

Why Trump Won: A Corpus and Argument Reconstruction-based Discourse Analysis of How the U.S. Democratic Narrative Failed

Rachel Wyman (King's College London, UK)

The 2016 U.S. Presidential election was explosive, with both candidates – Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump – mired in a seemingly endless array of scandals. Trump's win was swiftly followed by an enraged outcry from the liberal mainstream media in which those who voted for him were condemned as racist, xenophobic, sexist, homophobic and unintelligent. Trump countered these claims by Tweeting that it was his debate performances that had resulted in his victory. In these debates, Clinton's strategy was to continue the democratic establishment narrative that Obama has created over the course of eight years, largely pushing for the same policies and repeating the same arguments. Trump's strategy was mainly to refuse Clinton's arguments; he regularly stated that the reality Clinton was creating was absolute fiction. In its place, he offered a new political narrative on America, one in which President Obama had abjectly failed the American populace, regarding both foreign and domestic policy. In place of the economic domestic recovery and increasingly peaceful world Obama now claims as his legacy, Trump argued that the economic recovery has been a farce supported with misleading statistics and that the war on ISIL in the Middle East has been a humiliating blunder, resulting in decreased American global hegemony. This presentation details the results of a corpus and argument reconstruction-based critical discourse analysis of Obama's political narrative and how the prototypical arguments within it eventually came to be defeated by the emergence of Donald Trump's conflicting narrative during the 2016 Presidential debates.

This study utilizes a new 5-step research approach which combines corpus linguistics, qualitative coding and argumentation analysis. The data for this study are 413 of Obama's *Weekly Addresses to the Nation*, spanning both of his terms, 2009 – 2017, as well as the 2016 Clinton/Trump presidential debate transcripts. In Step 1, a corpus analysis of these combined speeches is undertaken to identify the lexical and semantic patterns in Obama's language, as well as how he frames key issues. In Step 2, the major argument in each individual speech is isolated and qualitatively codes into five separate functional units with NVivo: *goals*, *claims for action*, *means-goal*, *circumstances* and *values* (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012). These coded units are then used to create five distinct corpora, which are then quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed, to illuminate the distinctive characteristics of each (O'Halloran 2011). The resulting data shows the key frames that define each of these functional units as well as how Obama's arguments on his major topics develop over time. In Step 3, the trajectory of Obama's arguments on each of these major topics is analyzed using a process of comparative argument reconstruction, to identify arguments that have a high probability of being flawed. These results are used, along with the corpus data from Steps 1 and 2, to select the major arguments of Obama's Presidency and the arguments that have been flagged as needing further analysis based on the how they develop over time. In Step 4, these arguments are evaluated using argument reconstruction and critical questioning (Fairclough & Fairclough 2012). This evaluation focuses on assessing both the structure of the

arguments as well as the content of the functional units, particularly how key representations are used to reinforce ideologies. In Step 5, Obama's arguments and the key representations upon which they are based, are then compared to Clinton's and Trump's arguments on the same topics. This comparison shows how the establishment democrat narrative, as developed by Obama and continued by Clinton, works to depict a very different world than the one that Trump portrayed in his debate arguments. The result was an election in which voters had to choose between one of two contradicting versions of reality.

The corpus analysis results show that Obama's political narrative focuses on a group of eleven major subject areas. Within each he uses a progression of arguments to chart a story of progress on each issue, spanning his eight years in office. Each of these minor narratives works within the greater over-arching Presidential narrative which focuses on America's fight to recover from the Great Recession, culminating in the nations' successful economic recovery – the major goal of Obama's Presidency. By incorporating a strategy of highly repetitive language, frames and arguments, he constructs a complex political narrative which works to create the version of reality that he wants the American public to see. But the argument analysis results show that many of Obama's major arguments, which form the basis of this narrative, do not stand up well to critical evaluation. It is Obama's argument's in reference to Syria, which Clinton adopted and enhanced by involving and attacking Russia, which ultimately led Trump to outperform her in the second and third debates. He did so by rejecting the reality that Obama had worked for eight years to create and in doing so, established a new reality in which Syria, Russia and Iran – represented as villains in Obama and Clinton's speeches – were on the front lines fighting ISIL. I argue that it was this argument, along with Obama's inability to convince the populous that an economic recovery had occurred, that led to the shocking election of Donald Trump.

References

- Fairclough, I. & Fairclough, N. (2012). Political Discourse Analysis. Routledge: London.
O'Halloran, K. (2011). Investigating argumentation in reading groups: Combining manual qualitative coding and automated corpus analysis tools. *Applied Linguistics*, 23(2), 172-196.