

EUPHEMISTIC SYMBOLSPEAK IN AMERICAN PRESIDENTIAL SPOT(S)

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Abstract

The account presented in this paper combines insights from verbal-centric and visual theories in arguing that Political Campaign Discourse exploits multimodal manipulation, with specific reference to American presidential advertisements. Symbolspeak, or deliberate distortion of reality designed via manipulation of (visual) language and other symbols, is a ubiquitous semiotic production in multimodal meaning making environments such as Political Advertising. The present work employs a theoretical splicing that builds upon politeness theory (Brown and Levinson 1987) with features of Intersemiotic Complementarity (Royce 2007) and a critical multimodal approach (Ledin and Machin 2020) to identify and analyse visual-with-verbal euphemistic symbolspeak across several layers of presidential campaign discourse (Benoit 1999, van Dijk 2006). Specifically, the article investigates American Presidential Campaign Ads proving multimodal manipulation based on two primary focuses: firstly, by turning the spotlight on the concept of euphemistic symbolspeak as an integrated multimodal manipulative tool in presidential campaigning. Secondly, by triangulating a (systemic) functional multimodal critical discourse study and applying this multidisciplinary framework to a representative sample, i.e. the 2020 Biden sponsored spot tagged *Climate Change*. The overall aim is to identify, analyse visual-with-verbal euphemistic symbolspeak representations constructed through multimodal and discursive strategies along with visual-verbal intersemiotic complementarity, and to unpack the legitimization of stereotypes reflected on sociocultural structures.

Keywords: Multimodal manipulation; Visual euphemistic symbolspeak Presidential campaign spot; (Systemic) functional multimodal critical discourse analysis.

Received: 31 July 2024
Revised: 3 October 2024
Accepted: 30 November 2024
Published: 15 December 2024

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1 Introduction

In the current information ecosystem, the rise of (satellite) technology, real-time TV/mass media, high-speed Internet and social media platforms have brought politics and politicians within arm's reach. Large masses are reached by a simple click, exposed to and influenced by a range of (suasive) political messages through a variety of media, mediums and modes towards the potential effect of collective consent to (pre)designed topic-framings. Gradually, simple (ancient) rhetoric, old-fashioned linguistic persuasion received unfathomable “booster shots” up to the point of (mal-uses) AI-generated synthetic media and audio-visual manipulations. In due course, from Aristotelian linguistics to Orwellian linguistics up to post post-structuralism and post-truth applied linguistics, rhetoric in political communication got upgraded to illusory speech or counterfeit campaign speech (deepfakes), generating (a) new reality(-ies) in a post-new normal world. Fitly, the Aristotelian *phronesis* (practical wisdom for the public benefit) took quite a suasive spin (as Aristotle himself envisaged) by means of loaded images. Specifically, visual deceitful manipulations labelled Visual Doublespeak or Symbolspeak with an overall (de)legitimizing function. These two umbrella terms, coined by Ellen Rutledge and Roy Fox in 1994, are attached to the same ubiquitous phenomenon, i.e. multimodal manipulation.

I take the view that, interpreted as deliberate distortion of reality designed via manipulation of language and other symbols, the concept of Symbolspeak proves to be an integrated, intersemiotic manipulative tool for deception and illegitimate persuasion¹ in visual (political) communication by imposing a preferred version of reality which bypasses the audience's epistemic vigilance (Sperber et.al. 2010), a public unaware of the intricate means that underlie political advertising. Accordingly, prior to delving into a theoretical and practical analysis of data, I will briefly outline the main working operational concepts: manipulation, illegitimate persuasion, deception and symbolspeak.

To begin with, the salient features of both manipulator and manipulated have been sketched by de Saussure and Schultz (2005: 6-7) as:

Manipulative discourse implies an asymmetrical relation between the speaker and the hearer, where the manipulator has in particular the properties of (i) having at least some *power* over the addressee, (ii) is to some extent *insincere*, and (iii) leads the manipulated to believe *false* propositions [...]. Conversely, the manipulated is (i) *confident*, (ii) has a presumption of the *sincerity* (or cooperation), of the *relevance* [...] and of the *truthfulness* of the speaker.

¹ Conversely, a form of legitimate persuasion is education, for example, as the interlocutors are given proven and thoughtful arguments and they are free to act and believe as they please if not convinced. An “illegitimate influence entails control to one's own advantage through deceitful means” (Van Dijk 2006: 360), politicians and advertisers a case in point; “recipients are unable to understand the real intentions or to see the full consequences of the beliefs or actions advocated by the manipulator [...]; when the recipients lack the specific knowledge that might be used to resist manipulation” (361).

Secondly, on the one hand, targets of illegitimate “persuasion are made to believe that something is good or bad”, as persuasion “refers to the world of value, or cultural evaluations” (Galasinski 2000: 21). On the other hand, targets of “deception are made to believe that something is true or false”, given that deception “refers to the world of truth and fact” (21).

Last but not least, fundamental to double/symbolspeak is the incongruity between word/image and facts, between what is said/shown or left unsaid/unshown and what really is, between the word/image and referent, seems and be, between the primary function of language/image, i.e. communication and what double/symbolspeak does, namely mislead, distort, deceive, inflate, circumvent, obfuscate (Fox 1994:69; Rutledge 1994: 205; Lutz 1996: 4).

In this case study based article, the object of research is Symbolspeak and the final purpose is to investigate the extent to which Symbolspeak representations are constructed and used in American campaigning multimodal texts such as the 2020 *Climate Change* Biden sponsored ad. Particularly, to identify and analyse American electoral manipulation by multimodal means and to reveal how the visual-with-verbal symbolspeak type of representations are discursively exploited in the abovementioned 2020 American presidential spot. Subsequently, this article proposes a conceptualisation of visual-with-verbal symbolspeak and a theoretical and analytical framework for the identification and analysis of euphemistic symbolspeak and intersemiotic manipulation in Presidential Campaign Discourse.

2 Literature Review: Visual-with-Verbal Euphemistic Symbolspeak

The present paper embarks upon a balance between a functional multimodal critical analysis and intersemiotic complementarity processes towards the proposed concept of loaded visuals. In doing so, the following exemplification of visual manipulative euphemism is to be advanced as a major representative of Symbolspeak, particularly the visual-with-verbal symbolspeak category.

Browsing through the explanations provided by Roy Fox’s (1994) four levels of symbolspeak, visual doublespeak is forefronted as an umbrella concept for multimodal manipulation. The main take-away is the classification of symbolspeak as verbal, verbal-with-visual, visual-with-verbal and visual. Specifically, visual-with-verbal symbolspeak entails either the case where external images dominate the verbal-visual messages as in magazine covers and advertisements, or instances when verbal and visual texts attune, nonetheless the (less explicit, ambiguous) visual carrying a heavier impact on the receivers of television programs, debates or commercials.

This current work holds that loaded visuals amount to the visual-with-verbal type of symbolspeak by exhibiting foxy messages experienced through synchronised external images and language. In that event, one major type of a higher form of loaded visuals is illustrated by visual euphemistic symbolspeak based on its respective manipulative conceptualisation, purpose, agency and organisation with a

design and configuration comprising of a basic unit of visual doublespeak as the warm-to-cool/cool-to-warm continuum.

With the following brief overview of euphemistic symbolspeak, I hope to open a new path of enquiry into multimodal manipulation. In this spirit, I will offer a definition of the higher form of loaded visuals as advertised by visual euphemism, followed by a description of its basic unit, i.e. cool-to-warm sequencing. One generally agreed upon type of symbolspeak is the use of euphemism, either linguistic or visual. While some motivations for employing euphemisms are more nefarious than others, mitigation and obscuration is always a condition of their use. Both verbal and visual euphemisms serve for indirect communication and therefore, necessarily, blur the relationship between the signifier and the signified. They are deviations away from the neutral or conventional use and, as such, euphemisms exist on a relative truth scale. Particularly those euphemisms, whose relationship to their referents is deliberately unclear and inconclusive, are found misleading, thus of interest as they become a form of symbolspeak. Chiefly, the problem being that they are deliberately designed to obscure meaning. In essence, a visual manipulative euphemism is employed in order to mask disguised politeness since “given the weightiness of the FTA, the plausible deniability afforded by the euphemism ranges from simply polite to deceptive and controlling” (Van Winkle 2016: 63). This can be exemplified by the difference between the use of blue liquid to represent blood and a graph’s vertical axis inverted, the latter being deliberately designed to obscure meaning, hence defying expected graphing conventions (see Chan 2014 vs. Engel 2014).

To continue, the forthwith investigated category of loaded visuals is the one propagated through warm and cool images, by this understanding „visual sequence patterns that evoke responses normally reserved for family, friends and other loved ones; respectively the absence of love, family, friendship relations.” In brief, it relates to “transformational advertising”. i.e. manipulating emotions through images. An example is the (re)direction of emotions via cool-to-warm images equating with the sad-to-happy emotional conversion, respectively a warm-to-cold visual continuum inducing a happy-to-sad emotional transmutation in a matter of seconds. (Fox 1994: 81-84; Fox 2000: 55)

Next follows the delineation of my proposed theoretical framework for the analysis of symbolspeak in Political Advertising. Ultimately, in this current incipient phase, I apply the analytical framework which is the operationalisable part of the theoretical framework, onto a representative sample, namely the 2020 *Climate Change* Biden sponsored advertisement.

3 Research Methodology

The main goal of the present article is to relate the ways communicative rationality² breaks down visually by looking at the integrated designs of American Campaign Messages such as the 2020 *Climate Change* presidential electoral spot. The corpus of presidential campaign advertisements from which I make my selection is freely available on the Internet. The main site that offers a fairly comprehensive collection of American campaign messages is the Museum of the Moving Image's official website, particularly the section tagged "The Living Room Candidate" that 'archives' Presidential Campaign Advertisements from 1952-2024. I will base my selection of ad(s) on the basic twin method positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation employed in legitimation (as advanced by Rank 1976 and van Dijk 2006). Basically, it is "a fundamental advertising requirement which, thorough practice, forms a norm" (Mackay 2013: 130).

By endorsing Cappelen and Dever's assertion (2019: 124) that all uses of language can induce vision, thoughts and feelings, and extrapolating it to visual language, this proposed take on Symbolspeak entails analytical procedures resulting from a cross-over between Linguistics, Critical Discourse Studies (CDS) and Functional Theory of Political Campaign Discourse. I base the translation/transduction (Kress, & van Leeuwen 2001: 51)/ transpose-ability of van Dijk's (2006) strategies to multimodal texts on the extension of the working assumption labeled *the equipollence hypothesis* (Mairal and Ruiz de Mendoza 2009: 154), a methodological principle in the analysis of multimodal metaphor of applying tools traditionally used in the study of verbal metaphor and metonymy. The possibility of employing verbal-centric theories to investigate visual communication in multimodal environments has already been tested and demonstrated by O'Halloran (2008), Mackay (2013), Van Winkle (2016) as well as Steen (2018), Forceville (2020) and Perez Sobrino (2017, 2021).

In managing the reflexivity³ of the researcher, the method of triangulation receives further brief attention. It is necessary to point out that approaching reflexivity this work follows Heller's (2016) account of not "taking sides" in political conflict but deconstructing it with the help of contextual detail that is structured by a triangulated approach of intertwining pragmatics (Politeness Theory) to approaches from CDS, such as Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis and Intersemiotic Complementarity, with Functional Theory of political campaign discourse. Triangulation entails the use of multiple methods, data sources, intersect investigators or theories in qualitative research to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena (Patton 1999). Theory triangulation merges different

² "Communicative rationality means that we seek a mutual understanding of something together, such as discussing different priorities or problems. In doing so we believe the other to be truthful and use a language that is comprehensible and can contribute to an agreement achieved through communication" (Ledin and Machin 2020: 25).

³ "An ordinary, unremarkable and unavoidable feature of any social action." (Lynch 2000: 26)

theories to analyse and interpret data, so the researcher supports or refutes findings based on different theories (Carter et al. 2014). Simply put, “the value of triangulation is that it reduces observer or interviewer bias and enhances the validity and reliability (accuracy) of the information” (Johnson 1992: 146 in Mackey and Gass 2016: 233). The final triangulation method presupposes an initial quantitative analysis that provides a general map of the data (frequencies of functions/topics/ (ideological) themes) to guide subsequent qualitative analysis (researcher versus participants’ textual analysis and interpretation), in view of a broader, cross-linguistic doctoral methodological approach.

In essence, this study proposes a splicing of the following theories as to create a (systemic) functional multimodal critical discourse framework: Brown and Levinson’s (1987) *Theory of Politeness*, William Benoit’s (1999) *Functional Theory*, an adapted version of van Dijk’s (2006)⁴ *discourse manipulation strategies*, Royce’s (2007) *Intersemiotic Complementarity* and Ledin and Machin’s *multimodal critical discourse analysis* (2020).

3.1 (Systemic) Functional multimodal critical discourse analysis framework

The proposed systematic analytical framework for loaded semiotic lexico-grammar, specifically loaded visuals, entails the following three levels:

- I. Visual euphemism identification
- II. Multimodal resources
- III. (Intersemiotic) Pragma-strategic level

I. 1st LAYER - VISUAL EUPHEMISM IDENTIFICATION FORMULA

Building upon Brown and Levinson’s (1987/2004) politeness theory, along with Goffman’s (1967) face/face work and Grice’s (1975) cooperativity, Van Winkle’s (2016) formula adjusted for visual designs measures the (W)eightiness of a face-threatening act based on the conflation of social (D)istance, (P)ower, and (R)ank of imposition. As such, instead of: $W_x = D(S,H) + P(H,S) + R_x$, the tested formula for identifying visual euphemistic symbolspeak implicitly is: $W_x = D(*C,*A) + P(A,C) + R_x$ [$*C = (C)ommunicator$; $*A = (A)udience$].

The definition of visual euphemism used in this study is a slightly adapted version of the one advanced by Van Winkle (2016). He advertises visual euphemism as „an abstracted and ideologically encoded substitution of a visual sign for any other type of sygn(s), motivated by the avoidance of a face-threatening-act, as measured by social distance, power, and rank of imposition; typically related to taboo or specialised content; can range from mostly truthful to purposefully deceptive” (2016: 79). A more suitable definition of visual euphemistic symbolspeak, considering the purposes of the present study, therefore is as follows: “an abstracted, ideologically encoded and purposefully deceptive substitution of a visual sign for any other type

⁴ Teun van Dijk (2006: 373) outlined a manipulation scheme at several discursive layers (DSM) that, to a certain degree, does crosscut with Hugh Rank’s (1976) Intensify/Downplay schema.

of sign(s), motivated by the pretence avoidance of a face-threatening-act, as measured by social distance, power, and rank of imposition”.

II. 2nd LAYER - MULTIMODAL RESOURCES

Modes, Affordances, Contextual demands, Cultural context, Modal hierarchy, Temporal features

III. 3rd LAYER - PRAGMA-STRATEGIC LEVEL

General strategy, Macro speech act, Topic selection, Supporting Intersemiotic Complementarity, Loaded Rhetorical figures, Emotional manipulation

As regarding the second and the third layer, the aforesaid resulting strategies represent the multimodal and (intersemiotic) pragmatic level of an integrated theoretical and analytical framework exploring multimodal manipulation, expressly symbolspeak in presidential campaigning filmic artefacts.

Particularly, the pragma-strategic level foremost involves the *General strategy* based on Rank's (1976) Intensify/Downplay schema given that positive and negative expression is a cross/multi-modal ability. Rank's Model of Persuasion, a tool designed to identify verbal, nonverbal and/or visual patterns of persuasion techniques used in advertisements and political campaigns. The model of Intensify/Downplay (1976: 7) shows the way in which people's perceptions of good and bad are manipulated by: intensifying the positive attributes of the speaker; intensifying the negative attributes of others; downplaying the negative attributes of the speaker; downplaying the positive attributes of others. Intensification, ranging from raised voice, shouting, certain gestures, words/images to patterns of words/images, is achieved by means of repetition, association (to link an idea or person with something that is either valued or hated by the audience) and verbal and non-verbal composition. Downplaying ranges from silence to euphemisms, gestures, satire, irony, to concessive arguments, and calls for the following three devices: omission, diversion (to take people's attention away from the matter under consideration by using criticism, political attacks, or humour, interruptions), and confusion (anything which obscures clarity and understanding) (Rank 1976: 12-15).

Secondly comes about the *Macro speech act* strategy, given that, in a simplistic manner, campaign messages may be classified as positive either negative (or both).

Thirdly, what follows is the *Topic selection* tactic based on Benoit's (1999) Functional Theory. The author develops a theoretical approach towards functions and topics of political campaign messages by employing content analysis across several message forms using themes and arguments as the coding unit. This is an optimised version of content analysis of campaign messages on account that many individual spots usually blend the two positive and negative dimensions. Essentially, The Functional Theory is based on fundamental functions or utterances (acclaiming –positive-, attacking –negative-, and defending –image repair) that can occur on two

topics (policy –issue- and character –image). Moreover, each of the afore-mentioned topics is further classified into three sub-forms: policy is divided into remarks on past deeds, [specific] future plans, and general goals; character consists of comments on personal qualities of the candidate, the candidate’s leadership ability, and the candidate’s ideals.

Strategy number four is *Supporting intersemiotic complementarity* as framed by Royce (2007: 103). Helped by van Dijk’s (2006) adapted version as advanced by Mackay (2013), I integrate visual-verbal intersemiotic complementarity to support the synergic and cohesive communicative power of the integrated multimodal (manipulative) text and its general strategy plus speech act (illegitimate persuasion), and its specific design along with configuration (deception). Centrally, metafunctional meanings may be coded systematically by identifying inter-semiotic relations between the three metafunctional systems. Intersemiotic complementarity allows a better understanding of how visual and verbal resources semantically complement one another to form a unified text. In particular, metafunctional meanings are coded via this framework based on the occurrence of the following intersemiotic sense relations: relations of repetition, synonymy, antonymy, hyponymy, meronymy, and collocation creating ideational meanings across verbal-visual modes. Also, the ideational metafunction may be coded by identifying visual and verbal meanings in the representation of participants, processes and circumstances, thus drawing on the SFL transitivity system (Halliday 1978). Following are intersemiotic relations of reinforcement of address, attitudinal congruence and attitudinal dissonance producing interpersonal meanings across both modes. The interpersonal metafunction can be categorised pending, for instance, how the viewer is visually addressed and visual modality, or the degree of certainty, probability and credibility conveyed by visuals to viewers. Visual features may then be related to verbal meanings, including those arising from mood (e.g. address via commands, statements, offers, questions) and modality, based on the three SFL degrees (low, median or high modality) indicating “confidence, or lack of confidence about what a speaker feels toward the truth or otherwise of a proposition” (Royce 2007: 94). Thirdly, compositional relations of information value, salience, visual framing, visual synonymy, and potential reading paths generating integrated compositional/textual meanings. The textual metafunction can be coded by examining compositional elements (e.g. information value, visual salience and framing) in relation to verbal ones (e.g. cohesion, typographical features). Last follow the strategies *Loaded rhetoric* and *Emotional manipulation*.

Comprehensively, my take on Symbolspeak, with mechanisms such as Loaded semiotic lexicon and Loaded semiotic grammar represented in this particular case solely by Loaded Visuals (i.e. visual-with-verbal euphemistic symbolspeak) is demonstrated by a case study based practical application of my proposed (systemic) functional multimodal critical discourse framework.

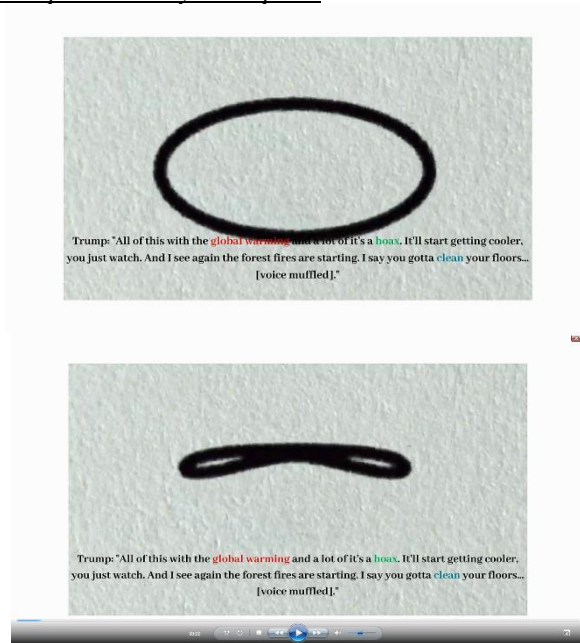
4 Results and Interpretation: A Concrete Example

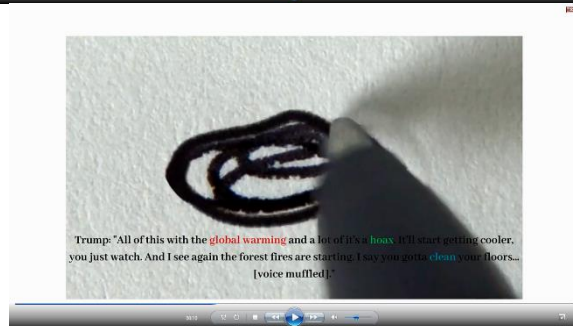
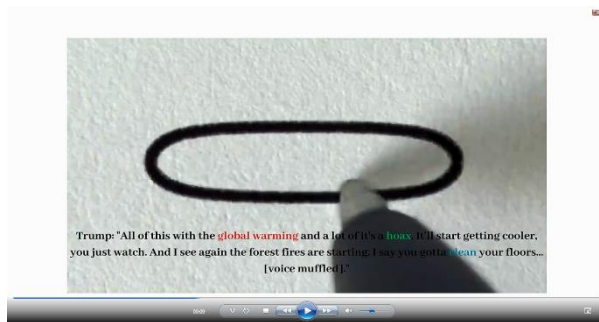
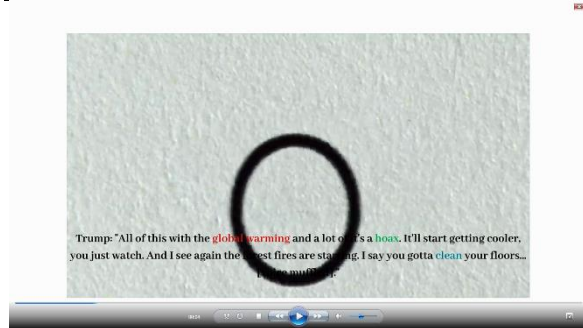
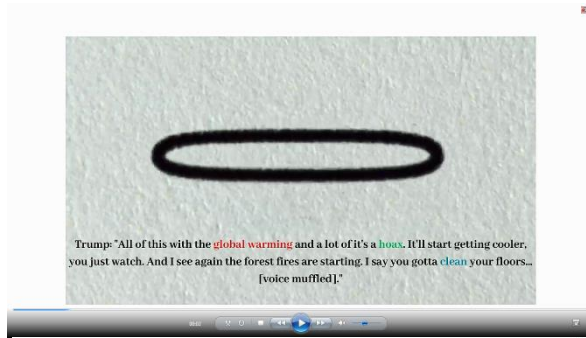
2020 *Climate Change* Joe Biden sponsored advertisement

Original Air Date: 10/22/20

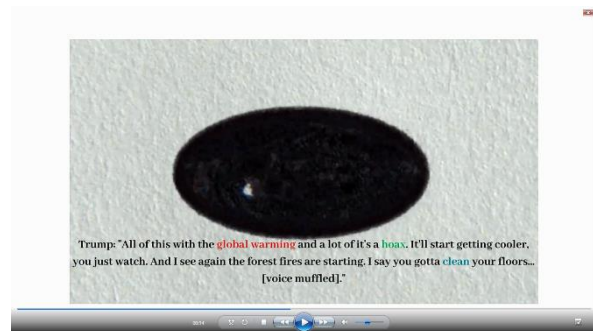
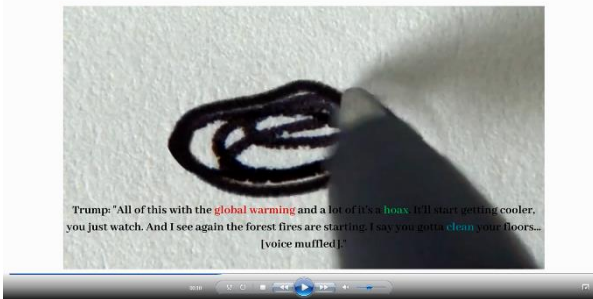
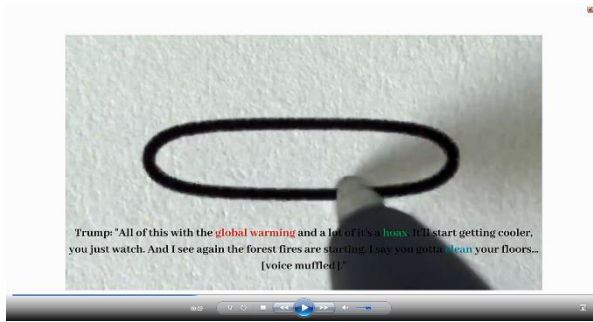
VIDEO EXTRACT 0' 01'' – 0' 17''

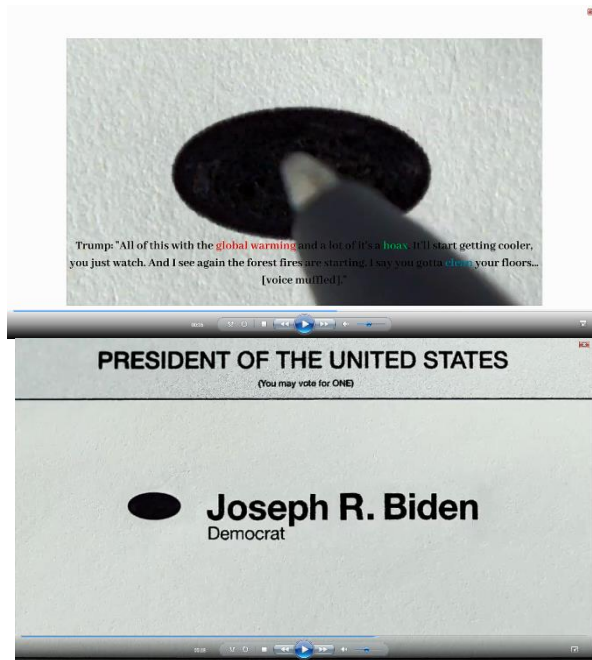
A case of *cool-to-warm sequencing* as basic component of the higher form of Symbolspeak, i.e. *euphemistic symbolspeak*





Euphemistic Symbolspeak in American presidential spot(s)





(original with no on-screen text)

Voice-over/Transcript:

Trump: “All of this with the global warming and a lot of it’s a hoax. It’ll start getting cooler, you just watch. And I see again the forest fires are starting. I say you gotta clean your floors... [voice muffled].” (<https://www.livingroomcandidate.org/commercials/2020#>)

RESEARCH QUESTION 1

What strategies and semiotic resources of visual euphemistic symbolspeak are revealed by the identification and analysis of an electoral spot ad with this framework?

RESEARCH QUESTION 2

What range of intersemiotic relations are articulated in the integrated design determined to be visual euphemistic symbolspeak?

Level 1 – VISUAL EUPHEMISTIC SYMBOLSPEAK IDENTIFICATION

This level is based on a scales of Social Distance, Power and Rank of Imposition that range in numerical value from 1 to 5, as this range allows a common categorisation of evaluative measures used in Likert scales, such that 1=very low, 2=low, 3=moderate, 4=high, 5=very high, due to the fact that the sum of these measurements equates to one of five possible politeness strategies (no FTA, On record, Negative politeness, Positive politeness, Off record-includes euphemism). Euphemism is the

quintessential realisation of off record communication. The higher the combined sum, the higher the severity of the FTA, the more indirect the language. Communicator is expected to use euphemism to mitigate that FTA. Therefore, those artifacts whose weightiness falls into the highest 12-15 weightiness range will be recognised as artifacts whose contexts are conducive to and likely to produce off record communication, this to include euphemism.

In terms of Social Distance, measured by the shared knowledge between speaker and hearer, there is no familiarity among Communicator and Audience, ergo their association comes to pass as strangers. To continue, on the one hand, Communicator, on account of his role as a high-profile social actor, hence status, authority and relative wealth, and “material control” this category of high-ranking social actors has over economic distribution and physical force, the power imbalance sways favourably and conveniently towards the presidential candidate. On the other hand, Audience has total Power over Communicator as to either to turn (off) the channel or not vote. After, regarding Rank of Imposition created by the communicative act, i.e. the request made by a participant to another, relating to both positive and negative face wants thus to the form and/or content and mode of communication (Brown, & Levinson 1987: 77; Van Winkle 2016: 60-61), due to the aggressive close-up, it qualifies as a case of Audience offensive by each of the three: limiting content, the request of amount of time and/or accepting the attack by ridiculing and intensified stereotyping. Proportionately, based on the off record conducive context result bellow, the *2020 Climate Change* Joe Biden sponsored advertisement is identified as a visual euphemism.

Formula: $W_x = D(C,A) + P(A,C) + R_x$

$$14_x = 5(C,A) + 5(A,C) + 4_x$$

Level 2 – MULTIMODAL RESOURCES

Modes and Affordances

In this ad there is the use of film, a composite mode which in this instance includes the monochromatic/sepia colour, visuals, spoken language and voice over narration. No mode has more legitimacy than another per se, but the deselection of a particular mode(s) or semiotic resource(s) and their materiality and affordances will have implications as how the text is received/analysed, interpreted and explained.

Contextual demands

Due to the fact that all presidential candidates for the two main parties in the US have immense advertising budgets, I am quite confident that the decision to design this ad in sepia/grainy colour was not down to financial considerations, yet the subversive monochrome employment that carries a recognisable *code* which incorporates emotions of deviousness, coldness, national shame was a deliberate choice.

Cultural context

The 2020 election took place following a year of political, public health, economic and social crises. On December 18th 2019, the House of the Representatives voted to impeach President D. Trump on charges of abuse of power and obstruction of Congress in relation to his dealings with Ukraine. On February 5th, 2020, the Senate voted to acquit him on both charges.

Modal hierarchy

The most obvious stylistic decision, namely to tailor the ad in sepia colour, hence the lack of full colour was neither a financial move nor one enforced by technology (lack of money or tech). Therefore, to purposefully deselect the mode of colour, which affords so much, highlights the purpose behind the use of sepia. Clearly, this stylistic move makes the visual mode most prominent, yet there is no definitive modal hierarchy, as impact is subjective. However, salience through the visual film is one way to attempt to sort between the modes as in this ad, the spoken text is not hard-hitting in terms of informational content, besides tonality of voice.

Temporal features

Presidential campaign advertisements are traditionally thirty seconds long and this one confirms to this expectation. It ran nationally as part of the Biden 2020 campaign. The spot references climate change activism versus climate change scepticism on the one hand, as well as the *global warming* versus *climate change* debate.

Level 3 – PRAGMA-STRATEGIC LEVEL

General strategy

As Rank (1976) advances, this 2020 presidential commercial is systematised as manipulation of communication on account of intensification via association and composition and downplay by way of omission and diversion. On the one hand, the presidential candidate Donald Trump is equated with the idea of ‘loud-mouth’ visually by placement of the represented participant/social actor into a loaded context which has emotional significance for the intended audience fitting the visual background setting, i.e. decontextualised recontextualisation. A further point is the intensifying composition by patterns and arrangements the design of the spot uses, variations in sequence that add to the effectiveness of the images. Concretely, the cool-to-warm visual continuum subverts the verbal message for the viewer through the semantic intersemiotic relation of attitudinal dissonance. On the other hand, the audience’ perceptions of good and bad are manipulated with the downplaying omission via euphemism, considering that the selection process unnecessarily conceals more than can be presented. As a result, employing diversion too, the ad distracts focus away from key issues by emphasising the trivial, delivering entertainment (*bread and circuses*) through emotional appeals (*ad hominem*). The overall multimodal (rhetorical) cumulative effect is an elusive, confusing one based

on the contradiction delivered by the intersemiotic semantic relation of attitudinal dissonance, namely a modalised verbal direct address and a low modality visual indirect address that feature incongruity. Pointedly, despite the fact that, ideationally, there is multimodal coherence that ‘anchors’ the audience’ interpretation, interpersonally, the opposing attitudes rather create the ridiculing, yet manipulative, intersemiotic complementarity effect based on a contradictory visual humorous illegitimate influence in comparison to the denotative meaning of the spoken text.

More to the point, the ad is set on delegitimising the incumbent Donald Trump via appeals to combined elements of both ideational and interpersonal illegitimate persuasion. The former manipulative mechanism, regarding Aristotle’s logos-ethos or ideational persuasion (Partington and Taylor 2018: 46) corroborated by Charteris-Black’s (2018: 100) communicating political arguments (logos) under the aegis of ‘thinking right’, in this presidential campaign artefact downplays Trump’s competence face by discrediting the usefulness of his argument and the effectiveness of such action, as Trump simply conveys an actual, practical solution to counter climate change contingencies by calling upon clean forest beds. Secondly, as to Aristotle’s pathos-ethos or interpersonal persuasion (Partington, & Taylor 2018: 46) complemented by Charteris-Black’s (2018: 100) ‘being right’ persuasion, the 2020 *Climate Change* Biden sponsored ad is rather illegitimately ‘telling the right story’ through a visual metonymy (mental and visual representations). In effect, the emotional impact (pathos) is heightened up front, firstly, with the rhetorical resource of ‘sounding right’ by way of turning the opponent’s words against himself, making Trump sounding (aggressively) wrong, hence negative other–presentation, and secondly, on establishing Biden’s integrity (ethos) by ‘having the right intentions’ via subverting the opponent’s ethical integrity, thus Biden’s positive self–presentation. As such, via appeals to emotions, the ad downplays Trump’s affective face (so intensifying Biden’s own) by means of an extreme close-up of the cinematic metonym ‘mouth for talking person’ (Forceville 2009: 65). Furthermore, the low modality through maximum abstraction, hence reduction, no documentation, no indexicality supports the fact that the interpersonal metafunction is subverted, as it is not about expressing factual truth but aligning the audience/the viewer/the voter with some truths whilst distancing them from others (Machin 2016: 66). Precisely due to the lack of the implicit truth value of the real audio-video recording of Donald Trump and using, instead, an animated line-sketch, the 2020 *Climate Change* spot must rely on the indexicality of the auditory mode, i.e. candidate’s Trump voice, to confirm that the visual parody represents a real individual. Through misleading selectivity (Messaris 1997: 147-149) with regards to the control of what the viewer is shown as a representation of state of affairs, the presidential commercial is the equivalent of metadiscursive visual deception as there is no direct indexical relationship between the image and the fact, only implicit, cognitively limiting propositions.

Macro speech act

The ad is a more generalised message instilling covert fear mixed with an indirect/implicit invitation paired with a promise: help (by voting for) Biden and he promises to protect the planet, future generations implicitly, by fighting climate change, in Benoit's (1999) terms, a thematic policy comment, specifically, general goals and future plans. Nonetheless, the 2020 *Climate Change* commercial's design signals (visual) deceptive communication. This campaign spot is passively deceptive by omission /selection on account of premeditated background information deficiency, reduction of visual background, two shades of tonal gradation, low depth, employment of a completely decontextualised image that is symbolic rather than documentary, as it is a conceptual representation with no vectors, that merely describes and classifies Trump for a big mouth. Moreover, this stereotyping may be considered an ad hominem argument by attacking the person instead of the person's rationale. Furthermore, as a micro speech act, framing Trump in this manner classifies as metadiscursive deception by obfuscation, as it conceals the noncooperation on the level of communication itself, because the designer/sponsor intends the addressee/viewer not to understand the full import of the utterances/verbal-visual message (i.e. well-hidden attitudinal dissonance for the untrained eye) whilst exploiting the *false belief* of truth bias or communicative rationality regaled by the public that a speaker is "benevolent, cooperative or relevant" (de Saussure 2005: 137). What is more, the designer/sponsor attempts to deceive the target audience as to his communicative intentions by flaunting, primarily, the conversational maxim of quantity via omission and low degree of informativeness, and, secondly, the maxim of manner through ambiguity and innuendo.

Topic selection

Based on Benoit's (1999) functional approach to political campaigns which analyses utterances into acclaims, attacks and defences, that, in turn, are further subdivided into policy (or issues) comments or character (image) remarks, this ad qualifies as an attack. Negative other-presentation is intensified by framing Trump as uncommitted towards the environment, resulting in implied Biden positive self-presentation as a *green activist*.

Supporting Intersemiotic Complementarity

Firstly, the metafunction identified as ideational is realised through the intersemiotic sense relation between the visual symbol *mouth*, an abstracted representation via the visual euphemistic metonym "mouth for (talking) person" as identified by Forceville (2009: 65) and its verbal units based on the components of the language transitivity system. Accordingly, *I*, the first person singular is the participant, *see, say, clean* stand for the process, while *global warming* (forest fires and forest floors) indicate the circumstance associated with the process. As such, in regards to the ideational meaning(s), a naturalistic monochrome dynamic cartoonish metonymic *mouth* that

carries the visual weight is identified. In terms of activity, the action taking place is that of a portrayal, namely the carrier is involved in a Symbolic Process that generates connotative meaning and conventional symbolic value. As for the circumstances, there is no evident background setting (frame sequences between 01''-17''), there are no other human or non-human participants in the visual frame with which actional vectors may be formed, the general action is that of display and the following is the symbolic attribute of the represented participant projected by the dynamic visual: a non-human stereotypical abstracted Carrier as the most prominent of the ideational representation. In brief, starting with the visual message element outlined above and checking through the verbal aspect of the spoken text for semantically related lexical items, i.e. intersemiotic sense relations, locally there is not enough intersemiotic evidence for a consistent and coherent general message on the topic focus of the advertisement, the environmental issue of climate change, hence a character (image) attack.

Treated as a deceptive micro speech act via obfuscation by masking the attack with pretence entertainment claims, rather a more manipulative mechanism is subliminally set in motion that potentially bypasses the viewers' epistemic vigilance: by bringing forth and discrediting the person via ridicule, inherently the person's words and his overall message are downplayed. Thus, instilling covert fear (global warming as a rather anthropologic disaster threat) mixed with an indirect invitation paired with a promise (vote now for future protection), the practical solution "mouthed" by Trump for preventing future forest fires by simply cleaning the forest beds, is "smothered" when "shutting Trump up" with the prompted act of voting for Biden. And this is a mere example of how manipulative targeted discourses are being created/designed towards specific social practices and actions such as voting.

Secondly, an examination of the interpersonal features of the visuals in the *Climate Change* electoral spot ad considers the manner in which relations between the filmic text and the viewer are represented. The ways in which the designer/sponsor and the viewer of the presidential commercial are placed socially in relation to each other are important because this can affect the topic of the visual, its 'reading paths', and as a result how and why it can be interpreted. The focus on these interpersonal features requires an analysis of intersemiotic aspects of address, levels of involvement, power relations, social distance, and an analysis of the verbal-visual modality. In short, there is no reinforcement of address because visually, there is no 'real' gaze, and consequently no vector(s). As such, the image act is that of a visual offer via indirect address. Verbally, the mood is declarative and the address is direct by means of the second person singular 'you' and marks importance and personal relevance. As such, there is an interpersonal verbal-visual incongruent form of address supported in ideational terms by the cinematic *mouth for person* metonym's symbolic attributes. At the level of involvement, the horizontal angle with a frontal point of view creates a strong degree of engagement with the 'mouth' sketch required from the part of the viewer not by choice, yet by the requirement to be involved which is loaded into the visual by the designer. The fully fronted nature

of the “this is how it is” (Royce 1999: 84) angle holds a loaded choice of inclusion which places the viewer in the direct line of the indirect address, hence incongruity.

In terms of social distance, which is realised by the size of the frame, the extreme close-up and personal shot that may connote aggression, conflict, ideological polarisation intensified by the high-pitched tonality of voice, the ad is a visual subjective offer that invites the viewer to socially engage with the represented participant and just merely observe the portrayal. Thus, the maxim abstraction hence reduction, lack of documentation hence no indexicality supports the fact that the interpersonal metafunction is subverted as it is not about expressing absolute truth but aligning the audience with some truths and distancing them from others. This deliberate stylistic abstracted drawing form of inaccurate visual representation holds propositional content via indirect address. As it is a mere line sketch, the most simplified portrayal in the naturalistic coding orientation in a continuum of possibilities of representation, the viewers are forced to view the information portrayed as an offer of information with which they can agree or disagree, acknowledge or contradict its veracity. The main stereotyping feature of the represented participant has been chosen in order to be presented from certain points of views, specifically the ones held and intentionally imparted by the (graphic) designer with any potential viewer(s). Hence, it is a *suggested* interpretation of reality that carries a lower modality regarding its interpretation of ‘truth’ comparatively to photographs and videos, only being anchored via the spoken text and so drawing attention to the attitudes that the producers wish to express.

Regarding power relations, the vertical angle via a slightly high angle creates viewer superiority thus downplaying the verbal aspect of the spoken text’s direct address by the uses of the second person pronouns *you, your*. Said employment of pronouns engages the viewers as members of a group which believe the environment needs practical solutions such as clean forests beds in order to prevent future forest fires. Resultantly, entertainment by ridiculing is potentially manipulative, via a social device involved in communication known as group pressure, based upon overcoming the viewer’s Machiavellian intelligence (ability to understand deceptive interaction) regarding the problematic properties of the multimodal message contingent on a verbal direct address and a visual offer with potential (pretence) topic disengaging implications by merely showcasing the represented participant as specimen in a display case.

With reference to attitudes, the absence of colour, the abstraction, the employment of decontextualisation via a lack of setting (segment-sequences 01’’-18’’) also combines with the monochromacity to lessen the visual modality. Thus, attention is drawn to the meanings that the designer wishes to attach to this ridiculing sketch. A closer examination of the spoken text reveals a declarative mood with an assessed modality “you just watch”, “I see”, “I say” (verbal process), yet slightly modulated regarding future possibility, future promises such as “that it will start getting cooler”. Simply put, the abstracted monochrome representation is not complemented by the verbal language which is direct, yet slightly modulated. Image and text are presenting to the viewer as attitude that the visual-verbal interpersonal

sense relation is contradictory, hence attitudinal dissonance between the visual and the linguistic representation.

Thirdly, this particular ad is a centre composition with a most salient central element that conveys immediate symbolic meanings. The central placement functions perceptually for the viewer as a stabiliser of weight and the central axis gives power to the element symbolspeak metonym. There is no visual given-new relation, and the verbal theme-rheme organisation in the spoken text, represented by relevant themes to the speaker: *it-global warming*, or *I and you* relevant to the viewer, is not mirrored visually. In relation to the degrees of framing of elements, there is no existent text on image (segment 01''- 22''), there is visual space hierarchy, no frames, no borders, a nonexistent sense of cooperation, no visual unity so that the whole message can be easily projected. The overall effect is of verbal-visual spun intersemiotic complementarity on verbal and visual attitudinal dissonance.

Loaded rhetorical figures

The use of the visual metonym 'mouth for talking person', thus symbolic for a real person, has a subversive effect via juxtaposing connotations in the name of entertainment and humour, thus more easily bypassing viewer's epistemic vigilance and rational device by blocking the identification of the speaker's manipulative intention. Agency is communicated symbolically through the foregrounded cartoonish visual metonym. The meaning potential of the lines (creating a circle) connotes softness, gentleness, unmanliness yet, the close shot that suggests aggression or threat brings the audience too close to the (emotional) energy of the moment. All the above whilst backgrounding any logical consideration regarding the reasons and intentions behind the choice of representing such a conflictual behavior via a high-pitched tone of voice other than ridicule. Additionally, due to lack of *eye contact*, the viewer is a mere observer, the image is only an *offer* that intensifies a version of reality, an offer with information available for scrutiny, for expected responses, thus an indirect address, an indirect form of communication, an euphemistic symbolspeak.

Emotional manipulation

The lack of scientific information, proven facts and data is notable in an ad nonetheless concerning global warming, even titled *Climate Change* by the Democratic sponsor/campaign symbol manipulators. There is a clear, intensified attempt at a scare-mongering or justified instilling of fear.

5 Conclusions and Recommendations

The present article has taken a multidisciplinary approach to an account of multimodal euphemistic manipulation, viz. the 2020 *Climate Change* American

campaign spot. Why the American case and why the usage of euphemism, specifically?

Firstly, because these elections, potentially, further polarise the global community, as eminently as do the American society, whilst facing the post-pandemic and ongoing armed conflicts that warrant an Orwellian twinge at the possibility of abrupt economic, societal, geopolitical, environmental and technological reworking(s).

Secondly, because, from a critical perspective, this overall investigation answered the following main question: “did it appear that the (C)ommunicator employed the (visual) euphemism for the sake of facilitation or deception?” (Van Winkle 2016: 201). To the greatest extent, this examination stands on the grounds that similarity between both figurative language abstraction and visual abstraction is based on choosing the most salient feature(s) of a whole thing, or “sharpening the concept” in Arnheim’s words (1969: 109), which is an essential criterion for effective verbal and visual communication, and, above all, a deliberate decision made by the (C)ommunicator. As a consequence, by this dual process of inclusion and exclusion, visual ideology is encoded “in such artifacts and their designs created in and by a discourse community” (Van Winkle 2016: 197-198) through the agency of manipulatively directing hearer/viewer attention to specific *angles* designedly chosen by the speaker/producer.

Overall, the aforementioned inquiry was clarified twofold: first, by uncovering the strategies and semiotic resources that an identified instance of visual-with-verbal euphemistic symbolspeak exploited for the legitimation of hidden ideologies, values and stereotypes prevailing sociocultural structures; in the second place, by exposing the intersemiotic relations a particular case of electoral visual euphemism obscurely manoeuvres to stereotype social and political reality towards ideological polarisation using visual-with-verbal pretended cooperative semiosis.

Former wise, the findings indicate that euphemistic symbolspeak strategies deliberately embedded in the design of this particular American presidential spot are: primarily, a loaded off record conducive context for social manipulation by power abuse and domination through group pressure on (global) cultural and climate issues in troublesome times. This manipulative technique makes use of linguistic semiotic resources as referential person markers, i.e. *you/your*, hence indexicality in speech that are incongruous with the lack of visual indexicality and the indirect visual address eliciting the viewer(s) to engage with an implicit/inferred represented participant that has been abstractively produced by opting out the visual semiotic resource of gaze, hence disengaging and hindering mutual understanding on purpose.

Secondly, local and global strategies that reveal evidence of cognitive manipulation for mind control supported by the design process which involves: the materiality of compositional semiotic resources like the cool-to-warm sequencing that allows organisation and ensures the structure of the communicative event; the affordances of ideational discursive resources as recontextualisation, denotation and connotation that allow conceptualisation and anchor the content of the communicative event; interpersonal pragmatic and stylistic semiotic resources, like

the visual metonym, that allow purpose and agency and tend to function and identities. This tripartite schema induces constraints on the process of information treatment. Locally, interpersonal attitudinal dissonance via the contradictory intersemiotic mood and modality systems expressed by a verbal indicative, directly addressing, highly modulated, explicit subjective declarative informative statement towards equal footing encouragement for services via practical solutions and actions and a visual indirectly addressing non-indexical abstracted, low modality stereotypical offer towards an implied goods and services exchange: act by voting now in change for a promise. As a result, demonstrated multimodal manipulation that hinders the full interpretation of the verbal-visual intersemiotic information.

Globally, the illegitimate persuasive appeals to audience' emotions via ad hominem fallacy, and the use of deception by omission and obfuscation create the adequate social and psychological conditions for manipulation by resorting to group pressure and by building an over-competent image of the manipulator. Basically, this deployment of schemes at various lexico-semantic, pragmatic, cognitive, discursive, intersemiotic and multimodal dimensions of symbolspeak, by emphasising the ubiquitous ideological polarising structures of intensify own *good* – intensify others' *bad* and downplay own *bad* – downplay others' *good* de facto double-play dissonant worldviews via verbal and visual doublespeak, starting from buzz/mere words like “linguistic euphemistic semiotic resources: *climate change* and *global warming*, linguistic biased adjectives: *clean* (Pascu 2022) leading up to visually manipulative semiotic resources as the *cool-to-warm pattern of sequences*.

Latter related, intersemiotic (non)complementary based on interpersonal attitudinal dissonance is incongruently manipulative and representative of the Symbolspeak phenomenon.

Utterly functional, the 2020 *Climate Change* spot proves to be an ad hominem attack on a pretence environmental topic, that deceptively obfuscates, via a euphemistic abstracted animation that ‘softens’ the audience to the idea of putting entertainment above concrete facts and critical thinking, for a much susceptible mobilisation of the electorate.

Future work will integrate Audience Research and the cognitive-pragmatic model of Relevance Theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995) to investigate whether or not presidential candidates' intentionality of dynamic symbolspeak use during an interactive experience succeeded in manipulating the mass-media audience, and to what degree individual study participants are indeed symbolspoken when building their ideological positions.

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