An investigation of weasel words in selected political speeches

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ABSTRACT

Weasel words are used to connect weak data in order to justify the opinion. So the speaker tries to affect the hearer. It is obvious that weasel words can influence the receiver's thinking spontaneously. Since the writers/ speakers produce vague words with double meaning so that they can cause ambiguity to the receivers.

This study aims at showing the weasel words that used by political speeches and classifications of weasel words. It also aims at showing the difference between hedging and weasel words.

The current study hypothesizes that the politicians tend to employ weasel words to a wide extent in their speeches.

The study is limited to deal with some selected political speeches for some famous politicians . The procedure of this study is: firstly, giving an account about political speeches, secondly, explaining the meaning of weasel words and its classification, thirdly, identifying the difference between weasel words and hedging.

1. Introduction

1.1. Theoretical Background

Language is a means of communication; it expresses thoughts, emotions, feelings, and desires of human beings. Proverbs play an essential role in cultural, social, didactic, and psychological aspects in all societies. Proverbs are the essence of popular philosophy. They form the consensus of folklore and give a true picture of the spirit of the nation.

A weasel word, or anonymous authority, is an informal term for words and phrases aimed at creating an impression that something specific and meaningful has been said, when in fact only a vague or ambiguous claim has been communicated. Examples include the phrases "some people say", "most people think", and "researchers believe (Jason, 1988:266).

So using weasel words allows the speaker to refute their statement when challenged by the media and this is why many politicians are getting away with claiming fake news. Since the statement was never specific in the first place, it is easier for them to get away with blaming the media and avoiding their statements.

In talking about weasel words, it is very important to refer to hedges because many users of language have confused between these two expressions; weasel words are used with intent to provide the receivers with unspecific claims, while hedges are used when the speaker is not sure of something. So s/he uses some expressions which show his or her uncertainty like (kind of, I am not sure, but…).

1.2 Defining Weasel Words

In The Macmillan Dictionary of Contemporary Phrase and Fable (1916), the word 'weasel' is defined as the word that implies deception and irresponsibility include: the noun form, referring to a sneaky, untrustworthy, or insincere person; the verb form, meaning to manipulate shiftily; and the phrase "to *weasel out*", meaning "to squeeze one's way out of something" or "to evade responsibility".

Furthermore, weasel words are those words that used to weaken the conclusion in order to lessen the opportunities of being refuted. They are so named for the reason of weasels behavior. There is a lovely example which shows what is meant by weasels. Weasels like to eat eggs, but

instead of smashing the shell of the egg and leaving evidence of their eating, they try to make holes and suck out the egg's contents, as a result, the birds think that its contents are still be found. Similarly, weasel words are directed to suck out the meaning of the claim, so that most receivers are not aware that the contents are omitted (Murray,2005:94).

The deception of weasel words is based on the addressee's inference that comes from his expectations in association to the conveyed message. Rudinow and Barry (2008: 317) explain that when the receiver hears or reads a message the contains weasel words, he tends to ignore it and focus only on the rest of the speech. The expression (sustainable development) should have knocked on the head long ago, but it still maintains a zombie-like existence.

1.3 Categories of Weasel Words

Susumu et. al. (2017:91) states that weasel words can be divided into three main categories, which are:

1. Numerically Vague Expressions, as (many, some people, experts, most people) or some people say. (any people? how do they know?)
2. The Use of Passive Voice, passive voce is used to avoid specifying an authority, as (it is mentioned) or it has been said that … (who says? Where and when?)
3. The Use of Specific Adverbs that Weaken the Idea, as (often, probably, possibly).They often provide these tasks**.**

1.4 Weasel Word Versus Hedging

This section is directed to give a brief account of hedging in order to be distinguished from weasel words.

Hedging can be defined as words or phrases used by the speaker or writer to indicate that he is not really sure that what he says is sufficiently correct or complete. One can use *sort of* or *kind of* as hedges on the accuracy of his statements, as in descriptions such as*:*

* *"Her hair was kind of long"*
* *The book cover is sort of yellow* (rather than it is yellow) (Yule,148).

These are examples of hedges on the Quality maxim. Other examples would include the expressions listed below that people sometimes put at the beginning of their conversational contributions.

* *As far as I know ...,*
* *Now, correct me if I'm wrong, but ...*
* *I'm not absolutely sure, but ....?????(ibid).*

Occasionally, hedging is also used in scientific writing. The job of hedges is to make things more or less fuzzy by the use of some expressions like (would, may, could, possible, might, suggest, seem). The behind the use of hedges is a linguistic means of claiming a lack of commitment to the truth of a proposition and as an opening for the writer to introduce alternative untruthful claims to influence receivers (Douglas,2018:2).

Crystal (2008: 227) explains that hedging is an application in pragmatics and discourse analysis of a general sense of the word "to be non-committal or evasive" to a range of items which express a notion of imprecision or qualification. Examples of hedging include *sort of, more or less, I mean, approximately, roughly*. Hedges may also be used in combination: something of the order of 10 per cent, more or less.

So one can conclude that weasel words and hedges are different, but somehow they are interrelated. Weasel words imply that the speaker/ writer is sure that he says something ambiguous for the addressee and he intends to make the receiver in puzzle. And can be embodied in the use of words with double meaning. Hedging on the other hand, implies that the speaker/ writer is unsure about the utterance that he claims and he draws the receiver's attention that what is mentioned may be true or false. So both of them gives untrustworthy ideas, but the first one with intention and the last without intention.

1.5 The Role Weasel Words in Political Speeches

Political language deals with the use of power to organize people's mind and opinion. It is a tool used to control the society in general. Since Speech is heard by a lot of people, every person has different interpretations that can

influence the success of the candidates. Political speech can be seen as a means of establishing and maintaining social relationships, expressing feelings, and selling ideas, policies and programmes in any society (Hashim,2002:699).

Studying language in cases where all its variations and functions are taken into consideration, it is necessary to know how convictions, perceptions and identities are influenced by language. During election campaigns, ideas and ideologies need be given by the use of language to be agreed upon by people. In political language, words and expressions are used or omitted in some cases in order to affect meaning in different ways. As a matter of fact, political speeches are regulated by a group of professional speech writers, who have experience and knowledge of persuasive language (Beard, 2000:18).

So one can conclude that political language is used to make lies seem truthful and murder acceptable.

2. Methodology and Data Collection

The method followed in this study is taking some political speeches and analyzing them to discover the quantity of weasel words that used in these speeches and the pragmatic role behind their use.

2.1 Data Analysis

The table (1.1) shows the using of the weasel words by the politicians viz, (Barack Obama, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton) through analyzing their selected speeches according to the categories of Susumu et. al. (2017:91).

Text 1:

"We are here today because ***enough people ignored the voices*** who told them that the world could not change." https://en.wikipedia.org.

Text 2:

"The fundamental human rights that had been denied to them for far

oo long. Sametová revoluce - the Velvet Revolution taught us many things. It showed us that peaceful protest could shake the foundation of an empire, and expose the emptiness of an ideology. It showed us that small countries can

play a pivotal role in world events, and that young people can lead the way in overcoming old conflicts. And it proved that moral leadership is more powerful than any weapon." https://en.wikipedia.org.

Text 3:

"Some have suggested a barrier is immoral. Then why do wealthy politicians build walls, fences, and gates around their homes? They don't build walls because they hate the people on the outside, but because they love the people on the inside. The only thing that is immoral is the politicians to do nothing and continue to allow more innocent people to be so horribly victimized." https://factba.se›transcripts.

Text 4:

" Over the last several years, I've met with dozens of families ***whose loved ones were stolen***. I've held the hands of the weeping mothers and embraced the grief-stricken fathers. So sad. So terrible. I will never forget the pain in their eyes, the tremble in their voices, and the sadness gripping their souls. How much more American blood must we shed before Congress does its job?" https://factba.se › transcripts.

Text 5:

"Some wanted to stick it to the king, and go their own way. The revolution hung in the balance. Then somehow they began listening to each other … compromising … finding common purpose. https://www.nytimes.com

Text 6:

"It **possibly** stands up to a King." That took courage." https://www.nytimes.com

Text 7:

"There's **a lot of** work to do."

"Too **many** people haven't had a pay raise since the crash."

"There's too **much** inequality."

"Too   **little**   social   mobility."
https://www.nytimes.com

Text 8:

"And here's something we don't say ***often*** enough: College is crucial, but a four-year

degree should not be the only path to a good
job." https://www.nytimes.com

Text No.	Unit of Analysis	The speaker	Weasel word category	Explanations
Text 1	enough people ignored the voices.	Barack Obama	Numerically Vague Expressions	Obama here says enough people and it is not obvious to the receivers any people who means.
Text 2	The fundamental human rights that had been denied	Barack Obama	The Use of Passive Voice	Obama here uses passive voice in order not to specify the authority(had been denied) who denies them?
Text 3	Some have suggested a barrier is immoral	Donald Trump	Numerically Vague Expressions	In this speech, Trump uses the word (some) and it is not obvious whom does he mean by some?
Text 4	whose loved ones were stolen	Donald Trump	The Use of Passive Voice	Trump here uses passive voice in order not to specify the authority(were stolen) who steals them?
Text 5	Some wanted to stick it to the king	Hillary Clinton	Numerically Vague Expressions	In this speech, Clinton uses the word (some) and it is not obvious whom does she mean by some?
Text 6	It possibly stands up to a King	Hillary Clinton	The Use of Specific Adverbs That Weaken the Idea	In this speech, Clinton uses the adverb (possibly) to weaken the idea that she presents.
Text 7	"There's a lot of work to do." "Too many people haven't had a pay raise since the crash." "There's too much inequality." "Too little social mobility."	Hillary Clinton	Numerically Vague Expressions	In this speech, Clinton uses the words (A lot of , many, much, little.) and it is not obvious who people does she mean by these words?
Text 8	"And here's something we don't say often enough…"	Hillary Clinton	The Use of Specific Adverbs That Weaken the Idea	In this speech, Clinton uses the adverb (often) to weaken the idea that she presents.

Conclusions

1. Weasel words are used in most political speeches, since they make the claim unspecific.

2. The 'Numerically Vague Expressions' category is used more than the other categories it is used 50% in the selected data.

3. The category, 'The Use of Specific Adverbs That Weaken the Idea' is used 25% and 'The Use of Passive Voice' category is also used 25%.

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