Scorekeeping With Donald Trump in a COVID-19 Language Game

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During times of widespread fear, uncertainty, and panic civilians look most to their leaders for guidance and reassurance. As a result, the words of leaders are trusted, amplified, and weaponized. When a population is deprived of certainty, such as in the midst of the current coronavirus/COVID-19 pandemic, its constituents are more inclined to take unsubstantiated propositions as facts, and opinions as knowledge. Regardless of their commitment to the truth or ignorance of it, leaders become an authoritative source of information in the eyes of their adherents. For the duration of the chaos, they wield the power to forge truth by asserting it. In the case of COVID-19, U.S. President Donald Trump has used this power to divisive ends, creating heroes and villains by simply identifying them. Consequently, at a time in which many Americans are especially inclined to treat his words as gospel, the victims of his baseless accusations face frightening repercussions.

Authority of presidential speech

With the utterance of a few words, the president has the absolute power to veto legislation, wage war, pardon convicted criminals, and issue executive orders. Beyond absolute and regulated powers, the president is also the face of the country, and is traditionally regarded as the leader of the free world. In times of crisis, the president is tasked with bringing the country back to its feet: to produce words of reassurance, and institute policies that remedy disasters. The edifice of American government and the nature of human uncertainty enhance the social power of the president in times like these. When the banking crisis rocked the nation in 1933, Roosevelt took to the radio waves to deliver his first fireside chat. When the Soviets threatened nuclear attack in 1962, Kennedy televised a promise of retaliation. When the Twin Towers came under siege in 2001, Bush spoke to millions of Americans to remind them that the terrorists had not won.[1] History has illustrated that when presidents speak during times of tremendous uncertainty, the people listen. Fueled by fear, anxiety, and oftentimes anger, they are desperate for someone to lead them. The word of a president to such an audience at such a time thus carries immense authority.

A speaker requires authority to effectively communicate information. In *Scorekeeping in a Language Game*, David Lewis outlines a framework of communication analogous to a competitive scoreboard. On the scoreboard of any given conversation, there are a set of rules, a current score, and a set of possible moves. For example, in a conversation between a master and a slave, a master can tell the slave that he is no longer permitted to enter a certain designated space.[2] Because of the master's authority over the slave, that speech-act successfully changes the scoreboard, and the slave is, in fact, no longer permitted to enter that space. However, if the slave were to tell the master that he cannot do a certain thing, the scoreboard does not change, because he lacks the authority to change it. The conversation is also governed by rules of accommodation, by which the scoreboard automatically updates when new information is introduced. For example, if you are conversing with a stranger and they mention that their spouse just got a new job, then the scoreboard instantly updates to include the presupposition that they are married, before it can process that their spouse is newly employed. This person's authority to change the scoreboard comes from the fact that you have no reason to doubt them.

When a president engages the American people in a conversation – be it through a press conference, social media post, or formal address – the scoreboard of the national conversation changes. Information is added, revised, or

deleted, and the conversational score reflects any accommodations made. A country that was once a sworn enemy can become an ally; a commitment to an environmental or political cause can be dissolved; national priorities can be drastically reordered. The president certainly possesses the authority to change the scoreboard at any point in his term, but especially during times of crisis, in which the American public looks desperately to the government for guidance.

Embedding prejudice into presupposition

It is no secret that certain propositions are more socially acceptable than others. When in the privacy of our own homes, conversing with trusted, like-minded friends and family, we are able to speak rather freely, without fear of backlash or judgment. However, this is not the nature of political discourse. When politicians speak, they do so in front of large, heterogeneous audiences, each faction of which is charged with a distinct set of beliefs from the next. As a result, political speech becomes a game of using the same words to appease different audiences.

The president, above all else, is a politician traditionally held to the highest of standards. He is obligated to support the explicitly moral choice in any situation, and fight against what one would uncontroversially deem immoral. However, it is not uncommon for a president to believe in something that is not necessarily considered moral or socially acceptable. The president must then figure out a way to convey his opinions to a sympathetic audience without explicitly stating them. There are two primary avenues to accomplishing this goal. The first is through dog-whistling, a practice in which a secret message is stored within a seemingly innocuous proposition, but is only accessible to the desired audiences. For example, in his 2000 campaign, Bush consistently reinforced his opposition to the Supreme Court's *Dred Scott v. Sanford* decision. Liberals agreed with the obvious stance, while conservatives understood that he was also subtly voicing his opposition to *Roe v. Wade*, a case to which *Dred Scott v. Sanford* had often been compared in conservative circles.[3]

The second, more improvisable method of conveying controversial opinions in public discourse is through embedding them into presuppositions. Presupposing a controversial piece of information protects it from immediate criticism. Take the controversial proposition: "Hillary Clinton is a criminal." If you were to voice that proposition outright, it would be easy to refute. All one would have to say is "No, that isn't true," and your proposition has been denied. However, if you were to embed that proposition as a presupposition in a greater clause, it becomes harder to refute. Consider, instead, the following proposition: "The crimes of Hillary Clinton are an insult to this country." A critic's "No, that isn't true" does not have the same effect of denying the claim that Clinton is a criminal. All it denies is the notion that Clinton's crimes are an insult to this country. Because a proposition and its negation share the same presupposition,[4] the presupposition is protected when the proposition comes under attack. Of course, an adamant opponent could simply say, "Hillary Clinton did not commit any crimes," but this would be a regressive, illogical step in the conversation, as it does not deny your proposition that Clinton's crimes are an insult to the country.

Presupposition is an especially powerful tool when implemented in group discourse. When there are more than two participants sharing the same conversational scoreboard, a proposition not only conveys its presupposed elements, but also communicates that everyone is already aware of the presupposed elements. If a speaker were to say, "The crimes of Hillary Clinton are an insult to this country" at a campaign rally, it would be implied that each person at the rally already knew that Clinton was a criminal. To reject the presupposition is therefore to contradict what is agreed upon by an entire audience of people.[5] In the case of rejecting a president's speech, it is to go against a country.

Insinuations of Trump's "Chinese virus"

"I always treated the Chinese Virus very seriously, and have done a very good job from the beginning…" Donald Trump (March 18, 2020). In mid-March of 2020, President Trump began referring to the coronavirus as "the Chinese virus."[6] Such a term epitomizes the strategy of embedding controversial propositions into the presuppositions of greater clauses to elude criticism. He would not have dared to say something like, "The Chinese are responsible for the virus," or "The virus is spread by the Chinese," because these propositions would be blatantly racist and vulnerable to backlash. However, he is able to get across such sentiments to a receptive audience by shielding "the Chinese virus," which presupposes those controversial notions, within larger statements.

The term's ability to suggest a diverse range of propositions comes from its status as a compound noun. Compound nouns, as an open semantic class, allow for a certain degree of ambiguity. Consider, for example, the compound noun, "pizza table." Lacking context, a listener might take this phrase to mean "a table for pizza," "a table made of pizza," "a pizza shaped like a table," or "a miniature table included on top of a pizza." In political rhetoric, such ambiguity is strategic in that it gives listeners the freedom to interpret controversial phrases as they wish. In employing the amorphous compound noun "Chinese virus," Trump deliberately allows for a spectrum of interpretations – some neutral, some harmful. Crucially, the term does not disambiguate "the virus developed in China" from "the virus developed by the Chinese," nor does it specify in what way the Chinese are implicated. The "Chinese" designation extends beyond an alleged group of biologists in a Wuhan lab, and beyond the Chinese government; it refers to all individuals of Chinese heritage.

Some of the most salient insinuations of the term include:

(1) Chinese people are responsible for the origination and spread of the virus.
(2) Chinese people are more likely to be carriers of the virus.
(3) Individuals of Chinese origin are distinct from American citizens.

None of these propositions are explicit in Trump's use of the term, and that is precisely why he is able to wield it so freely. They are all cancellable, such that if someone were to criticize them, he could plausibly deny he expressed them in the first place.

When asked to justify his use of the term, Trump has claimed that the virus is Chinese because it originated in Wuhan, China.[7] While it is indeed "from" China, Trump willfully fails to acknowledge the imputations associated with calling it "Chinese." Labeling something as "Chinese" does not only mean it was "spawned in China." To call something "Chinese," or "Mexican," or "Thai," or "Bolivian," for that matter, associates the subsequent noun with the ethnic property of being Chinese, or Mexican, or Thai, or Bolivian –– that is, the noun becomes tied to the country's national and cultural origins. A "Mexican woman" is a woman who is ethnically Mexican. "Thai food" is food that traces its origins to Thai culinary roots. "Bolivian dance" is the style of dance performed at traditional Bolivian festivities. Accordingly, it feels strange to assign the adjective "Chinese" to a virus, when it is impossible for a virus to have an ethnic background. The assignment of an ethnicity to a dangerous, inhuman entity turns the otherwise unifying conflict of a global pandemic into an internal one.

Describing a virus with more specific language than simply "the virus" is certainly necessary. However, the flagrant prejudice in Trump's use of the term "the Chinese virus" is evidenced by his choice to replace the scientific community's term with an ethnically-focused one.[8] The world was not struggling to determine what adjective to pair "virus" with when Trump settled on "Chinese"; it was already called the "coronavirus," or "COVID-19." Choosing to repeat the term, even after being informed of its offensive nature, actively groups the two entities together. The reiteration of the term conditions American citizens to associate "Chinese" with "virus," and thus to associate all that comes with the virus with the Chinese. When a speaker of authority suggests a relationship between a disaster and a group of people, those people inevitably fall victim to unwarranted blame and punishment.

"The Chinese virus" is a rhetorical weapon in that it operates much like a slur, requiring a listener to indulge in the speaker's prejudiced perspective in order to grasp it. Upon hearing the term, a listener enters the speaker's intuitive thinking style,[9] recognizing "Chinese" as the primary descriptor of the virus. Even those who do not respect Trump's rhetoric must acknowledge that anyone of Chinese origin falls into the category of those associated with the term. And while they refuse to accept the aspersions of Chinese villainy and accountability that come with the term, there is a certain cognitive complicity in their brief adoption of the speaker's perspective. That is, the more an individual hears "the Chinese virus," the more time he or she spends indulging the notion that "Chinese" is classificatorily useful in describing the virus. Over a sustained period of time, this sort of language has a persuasive, perspective-shifting effect, even on those who do not agree with it at first.

Another insinuation of "the Chinese virus" is the notion that American citizens of Chinese origin are distinct from the rest of American citizens. The rhetoric is reminiscent of that of the America First period, during which the Asian

Exclusion Act of 1924 banned the naturalization of Asian immigrants.[10] In 2016, the America First slogan was reappropriated by Trump, and the values of unilateralism, protectionism, and isolationism[11] were reprioritized. When a vehemently nationalist president then refers to a virus crippling the nation as "Chinese," Chinese-Americans are made to feel like enemies of the state, divorced from their status as Americans. When they watch their president on television, they feel as though his words are not meant for them, and thus they are stripped of an intrinsic part of their identity. They must adapt to the dangers of living in a country in which they are considered the "other," unjustifiably associated with a virus responsible for the deaths of over 60,000 of its citizens.

At this point, the prejudiced insinuations of the term are effectively uncancellable. Because Trump has been consistently admonished by liberal news outlets throughout his presidency, his supporters sympathize with his frustration toward the media. In fact, they largely accept his claim that the media is his enemy, and a proponent of unjust scrutiny.[12] Consequently, any attempts on his part to publicly cancel the term's negative connotations will be dismissed by his supporters as measures to placate the media.

COVID-related discrimination against Asian-Americans

In her study of the Rwandan genocide of 1994, Lynne Tirrell analyzed "how patterns of speech acts become linguistic practices that constitute permissibility conditions for non-linguistic behaviors."[13] While the rhetoric employed by the Hutu government in the 1990s was much more forceful than Trump's today, parallels can be drawn insofar as both patterns of speech-acts incited domestic acts of violence. In recent weeks, perceptions of Chinese guilt and alterity encouraged by Trump's rhetoric have festered into hostility. Asian-Americans have been the victims of a horrific spike in hate crimes, ranging from incidents of verbal abuse to acts of biological terrorism.

In associating individuals of a certain ethnic group with a dangerous problem, Trump renders a population of innocents vulnerable to the whims of an angry, grieving society. He is therefore in part accountable for the attacks that have since ensued across the country, totaling nearly 1,500 counts of discrimination against Asian-Americans over the course of one month.[14] Primarily in places of business, public parks, and public transit, thousands of Asian-Americans have endured being cursed at, beaten, and coughed at for their alleged association with the virus. As only 37% of the reports targeted Chinese victims, it is evident that this harassment affects many other Asian-Americans groups as well, including those of Korean, Vietnamese, and Japanese descent. While these bigoted acts cannot be traced directly to Trump's rhetoric, it is safe to say that a president's words in a time of national crisis are strong enough to license action.

Conclusion

When the citizens of countries in crisis find themselves in need of a guiding voice, they listen to their government leaders, and thus the propositions expressed by those leaders take on a new gravity.[15] Perhaps even more powerful than those propositions, however, are the presuppositions embedded within them, which carry the same weight as the propositions but are protected from the same degree of scrutiny. President Trump's frequent reference to COVID-19 as "the Chinese virus" inflicts serious harm unto those of Chinese ethnicity, as it presupposes their blame in spreading the virus, as well as their otherness in the context of American society.

Without launching any explicit accusations, Trump subliminally reinforces these notions by embedding "the Chinese virus" in his propositions. While the insinuations of the term are unspoken, his nationalist background and ambiguous rhetoric certainly allow for prejudiced interpretation. His targeted, xenophobic language has since been weaponized against the Asian-American population, subjecting them to public abuse and humiliation, and forcing them to reconsider their American identity. During an unprecedented crisis in which the entirety of the human population is faced with a common enemy, it is disheartening to see a global leader use his heightened authority to such divisive ends.

Notes

[1] Reaction to 9/11. 2010. url: http://www.history.com/topics/21st-century/reaction-to-9-11, p. 3.

[2] David Lewis. “Scorekeeping in a Language Game”. In: Philosophical Papers Volume I (1983), pp. 233– 249. doi: 10.1093/0195032047.003.0013, p. 4.

[3] Jennifer Saul. “Dogwhistles, Political Manipulation, and Philosophy of Language”. In: Oxford Scholar- ship Online (2018). doi: 10.1093/oso/9780198738831.003.0013, p. 5.

[4] Robert C. Stalnaker. “Pragmatic Presuppositions”. In: Context and Content (1999), pp. 47–62. doi: 10.1093/0198237073.003.0003, p. 6.

[5] Rae Langton. “Scorekeeping in a Pornographic Language Game”. In: Sexual Solipsism (2009), pp. 173– 196. doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199247066.003.0009, p. 7.

[6] These quotes show how Trump’s response to the coronavirus has changed over time. 2020. url: http://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/politics/trump-coronavirus-statements/, p. 8.

[7] Trump defends calling coronavirus the ’Chinese virus’. url: http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/ newsfeed/2020/03/trump-defends-calling-coronavirus-chinese-virus-200323102618665.html, p. 10.

[8] Hugh Gusterson et al. What’s Wrong With ”the Chinese Virus”? 2017. url: http://www.sapiens. org/column/conflicted/coronavirus-name/, p. 11.

[9] Elisabeth Camp. “Slurring Perspectives”. In: Analytic Philosophy 54.3 (2013), pp. 330–349. doi: 10.1111/phib.12022, p. 12.

[10] Edward Bing Kan: The First Chinese-American Naturalized after Repeal of Chinese Exclusion. 2013. url: http://www.uscis.gov/history-and-genealogy/featured-stories-uscis-history-office-and- library/edward-bing-kan-first-chinese-american-naturalized-after-repeal-chinese-exclusion#1, p. 13.

[11] America First Foreign Policy. url: web.archive.org/web/20170224011956/www.whitehouse.gov/ america-first-foreign-policy, p. 14.

[12] Jeffrey Gottfried et al. Trusting the News Media in the Trump Era. 2019. url: http://www.journalism. org/2019/12/12/trusting-the-news-media-in-the-trump-era/, p. 15.

[13] Tirrell Lynne. “Genocidal Language Games1”. In: Speech and Harm (2012), pp. 174–221. doi: 10.

1093/acprof:oso/9780199236282.003.0008, p. 16.

[14] Russell Jeung and Kai Nham. “Incidents of Coronavirus-Related Discrimination”. In: San Francisco State University Asian American Studies (2020). url: www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/ wp-content/uploads/STOP_AAPI_HATE_MONTHLY_REPORT_4_23_20.pdf, p. 17.

[15] Nicolás Ajzenman, Tiago Cavalcanti, and Daniel Da Mata. “More Than Words: Leaders’ Speech and Risky Behavior during a Pandemic”. In: SSRN Electronic Journal (2020). doi: 10.2139/ssrn.3582908, p. 18.

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