Chaos and Stability in Donald Trump's Acceptance Speech

TIM MATHENY, PHILIP POE, MELODY FISHER, & SHANE WARREN
Mississippi State University, USA

An analysis of Donald Trump's acceptance speech to the 2016 Republican National Convention reveals a speech structure built around god terms vs. evil terms with the threat that evil terms associated with the enemy lead to chaos and god terms, which were associated to Trump and Republicans, led to stability. Trump's performance reinforced the speech structure with hand gestures that cued the audience to the speech structure.

Keywords: God term, evil term, Donald Trump, chaos, stability, binary oppositions

In his acceptance speech for the Republican nomination for President on July 21, 2016, Donald Trump delivered a speech that invoked a strong emotional reaction from the audience at the Republican National Convention and likely among some of the 32 million people who watched on television.[1] Our analysis of his speech provides evidence that Trump created an empathetic resonance with the audience that helped generate a sense of political movement and unity among the Trump supporters.

Empathetic resonance was originally used to explain the interaction between an artist and the audience when the two shared a moment. Audience members understand the emotions felt by the artist during the creative process and this gain emotional insight into to new situations. Shared emotions create a sense of unity among audience members and a sense of genuine experience shared with the artist. Empathetic resonance has been used to analyze Meryl Streep's acting career (Adams, et al., 2006) and emotions expressed through a social media blog (Goodman, 2010).

In the case of Trump's acceptance speech, we found that the structure of the speech and the body language utilized by Trump invoked an emotional interaction with the audience members. Our statistical analysis of the structure of the acceptance speech will demonstrate the relationship between the structure of the speech and Trump's body language to the emotional reactions of the audience. By creating emotional unity among the convention participants, Trump could create a sense of unity behind his candidacy for president.

Republican unity was important because of the divisions in the party during the primary contests. Seventeen candidates ran for president. Jeb Bush and Lindsey Graham represented mainstream Republicans. Rand Paul ran as a libertarian. Ted Cruz was a favorite of the Tea Party wing. Marco Rubio and Mike Huckabee represented the Christian right. Carly Fiorina was the only woman in the race while Bobby Jindal and Ben Carson hoped to attract minority voters. John Kasich and Chris Christie were two sitting governors seeking the nomination. Six additional candidates offered variations from the main party divisions.[2]

Correspondence to: Philip Poe, Department of Communication, Mississippi State University, 130 McComas Hall, Mail Stop 9574, P.O. Box PF, Mississippi State, MS 39762, USA

Trump defeated all of these candidates in the primary process; the Republication National Convention brought all of these elements of the party together to hear Trump's acceptance in person or on television. Party unity would help Trump in the November general election.

Rhetorical Devices

Burke (1966) argues that morality is presented in binary oppositions. The moral good is presented as "god terms" (p. 378) while the polar opposite is presented as "the devil function" (p. 196). Once good has gathered together, then the group needs a "symbol of a *common evil,*" (Burke, 1941, p. 193). "Men who can unite on nothing else can unite on the basis of a foe shared by all," (p. 193). Once the group of the people who are good are formed, they then become the community of the people who are "right thinking" and "right living" (p. 202). The good people are not required to change their bad behavior because punishing the scapegoat would solve the problem. Burke argues the symbolic battle with the evil becomes the substitute for change in the real conditions (p. 203). People who are good sacrifice for the common good while people who are evil only want what serves the interests of the tribal group to which they are members (1941). Burke explains that through this process of establishing good and evil in binary opposition to each other, then "vices and virtues" become the basis of hierarchies with good at the top and the values of the other assigned to subordinate positions (1969, p. 141). In our analysis Trump invoked god terms in all 55 of his topics in the speech and evil terms in 50 topics. In 54 of those 55 topics, there was a cause and effect between good and the creation of stability and 49 times evil led to the creation of chaos.

God and evil terms often have "inherent potency" because the words lack precise meanings, argues Weaver (1985). Accordingly, each person is in position to assign an individual meaning to the words while remaining within the group. Trump invoked inherent potency words like safety, prosperity, peace, generosity, warmth, law, and order throughout the speech. Zizek (2008) points out that people in power like to invoke god terms because assigning themselves to the side of good justifies attacks on the other, who represents the evil in the world. This process of othering, characterized by applying god terms to one side and evil terms to the other, allows a speaker – and the audience by association – to dismiss a political opponent or competing idea as fundamentally evil and therefore unworthy of compromise. "Basic human evil (the intention to hurt and humiliate the other,)" Zizek (2008) explains, "is not a simple falling-off from a man's ontological essence, but has to be grounded in this ontological essence," (p. 147).

Weaver's (1990) discussion of cause-and-effect relationships also informs our understanding of the rhetorical devises Trump used. Weaver argues that "the attitudes of those who are listening will be affected according to whether or not they agree with our cause-and-effect analysis." (p. 1047). Because Trump's rhetoric influenced his audience in agreeing that Democrats and liberal policies were the root cause of everything wrong with the country, they were willing to believe that a Trump administration would right these wrongs.

Methods of Speech Analysis

The speech was structured around binary oppositions and cause/effect relationships. In the speech, god terms were associated with Trump and his candidacy. The promised outcome of a vote for good and for Trump would be stability. Democrats, specifically President

Barack Obama and Democratic nominee Hillary Clinton, were associated with evil terms. The evil of the Democrats created chaos. A vote for Hillary Clinton would be a vote for evil and would result in political, security, and economic chaos. A vote for Trump and the Republican good would create economic, political, and security stability. Of the 55 topics raised by Trump in the speech, 49 of them used the good/stability vs. evil/chaos structure.

In the process of presenting the structure of the speech, Trump used his body language and physical semiotics to signal the audience when the key points of the speech were coming, i.e., the presentation of the stability to come or the chaos existing. Then, Trump's body language signaled to the audience when the key points had been delivered. Of the 151 audience responses we counted,[3] all 151 responses were preceded by Trump using only four different hand signals.

Structure of the Speech

Trump presented the god terms, the statements of good, and then followed them with a statement of the stability that would follow. In his second argument, Trump indicated that when "Republicans were back in the White House," then the result would be Americans would live in safety, prosperity, peace, generosity, and warmth in a state of law and order, examples of the god terms he deployed. In binary opposition, the Democrats, Obama and Clinton Democrats were responsible for terrorism, attacks on police, and attacks on the American way of life, and a perpetuate state of crisis, all of which are examples of evil terms for this era. In these examples, the binary oppositions were in stark contrast: Republicans in the White House or Democrats in charge. The results were also in binary opposition: safety, prosperity, and rule of law versus the terror and crisis of the last eight years under the Democrats.

The stark contrasts established by setting up the binary oppositions made the issues clear cut. Trump does not attempt to explain how he will accomplish safety, prosperity and rule of law. Nor, does he state what policies would be needed to create the ideal world because his election to the White House would be enough to create the perfect state. Trump does not present arguments on the specific errors in policy or decision making made by the Democrats. For example, Trump indicates that Democrats are responsible for "terrorism in our cities" without reference to specific events. No explanation came from Trump on how the Obama Administration was responsible for a single shooter killing Dallas policemen while they shielded Black Lives Matter marchers. Trump did not substantiate his claim that Americans were economically challenged during a time of low unemployment and a record setting New York stock market.

The sharp differentiation of the binary oppositions made it easy for the audience to identify the good guys and the bad guys. With a chorus of "Trump, Trump, Trump" the audience assented to leadership by a Trump administration. Conversely, the audience agreed to assign blame to Clinton first with boos when Trump used her name and then with a chorus of "Lock her up, lock her up, lock her up." Trump sought an emotional response to his binary oppositions, and by coupling those with rhetorical gestures designed to accentuate his message, he fostered the appearance of group unity and group identification with Donald Trump as the person leading the cause.

Altogether, we counted 55 topics in Trump's speech. In 49 of them, Trump assigned god terms to himself and/or Republicans and evil terms to the Democrats. In all 49 cases, Trump explained the stability that would result if he won the presidency and warned of the chaos that would result if the evil Democrat Hillary Clinton won the presidency. On only one topic Trump presented the good (a rebuilt military) and the evil (a depleted military)

without assigning chaos or stability. Five times, when discussing his family, Trump assigned the god terms to his family and then assigned stability attributes to those family values. Here is a table:

God terms	Evil terms	Stability	chaos
49	49	49	49
5		5	
1	1		

The Gestures

Many studies have considered the audience perception of the interaction of body language to perceived credibility to creation of persuasion (Joo, Li, Steen, and Zhu, 2014; Larrimore, Jiang, Larrimore, Markowitz, and Gorski, 2011; Jorgensen, Kock, and Rorbech, 2010; Higdon, 2009; Burgoon, Birk and Pfau, 1990; Coker and Burgoon, 1987; Gold, 1987; Stefano, 1977). We are not interested in speaker credibility or even speaker persuasion. We are interested in the function of body gestures at the point where the structure of the speech and the audience's empathetic resonance intersect.

In his speech, Trump consistently used the same body language. He would open the introduction of a binary opposition by putting his thumb to a finger in a pinch. He would keep the pinch and move it in rhythm of the speech rate as he developed the opposition and the ideological arguments. He would close the argument with a finger pointing up into the air, moving up and down with the speech cadence until he finished the argument. Then he would hold the finger point as the audience responded.   Of the 151 times the audience reacted to Trump's acceptance speech, there were 96 pinch and point instances (63.57 per cent). Nineteen times (12.58 per cent) in the speech Trump signaled inclusion by spreading his arms to the audience. Another 26 times he incorporated the inclusion gesture into the point/pinch pattern (17.21 per cent).

The remainder of his gestures that we recorded we considered neutral. A point early in the speech demonstrates how he used these gestures.

> I WILL *finger point up* PRESENT THE FACTS *fore finger* PLAINLY *spreads hands* AND HONESTLY *spreads hands*. >>Tell it Donald>> *hands on the podium* WE CANNOT AFFORD *left hand open palm looks left* TO BE *2 hands spread* SO *hands up* POLITICALLY CORRECT *hands down* ANYMORE. *hands spread out of frame* [CHEERING] *Trump has arms down, looks out to audience and sways right to left* SO IF *right hand up* YOU WANT TO HEAR *pinch* THE CORPORATE SPIN, *hands to the podium* THE CARE *pinch* FULLY-CRAFTED LIES *right hand out* , AND *pinch up and down* THE MEDIA MYTHS *right hand open , fore finger up and down* THE DEMOCRATS *points at audience* ARE *pinch up* HOLDING *pinch down, forefinger up* THEIR *finger points to audience* CON *forefinger up* VEN *forefinger down* TION NEXT WEEK *.forefinger points to audience* GO *ff up* THERE *ff down*. >>boos>> BUT HERE *hands off podium palms out to audience*, AT *palms out from body* OUR *palms back to body* CONVENTION, *fore finger* THERE WILL *pinch* BE *pinch* NO *ff* LIES *pinch*. WE WILL HONOR *pinch goes into ff point* THE *pinch* A *pinch* MER *pinch* ICAN PEOPLE *pinch* WITH THE TRUTH, *fore finger* AND NOTHING ELSE *pinch*. *hands to podium* [CHEERING] >> USA. USA. USA. >>

In this section, "plainly" and "honestly" are good put into conflict with "politically correction." Then follows several evil terms: corporate spin, fully-crafted lies, media myths, the Democrats, their convention. Now comes the stability ideology. "We will honor the American people with the Truth and nothing else." The crowd buys into the argument:

"USA, USA, USA." The first finger point comes with "I will". Then with "facts" and "media myths." Trump paced his way through "The Democrats are holding their convention next week. Go there." with several finger points, breaking convention up by syllables with finger points. He breaks up "no lies" with a finger point and finishes the point of "honor" with a finger point and concludes the point with a finger point after truth. Trump spread his hands to indicate openness and honestly. When Trump spread his hands so wide the camera shot cut off his hands, he received a cheer from the audience as he addressed "politically correct." Trump paused twice in the speech, placing both hands on the podium and looked out to the audience. Both times the audience responded with cheers.

This sample is typical of a pattern where Trump set up good vs. evil with his gestures and then signaled the audience when to cheer by moving his hands to the podium and making eye contact with the live audience. Open body language, such as open hands and open arms, signaled ideological agreement between Trump and the audience with honestly in government, opposition to political correctness, and the unity of the Republican convention (i.e. "but here").

Sixty-five times in the speech Trump posed for the camera. As he set up an argument, Trump would look into the camera, and may additionally point into the camera. At the conclusion of his point, Trump would straighten his coat, lift up his chin, set his eyes, and take an erect posture. The conclusion of the speech demonstrates his body language for the camera.

> SO TO *ff* EVERY *ff* PARENT *pinch* WHO *pinch* DREAMS *pinch* FOR THEIR CHILD *right palm open* , AND *pinch up* EVERY *pinch up* CHILD *points with hand* WHO *palm at waist* DREAMS *palm up to shoulders* FOR THEIR FUTURE *right palm to the right*, I SAY *pinch* THESE *pinch* WORDS *pinch ff* TO *ff up to ear level* YOU *ff down* TONIGHT: *pinch up* I am [left out of transcript] *ff* WITH *ff* YOU, *ff drops to waist, eye contact with audience* I WILL *pinch up* FIGHT *ff* FOR YOU *hands to podium, ff* AND *ff* I WILL *ff* WIN *ff points to audience* FOR YOU. *Points into camera, the pose, looks into camera and nods* [CHEERING]

In effect, Trump's acceptance speech was a visual and verbal performance. He began a new point by using the finger pinch to set cadence as he developed good and evil. As he moved verbally towards resolution of stability over chaos, Trump switched to the finger point. After presenting himself or Republicans as the creators of stability, Trump would either spread his arms to be inclusive or he would assume the masculine pose for the television and convention audience to indicate Trump was the solution.

The statistics: Total time (151 audience responses)

96 are solely a Pinch, Point, or alternating Pinch & Point	63.57%
19 are solely an Open gesture	12.58%
10 is solely a Neutral position	6.62%
26 are both Open and Pinch/Point gestures	17.21%

Discussion

Trump covered 55 topics in speech that lasted about 75 minutes. Since there were many pauses in the speech, Trump covered each topic in about 1 minute. This kept the speech moving, but it also meant that there was little elaboration on the points. The binary opposition was presented as causes that led to conclusions that were either chaos or stability. The god terms and evil terms made it easy to easy to lay out for the audiences the

good vs. evil binary oppositions. The stability vs. chaos created a single cause-effect relationship between the god terms and stability and the evil terms and chaos.

The stability created Trump as the god-like figure, which was consistent with Lakoff's theories about conservative voters. Trump's allies were Republicans, his supporters and his family, and Christians. The evil doers were Obama, Clinton, Clinton supporters, supporters of gay rights, haters of Christians, opponents of the Second Amendment, those who misuse the power and resources of the federal government, national debt, Obamacare, failing schools, failing economy, higher taxes, terrible foreign policy, immigration, gangs, Islamic terrorism, violence, politicians who have forgotten the people. globalism, corporations.

To reinforce his points, the businessman and television star used the body language of a dominant male. He used his right hand like a director leads the orchestra, then he accented the key points with his forefinger. The visual reinforced and identified the presentation of good and evil and then the body language indicated the stability that he promised to provide.

Conclusion

The 151 times the audience responded to Trump indicates that they were emotionally involved in the speech. The structure of the speech provided a means to easily identify with the god term cause/stability effect that many in the audience accepted and pronounced their agreement with by responding to Trump. The responses also indicate that members of the audience recognized the evil causes that led to instability. Trump used his gestures to lead the audience through the structure of the speech, which generated the emotional responses that created agreement between audience and speaker.

While these results help contextualize Trump's rhetoric using established theoretical approaches, they also point toward interesting directions for future research. First, scholars could compare Trump's acceptance speech to others before him – what rhetorical similarities and differences exist? How can we compare audience responses between his speech and other's like it. Most importantly, a comprehensive examination of Trump's overall rhetorical strategy – semantics, gesture, topic choice, medium and audience response may help us understand how Trump engenders support and illuminate the process by which political and ideological power coalesces in the present media environment.

Notes

[1] http://money.cnn.com/2016/07/22/media/republican-convention-ratings-donald-trump/index.html
[2] https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/how-the-republican-field-dwindled-from-17-to-donald-trump/
[3] We used the C-Span transcript and video of the speech. We corrected the transcript in a few places. https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4612805/donald-trump-addresses-republican-national-convention

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Tim Matheny is an assistant professor of communication at Mississippi State University, USA. He researches performance while also serving as a director of theater productions.

Dr. Philip Poe and **Dr. Melody Fisher** are assistant professors of communication at Mississippi State University. They specialize in the application of persuasion in a variety of contexts.

Dr. Shane Warren is a senior research assistant for NSPARC at Mississippi State University. He specializes in quantitative research.