist, their impact on electoral outcomes remains minimal. For most people, voting rationally means voting for Democrats or Republicans (Russell and Goddard 2013, 112).

The Democrats and the Republicans are not homogenous groups by any means. Russell and Goddard (2013, 112–113) note that the dominance of the two major parties requires internal compromise, bringing together diverse and occasionally conflicting ideologies. In their view groups within the Democratic Party include socially liberal and economically statist left-leaning activists, pro-lifers, and center-right reformers. Similarly, the Republican Party comprises a range of groups from fiscal conservatives, libertarians, the religious right, and neo-conservatives among other groups.

The 2024 U.S. presidential election initially featured President Joe Biden as the Democratic nominee and then former President Donald Trump as the Republican nominee. However, the race took an unexpected turn when Biden withdrew from the race on July 21, 2024, midway through the election cycle. Shortly before his withdrawal, Biden participated in a debate with Trump. According to the Associated Press (2024), the event raised significant concerns about Biden's ability to fulfill the demands of the presidency.

The following month Biden dropped out from the race and Vice President Harris emerged as the Democratic nominee, setting the stage for a contest between Harris and Trump. Reflecting broader party ideologies, Harris's campaign was aligned with the Democratic Party's

progressive and liberal principles, while Trump's candidacy embodied the Republican Party's conservative platform.

2.2.2 Presidential Debates

Televised debates are a key feature of the U.S. presidential elections, often regarded as a high-risk, high-reward opportunity for candidates. Schroeder describes these unscripted live events as follows:

Presidential debates transcend the months of negotiation, preparation, and speculation leading up to the featured event. Once a debate begins, all previous maneuvering yields to a superior force: the on-camera prowess of the candidates. [...] Each debater appears before the nation as a solo act, succeeding or failing in an utterly personal way. For ninety minutes the support systems and defensive armor of a presidential campaign are stripped away, leaving only the mystical bond between audience and star. (Schroeder 2016, 149)

It is fitting that Schroeder calls the candidates stars as presidential debates have long been a spectacle for the American public. Since the Kennedy-Nixon debate in the 1960s, which attracted 70 million viewers, debates have consistently garnered significant audiences. Schroeder (2016, 325–326) compares the debates to major entertainment spectacles such as the Super Bowl or the Academy Awards. He highlights the debates' hybrid nature by pointing out similarities between them and the ingredients the debates borrow and refashion from the sport spectaculars and entertainment extravaganzas. In his view, the common themes include “big names, high stakes, competition, spontaneity, and hype” (Schroeder 2016, 326).

On September 10, 2024, audiences once again turned their attention to their screens for the highly anticipated head-to-head political match between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump. As reported by the Guardian, the debate was broadcast on 17 different networks, reaching an audience of 67.1 million viewers (Sullivan 2024). Even though the number of viewers is substantial, this covers roughly the quarter of all the eligible voters in the United States. As stated in the 2.2.1, for most people voting rationally means voting for either a Democrat or a Republican (Russell and Goddard 2013, 112). This also means, that people tend to be set in their ways. Many vote for the same party regardless of the candidate.

It is worth noting that while presidential debate format has varied historically (Schroeder 2020), they rely on a standardized format. Specific production details of the debate depend on the media outlet hosting the event. The debates are typically moderated by a representative from a news organization. They usually last 90 minutes and are traditionally divided into

segments addressing various political issues. In its current format, candidates take turns responding to questions, with designated time limits for their initial answers, rebuttals, and closing statements. As the Harris vs. Trump debate is my primary source of data, I present the specifics of the production of this debate in more depth in the following subsection.

3 Materials and Methods

In this section, I will introduce the materials and methods used in my analysis. As the general details of the theoretical framework have been covered in section 2.1, section 3.3 here focuses on how I apply the three-dimensional model to my analysis.

My primary source of data is the Harris vs. Trump presidential debate held by ABC News on September 10, 2024 (Hoffman, 2024). As I will only examine the first and last impressions, my first piece of data is 10 seconds at the beginning of the debate, and the second piece is 4 minutes and 16 seconds by the end of it. Through ABC News' website I have access to both the debate and its partial transcript, which I have determined to be sufficient considering the parts of the debate I will focus on.

My secondary source of data is a selection of post-debate news coverage, which I have gathered using advanced Google search tool. I picked out the articles by reviewing their relevance to my topic.

3.1 Harris vs. Trump Debate

As already mentioned, the primary source of data for my analysis is the presidential debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, that was held on ABC News on September 10 in 2024 (Hoffman 2024). This debate was the first, and ultimately the last between the two candidates. The Democratic nominee Harris would have been willing to have another debate offered to be held by CNN on October 23, but despite the invitation and his opponent's willingness President Trump declined (Debusmann and Drenon 2024).

The debate hosted by ABC News took place in Philadelphia at the National Constitution Center. The debate had two moderators, David Muir, World News Tonight anchor and managing editor, and ABC News Live Prime anchor Linsey Davis. The length of the debate was 90 minutes, not including the two commercial breaks. The debate broadcast shared on the ABC News website had the duration of 1 hour 52 minutes.

The rules and the setting of the debate were described at the beginning of the debate by the hosts (Hoffman 2024). There was no live audience at the National Constitution Center at the time of the event. No topics or questions were shared with the campaigns in advance and no prewritten notes were allowed. The candidates were given two minutes to answer each

question and two minutes for rebuttals, as well as one minute for follow-ups, clarifications, or responses. The microphones were only turned on when the candidates had their turn to speak.

As my focus is on the candidates themselves, I will skip the moderators' introduction of the debate. The first piece of data spans from minute 2:20 to minute 2:30, a ten second clip, which covers the candidates' entrances to the stage. The second piece of data is from minute 1:31:30 to minute 1:35:46 which covers both candidates' closing statements.

It would have been ideal to take the candidates' opening statements into account as well, but I decided to not include them, since their opening statements were not exactly something they themselves had power over, when compared to the closing statements. The opening statements of the candidates, while most certainly not thought of on the spot, were answer to moderator Muir's question on the economy. In comparison to the closing statements, in which the candidates can highlight the issues they deem important and end on the note they themselves want, there is little leeway in terms of highlighting issues when they are posed with a question on a certain topic.

3.2 Post-Debate News Coverage

My secondary source of data is a selection of post-debate news articles. These articles provide the base for third dimension of my analysis, which focuses on the broader societal context of the debate.

Using the advanced Google search tool, I gathered a total of four articles that contained coverage on the candidates' performances and had a mention of either their entrance to the stage or their closing statements. I first searched with "Harris Trump Debate 2024" and set a custom time range to narrow down the articles to include ones from September 10, 2024, to September 17, 2024. Using these specifics, I chose articles from CNN, Reuters, NPR, and Time.

3.3 Methods

As stated in section 2.1, my analysis follows Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional model from a partly multimodal angle (Kress and Bezemer 2023) that addresses gestures and postures (Gentry and Duke 2009). My analysis begins with the description stage, in which the focus is on the textual practices of the candidates, which includes the first and last impressions of the candidates. Regarding the closing statements my focus is on the pronoun

usage of the candidates, which I believe offers great contrast to how they present themselves as authoritative figures. Incorporating van Dijk's approaches to discourse analysis from the point of view of group relations to this part of my analysis helps me illustrate the forementioned contrast.

After the description stage, the analysis moves onto the interpretation stage where the focus is on the discursive practices. Here I examine the production of the debate as well as its distribution. Traditionally in this type of research the analysis of the discursive practices would include an analysis of the reception of the discourse, e.g. what the audience's immediate reaction to the statements is, but since the debate had no live audience, I shall not be including this.

4 Analysis

In this section I will provide my analysis of the Harris vs. Trump debate. Following Fairclough's (2015) three-dimensional model, my analysis will begin with the description stage. I then move onto the interpretation stage and finally to the explanation stage.

4.1 Description

As previously mentioned, the description stage of analysis is two-fold and utilizes a multimodal critical discourse analytic approach (Kress and Bezemer 2023). Section 4.1.1 and 4.1.2 cover the first impressions and section 4.1.3 the last impressions of the candidates. The analysis of the first impressions leans heavily on non-verbal components, whereas with last impressions pronouns and the way they interact with other linguistic components is more prominent to the analysis.

4.1.1 Speaking Volumes without Words

Maurer (2016, 1803) remarks "that candidates' visual communication attracts attention even before they begin to speak". This would mean that viewers base their very first opinion of the candidate on the candidates' non-verbal communication. Gentry and Duke list some qualities that a leader should be conscious of in their non-verbal communication:

Leaders must be cognizant of both the more obvious non-verbal signs such as eye contact, posture, gestures, tone of voice, or facial expressions, and the communications that might be less obvious [...] A leader's slumped posture may convey the feelings of disinterest. Hands in pockets may convey boredom. Good, straight posture may communicate excitement, enthusiasm, confidence, and interest. A leader leaning toward a person with whom he/she is talking communicates interest. (Gentry and Duke 2009, 42)

This assessment provides a solid starting point for examining Harris and Trump's non-verbal signs at the beginning of the debate. When the candidates were called to the stage, Harris approached her candidate with her back straight and reached out her hand (2:28) to shake that of her opponents. Trump on the other is in a slouching position and clearly approaching his podium, not his fellow candidate whose handshake he ultimately responds to.

Applying Gentry and Duke's (2009) list of non-verbal signs to the Harris vs. Trump debate, it could be argued that Trump and his slouching posture can be seen as a sign of disinterest.

Whereas Harris' straight posture conveys enthusiasm and interest among other things. But there could be more to the body language of the two candidates.

Since there has been no handshaking in presidential debates for the last eight years, this moment that lasted mere seconds was not only historical but can also be seen as a power move on Harris' part. However, there could be more to this short interaction.

Considering the fact that a handshake at the beginning of the debate could be considered unorthodox, it is possible that Harris initiated the greeting not merely out of politeness but also to pose herself as a leader. She took the lead in that moment and Trump had no choice but to fold to her surprising gesture.

4.1.2 Greeting Like a Leader

On top of the non-verbal aspects, the first exchange seems odd but simultaneously fitting to the previous findings. Examples (1) and (2) occurred while the two candidates were shaking hands.

(1) Harris: Kamala Harris. Let's have a good debate.

(2) Trump: Nice to see you. Have fun.

The two candidates met for the first time in person at the debate. Harris chose to introduce herself by saying her full name as well as wishing the candidates have a good debate. The way Harris chose to greet her opponent concise, professional, and polite. However, the latter part of Trump's response (2) was a little unusual in comparison.

While having a debate could certainly be fun to a career politician, Trump seems to imply that Harris should enjoy herself, as in his mind she does not stand a chance of winning.

4.1.3 Closing Statement Strategies Illustrated by Pronoun Use

The pronoun use in the closing statements of the candidates illustrates their strategies for the final chance to affect the audiences' minds well. As presented in Figure 1, the biggest differences between the candidates are in the use of the first-person singular pronouns and the third-person singular pronouns:

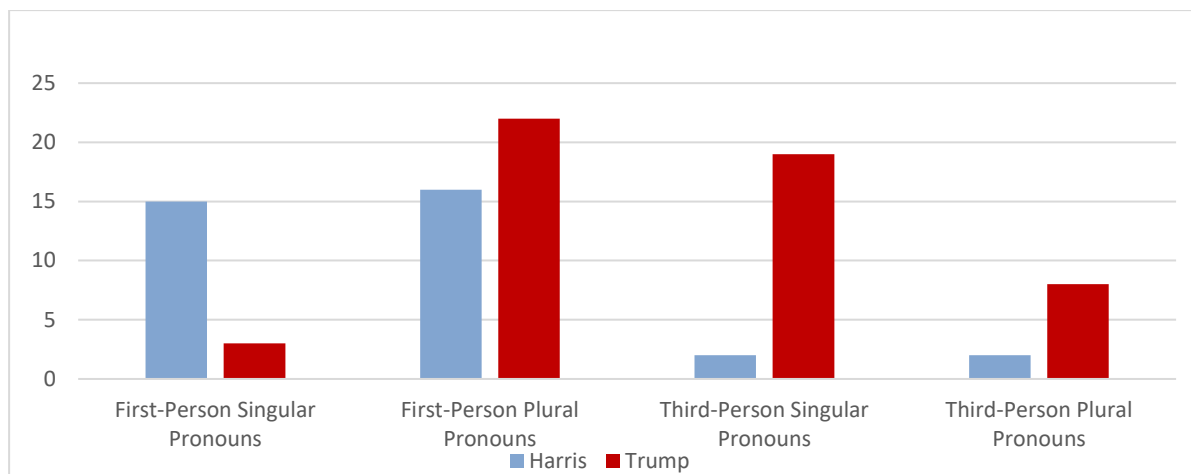


Figure 1: Pronoun Usage in the Closing Statements

In comparison to Trump, Harris used noticeably more first-person pronouns, especially the singular ‘I’ as further elaborated by Figure 2:

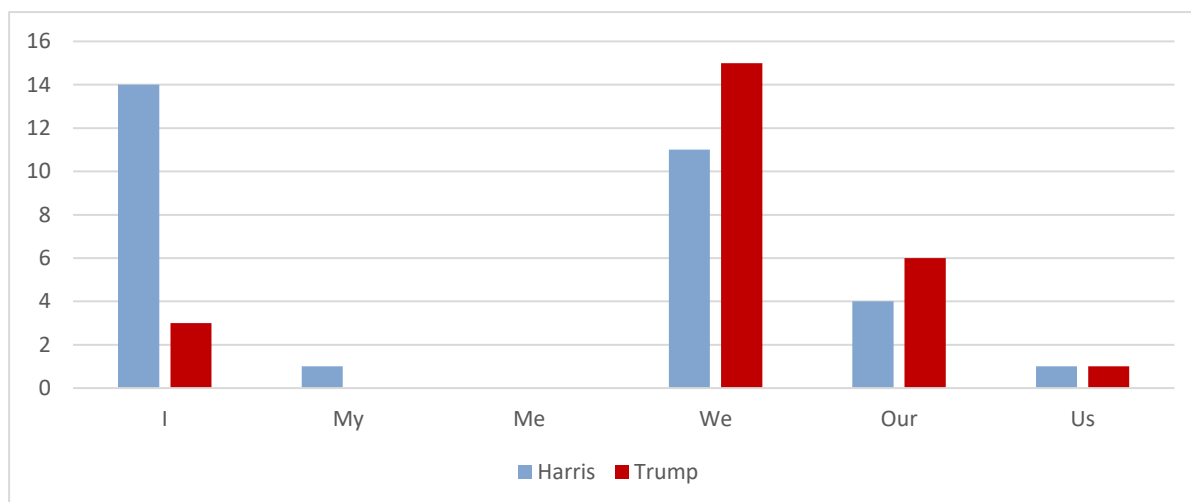


Figure 2: First-Person Pronouns

As shown in example (3), it was evident in Harris’ closing statements that she wanted to highlight her merits to illustrate that she was a capable leader for the country.

(3) Harris: **I** started **my** career as a prosecutor. **I** was a D.A. **I** was an attorney general. A United States senator. And now vice president. **I**’ve only had one client. The people. As a prosecutor **I** never asked a victim, or a witness are you a Republican or a Democrat. The only thing **I** ever asked them, are you okay?

Trump however took a different approach. The only instances where he decided to underline his leadership accolades through the first-person singular ‘I’ can be found in (4) and (5).

(4) Trump: **I** know the leaders very well. They’re coming to see **me**. They call **me**.

(5) Trump: I rebuilt our entire military. She gave a lot of it away to the Taliban. She gave it to Afghanistan.

There is an especially interesting contrast in the way the two candidates use third-person pronouns. As presented in Figure 2, instead of highlighting his achievements, Trump wanted to launch an attack on his opponent. This is further evident from his frequent use of third person pronoun 'she', as illustrated by Figure 3:

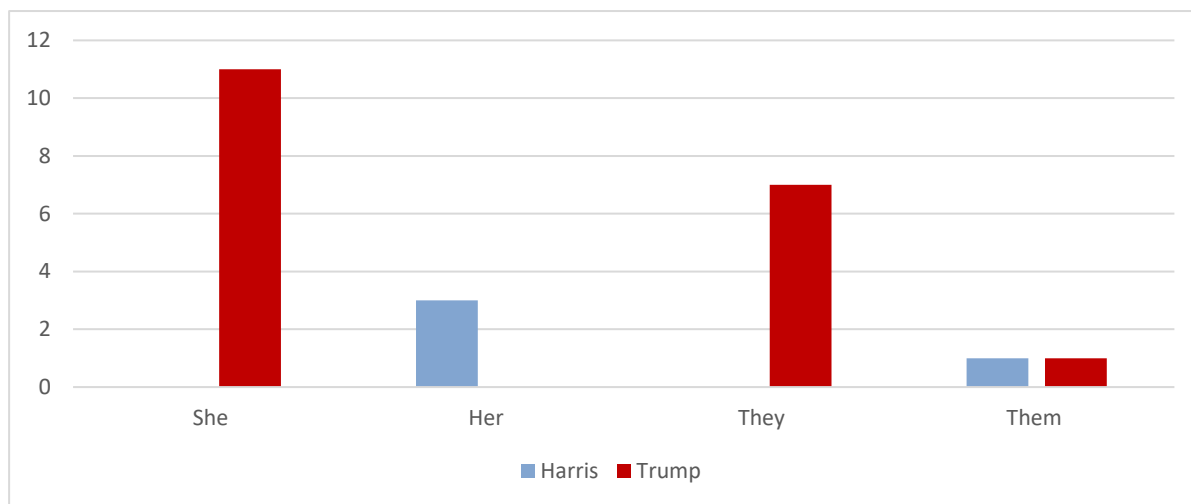


Figure 3: Third-Person Pronouns

This is exemplified by (5) where he claims that the military he claims to have rebuilt was given to the Taliban and Afghanistan by Harris. Trump also began his closing statements with an obvious attack to Harris (6) and (8) as well as the Biden administration as a whole (7).

(6) Trump: So, she just started by saying she's going to do this, she's going to do that, she's going to do all these wonderful things. Why hasn't she done it? She's been there for 3 1/2 years.

(7) Trump: They've had 3 1/2 years to fix the border. They've had 3 1/2 years to create jobs and all the things we talked about. Why hasn't she done it?

(8) Trump: She should leave right now, go down to that beautiful White House, go to the Capitol, get everyone together and do the things you want to do.

(9) Harris: I will be a president that will protect our fundamental rights and freedoms including the right of a woman to make decisions about her own body and not have her government tell her what to do.

In contrast Harris only uses third-person pronouns in (3) and (9), and both times she is referring to something other than Trump. In (3) she is referring to her clients from her years as a civil servant and in (9) she is bringing up the issue of abortion rights.

4.2 Interpretation

As mentioned in 2.2.2, the Harris vs. Trump debate was broadcast on 17 different networks to an audience of 67.1 million viewers (Sullivan 2024). Even after the live broadcast, the full debate remained and still remains easily accessible to anyone interested in it on ABC News' website as well as on YouTube where the upload made by Wall Street Journal (2024) has been viewed 14 million times.

Even though it is highly unlikely for any candidate to sway the majority's minds, the debate platform offers them a chance to at least try. In terms of the production of the debate, one of the key elements is the coin toss. This refers to a virtual coin flip that is administered by the host of the debate before the event. Trump opted to have the last say, having won the coin toss, whereas Harris positioned herself by the right podium from the viewers perspective (Popli 2024).

This ties into the larger idea behind the importance of last impressions. On that debate stage, Donald Trump, having won the coin toss, got to deliver the very last closing statement (10) of the evening. He decided to launch a verbal attack on his opponent, as shown in previous examples, and ended his speech by criticizing Biden and Harris, knowing there was no way for his opponent to defend herself. In example (10), it is clear that Trump is using the Us / Them rhetoric, as discussed by van Dijk (2008). He uses this to portray Harris, Biden's administration, and maybe even the Democrats as a whole as enemies of the country:

(10) Trump: What these people have done to our country, and maybe toughest of all is allowing millions of people to come into our country, many of them are criminals, and they're destroying our country. The worst president, the worst vice president in the history of our country.

On top of simply criticizing his opponent, Trump opted to use scare tactics (11) by mentioning the wars in the Middle East and Ukraine, as well as bringing up the possibility of a third World War and the threat of nuclear weapons.

(11) Trump: We have wars going on in the Middle East. We have wars going on with Russia and Ukraine. We're going to end up in a third World War. And it will be a war like no other because of nuclear weapons, the power of weaponry.

Ending with a heavy note such as this is a sure-fire way to leave a lasting impression. This is not to say that Harris would have been bested in terms of delivering a powerful closing statement. Her strategy relied mostly on highlighting her achievements, and in a way that was probably the best move on her part. Had Harris launched an attack on Trump, he would still have had the chance to respond and maybe respond in a more aggressive manner, albeit the way Trump went about his closing statements could be considered aggressive and quite dramatic.

Closing statements in general can be viewed as the component of the debate that is possibly the most practiced. While the candidates do prepare for different questions and topics they may encounter during the debate, the closing statements allow for a more rehearsed genre of speech. Schubert describes closing statements in presidential primary debates as follows:

[W]hile the dialogic main part of a primary election debate is largely subject to ad-hoc production, the closing statements are anticipated by candidates and may therefore be pre-formulated and memorized, so that they show a higher degree of conventionalization. Thus, within the genre of primary debates, the closing statements constitute an embedded subgenre that likewise serves the goal of persuading voters. (Schubert 2021, 374)

It is possible that the strategies the candidates chose were just ones of many possible rehearsed options. The candidates presented themselves as authority figures, but both went about it very differently. Harris presented herself as a leader through her own achievements and attacked her opponent in a more subtle and polished way, creating an image of a calm and knowledgeable leader. Trump continued on the same path as he has previously done which was not focusing on his personal achievements but rather playing the blame game as well as using scare tactics.

This is not to say that one way is better than the other, but based on the election results, one could argue that Trump's way of being a leader appeals to voters' more effectively than Harris'.

4.3 Explanation

Reactions to the debate were varied, but most common take on the event was that Harris was the winner. Out of the four articles gathered, the headlines from Time Magazine (Bennett, Cortellessa and Elliott 2024) and CNN (Collinson 2024) explicitly crown Harris as the winner of the debate. Reuters' (Oliphant and Slattery 2024) article is titled more neutrally as "Takeaways from the Harris-Trump presidential debate" while NPR (Montanaro 2024) opted for a mix of clickbait and neutral "The debate between Harris and Trump wasn't close — and 4 other takeaways".

The journalists agreed that Harris bested her opponent. Both Reuters and CNN highlighted Harris' entrance and handshake as a winning move. CNN's Collinson (2024) frames the scene as follows: "When the vice president strode over to Trump's podium and all but forced him to shake her hand, she dictated the terms of their critical clash exactly eight weeks before Election Day."

Collinson (2024) went on to say that Harris "came across as energetic and brimmed with a positive future vision" and that "Trump glowered and ranted and blasted America as a failing nation and seemed off his game." This was shown clearly in the closing statements as well. Trump painted a gloomy picture for the future of the country, while Harris' closing statements were more about how united the people of America are and how they could work together to build a better future. Trump used pronouns in a polarizing manner, creating a gap between us vs. them, while Harris' main use of pronouns was the opposite and her interest was clearly trying to find common ground with anyone listening.

Oliphant and Slattery (2024) from Reuters pointed out that the handshake was an assertive way to approach Trump, who had been insulting Harris for weeks with racist and sexist attacks. They also mention that Trump had no choice but to accept Harris' gesture. The media's reactions are well in line with the previous findings of Trump and Harris' non-verbal communication in 4.1.1 and 4.1.2. What is especially interesting when examining the Reuters article, is that while Harris is described as being the leader in the first interaction of the two candidates, she is still described as a victim of sorts, a woman who has been insulted through sexism and racism.

While that certainly is the case, it ties into a larger phenomenon, where people tend to think that women are victims and in a way weak and it is incredible for them to rise above. The

interaction could have been explained without the mention of Harris having been attacked verbally by her opponent, but it is likely that the writers wanted to emphasize Harris' victim-like position and how she managed to show grace in the face of discrimination. However, it is unlikely that Harris herself would prefer to be seen as anything other than a capable leader and accomplished woman. A problem seems to arise if gender is left on the sidelines of the discussion of leadership. Gipson et al. describe the difference in the stereotypical characteristics of male and female leaders as follows:

Men are often stereotyped with agentic characteristics such as being confident and assertive. Incidentally, agentic characteristics are often seen as requisite traits for leadership. However, research has shown that women who behave agentially can be subjected to denigration and backlash for violating the prescriptive stereotype of being communal. Therefore, women leaders must consider how to exhibit the agentic characteristics deemed necessary for leadership without violating gender stereotypes. (Gipson et al. 2017, 35)

By this standard one could argue that Harris exhibited agentic characteristics throughout her entrance to the stage as well as her closing statement by being confident and assertive. This could, however, be viewed as odd or something that does not quite fit right with the audience, including media outlets. Therefore, there seems to be a need to add something to her character in media reportage that makes her more fitting to a female stereotype.

Nonetheless, most of the reporting concerning Harris' performance was positive. However, as Trump won the election and returned to the oval office, it begs to question if the average voter had the forementioned stereotypical view toward Harris' leadership style, either consciously or subconsciously.

Time Magazine's article by Bennett, Cortellessa, and Elliott (2024) mention how after the debate Trump's top advisors had "claimed victory" and hailed his masterful performance, while Harris' team had immediately asked for another showdown. This implicates that Harris was more confident about her performance and success than Trump was of his. NPR's Montanaro (2024) concluded that Harris arguably handled her opponent better than the Democratic candidates of 2016 and 2020, "even though most concluded that Clinton and Biden won most, if not all, of those face-offs." Montanaro suggests that Trump's best attack came during his closing statements (6) and (7). He describes the coherent attack line as rare from Trump during the course of the debate and goes on to say that even that one was nearly a concession.

These post-debate articles, while striving to be objective, are by no means neutral. Harris was framed as the winner, but also as a hero who has overcome adversity. Trump was framed not only as the loser, but also as a liar and someone who does not have a good grip on things.

It could be argued that by framing Harris as both a winner and a victim, the media highlights a paradox in the way female leaders are often portrayed. They must be seen as overcoming significant barriers to succeed, which can simultaneously affirm their leadership while subtly reinforcing the idea that female leaders must constantly prove themselves in ways their male counterparts do not.

5 Discussion

The subject of leadership and how leaders construct their leadership personas through discourse is widely studied by researchers such as Fairclough (2015), Charteris-Black (2016), and van Dijk (2008). Yet, there remains room and a need for further research. It is important to question and even criticize different strategies and ways the leaders of the world present themselves and what connotations their style of leading carries.

After Trump was elected to office, he has gained a lot of momentum. Most recently from his White House press conference with war-ridden Ukraine's head of state Volodymyr Zelenskyy, where Trump together with Vice President JD Vance berated Zelenskyy for the way he dressed as well as for not being appreciative enough to them (Smith 2025). Trump has also claimed that he will take over Greenland, a territory belonging to Denmark (The New York Times, 2025) and he has implied that the Gaza strip could be turned into a Gaza Riviera (Al Jazeera, 2025).

It should be considered concerning how regressive many heads of states' way of speaking has become, notably Trump's and it seems to be getting more bizarre by the minute. Similar patterns have been present in history, and it begs to question, has anything been learned from past mistakes?

It would have been beneficial to go into more detail on the subject in this thesis, but due to limited space, it was not possible. It should also be noted that while the presidential candidates did use the linguistic devices they did, it is hard to say how much they contributed to the construction of these speeches. Certainly, some things are thought of on the spot, but it is safe to assume that the closing statements are rehearsed at least to some extent.

6 Conclusion

In conclusion Harris and Trump both exhibited language strategies which characterized them as leaders. Both candidates had similar agentic features about the way they spoke. Harris presented herself as confident through her non-verbal communication, and it can be said that in this respect she presented herself as the stronger authority figure in the debate.

Illustrated by pronoun use, Harris and Trump employed somewhat similar and vastly different strategies in their closing statements. Both candidates used first person plural “we” to express unity with their countrymen, thus conveying themselves as leaders of all Americans.

Trump opted to project his authority using scare tactics and leaning heavily on polarizing rhetorics such as us vs. them. He played the blame game in order to make his opponent look bad. Harris wanted to highlight her own accomplishments and her digs at Trump were more subtle and as straightforward as Trump’s third-person singular and plural attacks.

Harris’ failure to win the election goes hand in hand with the societal norms and preferred power dynamics. It all seems to boil down to the fact that she is woman. Even though she used non-verbal strategies that are considered correct, gave a well-constructed closing statement, employed agentic characteristics expected from leaders, and was hailed as the debate winner, she did not win the election.

The United States has yet to see a woman president, and in many ways people can view strong women as a threat or something out of the norm. Many people are not ready for a woman leader, who employs the same strategies their male counterparts do. Even though this can be seen as problematic, it proves that the world needs to be exposed to more female-leaders who strive towards gender equality.

It would be interesting observe a similar event with a male world leader who presented himself as more communal and a Harris-like female leader. How would they be viewed by the media and the global audience?

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