Deconstructing the Narrative: Analysing Cable News' Lexical Choices and their Representation of Leadership during the 2020 U.S. Presidential Election

"If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought" (Orwell, 2015).

Figure 1, New York Magazine, 2020

Figure 5, CNN, 2020

1. Introduction.

- As Fairclough (1995, cited in Giles, 2009, p.212) argued, choice of words is not accidental; discourse is built from a series of optional terms and expressions within a given vocabulary or grammar.
- This investigation will direct its research towards studying how cable news broadcasting used lexical choices to represent/portray leadership during the 2020 U.S. presidential election period.

2. Research Questions. – to investigate...

1. how cable news networks incorporate lexical choice patterns into their broadcasting to support governmental leaders whose political values align with their own.
2. if cable news broadcasts differ in their lexical representations of leadership due to their contextual impacts.
3. how the leadership qualities of political candidates are represented in cable news broadcasting through lexical choice.

4. Possessive Collocates.

- Most frequent R1 collocation to 'Trump' and 'Biden' in each main corpus is the inflectional suffix, '-s.'
- CNN: most frequent 'Trump + s' R3 collocates = "*handling, claim, attacks, incompetence.*"
- FOX: most frequent 'Trump + s' R3 collocates = "*America, leadership, team, accomplishments.*"
- BOTH: most frequent 'Biden + s' R3 collocates = "*plan, campaign, running.*"

5a. Does the context of news affect how leaders are referred to?

5b. CNN's L1 Naming of 'Trump' in 2020 Contextual Events

3.2. Methodology.

- To analyse and address the limitations of dealing with two sizeable corpora, a combination of computational and manual methods was employed (Angouri, 2010, p.30).
- Corpus-based CDA approach:
- *Quantitative Data*: studying the frequencies and patterns of lexical keywords, n-grams and collocates via *AntConc* (2022).
- *Qualitative Data*: comparing my own interpretations of leadership and presidential qualities with cable news' representation(s).
  - CDA applied to individual transcripts, used to analyse persuasive techniques, i.e., syntactic structure, modality, naming via *LFM* (Woolls, 2021).
    - (CDA also applied to Oct 22 Final Debate Transcript)

3.1. Data Collection.

- Broadcast transcripts taken from CNN and Fox News via Nexis.com.
- Data collected between timeframe: 01.01.2020 → 03.11.2020 (election day).
- Transcripts to be compiled into 2 Corpora (CNN & Fox).
- Each corpus covers 5 significant 2020 events/sub-corpora:
- Donald Trump's 2nd Impeachment
- COVID-19
- 'Black Lives Matter'
- Climate Change
- Final Presidential Debate
- 40 transcripts gathered for each contextual event (CNN:20, Fox:20).
- CNN corpus: 547486 tokens.
- Fox News corpus: 801000 tokens.

(Transcript of Final Debate also used)

Figure 2, CNN, 2023

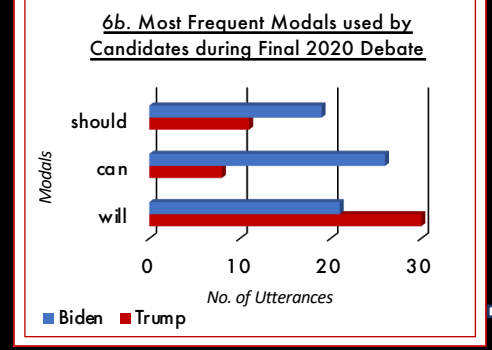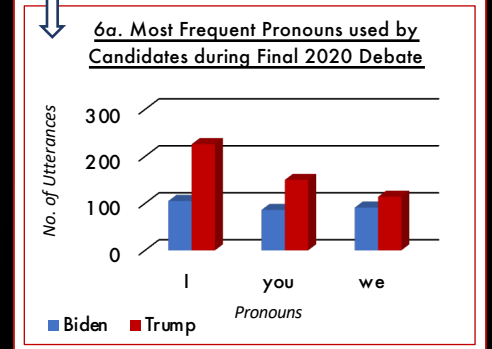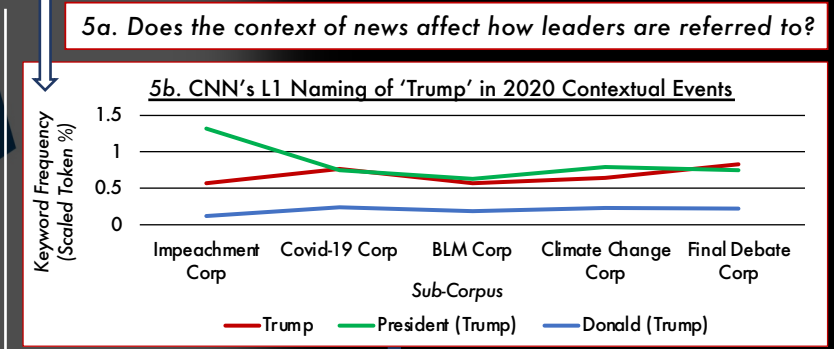**Figure 3, Backdrop Express, 2023**

Figure 4, Fox News, 2023

7. Preliminary Findings.

✓ Possessive's: CNN coverage suggests Trump's insufficient leadership, as Biden actively prepares to supersede. In contrast, FOX collocates imply that Trump already has strength and control over America. Consequently, despite collocates of 'Biden + s' being the same as CNN's, this instead conveys the idea that Biden still has to fight for it.

✓ In the Impeach sub-corpus, 'President' is more frequent than 'Trump,' indicating that CNN may have used a more formal tone for the impeachment proceedings. On the other hand, in Covid-19 sub-corpus, 'Trump' is more frequent than 'President,' suggesting that CNN may have focused more on Trump's actions and decisions during the pandemic rather than his position as president.

✓ Coverage of the final debate contradicts my findings, which imply Trump's confidence, Trump's personal approach, and Biden's collectiveness, in accordance to their network's political affiliations (CNN contradicts Trump's qualities, and FOX contradicts Biden's).

❖ *Further Research*: To study these findings in the context of their sentence/discourse.

6a. Most Frequent Pronouns used by Candidates during Final 2020 Debate

6b. Most Frequent Modals used by Candidates during Final 2020 Debate

6c. Leadership Qualities.

- Pronoun quantities and discourse contexts suggest that Trump's leadership approach is more self-centred and personal, whilst Biden's is more collective.
- Modal verbs imply that Trump is more confident with his statements (will:30), Biden is more flexible with his (can:26), and Biden may also indicate more sense towards duty and obligation (should:19) regarding his leadership actions.
- CNN Debate sub-corpus however follows most '*Trump is...*' 3-grams with *trying, irrelevant, confused.* '*Biden is...*' 3-grams = *leading, pushing, overperforming.*
- FOX Debate sub-corpus follows most '*Trump is...*' 3-grams with *competing, confident, blitzing.* '*Biden is...*' 3-grams – *trying, corrupt, disqualified.*

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