

Analysis of the Verbal Humor in Trump's Speech in the Election Campaign: Semantic Study

Lecturer: Ali Flayyih Hasan
Imam AlKadhim University College (I.K.U)

Email: Lecwasit1@iku.edu.iq

تحليل الفكاهة اللفظية في خطاب ترامب في الحملة الانتخابية: دراسة دلالية

م. علي فليح حسن

كلية الامام الكاظم ع. / اقسام واسط

Email: Lecwasit1@iku.edu.iq

المخلص:

الفكاهة هي إحدى القنوات المستخدمة في التواصل للتعبير عن مفهوم أو فكرة. تبحث الدراسة في الفكاهة اللفظية في خطابات دونالد ترامب خلال حملته الانتخابية ضد خصومه. تهدف الدراسة إلى تحديد الاستراتيجيات اللغوية لخلق الفكاهة اللفظية في خطابات دونالد ترامب والكشف عن الفوائد السياسية التي يمكن الحصول عليها من استخدام الفكاهة اللفظية في حملته الانتخابية. تم جمع بيانات الدراسة من مؤتمرات الحملة الانتخابية لدونالد ترامب. تدرس البيانات دلاليًا باستخدام النظرية العامة للفكاهة اللفظية (GTVH). علاوة على ذلك، توضح النتائج أن ترامب يستخدم ست استراتيجيات لغوية دلالية في خطابه لإنتاج الفكاهة اللفظية: معارضة النص، والآلية المنطقية، والموقف، والهدف، واستراتيجية السرد، واللغة. الكلمات المفتاحية: الفكاهة اللفظية، GTVH، الحملة الانتخابية، النكات والسخرية.

Abstract

Humor constitutes one of the communication mediums used to convey a certain concept or idea. The study investigates verbal humor in Donald Trump's speeches during his election campaigns against his opponents. It aims to identify the linguistic strategies for creating verbal humor in Donald Trump's speeches and reveal the political benefits to gain from using verbal humor in his election campaign. The study's data were collected from Donald Trump's election campaign conferences. It examines the data semantically using the General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH). Furthermore, the findings demonstrate that Trump employs six semantic linguistic strategies in his speech to produce verbal humor: script opposition, logical mechanism, situation, target, narrative, and language strategy.

Keywords: Verbal humor, GTVH, Election campaign, Jokes and mock.

1. Introduction

Humor plays an important role in societal interactions and humans' daily lives. People use humor for more than just easing their sadness. Martin (2007, p. 2) defines *humor* as "an emotional response of mirth in a social context elicited by a perception of playful incongruity." Humor is an inherent characteristic that all humans have, and as a result, numerous theories attempt to elucidate the nature of humor and its purposes. These ideas encompass various views, such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, anthropology, and linguistics (Polimeni and Reiss 2006, p. 347).

Sunday and Bamgbose (2021) characterize humor as a universally understood and appreciated human phenomenon across cultures. Fry (1994) asserts that humor is ubiquitous. Nevertheless, individuals with

diverse cultural origins may perceive humor via varying ways. While humor's methods and cultural context may vary across different countries, it is a universally recognized and valued aspect of human interaction. According to Schwarz (2009), humor is a fundamental element of ordinary discussions, and all individuals engage in hilarious speech and behavior. Martin (2007) categorizes humor in everyday social encounters into three main groups: jokes, spontaneous conversational humor, and inadvertent or unintentional humor. Attardo (1994, p. 323) states, "*Humor* enhances communication and strengthens connections among individuals belonging to a certain social group."

Verbal humor plays a crucial role in human communication, particularly in politics. Political verbal humor has gained significant prominence in recent decades, particularly at the end of the 1990s. This is largely due to politicians appearing on televised talk shows in different countries, most notably in the US. Additionally, the popularity of political satire programs like *The Daily Show* and *Saturday Night Live* has contributed to this trend. The verbal humor in politics significantly influences the attitudes of supporters, voters, and opponents. Davis et al. (2018) argue that humor is a common political communication technique that facilitates political interaction. This study linguistically analyzes the function of Trump's verbal humor in political speech.

The study primarily examines Donald Trump's negative verbal humor attacks in the US elections from 2017 to 2024. Furthermore, it depicts political comedy as a viable and significant method of political communication. Trump uses verbal humor in his campaigns through various means, such as parody, humor, satire, and jokes. Press conferences, social media, and television programs all serve as platforms for criticizing and mocking political opponents through jokes, puns, and analogies during elections. This impacts voters' opinions and beliefs about candidates, shaping their political attitudes and behavior. Trump uses Press conferences and television programs all serve as platforms for criticizing and mocking political opponents through jokes, puns, and analogies during elections. This impacts voters' opinions and beliefs about candidates, shaping their political attitudes and behavior. This paper presents a valuable contribution to the identification and analysis of humor in Donald Trump's speech, the most powerful candidate in the US elections in the last few years. The study is significant in capturing the essence of Trump's personality in the US elections through comedy.

2. The questions of the study

The study aims to answer the following two questions:

1. What are the stylistic elements and linguistic strategies for creating verbal humor?
2. What political benefits does Trump gain from using verbal humor in his election campaign?

3. Previous studies

Omer and Al-Azzawi (2021) present a pragmatic study of the phenomenon of humor in American television talk show programs. The study aims to examine the flouting of maxims. In creating verbal humor, scrutinize the pragmatic structure of humor and elucidate the functions of verbal humor resulting from maxim violations in TV talk shows. YouTube provides the data for the study. The study relies on Grice's and Leech's principles of politeness, which contribute to creating humor. The study's analysis is divided into three categories: first, the initiation of humor and its intended function; second, pragmatic approaches to humor; and finally, the functions of humor. The study concludes that speakers generally disregard Leech's maxims; however, they tend to violate Grice's principles more frequently due to their humorous utterances' lack of truth. As a result, the pragmatic creation of humor entails violating conversational maxims. Television talk shows divide humor into three levels: initiation, pragmatic approaches, and the intended function of humor.

Kehinde (2016) investigates the conversation in the comedy series "*A Night of a Thousand Laughs*." He focuses on language structure as a communication tool, so the study uses pragmatic approaches in the text analysis, emphasizing the Gricean cooperative maxim (1975). Five distinct episodes from the series comprise the data. The study reveals that Nigerian stand-up comedies use violations of the Gricean maxims to create humor. The study concludes that the participants in the series achieve the purpose of humor in conversation by deviating from the principle consciously or unconsciously to create perceived humor.

Hakim (2022) presents a study on the phenomenon of humour in the episodes of "*Pretty Smart*." on the Netflix platform. The study endeavors to pinpoint the types of maxims that defy expectations and scrutinize

their application in generating verbal humor. He uses Grice's (1975) cooperative principle and the second Richard Shade theory (1997) to analyze the humor in "Pretty Smart.". The results of the study reveal that the violation maxim is quality first, then relation, quantity, and manners. The study establishes a connection between the violation maxim and the creation of verbal humor, concluding that breaking the four maxims can lead to wit, irony, and jokes. Therefore, actors in "Pretty Smart" episodes frequently utilize diverse comedic tactics to provoke laughter from the audience.

4. Definition of humor

Humor is a multifaceted phenomenon believed to be an excellent means of observing others' actions through social contact. Humor is a potent tool for achieving a specific objective. Attardo (2003) initially describes humor as a form of linguistic activity.

Turner (1986, pp. 1-2) defines *Humor* as "the faculty of perceiving or expressing what is amusing or comical." Regarding the verbal aspect of Humor, DiCioccio (2012, p. 5) argues that Humor is "that quality of action, speech, or writing which excites amusement."

Attardo (1994) argues that linguistics, psychology, anthropology, and sociology specialists consider humour a broad category. It includes any event or thing that causes laughter or amusement or is perceived as amusing. Bremmer and Roodenburg (1997) say that humor is a form of communication that can be conveyed through several means, such as physical gestures, written text, spoken words, or visual representations. It elicits grins or laughter. According to Schnurr (2005) defines humor as statements intended and/or perceived as amusing that lead to an emotional shift in spectators that elicits an immediate reaction.

Humor serves various functions beyond being lighthearted, enjoyable, and amusing. These interpersonal functions may exhibit contradictions. It can facilitate social cohesion among individuals or societies or act as a mechanism to exclude one or more people from that group or community. It can serve as a method to either diminish or strengthen disparities in situation among people by conveying concurrence or dissent. Humor has evolved into a universally recognized method of communication and a social force that serves many purposes (Martin, 2007, p. 20).

Martin (2007, p. 11) categorizes daily humor into three primary classifications:

1. Jokes: Individuals convey these witty phrases or extremely brief funny stories through their own words with each other.
2. Spontaneous conversational: Individuals intentionally express this throughout a discourse, which may take the form of spoken or non-spoken communication.
3. Accidental humor.

Humor is vital in any politician's repertoire. It can disarm an adversary, win over a hesitant voter, or penetrate an argument. Using humor in politics boosts politicians' cognitive abilities and sophistication by giving engaging information to audiences and helping them understand the impact of their decisions on specific topics. Hence, humor influences knowledge organization in memory by triggering conflicting mental frameworks. This leads to a more profound and long-lasting understanding of material across different areas of knowledge (Gregorowicz, 2013).

On the political level, candidates use rhetorical humor not just as a persuasive tool but also as a means to create a sense of unity with the voters. Davis et al. (2018) argue that a political joke gives the impression that the speaker and the listener are in on a secret, fostering camaraderie through circumventing logical barriers. Humor can also indicate political affiliation and foster public endorsement of a cause. Stewart (2015) explains that humor in a political argument that elicits the audience's reaction can demonstrate a politician's endorsement and agreement.

5. GTVH (Raskin and Attardo,1991)

Raskin and Attardo (1991) present the analysis model for humor known in "General Theory of Verbal Humor" (GTVH), in an article titled "Script Theory Revised: Joke Similarity and Joke Representation Model." GTVH is a linguistic theory that examines the semantic and pragmatic elements of humorous expressions and texts, excluding any consideration of their paralinguistic or prosodic components. Victor Raskin introduced the "Semantic-Script Theory of Humor" (SSTH) in his 1985 publication "Semantic Mechanisms of Humor," which established the foundation for the development of the GTVH.

Attardo (2017) says that GTVH includes all humorous texts. It includes not only narrative texts but also dramatic and conversational texts. Because it is adaptable to all types of text, it includes most linguistic

disciplines, such as textual linguistics, the theory of narrativity, semantics, and pragmatics. Raskin and Attardo's model attempts to create a comprehensive representation framework for jokes that encompasses all their facets. The GTVH theory requires parameters from other concepts for constructing a joke into a certain text. Attardo and Raskin (1991) extract necessary concepts from related disciplines, including cognitive language study, psychology, stylistics, etc.

Raskin and Attardo (1991) expand the GTVH theory to include six elements known as "parameters": script opposition, logical mechanism, situation, target, narrative strategy, and language. These parameters are referred to as "knowledge resources" (KRs). Attardo (2017) asserts that humorous communication utilizes these six knowledge resources to convey a hostile aim toward a specific target. Humor can be used by individuals who perceive themselves as superior to others to criticize and influence the conduct of others they consider inferior (Attardo 2017).

The Raskin and Attardo theory's fundamental concept presents a hierarchical system that distributes knowledge resources from the lowest level (language) to the most prominent (script opposition), as follows:

1. The language parameter comprehensively encompasses all linguistic elements of the joke, including phonetics, phonology, morphology, lexicon, syntax, and semantics (Attardo and Raskin, 1991, p. 298). The availability of linguistic information resources, often called script opposition, usually influences the choice of language employed in making a joke. Therefore, Attardo (2002, p. 177) states that "the linguistic characteristic is likewise crucial in conveying a distinct comic connotation, irrespective of the literal meaning of words or sentences."
2. Narrative strategy shows that any joke must be told through a story, conversation, riddle, or other narrative form. It involves the management and organization of the humorous elements in both spoken and written amusing stories rather than concentrating exclusively on jokes (Attardo, 2001)
3. The target parameter refers to the specific groups or individuals who are the subject of the joke in humorous communication. Attardo (2002, p. 178) states that humor can target individuals, groups, or institutions, subjecting them to mockery or satire .
4. The situation parameter refers to the objects, participants, activities, instruments, and props required to tell the joke (Attardo, 2002, p. 178)
5. A logical mechanism connects the various scripts of a joke. The Logical Mechanism aims to elucidate the generation of jokes by providing tools to identify incongruity resolution, a pivotal comedy component (Attardo, 2002, p. 179). The logical mechanism concept proposes that a comedy should provide a logical justification for the absurdity or unreality it presents. Therefore, it encompasses "distorted" or "playful logic" that may not necessarily be applicable "in contexts beyond the realm of the joke."
6. Script opposition refers to comedic themes such as reality (unreality), actual (not actual), normal (not normal), and possible (not possible). Script opposition refers to using components that evoke different interpretations since they are linked to one or more scripts" (Attardo, 2002, p. 180).

6. Methodology of study

This study focuses on a semantic analysis of humor in Trump's speech during his campaign. Hence, it examines how Trump mocks his opponents mockingly. The study adapts Raskin and Attardo's (1991) General Theory of Verbal Humor (GTVH). The study's data were gathered from various internet sources, including Truth Social's platform, channels, and campaign conferences. The study data is analyzed according to the General Theory of Verbal Humor to determine the humor in Trump's speech against his opponents. Data analysis depends on the six knowledge resources: script opposition, logical mechanism, situation, target, narrative strategy, and language.

7. Data analysis and discussion

Verbal humour is a linguistically efficient instrument for politicians to enhance their accessibility to the public or diminish the appeal of their opponents, particularly during presidential election campaigns. Candidate Trump frequently uses political verbal humor because he understands the value of political discourse, particularly when competing to win the US elections. So he sarcastically attacks his opponents. On July 5, 2024, Trump mocks US Vice President Kamala Harris in his campaign for the presidential election. Calling her "laffin' Kamala Harris." As shown in the excerpts (1),

(1) " *“Respects to our potentially new Democrat Challenger, Laffin’ Kamala Harris.”*

The word "Laffin" describes a humorous individual with a lackluster leadership style and constantly pursuing trends.

Trump employs humour to denigrate Kamala, making her appear stupid. In other words, Trump wants to undermine voters' trust in Harris' leadership qualities by encouraging them to mock her.

The following day, on July 20, Trump repeated the same strategy at a rally in Michigan, as shown in the excerpts(2).

(2) ***"I call her Laughing Kamala. You ever watched her laugh? She's crazy. You know, you can tell a lot by a laugh. No, she's crazy. She's nuts."***

Trump's use of ironic words such as "laugh," "crazy," and "nuts" to refer to this woman's incontinent joy is not accidental. It is a calculated move to show her incompetence and lack of authority. His negative disposition towards this woman is not spontaneous but a deliberate attempt to belittle and ridicule her. His use of the adjective "crazy" specifically reflects his desire to draw voters' attention and attack her position and reputation. Furthermore, in an expletive-filled speech on the golf course, Trump mocks Joe Biden, as shown in excerpt (3).

(3) ***"I kicked that old broken-down pile of c--p, he's such a bad guy," before incorrectly claiming: "He [Biden] just quit, you know – he's quitting the race... I got him out."***

In the campaign election discourse, Trump uses words such as "c--p," "bad guy," and "he is quitting the race." He attempts to appeal to voters for his benefit. Trump mocks Biden's rival more boldly. Trump used the term "c--p," which decodes to "pile of crap," to allude to the accumulation of problems under the Biden administration.

Similarly, Trump uses humour with Nimrata Nikki Haley, the Republican Party presidential primaries candidate in 2024. He gives Haley the nickname "Nimbra." "Nimbra does not have what it takes," Trump wrote, "and she is weak." as seen in excerpt (4)

(4) ***"Anyone listening to Nikki 'Nimrada' Haley's wacked out speech last night, would think that she won the Iowa Primary. She didn't, and she couldn't even beat a very flawed Ron DeSanctimonious, who's out of money, and out of hope,"***

Trump may implicitly use "Nim" to evoke "Nimrud," which can refer to a silly, foolish, or idiotic person. Merriam-Webster defines "DeSanctimonious," another nickname Trump uses for humor, as being hypocritically pious or devout. Trump uses derogatory nicknames to refer to his political opponents; he attempts to ironize Nikki Haley's character by referring to her as a "DeSanctimonious" character, implying that she is disloyal. Trump attacked Nikki Haley ironically by calling her a "birdbrain" and arguing she does not have the talent or temperament to be president.

(5) ***"Birdbrain doesn't have the TALENT or TEMPERAMENT to do the job" [Sept. 29, 2023]***

Trump satirizes her by calling her a "Birdbrain," a pejorative nickname for foolish and ignorant people. On the Fox News program, President Donald Trump insults notable women of dark colours and sarcastically mocks "Ocasio-Cortez," who is a famous Democratic legislator.

(6) ***"AOC was a poor student. I won't say where she went to school, it doesn't matter," Trump said. "This is not even a smart person, other than she's got a good line of stuff. I mean, she goes out and she yaps. These guys, they're all afraid of her."***

Trump mocks Ocasio-Cortez's education by calling her a "poor student" in order to cast doubt on her academic performance in a sarcastic manner.

Trump mocks Ocasio-Cortez's political position "she's got a good line of stuff" by using the word "yaps" which refers to bark sharply. Trump continues to mock Democrats. In his strategy of mockery, Trump targeted Democratic House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

(7) ***"She's turned on him like a dog. She's as crazy as a bed bug." [July 20, 2024]***

Trump makes fun of Pelosi by calling her "crazy." He refers to mockery negatively, dismissing Pelosi's thoughts and actions as unworthy of consideration. Trump attempts to discredit or undermine Pelosi's credibility or authority.

Trump uses a more bizarre term, "bed bug," to mock Pelosi's character. "bedbug" refers to a visible, wingless, bloodsucking bug. It sometimes infests houses, especially beds, and feeds on human blood. Bedbugs derive their name from their inclination towards human homes as their preferred habitat. He mocked her for persuading and exploiting Biden to end his re-election bid.

Trump mocks Stormy Daniels's appearance in exaggeration, calling her "horseface" after a federal judge dismissed her defamation suit against him. as seen in excerpts (8)

(8) **"Great, now I can go after Horseface and her 3rd rate lawyer in the Great State of Texas,"**

"horseface" is an expression to describe a person whose face reminds you of the face of a horse: an oval-shaped face with prominent jaws and chin, buck teeth, and a goofy smile. Trump sarcastically describes MSNBC host Mika; he mocks her by using "low I.Q.," "crazy," and "bleeding badly from a facelift," as seen in an excerpt (9).

(9) **"How come low I.Q. Crazy Mika, along with Psycho Joe, came to Mar-a-Lago 3 nights in a row around New Year's Eve and insisted on joining me. She was bleeding badly from a face-lift. I said no!" [June 29, 2017]**

Trump mocks her by using the "IQ" test, short for "intelligence quotient," which measures a range of cognitive abilities related to human intelligence. Regarding Mika's appearance, he mocks her for Anchor's alleged plastic surgery by saying, "Bleeding badly from a facelift."

Trump mocks his previous counsel, Omarosa Manigault Newman, because she accused the Trump campaign of trying to buy her silence, as seen in the excerpt (10).

(10) **"A crazed, crying lowlife" and a "dog." [Aug. 14, 2018]**

Trump uses harsh words to mock her actions, and the term "lowlife" refers to a person who is morally unacceptable in their community or deserves contempt.

Furthermore, Trump attacked American businesswoman and media personality Kim Kardashian over comments she made for journalist Jonathan Karl and accused her of disloyalty. as shown in (11) and (12).

(11) **"Asked if her butt is big: "Well. It's record-setting. In the old days, they'd say she has a bad body."**

(12) **"Does she have a good body? No. Does she have a fat ass?"**

Trump uses vulgar and sarcastic words, such as "butt," "record-setting," "bad body," and "fat ass," to mock Kardashian and denigrate her.

On the Truth Social, Trump engages in racist ridicule towards Elaine Chao, the wife of the Republican Party's Senate leader, who previously served in his Cabinet. He refers to her as the senator's "China-loving wife, Coco Chow!" as seen in excerpts (13) and (14)

(13) **"Must immediately seek help and advice from his China-loving wife, Coco Chow!"**

(14) **"Does Coco Chow have anything to do with Joe Biden's Classified Documents being sent and stored in Chinatown?" Trump wrote. "Her husband, the Old Broken Crow, is VERY close to Biden, the Democrats, and, of course, China."**

Trump uses racist terms to mock Elaine Chao as "Coco Chow." The word "Coco" refers to the name of Coco Chanel, who famously had sex with Nazis during World War II when they invaded her city, and the word "Chow" refers to the Chinese dog breed.

During the meeting in CNN's town hall, Trump also mocks E. Jean Carroll, who filed a lawsuit against him on charges of sexual harassment. Trump employs the term "wack job," which denotes an individual who is irrational or displays abnormal behavior. as seen in excerpt (15)

(15) **"She was a wack job,"**

Trump also mockingly denied Carroll's claim that they met in a Manhattan store. as seen in excerpt (16)

(16) **"What kind of a woman meets somebody and brings them up, and within minutes, you're playing hanky panky in a dressing room?"**

The term "Hanky-panky" refers to discrete or surreptitious sexual activity. In other words, it refers to an improper or not serious romantic relationship between two people.

8. Conclusion

The current study concludes that politicians can use humor to target opponents, particularly in election campaigns. Trump used excessive humor in political dialogues and statements to ridicule his opponents, aiming to undermine them politically and electorally. The study reveals that Trump used six semantic linguistic strategies in his speech to produce humor, according to Raskin and Attardo's (1991) theory: script opposition, logical mechanism, situation, target, narrative strategy, and language. In the language parameter, Trump uses a lexicon and syntax with humour meaning and a level narrative strategy; he tells the humor within the narrative context appropriate to humor. In the target parameter, he uses the names of his opponents as targets for his humor; additionally, he employs the situation parameter in his speech to refer

to the props for the humor, such as objects, participants, activities, and instruments. Trump uses a logical mechanism to connect the various humor scripts, a pivotal comedy component that provides tools to identify incongruity in the scripts. Lastly, he uses script opposition to refer to comedic themes that evoke different interpretations, such as reality (unreality), actual (not actual), normal (not normal), and possible (not possible).

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