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Using Language Markers, and Hooray and Boo Words to Find Political Alliances in CNN and Fox News Articles

Introduction

Political language has the power to persuade and influence a listener's opinion on how to think about a political topic. This influence can be even greater when major news networks use political language to influence public opinion. Many Americans are aware the two major news networks in the country, CNN (Cable News Network) and Fox News Network, align with different political parties. CNN attracts a Democratic audience, and Fox News attracts a Republican audience. These two networks are supposedly unbiased, yet they attract audiences that follow the same political leaning as each network supposedly has. To find how each station uses political language, I proposed the following research question: How do CNN and Fox News use political language to align themselves with a particular social group or class, and how does each station use language to present a kind of dominant ideology? To answer this, I performed the method of hand coding on two news articles from CNN, one news article from Fox News, and one transcript from a panel on Fox News. I also performed a close linguistic analysis of each article's headline to look for the presence of ideology. The topic of all four news items was the Robert Muller investigation on the Russian interference during the 2016 presidential election. The dates of the articles ranged from February 17, 2018 to March 12, 2018. I hand coded and then compared the data from the two CNN articles against the two Fox News items, along with their respective headlines. The results showed Fox News using more political language and language markers than CNN. Fox News used language to make more of an effort to align

themselves with a specific kind of political group, and with a specific kind of political ideology. CNN did use some instances of political language, however their minute use of it did not yield as strong of a consensus as Fox News did for where their allegiance to a social group lies. The research begins with a discussion of relevant literature, followed by a discussion on the methods used. The discussion of the data considers how the viewers of these two news networks are influenced by the framing of political issues through language. The conclusion of this paper offers potential research questions that build off of the data from this article.

Review of Literature

Partisan Language

The word partisan is defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as both a noun and an adjective. Its use as an adjective is defined as, “feeling, showing, or deriving from strong and sometimes blind adherence to a particular party, faction, cause, or person.” Partisan language is an extension of showing partisanship; using words to favor a particular party, cause, or person. Using two American political news sources as my artifact for analysis, it is necessary to understand how partisan language gets used.

In Alan Partington’s and Charlotte Taylor’s book, *The Language of Persuasion in Politics*, they define a specific kind of partisan language; a set of words called hooray and boo words. They explain,

. . . Jamie Whyte coined the term ‘hooray’ word for a term which has a socially positive connotation and almost automatically arouses a sense of approval in an audience, and the term ‘boo’ word for one which, instead has a negative connotation and automatically arouses a sense of disapproval in the hearer. [29-30]

Partington and Taylor list a few common hooray words such as sustainable, fairness, and equal. Boo words are usually antonyms of hooray words, using the prefix *–un* or *–in*, making the words previous listed unsustainable, unfair, and inequality. They also explain how most boo words “. . . are highly sectarian, that is, they are boo words for one group but not for others.”[29-30] Finding sectarian hooray and boo words is important to my research because these words signal a partisan allegiance to a specific political group, depending if they are being used positively or negatively. If CNN and Fox News are supposed to be unbiased, then their news articles should not contain sectarian language.

Partisan Language Throughout American History

The use of partisan language by American politicians and government officials is not a new tactic. Partisan language in the current political context of 2018 however, has developed into two seemingly different languages. In Matthew Gentzkow, Jesse M. Shapiro, and Matt Taddy’s study of partisanship in congressional speeches from 1873 to 2016, they concluded that “. . . Democrats and Republicans now speak different languages to a far greater degree than ever before.” [25] The researchers used a combination of “tools from structural estimation and machine learning to study the partisanship of language in the US Congress from 1873 to 2016.”[2] One example of partisan language from 2015 to 2016 in their study was on the topic of public health. Republicans used the phrase “mental health” to discuss public health, while Democrats used the phrases “affordable care” and “planned parenthood” when discussing the same issue. From this example, both parties reference a variety of different issues, not simply public health. Another example from 2007 to 2008 was Republicans discussing “American energy” and “natural gas” when on the topic of energy policy, whereas Democrats discuss “oil companies” under the same topic. Again, both parties are talking about different issues when on

the same topic of energy policy. From both examples there is not one phrase both parties use when talking about the same Government Issue.

This study shows that partisan language continues to exist over time as a way to favor one political ideology over the other. It also highlights the continued growth of partisan language used by Democrats and Republicans. Gentzkow et al. concluded their study by suggesting further research on how partisan language and framing of political issues effect and influence public opinion on specific political issues. [19-20] This study relates to my research because I am also looking for the use of partisan language, but between two commonly known political news sources that influence public opinion on political topics. In analyzing news items from two popular news networks, I looked at how each used partisan language and language markers to signal allegiance to specific social and political groups, as well as to a specific kind of ideology. The following segment specifies the type of partisan language relevant to my research on political news articles.

Language Markers

Language markers are an element of socially constructed language. Language markers are elements other than speech that signal to the listener the kind of social allegiances the speaker has. A language marker can be a spoken convention, or something that is emblematic of a person's age, economic status, or region. In chapter two of Rosina Lippi-Green's book, *English With An Accent*, she defines what a language marker is from the perspective of a listener. She writes,

“What can be predicted is the fact that listeners will make assumptions about the speaker on the basis of language markers that signal alliance to certain social groups, primarily those having to do with race, ethnicity and economic factors.” [15]

She also defines language markers later in her book, writing,

“Language markers can be emblematic for dozens of different kinds of social allegiances. National origin, socioeconomic class, ethnicity, occupation, religion, occupation, kinship: all these things and many more might be signaled linguistically.” [40]

Spoken social conventions are another way to define language markers. Language markers, similar the hooray and boo words, can signal allegiance or belonging to a particular social group. These are necessary to look for in my research because as stated earlier, if these news networks are supposedly unbiased then there should not be any language markers present in the articles to mark belonging to a specific social group. However, the data I gathered disrupts the idea that these networks are supposedly unbiased.

Ideology

In Lippi-Green’s book, she gives her definition of ideology and standard language ideology (SLI) in the following quote,

. . . ideology is defined as: ‘the promotion of the needs and interests of a dominant group or class at the expense of marginalized groups, by means of disinformation and misrepresentation of those non-dominant groups. . . (SLI) is defined as ‘a bias towards an abstracted, idealized, homogenous spoken language which is imposed and maintained by dominant bloc institutions and which names its model the written language, but which is drawn primarily from the spoken language of the upper middle class. [67]

Politics are full of ideological values and belief systems, which is why I chose to look for the presence of any dominant or political ideologies in the articles I used. I found the presence of one visible political ideology in one of the networks.

Methods

Due to my research being an analysis of written articles, I could not listen for language markers. Instead, I read for them. While reading for the presence of language markers, and hooray and boo words, I highlighted the presence of each term through a system of hand coding.

Coding of Hooray and Boo Words

In Jenae Cohn's research article, "'Devilish Smartphones' and the 'Stone-Cold' Internet: Implications of the Technology Addiction Trope in College Student Digital Literacy Narrative", she used the method of coding to identify students' preferences for either embodied or virtual interaction from a sample of 75 digital literacy narratives. Cohn used coding to identify each student's preferred type of interaction, and I am using a similar method of coding to identify language markers, and hooray and boo words each news station used to signal allegiance to a particular social group.

In my first pass through each news item I used a pink highlighter to highlight all instances of language markers. During my second pass I used an orange highlighter to highlight all uses of hooray and boo words, and then used a pencil to mark them either "hooray" or "boo". I repeated this method three times to ensure no relevant words were missed. After hand coding each article, I inserted the data into Table 1, Coding Results, located in the Results section.

Due to the article headlines being relevant to their associated articles, I analyzed them as well. I did so by performing a close linguistic analysis. A close linguistic analysis is a method of analysis that looks for tone, phrasing, punctuation, and a potential interpretation in a given artifact. [Lippi-Green] Though all four news items are on the same topic of the Muller investigation on Russian interference, both news stations presented differing stances on the status of the investigation and the involvement of President Donald Trump based on the wording of their headlines, showing a partisan bias aligning with a kind of political ideology.

In order to find presence of a dominant ideology I looked for how language was used to signal to a kind of ideology, as well as took into consideration how the hooray and boo words were used to align with a political ideology.

Results

The hand coding process yielded a picture of how each network views the importance of the Muller investigation within the larger context of the government, and what allegiance they have to specific social and political groups. Table 1 below represents the hand coding data from all four news items, followed by Table 2, which represents the headlines, then followed by a discussion on how the data answers the research question.

Table 1

Hand Coding Results

Linguistic element	CNN Article #1	CNN Article #2	Fox News Article #1	Fox News Transcript
Language marker	0	0	“Grassroots”	“Folks”
Hooray word	0	0	“White House” x2	“White House”
Boo word	“White house”	0	0	“Washington” x3

The only data that shows what social group CNN aligns themselves with is their use of the phrase “White House”. “White House” gets used twice in the first article, the first time in context in the following sentence: “The White House sees little sign that Gates’ cooperation could pose any risk to the President”. In this sentence, “White House” is being used to reference those close to President Trump, and the President himself. Here, there is neither a positive or negative connotation, and therefor I did not categorize it as a hooray or boo word. The second time it is used in context in the following sentence: “The White House believes Muller is primarily interested in information Gates can provide about his long business history with

Manafort rather than activities related to the presidential campaign or transition”. By saying, “The White House believes”, CNN is interjecting the White House’s opinion on the purpose of the investigation. By interjecting the White House’s opinion by using the word “believes”, CNN is putting the “White House” in a less credible position. “White House” is being used to reference Trump’s inner circle, and Trump himself. By using “White House” instead of people’s specific names, CNN is grouping together those in close contact to the President located at the White House.

The absence of language markers and hooray words in the CNN articles suggests they did not overtly try to signal allegiance to a specific social group, or to a kind of dominant ideology. The only type of partisan language CNN used was the word “White House”. In their book, Partington and Taylor write,

“*Washington* is a boo word for many Republicans, as is *Wall Street* for many Democrats, both seen by the respective groups as acting against or at least ignoring the interests of ‘ordinary Americans’. . . What this shows us is that the connotation of many words and phrases can vary for different groups of people”. [30]

“Washington” holds a negative for most Republicans, and even more so recently because Trump frequently refers to Washington as “the swamp¹” creating even more vitriol and hatred for the word “Washington” among Republicans. The connotations for “White House” and “Washington” vary based on the political party that is using them. By using “White House believes” to deem the White House less credible, “White House” is being used with a negative connotation, and therefor used as a boo word by CNN.

The data from the Fox News items shows a more robust attempt to signal allegiance to a social group and ideology. In the Fox News article the word “grassroots” was used in the

following sentence: “Prosecutors accuse the Russians of communicating with a real U.S. person affiliated with a Texas-based grassroots organization.” “Grassroots” is being used as both an adjective and a language marker. It functions as an adjective because it describes the kind of political organization that was effected. It functions as a language marker because it signals the person affiliated as belonging to a specific group and region. By choosing to include the word “grassroots”, Fox News is emphasizing how small the effected organization was, and perhaps it being of less significance than if it were a large political organization that was affected by Russian interference. “Grassroots” is signaling to readers that this was a local, regionally located organization that was effected, and therefor not very important in relation to the Russian interference in the 2016 election, or the Muller investigation.

Fox News used what I concluded to be a Republican hooray word, “White House”, twice in their article. I explain later in this section why “White House” is used as a Republican hooray word. The first instance was in context of the following sentence: “The President ignored shouted questions from reporters as he departed the White House for Florida on Friday afternoon.” “White House” is being used to signal Trump’s presence at the White House. The second time it was used in context of the following sentence: “But in a statement released by the White House, Trump said ‘We cannot allow those seeking to sow confusion, discord, and rancor to be successful.’” Here, “White House” is used as a hooray word to signal authority to what Trump said in his statement in response to the indictment of the thirteen Russians who interfered in the presidential election.

What is striking from this data in the Fox News article is that both times “White House” is used, it used Trump’s name in the same sentence. In doing so, Fox News is creating closeness between the “White House” and President Trump. Creating this closeness signals to the reader

that there is a relationship between the White House as a part of the government, and Trump as the current President.

The Fox News transcript contained the language marker “folks” spoken by one of the panelists in the following sentence: “We have interviewed all of the folks we need to.” “Folks” is used as a language marker to signal allegiance to a socioeconomic class that would be familiar with this term, most likely middle or working class citizens. “Folks” is also a language marker of age because it is more typically spoken by older age groups, and is not a word commonly used by younger age groups to describe a group of people. The panelist could have said “suspects”, “persons of interest”, or “people”, but instead chose to say the word “folks”. “Folks” marks a group of people as informal and non-threatening. This creates a less worry-some tone to viewers about the people being interviewed by Robert Muller and the House Intelligence Committee.

The transcript uses one Republican hooray word, “White House”. “White House” gets used in context of the following sentence: “I’m going to call the buzzer on this one because we do want to get on to the school violence policy, the school safety policy that the White House came out with yesterday”. “White House” is used here to reference a school safety proposal created in response to the Parkland, Florida school shooting in February. By saying “the White House came out with [the school violence policy] yesterday” it sounds like they are taking a stance against school violence, when in reality this is a proposal to end school violence without restricting gun control. By saying “the White House came out with [a proposal] yesterday” for school violence, instead of saying for gun control in schools, the Fox News panelists are adhering to a Republican agenda that views gun control and guns themselves should not be up for debate.

The transcript uses the Republican boo word “Washington” three times. The first time it is used in the following sentence: “But almost all of this is the general Washington consensus at this point”. Here, this panelist is attempting to discredit the idea the Russians were trying make Trump the winning presidential candidate, brushing it off as “general Washington consensus”. The second and third time it is spoken in two sentences back to back by the same panelist: “That’s not part of the Washington consensus. That’s not even remotely part of the Washington consensus”. Here, the panelist is defending his position that Trump is not a traitor because the House Intelligence Committee found no evidence of collusion in his campaign. The panelist uses the word “Washington” all three times to reference political entities existing separately from the White House and President Trump.

The accompanying element to all articles was their headlines. The following table contains all four headlines.

Table 2

Article Headlines

CNN	Fox News
“Robert Mueller just made it impossible for Trump to call the special counsel probe a ‘total hoax’”	“13 Russian Nationals indicted for interfering in US elections”
“A top Trump campaign advisor close to plea deal with Mueller”	“Case Closed? House Intel Committee ends collusion probe”

Table 2 shows the discrepancy in word choice made between the news stations. CNN chose to directly refer to Trump in connection to the Muller investigation in both of their headlines, while Fox News did the opposite. Fox News made no mention of Trump or Muller in either of their headlines, effectively distancing Trump from the Muller investigation, as well as signaling to their viewers that Trump is not a part of the investigation. Fox News even poses the

question “Case Closed?” in the headline for the transcript, suggesting the Muller investigation should be coming to an end. The two news stations’ headlines read as two different takes on the same subject of the Muller investigation and indictment of the thirteen Russians, showing a partisan bias on the same topic.

The data from the articles and headlines answer my research question of, how do CNN and Fox News use political language to align themselves with a particular social group or class, and how does each station use language to present a kind of dominant ideology, to varying degrees. I will start with CNN, and then discuss Fox News.

From the CNN data, they used “White House” as a boo word to refer to those in Trump’s inner circle at the White House and Trump himself speculating about the Muller investigation. CNN used no language markers or hooray words in either article. CNN’s headlines used Trump’s name in relation to the Muller investigation. Due to the Russian meddling in the 2016 presidential election holding a negative cultural and political connotation, their use of Trump’s name in relation to the Russia investigation casts a negative connotation onto his name as well. By doing this, CNN is presenting a political ideology that Trump should be associated with this meddling investigation. Overall, CNN is aligning themselves with other groups who believe Trump is relevant to the Muller investigation, however their lack of language markers and hooray words does not signal allegiance to a definitive political group.

The Fox News data shows a more deliberate attempt to signal allegiance to a specific group and political ideological stance. Out of the two language markers, “folks” is the more definitive language marker to mark the speaker as belonging to a specific social group. By using “folks”, the panelist is making himself seem more informal, and by calling those being interviewed by Muller and the House Intelligence Committee “folks”, is making them sound less

threatening and perhaps harmless. Fox News used language to appeal to viewers who know what the term “grassroots” means and are familiar with the word “folks” used to describe a group of people. Their use of “Washington” as a Republican boo word, as stated by Partington and Taylor, signals Fox’s political alignment with the Republican Party, and to a Republican political ideology. Due to “Washington” being a boo word, “White House” holds a positive connotation as a Republican hooray word, especially since Trump is a Republican President. Fox News respects the position of Trump as a Republican President by not using his name in their headlines that mention the Russia investigation, which holds a culturally and politically negative connotation.

Although both of these news stations are supposedly unbiased, they were both found to have used some linguistic elements that aligned themselves with specific social groups, and a kind of ideology.

Discussion

The results of the hand coding and the close linguistic analysis matter to CNN’s and Fox News’ audiences because they exemplify how each station chose to frame the Muller investigation, the indictment of the thirteen Russians, and the president, thereby influencing how the viewers should perceive these topics. If viewers were made aware of how political language was being used to frame how news stories get reported, then perhaps viewers would reconsider watching those news stations that heavily manipulate the news through word choice. If viewers were also made aware of how everyday social language is used to send a particular message, then viewers might chose to agree or disagree with how news networks frame their version of the news.

The results of my research relate to Matthew Gentzkow's et al. article on partisan language because my results build off of their conclusion, where they suggest more research should be conducted to find how partisan language influences public opinion. My research studied a type of partisan language used by two major American news networks that influence public opinion. The networks' influence on public opinion gets spread even further when both stations' articles get shared and circulated around the internet on popular social media sites like Facebook and Twitter. The finding of the word "Washington" used by Fox as a boo word relates to Partington and Taylor's book because this exact example was used in their book. This was an unexpected find but reinforced the use of the term as a boo word.

Another important aspect to consider is that both stations use language to reinforce the viewers' beliefs and values. By using certain hooray and boo words, the stations are reinforcing a value system that their viewers may already adhere to. When Fox News uses "Washington" to discredit those outside of the "White House", they are reinforcing to their viewers that "Washington" is untrustworthy, and are adhering to a specific set of socially constructed values and opinions. When CNN says, "the White House believes", they are reinforcing that those in the "White House" are speculating and are perhaps less credible. If a viewer of CNN thinks that the White House is not credible, then by seeing CNN say that the White House is speculating about something, they are reinforcing that viewer's belief of the White House being not credible.

Conclusion

The first potential research opportunity from this data would be to expand the date range of articles from both CNN and Fox News to get a bigger sample size to code, and therefor may lead to finding more data.

A second research opportunity would be to analyze only the article headlines from one or both news stations. Something as small as a headline is crafted through deliberate choices to signal allegiance to a social group, adhere to a kind of political ideology, or to frame a person in a certain way.

Lippi-Green writes in her book, “Ideology cannot be abstracted away; no one can suspend the way they think about language from the process of interpreting language”. [71] Although these news stations are supposedly unbiased, they cannot totally separate their beliefs and value systems from how they use language, leaving some kind of interpretation to be made by their viewers.

Note

1) Tweets written by President Donald Trump in which he used the phrase “drain the swamp”, the hashtag “#DrainTheSwamp”, or “DTS” to refer to supposedly corrupt entities such as Washington and the press, listed in descending order by date.

@realdonaldtrump. “I recently had a terrific meeting with a bipartisan group of freshman lawmakers who feel very strongly in favor of Congressional term limits. I gave them my full support and endorsement for their efforts. #DrainTheSwamp.” 4 Apr. 2018, twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/991028027785138177.

@realdonaldtrump. “As the House Intelligence Committee has concluded, there was no collusion between Russia and the Trump Campaign. As many are now finding out, however, there was tremendous leaking, lying and corruption at the highest levels of the FBI, Justice & State. #DrainTheSwamp.” 17 March. 2018, twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/975057131136274432.

@realdonaldtrump. “According to the @nytimes, a Russian sold phony secrets on “Trump” to the U.S. Asking price was \$10 million, brought down to \$1 million to be paid over time. I hope people are now seeing & understanding what is going on here. It is all now starting to come out - DRAIN THE SWAMP!.” 2 Oct. 2018 twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/962345433170415616.

@realdonaldtrump. “Drain the Swamp should be changed to Drain the Sewer- it’s actually much worse than anyone ever thought, and it begins with Fake News!.” 24 July. 2017, twitter.com/realdonaldtrump/status/889435104841523201?lang=en.

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