The Use of “Purr” and “Snarl” Words as a Means of Manipulation in the American Presidential Debates

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Outline

• “Purr” and “snarl” words as a form of doublespeak
• Presidential debates
• Results of the analysis
Definition of Doublespeak

• Doublespeak is language that pretends to communicate but really doesn’t. It is language that makes the bad seem good, the negative appear positive, the unpleasant appear attractive or at least tolerable. Doublespeak is language that avoids or shifts responsibility, language that is at variance with its real or purported meaning. It is language which conceals or prevents thought; rather than extending thought, doublespeak limits it. (Lutz 1990: 1)
Hidden Bias

Words can imply a positive or a negative attitude and evaluate reality in a particular way, and thus manipulate people’s perception of reality (Bolinger 1980: 76)

• **Adjectives** – Young (and handsome, attractive, inexperienced), Extreme (absurd, dangerous)

• **Nouns** – Reformer (progressive, efficient), Dictator (brutal, ruthless, cruel)

• **Verbs** – succeed x fail, win x lose, build x destroy
Words whose conceptual meaning becomes irrelevant because whoever is using them is simply capitalizing on their unfavourable connotations in order to give forceful expression to his own hostility. Terms for extreme political views, such as *communist* or *fascist*, are particularly prone to degenerate into snarl words (Leech 1990: 44).

1. Social groupings, e.g. nationality words or religious sects
2. Words referring to political ideas or movements
3. Emotionally loaded words
Purr and Snarl Words as Extreme Case of Hidden Bias

Connotative meaning

Negative

Snarl words

Hidden bias

Objective expression

Hidden bias

Purr words

Connotative meaning

Positive

Denotative meaning
Analysis

• Televised presidential debates before American presidential elections in 2000, 2004 and 2008
• How “purr” and “snarl” words are used and in what contexts
• Comparison of Democratic and Republican candidates
Purr Words

• **Democracy** – it is endangered and we must fight for it

• **Freedom/Liberty** - something the United States regard highly and is worth spreading around the globe

• **Peace** - The United States should keep the peace in various parts of the world or at least should be active in helping keep the peace

• **American Dream** - owning one’s own home, having one’s own business and employing people, of having good education and thus having the chance to be successful
## Purr Words

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<th>Republican Candidates</th>
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Emotionally Loaded Words

1. America’s future
   But when we can -- when we have an issue that we may hand our children and our grandchildren a damaged planet, I have disagreed strongly with the Bush administration on this issue. (John McCain)

2. American troops in Iraq or Afghanistan
   That means that that mission succeeds, just like those young people who re-enlisted in Baghdad, just like the mother I met at the airport the other day whose son was killed. And they all say to me that we don't want defeat. (John McCain)

3. Candidates’ background and private life
   The man loves his wife and I appreciate that a lot. And I love mine. The man loves his family a lot, and I appreciate that, because I love my family. (George W. Bush)

   In the Senate I was one of only ten Democrats, along with Senator Joe Lieberman, to support Governor Bush's dad in the Persian Gulf War Resolution. (Al Gore)

4. Poor people
   But it's also that his entire life he has never forgotten where he came from, coming from Scranton, fighting on behalf of working families, remembering what it's like to see his father lose his job and go through a downward spiral economically. (Barack Obama)
Snarl Words

• Words referring to dictatorships from the past
• Fascism and 2\textsuperscript{nd} World War
  – Genocide
  – Ethnic Cleansing
  – Holocaust
• Communism and Cold War
  – Communist
  – Cold War
  – KGB
## Snarl Words

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Conclusion

- “Purr” and “snarl” words can be considered as extreme cases of hidden bias
- The use of “purr” words is much more common than the use of “snarl” words
- The most common “purr” words are the words “peace”, “democracy” and “freedom”
- The use of “snarl” words is much less common than the use of “purr” words
- “Purr” words are used much more by Republican candidates, the use of “snarl” words is the same
Bibliography
