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THE MULTIMODAL ANALYSIS OF ONLINE IDENTITY. THE CASE OF BORIS JOHNSON

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Abstract:

This paper aims to study how Boris Johnson, the current Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, is gaining popularity through his online discourse, by simplifying and distorting the implications of the coronavirus epidemic and the 2016 EU referendum. It utilizes a qualitative analysis of Johnson's online presence to explain how his digital discourse appeals to an identity-focused electorate while ignoring policies. The text reviews academic works on conceptual metaphors, populist discourse, and the construction of threat through political discourse. Analyzed authentic examples include Johnson's statements on Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and his apologies during the "Partygate" controversy. The findings show that Johnson uses vagueness, magniloquence, humor, and war metaphors to divert public attention from his lack of clear policies. In conclusion, while these strategies have contributed to his popularity, Johnson now faces political challenges, and his discourse style is criticized for its superficiality and detachment from reality.

1. Introduction

The appeal of political polarisation manifests itself under conditions of societal instability. Issues such as the aftermath of Brexit and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic have rapidly implanted a sense of uncertainty among British voters. Vulnerability not only shapes political preferences, but it also points voters in the direction of populist political discourse.

The purpose of this research paper is to examine the ways in which Boris Johnson, current prime minister of the United Kingdom, continues to gain popularity through his (online) discourse, which contains a dangerous oversimplification and distortion of the implications of the coronavirus epidemic and of the 2016 EU referendum.

A qualitative analysis of Johnson’s online presence will attempt to explain how his digital discourse appeals to an electorate that prioritises identity, while ignoring the focus on policy. The secondary aim of the study is to provide authentic samples of discourse in order to

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illustrate the way in which Johnson deliberately uses vagueness, magniloquence and humour in an attempt to camouflage crass incompetence and a lack of concern for the general public.

2. Literature Review

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's 1980 *Metaphors We Live By* is considered a touchstone of Conceptual Metaphor Theory, and it constitutes an immersion into the salient processes which produce conceptual metaphors. Its publication solidified the link between linguistics and cognitive theory. The present study aims to analyse Johnson's pandemic discourse through the lens of Lakoff and Johnson's taxonomy of metaphors. Therefore, Johnson's use of war metaphors as persuasive devices is examined in order to reinforce the premise that the public's understanding of the pandemic threat is best achieved through concrete representations rather than through abstract narratives.

In order to better understand the characteristics of populist speech I relied on Elena Block and Ralph Negrine's 2017 study entitled "The Populist Communication Style: Toward a Critical Framework" which is centred on "the lure of those who are abrasive" that must not be overlooked (178). The study provides not only an outline of the principal features of populism, but also discusses ties between populist discourse and the media.

Dr. El Shazly's cognitive study on the construction of threat through discourse tackles ways in which political interpretations of threat are meant to serve as tools for manipulating the public into accepting unlawful policies (290). It contains a case study of PM Johnson's discursive strategy used to warrant the March 2020 lockdowns, and it allowed me to better understand the use of war metaphors in threat proximization.

3. Initial Hypotheses

The initial hypothesis of the current research paper is that Boris Johnson's former political success and growing popularity are directly linked to his carefully-crafted cyberspace persona. The secondary theory put forth in this study is centred on populist discourse and its growing popularity among right-wing politicians of the Western world.

4. Methodology

My analysis relies on primary data collected from Twitter users. I have interpreted the data by subjectively observing Boris Johnson's presence on Twitter during the period between December 2020 and January 2022. Samples from the comment section of each tweet were also chosen in order to interpret the various ways in which the Prime Minister's online presence has been perceived by netizens. My approach is based on studying meaning produced through multiple modes; therefore, my method of discursive interpretation is multimodal. The secondary data present in my study has been collected or interpreted by researchers in the fields of linguistics and psychology.

The present study adopts a qualitative methodology, and is confirmatory in approach, as it is based on deductive research meant to support the two initial hypotheses. Moreover, as I planned to study Johnson's performance of identity at multiple points in time, the research paper's time horizon is longitudinal. My analysis techniques include both content analysis and

Critical Discourse Analysis. I have opted for an interdisciplinary approach based on such theories as proximization of threat.

5. Analysis of authentic examples

5.1. Background Information

Strategies employed during political campaigns noticeably evolved in the course of the last decade. Political discourse and the online environment have become inextricably linked, as social media platforms possess the ability of transmitting information in real-time. This feature of the online world represents an advantage to political parties which heavily rely on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter in order to relay slogans or policies meant to influence voting behaviour.

The practice of tweeting and of creating Facebook posts has become the norm in modern campaigning, while the comment section seems to have replaced the long-standing tradition of public forums. Members of leading political parties in the United Kingdom have turned to online networking platforms, and their accounts now represent some of the busiest ones in a social media landscape brimming with users. The UK Prime Minister's Twitter account currently boasts a following of over 3.7 million, while Keir Starmer, who has been Leader of the Opposition since 2020, is followed by 1.1 million Twitter users.

In order to sway public opinion, politicians resort to a number of online practices. Interactions with the voting public are carried out through live streaming, visual content or daily posting. Due to the striking effectiveness of such practices, digital campaigning now occupies a superior position over standard outreach methods. For instance, with regard to Facebook campaigns, the 2017 United Kingdom general election saw a rise in spending of up to £1.9 million (Neudert 38).

The past decade has also seen an increase in the political triumphs of conservative factions led by key populist figures such as USA's Donald Trump, Hungarian Viktor Orban and Boris Johnson (Maher). The discourse of the latter represents the focus of the present paper.

Paul Maher of the University of Limerick discussed the appeal of oversimplification in populist political discourse from a psychological point of view. In a 2019 article entitled "The psychology behind the rise of Boris Johnson," Maher states that periods of societal disequilibrium contribute to increased political polarisation, and to the allure of political extremism. During such times of uncertainty, voters show a preference for "simplistic black/white world views that offer certainty and discourage viewpoint diversity" (Maher). These preferences seek to detach the public from the reality of problematic issues such as the coronavirus epidemic or the Brexit referendum.

In his study of the effects of "disillusionment" – a mix of dissatisfaction and loss of hope – conducted alongside researchers from King's College in London, Maher has found that inducing such a state of disenchantment leads to voters opting for highly-polarised political views. Moreover, this phenomenon shifts the focus of the public toward individual identities

of leaders who resort to “simple rhetoric and offer straightforward solutions [which] often appeal most” (Maher).

Boris Johnson is one of the many politicians that make use of oversimplification and unwarranted cyber optimism in order to gain popularity by offering a false sense of security. Through his simplistic and direct discourse, Johnson manages to garner trust in times of social upheaval.

Maher points to a 2018 study lead by Dr. Martijn Schoonvelde of the University College of Dublin in which linguistic differences examined in the political addresses of liberal and conservative politicians show that differences in the personalities of liberals and conservatives account for variations in their “cognitive, affective, and motivational functioning” (2). This in turn leads to a discrepancy between the two factions – liberals have a tendency to use more complex phrasing, while conservatives such as Donald Trump opt for utterances normally found in the speech patterns of 5th-graders (1). Moreover, both Trump and Johnson advocate drastic measures in times of crisis in order to plant a false sense of security in the minds of the voting public.

As Vittorio Bufacchi has stated, “in the Age of Entertainment, it is more important to be amusing and whacky rather than competent or honest” in order to be victorious in the political arena. In this respect, Boris Johnson can be considered the poster-child for political eccentricity. Bufacchi lists further examples of political leaders who were formerly active in the entertainment industry. North American examples include such names as former actors Ronald Reagan and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Ukrainians have also chosen as president former comedian [Volodymyr Zelensky](#). The list goes on to include Liberia’s football player president, as well as cricket champion Imran Khan, current prime minister of Pakistan.

Johnson’s antics seem to be either disregarded or embraced by British voters. His latest gaffe, namely the “Partygate” controversy, is currently making headlines, and has led to continuous appeals for Johnson’s resignation. The British prime minister has addressed the breach of lockdown which allegedly took place in Downing Street’s garden on May 20 by issuing a number of apologies similar in their linguistic nature. The linguistic peculiarities have been analysed by academics such as Claire Hardaker of Lancaster University who relied on speech act theory when discussing the phenomenon.

Hardaker points to the lack of clear recognition of failure present in the discourse of the British PM. Thus, identifying the reasons behind Johnson’s ongoing apologies becomes challenging. When discussing the event, Johnson’s replies lack the propositional content criterion, namely a clear admittance of his misconduct. He states that he had no knowledge of the true nature of the gathering, as he “believed implicitly that this was a work event” (qtd. in Hardaker). Moreover, there seems to be a single occasion that might fit the propositional content principle – “there were things we simply did not get right” (ibid.). Johnson admits that he should have ordered his staff to enter their allotted chambers, yet he immediately points to the importance of “fresh air in stopping the virus” (ibid.). The authentic samples further provided by the current research paper will solidify the belief that Boris Johnson has a penchant for misleading the public.

5.2. “Brexit means Brexit”

The United Kingdom’s withdrawal from the European Union in 2016 garnered the attention of linguists who have focused on the tautological construction “Brexit means Brexit”. Theresa May was the first to use the phrase, but was quickly followed by her soon-to-be successor, Boris Johnson, who employed it during his 2016 speech at the London Spectator Awards. Johnson indulged in hyperbole as he stated that “in the words of our great PM, they understand that Brexit means Brexit and we are going to make a titanic success of it” (qtd. in Mompean 10). The strategy of not resorting to the default “be” usually found in tautological reasoning (“boys *will be* boys” for example) implies an interaction between form and meaning. While the verb “to be” simply denotes equivalence, the harsher use of “to mean” implies a command: “you have to accept that the meaning of Brexit is: the UK will inevitably leave the EU. Brexit means nothing different. Make no mistake about it” (ibid.).

Johnson later made use of May’s tautology in a video message supporting the Change Britain pressure group. The former Foreign Secretary stated that “Brexit means Brexit and that means delivering on their instructions and restoring UK control over our laws, borders, money, and trade” (qtd. in Mompean 13). The recorded message came as a response to John Whittingdale’s demand that Theresa May deliver on her promise to break with Brussels before the implementation of Article 50. This later came to be known as a “hard Brexit” – a political move which has been highly-criticised. Johnson’s speech not only lacked potential solutions to the controversial issue, but also employed the use of harsher phrasing which led to gaining the trust of the British public. This simple, yet effective address is one of the many instances in which Johnson has managed to exude charm despite having no clear-cut policy to put into practice – a standard technique in populist discourse.

Rowena Mason, political commentator for *The Guardian*, pointed out the vagueness that characterises May’s tautology when noting how “one of the problems Theresa May’s got with this phrase ‘Brexit means Brexit’ is that *that* doesn’t really mean anything at all And she’s not explaining what she wants and so it’s left this vacuum for other people to fill” (qtd. in Mompean 13). Boris Johnson took over the template which has been called a “meaningless campaigning expression” by Scottish MP Stewart Hosie, and “just a soundbite” by Nicola Sturgeon, who is serving as Scottish First Minister (ibid.).

5.3. “Politics is a Journey”

Having studied Classics at Oxford’s Balliol College, Johnson is well versed in Roman and Greek rhetoric. He often employs the use of rhetorical devices in order to develop his unique style of speaking. War metaphors are the hallmark of his discourse, as Johnson heavily seasons his speeches with martial grandiloquence.

The rendering of abstract notions in tangible terms constitutes the “grounding” function of metaphors as described by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. “Grounding” impalpable scenarios aids the public in conceptualising “the nonphysical in terms of the physical – that is, we conceptualize the less clearly delineated in terms of the more clearly delineated” (Lakoff and Johnson 59). The Lakovian approach to human cognitive functions identifies cognition as metaphorical, and perception as directly linked to physical experience. Thus, Johnson’s

reliance on war metaphors appeals to a public which perceives a new threat subjectively, by establishing a connection between a current destabilizing situation and a previous historical occurrence.

According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphors can be grouped into three main categories, namely orientational, ontological and structural metaphors. At the beginning of the current pandemic the purpose of the first type was to disseminate information regarding incidence rate, risk assessment and containment strategies. The “inactive”, i.e., unoriginal orientational concept of “politics is a journey” is derived from the Lakovian concept “life is a journey” – a frequent occurrence in political discourses meant to introduce new policies (Rinaldo 43). However, orientational metaphors were not individually employed, a process of hybridization being involved in Johnson’s discourse. Thus, the aforementioned concept provided a basis for the PM’s structural metaphors – his policy centred on the ability to move “forwards” and “backwards” while “walking through a steep road,” tracing a “roadmap” that shifted from “one position to another” in order to “reach the desired destination” (Rinaldo 44). This is one of the strategies meant to introduce harsher restrictions which were ultimately ignored by the Prime Minister himself, as further discussed in the context of the “Partygate” scandal.

Ontological metaphors were employed in order to depict the virus as an entity in the war scenario described by Johnson. The purpose was to establish the unfamiliar threat as an object – “We are beating this thing” – which then morphed into structural metaphors such as “enemy” or “killer” – “too many opportunities for our invisible enemy to slip through undetected;” “we are seeing the devastating impact of this invisible killer” (Rinaldo 45). Such metaphors related to armed conflict have been central to Johnson’s speeches since his first comment on March 3rd 2020. The statement, peppered with action verbs such as “mitigate,” “tackle” and “fight”, was meant to reassure the British public that it “should be going about [its] business as usual” – an oversimplification meant to instill a false sense of security throughout the nation. Paradoxically, the second purpose of the structural metaphors was to spread anxiety, a nation in distress being more susceptible to manipulation.

Undeveloped policy formulation is constantly being camouflaged through what Dr. Reham Farouk El Shazly calls “proximization of threat”. The findings of her study, “The Pandemic Lockdown Discourse Space: A Critical Cognitive-pragmatic Analysis”, reveal that PM Johnson makes frequent use of metaphors related to war in order to provoke panic and to plant a sense of imminent threat in the minds of the conceptualizers. The purpose of this, argues El Shazly, is to gather support for strict lockdown measures (320). Moreover, by making use of such phrasing as “all over the world” and “this country is not alone”, along with thirty-one instances in which the inclusive “we” appears (in contrast with the mere nine uses of the individual “I”), Johnson again induces a sense of solidarity (308).

5.4. Humour and magniloquence

Another characteristic of Johnson’s political discourse is its magniloquence. The Prime Minister’s bombastic manner is yet another mechanism of distortion. The man who had once flaunted the fact that he is able to recite one hundred Homeric lines in the original Greek tongue is being criticised by expert linguists for his “esoteric vocabulary, occasional crudity and episodes of bumbling bluster” (Hayward). His speeches, brimming with hyperboles,

extravagant metaphors and imperial archaic terms, are meant to convey the very insouciance which has become Johnson's trademark. He exudes a type of British nostalgia that renders him relatable to voters, and that mixes well with his nonchalant appearance and style of delivery in order to infuse serious matters with humour. A probable by-product of the elite debate clubs at Eton College, Johnson's flamboyance is considered deliberate by linguists (*ibid.*).

Regarding the issue of his handling of the coronavirus epidemic, Johnson continues to be a source of humour even in such uncertain times. Following his mock apology in the House of Commons after the "Partygate" scandal, numerous Twitter users have been producing memes or have been jokingly referring to his blunder. For instance, British comedian Michael Spicer tweeted the following message in January 2022: "I think parties and work events CAN be very similar. For instance, I confused a drinks menu for a spreadsheet once. And also a seventh mojito for a pen".

In a recent tweet from January 19, Johnson issued a response to the severe criticism he has been confronted with since "Partygate". In typical Boris fashion, the PM described the pandemic as the greatest predicament in which the United Kingdom has been since World War II, and also as the vilest epidemic since the Spanish flu in 1918. Although these two claims are valid, the final lines of the message contain the real message to be conveyed: "any government would get some things wrong. But this government got the big things right". This is an incomplete and vague admission of guilt, a mechanism of distortion which, lacking the aforementioned propositional content, is meant to forgo accountability.

5.5. The 2020 Christmas Eve video message

An analysis of the Christmas video posted on the Prime Minister's Twitter account on December 2020 shows the extent of Johnson's hypocrisy. The PM's discourse contains fragments such as: "it's not about presents or turkey or Brandy butter – much though I like all of them and that kind of stuff" (00:01:14 – 00:01:20) and "we know there will be people alive next Christmas . . . precisely because we made the sacrifice and didn't celebrate as normal this Christmas" (00:02:02 – 00:02:15). This is another type of right-wing populism; it contains certain key features which are used when classifying populist discourse, namely "an appeal to the people," anti-elitism, everyday language and crisis exploitation (Block et al. 179).

Firstly, the public is beseeched to adhere to a set of strict lockdown rules by a prime minister who seems far from snobbish. On the contrary, Johnson makes use of plain phraseology such as "jumbled together" (00:00:16 - 00:00:17) and "snogging under the mistletoe" (00:00:21-00:00:23) in order to be perceived as genuine and straightforward. He also turns to other informal language – "I bet" occurs twice in a one-minute interval: "I've never known a Christmas like it, not in my lifetime and I bet not in yours either" (00:00:05 – 00:00:12) and "I bet you agree that we had no choice but to take action," (00:00:51 – 00:00:55). An adjunctive general extender appears in the form of "and that kind of stuff" (00:01:19 – 00:01:20). Its function is interactional; it presupposes shared knowledge between speaker and addressee, and its aim is to "achieve intimacy" by expressing such common thoughts (Thompson et al. 64). The inclusive "we" occurs thirteen times, and is meant to act as a symbol of solidarity.

The second half of the video shows Johnson encouraging the public to read a “present” after Christmas lunch, i.e., a 500-page post-Brexit trade deal (00:02:18 – 00:03:21) – an unlikely household occurrence which nonetheless serves the purpose of directing the voters’ attention toward seemingly-positive actions undertaken by the government. He introduces the alleged gift through a biblical reference – “glad tidings of great joy” (00:02:35 – 00:02:38) – possibly to allude to his pious nature, as in the case of “everyone hoped and prayed, I certainly did” (00:00:32 – 00:00:34) which also contains a modal adjunct, i.e., “certainly”, meant to solidify Johnson’s piety. The video also begins with rather ambiguous phrasing – “at the end of this extraordinary year” – which makes use of the double meaning associated with the adjective; it can be interpreted as either “exceptional” or “aberrant”.

The responses to the tweet in question were mixed. One user mentioned Johnson’s hero, Churchill, speculating that “Winston would turn in his grave” (@dottydash). An even harsher comment reads: “how can a prime minister be so out of touch with the feelings of the country right now?! Banging on about Turkey and presents when people have lost their jobs, can’t afford to feed their families and are forced not to be around people they love! Resign!” (@Data__Driven). On the other hand, the PM’s video also managed to garner a fanbase. One user referred to Johnson as “a beacon of hope” (@boris_backing) and his trade deal was considered “a brilliant Christmas present” (@lynnyloo02), while another thanked Johnson “for listening and respecting the voters” (@timmyvoe). However, the “Partygate” fiasco has since revealed that the turkey dinner and Brandy butter had trumped the alleged respect and sacrifice on the part of Boris.

6. Findings

The authentic samples of multimodal discourse analysed above have revealed patterns and peculiarities in Boris Johnson’s political discourse. Firstly, the analysis of the “Brexit means Brexit” tautology has shown how deliberate vagueness is efficient in concealing incompetence. Secondly, Hayward’s article on Johnson’s magniloquence reveals how the PM’s flamboyant and nostalgic nature also acts as a mechanism of distracting the public. Also, misplaced optimism and humorous approaches conceal a lack of clear-cut policies. Finally, the frequent use of war metaphors when discussing the pandemic tends to create a sense of panic in the minds of the addressees.

7. Conclusions

Although his tricks have secured him his current position as prime minister, Johnson is left in a quagmire from which it will be extremely difficult, if not impossible to make a comeback. The relationships between Conservative MPs have also been left out of kilter, and it will be interesting to observe the consequences of the “Partygate” scandal.

Sadly, as Bufacchi’s article firmly asserts, within the “global theatre of democratic politics, buffoonery has been elevated first to an art-form, and then to a political-catalyst.” Professor Paul Chilton of Lancaster University has assigned three roles to the British Prime Minister, namely those of the “the rousing orator, the affable conversationalist, and the bumbling amateur” (qtd. in Hayward). The flop-haired PM manages to maintain these three roles through which he exploits voter vulnerability in the face of uncertainty.

The corpus of my research paper included authentic examples of written and spoken text which I have analysed in order to support my initial hypotheses. Firstly, that Johnson's identity performance centres on populist discourse marked by vagueness, flamboyance, inappropriate use of humour and misplaced threats. Secondly, that Johnson's populism has sadly proven successful, as it distracts the public from noticing the real PM behind the mask – an incompetent, yet nonchalant elitist leader.

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