A Linguistic Analysis of the Trump-Harris Debate on 10 September 2024

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Abstract

The article focuses on the sole televised debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump during the 2024 election cycle. The linguistic features and rhetorical strategies of both candidates were subjected to quantitative and qualitative analysis. The analysis revealed significant differences in their respective communication styles, including the length of sentences, the frequency of words, the overall tonality of each discourse, and the prevalent use of three-part lists, metaphors, and hyperbole as the main means of persuasion.

Keywords: debate, discourse, Kamala Harris, Donald Trump, president, linguistics, rhetoric.

Introduction

The campaign leading up to the 2024 US presidential election took an unprecedented turn when Joe Biden, the incumbent US president, withdrew from the race on 21 July 2024. In his post on social network X, President Biden announced: "It has been the greatest honor of my life to serve as your President. And while it has been my intention to seek reelection, I believe it is in the best interest of my party and the country for me to stand down and to focus solely on fulfilling my duties as President for the remainder of my term" (Biden 2024). This action was instigated by mounting pressure from the Democratic Party and influential supporters for Biden to renounce his candidacy in the wake of his performance during the first presidential debate with Donald Trump, which took place less than a month prior on 27 June 2024. On the same day that Joe Biden withdrew his candidacy, Kamala Harris, the sitting Vice-President, announced her campaign. She was officially certified as the Democratic presidential nominee on 5 August 2024 (Oppenheim et al. 2024).

The presented course of events suggests that televised debates can have a significant impact on the course of presidential elections in the USA, with the

potential to influence the result in either a positive or negative manner. However, according to Schroeder (2008), evidence from numerous academic studies and political surveys indicates that presidential debates are just one of many factors that voters consider when casting their ballots.

Since the first televised presidential debate between J.F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon on 26 September 1960, the format has been a regular feature of American politics. It has continued uninterrupted since 1976 when Jimmy Carter and Henry Ford debated after a 16-year hiatus following the first debates. (McKinney and Carlin 2004).

Naturally, the format of the debates has evolved over more than six decades. In 1987, the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) was established. The CPD's principal objective is to guarantee that the general election debates between or among the leading nominees for the offices of President and Vice President of the United States become a permanent feature of the electoral process. Its primary function is to sponsor and oversee the general election debates on a four-year basis, and additionally, to conduct research and educational activities relating to the debates (The Commission on Presidential Debates 2020).

Those who are critical of presidential debates have identified two interconnected key concerns. The first of these is the oversimplification of complex issues, while the second is that, rather than fostering in-depth discussions, candidates' policies are reduced to mere slogans (Mindich 2024). Despite this, the debates continue, with insiders such as Newton Minow, currently vice chairman of the CPD, proposing that the debates should become more informal with candidates permitted to question each other and citizens allowed to ask questions to them directly. This is particularly relevant considering new media platforms such as social networking sites and the internet more generally (Minow and LaMay 2008).

Literature Review

Presidential candidates' debates have attracted attention in various fields of expertise: political science examining their influence on the election results, cognitive psychology investigating how viewers pro-cess the information from debates, sociology providing insights into how debates shape public opinion, communication studies studying how chosen rhetorical and persuasion strategies can convince voters, social media analyses researching how these debates are disseminated on social media platforms, and last but not least, linguistics concerned with discourse analysis and pragmatics.

The critical discourse analysis (CDA) based on Fairclough's model provides the theoretical framework for the study of Trump's strategies in the first presidential debate with Hillary Clinton in 2016, as conducted by Nguyen and Sawalmeh (2020). According to the research findings, "Trump strategically combined the four strategies of presidential debates, including (1) self-acclamation, (2) describing opposing candidates through the verbal attack, (3) and self-rectification or image-enhancement through the defense against opposing candidates blaming argument, and (4) extra-vocalization" (Nguyen, Salwameh 2020, p. 75). Additionally, the authors note that Donald Trump used a new tactic during the debate, known as "fear appeals". This marketing tactic blended conventional appeals with a more business-oriented approach (Ibid.).

The discourse analysis in Kurnianingsih's (2017) paper focuses on the rhetorical devices used by Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton in their second presidential debate. The findings of the paper show that the two candidates used different types of rhetorical devices (hyperbole, parallelism, metaphor, irony, metonymy, allusion, and synecdoche) and discursive strategies, with hyperbole and pathos being the most dominant in both candidates' speeches, and both being prevalent in Donald Trump's speech. While Trump tends to use hatred to appeal to the audience emotionally, Clinton uses logical reasoning. The study thus shows how the analysed rhetorical devices and discursive strategies relate to the audience's favourable or unfavourable response.

The study of presidential debates between Clinton and Trump by Al-Tarawneh and Rabab'ah (2019) employs Fairclough's model CDA as its theoretical foundation, in a manner similar to that observed in Nguyen and Sawalmeh's work (2020) and analyses the participants' speeches on the description, interpretation, and explanation level. With regard to the use of pathos and logos, the conclusion reached is consistent with that of Kurnianingsih (2017), namely that Trump employs emotional manipulation as a persuasive strategy, whereas Clinton relies predominantly on factual arguments.

All three televised debates between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump in 2016, or more precisely extracts from them, also served as the basis for research by El-Hawary et al. (2020) that used an eclectic approach – a combination of Machin and Mayr's model of CDA and Culpeper's model of impoliteness to uncover Clinton's and Trump's ideologies and their respective use of persuasive language. The analysis reveals that Trump's use of language was designed to project power and dominance though the authors describe it as "unusual, simple and straightforward idiolect" (Ibid., p. 150). His speech style, characterized by verbal aggressiveness, face threatening acts, and impoliteness, contributed significantly to his image as a determined presidential candidate and a strong leader. The study concludes that his aggressive and simplistic language became effective tools for gaining voter support.

The CDA was utilised to investigate the discourse between Donald Trump, the 45th President of the USA, and Joe Biden, who was to become the 46th President, during the US presidential campaign in 2020. Sartika (2021) conducted an analysis of the usage of personal pronouns, three-part lists, fillers, and interruptions. The findings demonstrate that both speakers used personal pronouns, such as *I/me* and *we/us*, to present a positive self-image, whereas they pronouns like *he/him* and *they/them* portrayed their opponent in a negative light. However, this linguistic strategy was more prevalent on the side of Donald Trump when presenting himself and when attacking his rival.

Other authors have focused on specific linguistic features, such as conceptual metaphor (Nirwana, 2023), semantic analysis of idiomatic expressions (Utami 2021), slips of the tongue (Purba 2021), and conversational features related to turn-taking, adjacency pairs, and repair (Shofiah et al.). Other notable studies include those that employ rhetorical analysis to examine parallelism, antithesis, irony, hyperbole, metaphor, and simile (Jasim 2022), as well as those that investigate politeness and impoliteness strategies through verbal and non-verbal communication (Prasatyo and Gustary 2024).

A recent research paper by Halomoan (2024) examines the use of hedges (which introduce ambiguity) and boosters (which amplify certainty) in the sole 2024 presidential debate between Joe Biden and Donald Trump. The frequency analysis revealed that both candidates utilised a substantial number of hedges and boosters, with slightly more boosters found in Biden's speech and slightly more hedges in Trump's discourse. The author suggests that "Biden aimed to reinforce his policy positions with certainty and confidence, particularly during discussions on key issues. Trump's balanced use of hedges and boosters indicates a strategic approach to navigating rhetorical challenges, maintaining flexibility while projecting assertiveness" (Halomoan 2024: 164).

The same debate was an object of the analysis of discursive tactics in political rhetoric, based on Van Dijk's framework, in which Lafta (2024: 94) concludes that "[b]oth candidates demonstrate adept use of Van Dijk's discursive strategies, but their effectiveness largely hinges on the preexisting beliefs and values of their audiences."

In the presented literature review, studies in linguistics dealing with televised debates between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, the nominees who fought for the presidency in 2016, and between Donald Trump and Joe Biden in 2020, were selected. Additionally, the final debate between Trump and Joe Biden in 2024, which led to Biden's withdrawal from the campaign, was included. This literature review demonstrates the importance of CDA and rhetorical analysis in understanding the persuasive techniques employed by

political candidates to influence public opinion and voter behaviour. Furthermore, it provides a foundation for further research, particularly regarding the most recent 2024 Trump-Harris presidential debate.

Material and Methods

The paper presents an analysis of the sole presidential debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, which took place on 10 September 2024. The debate, which lasted 90 minutes, was hosted by ABC News at Philadelphia's National Constitution Center. The format mirrored the previous Biden-Trump debate, with both candidates being allotted two minutes to answer questions posed by the moderators, followed by two minutes for rebuttals. An additional minute was allowed for each candidate for follow-ups, clarifications or responses. The debate was conducted without a live studio audience, a strategy designed to minimise disruptions. Microphones were muted, except when it was a candidate's turn to speak, with the objective of preventing interruptions that impaired the quality of previous debates. There were no opening statements. Instead, each candidate delivered a two-minute closing statement at the conclusion of the debate. The order of the candidates' closing statements was decided by a toss of a coin won by Donald Trump who chose to deliver the final closing statement. These conditions were presented to the public before the even and were repeated at the beginning of the debate (Popli 2024, Hoffman 2024).

The context of the debate is of particular importance for the linguistic analysis of the presidential candidates' utterances. The moderators' contributions were excluded from the subsequent analyses. The two separate transcripts were then subjected to a quantitative analysis using online text-mining tools and were also evaluated in terms of their readability based on different formulas. This was followed by a qualitative analysis focusing mainly on the lexical properties of each discourse and their rhetorical devices and discursive strategies. For the purposes of this study, the written transcripts were used, and thus the non-verbal communication cues such as paralanguage and body language were not taken into account.

Results and Discussion

The quantitative analysis of Kamala Harris' and Donald Trump's speeches shows the following findings obtained from free text-mining software (voyant-tools.org) and online readability test (https://www.webfx.com/tools/readable/), as presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Summary of text statistics Harris vs Trump

	Kamala Harris	**Donald Trump**
number of sentences	363	826
tokens	5,980	8,161
types	1,256	1,216
vocabulary density	0.211	0.150
average words per sentence	16.47	9.84
number of complex words	749	609
percent of complex words	12.53%	7.46%
average syllables per word	1.46	1.35

A comparison of the text statistics reveals that Donald Trump used 56% more sentences and almost 27% more words than Kamala Harris. However, the number of unique word forms is found to be nearly identical. Consequently, the vocabulary density, which is a measure of the proportion of content words to the total number of words in a text, is 21.1% of unique words in Harris' speech and 15% in Trump's. This illustrates that there is somewhat greater diversity in the lexicon utilised by Harris, although the vocabulary density is relatively low, as both speakers used repetition as a rhetorical device.

A striking difference in sentence length is observed between the candidates, with Harris' sentences being 40% longer than those of Trump. At the same time, the percentage of complex words (words that contain three or more syllables) in Harris' speech is by 5% higher than in Trump's, a finding further substantiated by the number of syllables per word. These data indicate a more nuanced and sophisticated use of language on Harris' part.

Table 2 presents a summary of the most frequently occurring words in each candidate's speech, with their respective frequencies. These data are visually represented in Figures 1 and 2. It should be noted that only content words were extracted from the two separate transcripts, with function words being omitted.

Table 2: Ten most frequently used content words

	Kamala Harris		Donald Trump	
1	**president**	56	**people**	80
2	**people**	48	going	64
3	Donald	32	country	56
4	Trump	31	**said**	46
5	American	27	like	36
6	**said**	25	know	32
7	let's	24	**president**	28
8	states	22	look	27
9	united	21	years	25
10	plan	20	world	21

Figure 1: Harris' most frequent words

Figure 2: Trump's most frequent words

(created with voyant-tools.org)

The lexeme *president* was used by Harris to refer to the office in general and to her willingness to become US President as in: *I believe very strongly that the American people want a **president** who understands the importance of bringing us together knowing we have so much more in common than what separates us. And I pledge to you to be a **president** for all Americans* (Hoffman 2024). The word appears in places when she talks about Donald Trump, often in the phrase ***former president***: *And on that day, the **president** of the United States incited a violent mob to attack our nation's Capitol, to desecrate our nation's Capitol. On that day, 140 law enforcement officers were injured. And some died. And understand, the **former president** has been indicted and impeached for exactly that reason* (Ibid.).

It is noteworthy that Harris referred to Donald Trump not only as the former president, but also used his given name and surname more than thirty times, as seen in Table 2. Conversely, Trump did not address Harris by her

name on any occasion, which is considered by some as "an attempt to anonymize the vice president" (Rubiera 2024). On the other hand, Donald Trump even referred to himself by his name in eight instances, e.g. ***She*** *wants everybody to be on government insurance where you wait six months for an operation that you need immediately. That didn't happen under* ***Donald Trump*** (Ibid.).

Additionally, there are notable discrepancies in the way both candidates employed the word *people*. In Harris' discourse, it was predominantly utilized in the collocation *American* ***people*** (18)[1], ***people*** *of America* (5), or in cases where it was evident that she was speaking about Americans. This most common lexeme in Trump's discourse was used in reference to Americans, as well as to people in general, but also to immigrants: *On top of that, we have millions of* ***people*** *pouring into our country from prisons and jails, from mental institutions and insane asylums* (Ibid.). This is documented in Table 3.

Table 3: A sample of the context of the lexeme *people* in Trump's speech (adapted from voyant-tools.org)

Left	Term	Right
have inflation like very few	people	have ever seen before. Probably
has been a disaster for	people	, for the middle class, but
that, we have millions of	people	pouring into our country from
in violently. These are the	people	that she and Biden let
This was a group of	people	that got together, they came
since 1917 where 100 million	people	died has there been anything
that nobody thought possible. And	people	give me credit for rebuilding
country. It's going to make	people	want to be able to
a worse period of time.	people	can't go out and buy
or anything else. These the	people	of our country are absolutely
these millions and millions of	people	that are pouring into our
it's I believe 21 million	people	, not the 15 that people
people, not the 15 that	people	say, and I think it's
They're criminals. Many of these	people	coming in are criminals. And
to the states where the	people	could vote. And that's what
liberal. Much more liberal than	people	would have thought. But each
It's the vote of the	people	now. It's not tied up
the millions and millions of	people	that had to pay off
student loans. They taunted young	people	and a lot of other

A significant asymmetry has been identified in the usage of personal pronouns by Harris and Trump, particularly between *I/me, we/us* versus

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[1] The figures in brackets indicate the frequency of occurrence of the word(s) in Harris' or Trump's text respectively.

they/them, she/her, he/him. Donald Trump not only focused on his positive presentation but also sought to portray his opponents in a negative light, employing *they/them* at a considerably higher frequency than Harris did. Harris used the pronoun *you* relatively more taking into account the length of her speech, appealing to the television viewers in the absence of live audience.

Table 4: The usage of personal pronouns by Harris (KH) and Trump (DT)

	I	me	you	he	him	she	her	we	us	they	them
KH	129	6	85	53	9	4	9	98	17	10	7
DT	203	30	91	68	20	118	35	123	5	232	29

Furthermore, both transcripts were evaluated for positivity and negativity using Voyant Tools (Sinclair, Rockwell 2016). The results demonstrate that the speech acts of Donald Trump exhibit a markedly higher degree of negativity in comparison to the considerably more positive tone observed in the speech acts of Kamala Harris.
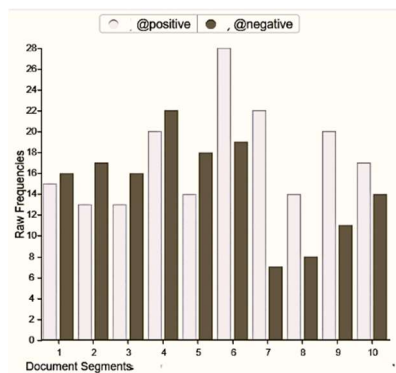
Figure 3: Tone in Harris' speech (created with voyant-tools.org)
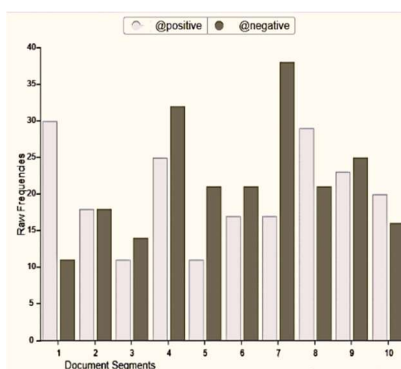
Figure 4: Tone in Trump's speech

It should be noted that raw frequency of negatively charged words in Trump's discourse are twice as high as in Harris'. The negativity is reflected in the way how the interlocutors address each other. Most often, Trump asserted that the policies of both Harris and Biden were *worst/worse* (7), *bad* (5), *horrible* (5), *weak* (5), and *incompetent* (4). In one instance he called Harris a *Marxist* three times: *She's a **Marxist**. Everybody knows she's a **Marxist**. Her father's a **Marxist** professor in economics. And he taught her well* (Hoffman 2024)*. When speaking about immigration, he used the same

strategy of repetition and used the term *border czar: She was the **border czar**. Remember that. She was the **border czar**. She doesn't want to be called the **border czar** because she's embarrassed by the border* (Ibid.).

Similarly, Harris employed a similar lexical set to Trump, denoting the subject as the *worst/worse* (4), *weak* (4), while also invoking the *criminal/crime* (3) in a single sentence: *Coming from someone who has been prosecuted for national security **crimes**, economic **crimes**, election interference, has been found liable for sexual assault and his next big court appearance is in November at his own **criminal** sentencing* (Ibid.). Indirectly, quoting his senior advisors, she also said: *His former national security adviser has said he is **dangerous** and **unfit*** (Ibid.).

On the other hand, when referring to their respective accomplishments, they both used extremely positive words, including one of Trump's favourite adjectives *great/greatest* (15): *We had the **greatest** economy. We got hit with a pandemic. And the pandemic was, not since 1917 where 100 million people died has there been anything like it? We did a **phenomenal** job with the pandemic* (Ibid.). In another place, when mentioning economic plans, Trump said: *… the top professors, think my plan is a **brilliant** plan, it's a **great** plan* (Ibid.). He also used a direct contrast between *me/us* versus *them: The polls say 80 and 85 and even 90% that the Trump economy was **great** that their economy was **terrible*** (Ibid.). There is also a tendency to use these adjectives in their superlative form: *People don't leave my rallies. We have **the biggest** rallies, **the most incredible** rallies in the history of politics* (Ibid.).

Harris employed such evaluative adjectives much more sparingly than Trump. She called Trump and his national security and foreign policy *weak* (4) *and wrong* (2) and also asserted: *Donald Trump left us the **worst** unemployment since the Great Depression. Donald Trump left us the **worst** public health epidemic in a century. Donald Trump left us the **worst** attack on our democracy since the Civil War. And what we have done is **clean up** Donald Trump's mess* (Ibid.). As evidenced by the previous example, she sought to differentiate their policies and personalities by outlining their respective actions: *Well, the former president had said that climate change is a **hoax**. And what we know is that it is **very real**. … We have **created** over 800,000 new manufacturing **jobs** while I have been vice president. We have **invested** in clean energy to the point that we are opening up factories around the world. Donald Trump said he was going to create manufacturing jobs. He **lost** manufacturing **jobs*** (Ibid.).

Both interlocutors were thus following one of the primary ideological strategies of political discourse, the ideological square, according to which *our* good things are emphasised, *our* bad things are minimised, *their* good things are minimised, and *their* bad things are emphasised (Van Dijk 2011).

Different types of rhetorical devices have been found in both transcripts, most often metaphors, hyperboles and three-part lists, but also metonymies and similes.

Harris said: … *you're going to hear from* **the same old, tired playbook**, *a bunch of lies, grievances and name-calling,* and she later repeated the identical phrase: … *the American people are exhausted with* **the same old tired playbook.** She also mentioned that *Trump's plan will* **explode** *the deficit*; *he invited* **trade wars; kill the bill;** *not everybody was handed $400 million on* **a silver platter;** *if that's a* **bridge too far** *for you; he said in this election there will be a* **bloodbath;** *if Donald Trump were back in the* **White House** *with no* **guardrails**; **red and blue states**, to name just a few examples (Hoffman 2024).

On the other hand, Donald Trump's text contains more hyperboles than Harris', especially when mentioning immigrants: **millions (and millions) of people** *pouring into our country* (Ibid.), but also when highlighting his successes and his opponent's failures: *I took in* **billions and billions** *of dollars from China; we did a phenomenal job…* **nobody's ever seen anything like it**; *we'll end up being Venezuela on steroids; I probably* **took a bullet to the head**; *we lost* **by a whisker**; *they're selling our country* **down the tubes**; *we have a* **nation that is dying**; *our country has gone to* **hell**; *they threw him* [Biden] *out of a campaign* **like a dog** (Ibid.).

The use of three-part lists was another rhetorical device abundantly used by both speakers, whether it was listing three things as in Harris' opening of the debate: *I believe in* **the ambition, the aspirations, the dreams** *of the American people* (Hoffman 2024); or Donald Trump repeating one phrase with minimal changes when replying to the question if he would veto a national abortion plan: **I have been a leader on IVF** *which is fertilization.* **The IVF — I have been a leader.** *In fact, when they got a very negative decision on IVF from the Alabama courts, I saw the people of Alabama and the legislature two days later voted it in.* **I've been a leader on it.** *They know that and everybody else knows it.* **I have been a leader on fertilization, IVF** (Ibid.). Similarly, parallelism was used in Trump's allegation that immigrants eat pets: *In Springfield,* **they're eating the dogs.** *The people that came in.* **They're eating the cats**. *They're eating —* **they're eating the pets** *of the people that live there* (Ibid.). Harris used the three-parts list twice when speaking about the 6th of January 2021 and the attack on the Capitol: *I say* **we don't have to go back. Let's not go back. We're not going back.** *It's time to turn the page. And if that was a bridge too far for you, well, there is a place in our campaign for you.* **To stand for country. To stand for our democracy. To stand for rule of law** (Ibid.). This figure of speech, which relies on repetition and

parallelism, is an effective tool especially in oral communication as it serves to emphasise the items in question and makes them more memorable.

Furthermore, primacy and recency rules were also applied by both candidates, at times incorporating three-parts lists. The recency effect may have been a contributing factor in Donald Trump's decision to have the final word of the entire debate, which was largely dedicated to criticising Harris and Biden's administration. This is evident in Trump's concluding statement during the debate: *The worst president, the worst vice president in the history of our country* (Ibid.)*.

Conclusion

The findings of the quantitative and qualitative analysis demonstrate how the two presidential nominees, Kamala Harris for the Democratic Party and Donald Trump for the Republican Party, employed various linguistic means and rhetoric strategies in their debate on 10 September 2024.

The utterances of Donald Trump were longer than those of Kamala Harris, yet his sentences and words were shorter. The shorter sentences may be perceived as communicating a sense of urgency and even fear, whereas longer speech acts could be associated with a sense of profundity and composure. The more complex words in Harris' speech point towards a greater degree of sophisticated verbal communication.

The lexicons of both candidates also exhibited some differences, as Harris focused more on addressing Americans and outlining her prospective actions, while Trump highlighted his accomplishments as the 45th President of the USA and criticised the current state of affairs in the country. These differences were reflected in the distinct ways in which personal pronouns were utilised, as well as in the more negative tone of Trump's speech in comparison to Harris'. Trump consistently used the third person singular (*she*) when addressing his opponent, which can be seen as a form of anonymisation or disrespect. Both speakers attacked each other with the adjectives *worst* and *weak*, although evaluative adjectives prevailed in Trump's discourse.

The presidential candidates attempted to persuade their audience and potential voters through the use of diverse rhetorical devices. Among these, three-part lists and metaphors were the most prevalent for both candidates, whereas hyperbole was a dominant feature of Donald Trump's rhetoric.

Limitations

The paper concentrated on a number of selected linguistic features of the sole presidential debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump. This topic can be subjected to further investigation from a variety of perspectives, including an analysis of the non-verbal communication of both candidates, a comprehensive discourse analysis, and comparative studies of this debate with previous presidential or vice-presidential debates. These studies could focus on potential changes in discourse, audience reception, and media coverage, including social media responses to this televised debate.

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