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LINGUISTIC PECULIARITIES OF HUMBLEBRAGGING AND OUTRIGHT BRAGGING IN PRE-ELECTION DEBATES

Kristina Topuria

Doctorate Student, Batumi Shota Rustaveli State University

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ABSTRACT

The article is devoted to the study of the phenomenon of bragging in general and its two main types: Humblebragging and Outright bragging in pre-election debates. Also, fundamental driver of the article is to reveal what linguistic “tricks” are employed by political actors when advertising themselves in order the audience to think highly of them.

Theoretical material of the research is collected from the works of Peggy Klaus, Meredith Fineman, Ovul Sezer et la and Henry Alford. As for the practical material, it is mainly retrieved from American cable and satellite television network, C-Span.

Based on above named sources, investigation revealed that various types of linguistic techniques such as: repetition, personal pronouns, idiomatic expressions, adjectives, intensifiers, comparative forms, superlative forms, rhetorical questions, rhetorical device such as enumeration etc, are used on frequent basis by politicians involved in political battle and bragging assuredly is very effective tool to knock your opponent down.

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Introduction.

Politics is the bragging capital of the world and politicians are skillful braggarts well-known for their outstanding speeches aimed at successfully persuading and manipulating their potential electorate. By and large, self-aggrandizing and self-enhancing statements are very typical for political actors but it is doubled and even tripled when they are acting in the frame of pre-election campaigns.

Nowadays, being a good politician equals with being a good self-promoter. What is more, contemporary society has become more tolerable towards the phenomenon of bragging and it is no longer considered as irritating as it used to be in the past. Point is, you need to know how to do it artfully and effectively in order not to backfire.

Especially, in the light of our tremendously competitive social life, starting from everyday job interviews ending up with political debates, wins the one with excellent self-advertising skills. Politicians engage in variety of self-representation strategies and bragging is one of them. Bragging itself is pretty comprehensive and multi-dimensional phenomenon and gives birth to different bragging species but the focus of my study are its two types: Humblebragging and Outright Bragging, as they appeared most pervasive in pre-election campaigns.

Bragging, inherent phenomenon of social interaction.

As political arena is one of the manifestations of social interaction, bragging is also inseparable part of politics, particularly, of pre-election debates. But what does bragging represent precisely? Peggy Klaus (2004) in her book “Brag! The Art of Tooting Your Own Horn Without Blowing It”, states that

bragging is very individual form of self-expression. Moreover, she considers it to be the art and in case of becoming the master of artful bragging, success in private as well as occupational life awaits you in the shadow. Based on Klaus theory, we can assume that those politicians who have mastered themselves in artful bragging, can win over their political foes. It is noteworthy that Peggy Klaus employs the word self-promotion as an equivalent for bragging and the word self-promoter as an equivalent for braggart. They are far more neutral words serving to neutralize the negative perception of the word bragging and braggart and evoke if not positive but neutral feelings towards the act of bragging/self-promotion itself.

As for Meredith Fineman (2020), in her book - "Brag Better: Master the art of fearless self-promotion", we read: bragging is "giving yourself credit" and "Getting the megaphone out" (7). Furthermore, the author states: "Being unafraid and to speak articulately about yourself, your life, and your accomplishments not only makes you feel great, but also leaves a positive and lasting impact on your listener" (7). She has also introduced very interesting term Qualified Quite, which is defined in the following way: "a group of highly competent individuals who are underestimated because they lack a strategy for self-promotion, thinking their work will speak for itself" (3). Fineman thinks the work done does not speak for itself and we need to be best showmen of ourselves. Pursuant to above provided opinions, we can conclude that the Qualified Quiet can never be a successful politician, the politician driven with the passion of victory feels free to speak about his accomplishments, gets pleasure from it and intends to leave lasting impression on his/her target through unique showmanship.

As it was mentioned in the introductory part, Humblebragging and Outright bragging are the focus of the investigation. The term – Humblebrag which already resides in Oxford Dictionary as an official word, was first coined by the comedian Harris Wittels.

Sezer, Gino, Norton (2015) in their research "Humblebragging: A Distinct – and Ineffective – Self-Presentation Strategy," are very critical towards the act of humblebragging and describe it as "false modesty", "faux humility" or "self-deprecating boast". Particularly, authors characterize humblebragging as self-presentation strategy which aims to fulfill dual purpose of to be liked and gain respect simultaneously. Besides, through humblebrag people emphasize on their positive qualities and convey competence with a brag, while enabling them to elicit sympathy by masking their self-glorifying statements (4).

As for outright bragging, it is very direct and straightforward form of promoting yourself without any camouflage and disguise. Henry Alford (2012), in his article "If I do humblebrag so myself," distinguishes between outright and humble bragging and says that outright bragging expects to be met with awe, but humblebragging wants to be met with awe *and* sympathy. It asks for two reactions from its audience, and in so doing makes fools of its beholders twice over.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/02/fashion/bah-humblebrag-the-unfortunate-rise-of-false-humility.html>.

Bragging and its linguistic features in the limelight of political statements

Political figures participating in pre-election campaigns are notably prone to the act of bragging. That is why, we have targeted on pre-election debates held in the United States of America.

Who if not the President Donald Trump? Unequivocally, he takes leading positions in the list of braggart politicians. Let's have a look at his self-praising statements uttered during presidential debate with John Biden in 2020 of US election:

"Dr. Fauci said **president Trump saved thousands of lives**. Many of your democrat governors said **president Trump did a phenomenal job**, most of them said that, people that would not be necessarily on my side said that, **president Trump did a phenomenal job. You could have never done the job that we did, you don't have it in your blood**".

From the beginning until the last sentence, we come across humblebragging. President Trump doesn't promote himself directly and instead of saying, "I saved thousands of lives" or "I did a phenomenal job", he applauds himself from the standpoint of others, uses the adjective "phenomenal" twice, word collocation "president Trump" thrice to sound more expressive and convincing. As for the last sentence, he vividly indicates on superiority of his party over his competitor and highlights the collective power of his party via the first person plural pronoun "we" and idiomatic expression "in your blood".

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CweqW7Pzxz8>

Governor Michael Dukakis in Presidential Candidate Debate with Vice President George H.W. Bush:
„As a matter of fact, **I'm the first governor in the history of my state** to fund that pension system. **I have been in politics for twenty-five years**. I've won a lot of elections, I've lost a few, as you know, and learned from those losses. **I won** the Democratic nomination in fifty-one separate

contests. **I think I'm a reasonably likable guy. I'm serious though I think I'm little more lovable these days** that I used to be back in my youth when I began in my legislature”.

This is very clear example of outright bragging. Governor Dukakis repeats first person pronoun “I” for twelve times to highlight his brilliance. Characterizes himself with adjectives “first” “likable”, “serious”, “lovable”. Besides, he employs the intensifier adverb “reasonably” to strengthen the meaning of expression “I am likable guy”, comparative degree “more” to highlight the fact that he is more lovable at the moment than he used to be in the past, present perfect, present simple and past simple to emphasize on his political and personal accomplishments. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?4256-1/1988-presidential-candidates-debate>.

Senator John McCain in presidential debates with senator Barack Obama prior to 2008 presidential election:

“American workers are **the best** in the world. They are fundamental aspect of America’s economy. They are **the most** innovative. They are **the best** exporters. We are **the best** importers. We are **most** effective. They are **the best** workers in the world”.

Senator McCain ostensibly brags about his people and their hard-work and uses superlative forms such as “the best”, “the most” for several times to show that something is to the greatest degree of a quality, in our case, American workers. Depending on the content he interchangeably uses first person plural pronoun “we” and third person plural pronoun “they”. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?281621-2/2008-presidential-candidates-debate>.

Dick Cheney against Senator John Edwards in vice-presidential candidates’ debate:

“What he said he (**George Bush**) **wanted** me to do was to sign on because of my **experience to be a member of the team, to help him govern**, and that’s exactly the way he **has used me**”.

This is very interesting example of complaint based humblebragging. Dick Cheney directs our attention to the fact that President George Bush himself asked him to become the member of his party because of his background and president still uses his wisdom to govern the country. If not President Bush and his insistence, we can assume that he might not even participate in elections. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?183584-1/vice-presidential-candidates-debate>.

[President Bill Clinton](https://www.c-span.org/video/?183584-1/vice-presidential-candidates-debate) against [Senator Bob Dole](https://www.c-span.org/video/?183584-1/vice-presidential-candidates-debate) prior to the 1996 presidential election:

“It’s a remarkable thing in a country like ours, a **man who grew up in Russell**, Kansas, and one who was **born to a widowed mother** in Hope, Arkansas, **could wind up running president**”.

This is very subtle example of humility based humblebragging. Bill Clinton tries to elicit liking from the audience by emphasizing on the fact that despite his origin and troublesome life, he managed to become one of the leading political faces of American history who is granted with the honor of becoming the president of the United States of America. He, himself characterizes his story with an adjective “remarkable” and as a result, consciously or unconsciously inspires hundreds of people not to give up their American dream and max out to achieve set goals. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?74273-1/1996-presidential-candidates-debate>

Senator John Kerry in debate with President George W. Bush prior to the 2004 presidential election:

“**I can make** America **safer than** president Bush has made us”.

In this short sentence, Senator Kerry, at the expense of directly pointing at the failure of his opponent to provide safety to his country, promotes his advantage via uttering self-superiority claims or in other words via comparative positive claims “I can make safer than”. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?183580-1/presidential-candidates-debate>.

H. Ross Perot in debate with President George H.W. Bush and [Governor Bill Clinton](https://www.c-span.org/video/?183580-1/presidential-candidates-debate) prior to the 1992 presidential election:

“The president mentioned that you need a right person in a crisis. Well, folks, we got one and that one is a financial crisis. Pretty simply, **who is the best qualified person up here on stage to create jobs?** Make your decision and vote on November the 3rd. **I suggest you might consider somebody who’s created jobs. Who’s the best person to manage money? I suggest you pick a person who’s successfully managed money. Who is the best person to get results and not talk? Look at the record and make your decision**”.

This is very fascinating example of humblebragging. Taking into account the fact that in the course of the whole debate he described himself as successful businessman, good at creating jobs and smartly investing money, brags very discreetly about himself. Humblebrag is achieved through asking rhetorical questions. At the first sight, he asks rhetorical questions usually expecting no answer, but on

the other hand, he acts in the role of responder when as if making suggestions who might be the right person for solving the problematic issues displayed in imposed questions. In difference with above represented politicians, he speaks in a very friendly and familiar way, directly addresses his electorate and himself provides responses to questions instead of them. <https://www.c-span.org/video/?33253-1/presidential-candidates-debate>.

Conclusion.

Based on above provided theoretical as well as practical materials it can be concluded that political debate resembles a polygon very much, politicians are in the battle with each other using words instead of the sword and bragging is very effective strategy to defeat the political foe.

Some politicians opt to use outright bragging and some of them humblebragging. Both of them are pretty compelling tactics to win the heart of the audience and it is achieved by means of the literary device such as repetition, actively employing of singular/plural forms of personal pronouns, idiomatic expressions to craft bragging episodes beautifully, adjectives with positive connotations, intensifier adverbs, comparison, most of the time perfect and past tenses to accentuate their jobs done, superlative forms “the best” “the most”, self-superiority claims, comparative positive claims, rhetorical questions etc.

After scanning the emotional temperature of the audience, real politician feels either brag overtly or in a concealed fashion and which of above named techniques to employ to take the reins of the audience. Real politician knows where is the line between under bragging and over bragging and those who are able to find the golden mean, deserve the liking of the people and get elected for the position they were craving for so long.

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