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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# ROMANTICIZING, AND EUPHEMIZING CENTURIES OF HISTORICAL AND MILITARY AGGRESSION AND HOSTILITIES: TRUMP'S SPEECH IN THE UNITED NATIONS IN 2017

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### ABSTRACT

Variation in language-use exists in everyday interactions and in all societies. This variation is real and cannot be overlooked. It is worth noting that this variation is systematic, i.e. it is done intentionally and to serve particular purposes. Status, solidarity, authority, power, control, and hegemony are goals served by language use. They are established and inculcated through economic and military supremacy and other formal governmental institutions. In referring to language-use as discourse, discourse is preferably perceived as a form of social practice and as a carrier of ideology. Viewing language-use as social practice implies, first, that it is a mode of action (Austin, 1962; Levinson, 1983) and, secondly, that it is always a socially and historically situated mode of action, in a dialectical relationship with other facets of 'the social' --it is socially shaped, but it is also socially shaping, or constitutive, Fairclough (1993). This paper argues that president Donald Trump's political and diplomatic capabilities are euphemized in a form of entrepreneurial and hegemonic discourse. In his repertoire, the language of threat, the romanticizing of military actions, jingoism, and falsification of historical events function to divert public attention away from his lack of knowledge of foreign policy.

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## INTRODUCTION

In order to remind nationals about their national identity, "banal words, jingling in the ears of the citizens, or passing before their eyes, are required". Such nationalism "operates with prosaic, routine words, which take nations for granted, and which, in so doing, inhabit them. Small words, rather than grand memorable phrases, offer constant, but rarely conscious, reminders of the homeland, making 'our' national identity unforgettable." (Billig 1995: 93). Among these small words is the deictic expression 'we'. The personal pronoun 'we' "appears to be of utmost importance in the discourses about nations and national identities" (de Cillia, Reisigl and Wodak 1999: 163), and has received increased attention in (national) identity studies. Brookes (1999) stipulates that it is unsafe to claim that whenever the words 'we' or 'us' are used in discourse it is the nation that is being automatically denoted. Indeed, most often the use of 'we' and 'us' was not explicitly linked to the nation within the text itself". (1999: 255). Brookes (1999: 256) further contends that even though not all 'we's in a text are explicitly 'national' in their nature, they could be interpreted as such.

The 'we' can facilitate shifts between different national categories and create very different Self/Other dialectics. Fowler (1991) suggests the existence of so-called 'implied consensus' and agreement whenever the deictic expression 'we' is used. Moreover, such "national deictic dialogically anticipates an instantaneous acceptance of speaker-listener unanimity" (Law 2001: p. 301). In this paper, such unanimity and consensus do not exist between Trump and the rest of the world leaders since power, authority, and egocentric rhetoric are the controlling factors of the scene. One can easily claim that in the case of Trump' rhetoric, these deictic expressions transcend nationalism to denote chauvinism.

**Hegemony/Dominance:** Hegemony entails combination of authority, leadership, and domination resulting in the predominance of one nation over another. Gramsci's definition of the term 'hegemony' goes further to include the intricacies of power relations in many different domains such as politics, history, cultural studies, and so forth. His definition further entails control with consent where the powerless side is coerced into obeying the powerful or the domineering side (Gramsci 1971, Forgacs 1988, Buci-Glucksmann 1980). The political domination is based upon a combination of 'domination'- control over the forces of repression and the capacity to use coercion against other groups, institution or

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governments - and 'intellectual and moral leadership' or 'hegemony' (Forgacs (1988): 249). In other words, this domination includes the combination of what is political and what is societal. This might affect leaders of hegemonized states as well as their citizens by hegemonic powers. Hegemony constructs oppressive leadership as well as domination across the political, cultural and ideological sectors of a society. Hegemony is the power over society as a whole with other social forces. It is a focus of constant struggle around points of greatest instability between blocs to construct or sustain or fracture alliances and relations of domination/subordination, which takes economic, political and ideological forms. Hegemonic struggle takes place on a broad front which includes the institutions of civil society with possible imbalance between different levels and domains, Fairclough (1995). Discourse is itself a carrier of all sorts of hegemony and control, and the hegemony of a class, a state, or a group over their counterparts or over particular institutions is a matter of its capacity to shape discursive practices and orders of discourse. One can easily conclude that hegemony can create and sustain different types of inequalities in societies such as political, ideological, educational, social, and economic inequalities. As a result, unfair distribution of power becomes prevalent. This gives a handful of powerful persons the room to unjustly and repressively dominate and control the majority in all social domains.

**Bureaucracy:** Studies of social control that use a bureaucracy perspective tend to emphasize the dangers involved when state agencies operate without sufficient democratic control (Benson, Rasmussen and Sollars 1995; O'Reilly 1987; Gamson and Yuchtman 1977; Useem 1997). Weber went as far as to equate bureaucracy with modern power: "domination is in everyday life primarily administration" (Weber 1922: p. 126). Bureaucracy can be defined as an apparatus created for the successful and efficient implementation of a certain goal or goals set up by oligarchies or elites. In this sense, bureaucracy is perceived as an excellent example of rationality and of subjective implementation of goals and provision of services. In other words, bureaucracy is seen as an instrument of power, of exercising control over people and over different domains of life, and of continuous prolongation of practice of such power in the interests of sponsors of such type of government or organization. This entails regimentation of social, political, economic, and religious lifestyle of the civilians.

**Text Analysis:** In what is an idiosyncratically simplistic, historically illiterate speech, Donald Trump once again attempts to moralize on issues of sovereignty and self-determination, peace, coexistence, humanitarian obligations, domestic and international policy, terrorism, and cultural values. Despite his vacuous idealizing, which forms the content of his speech, Trump's own nativist political posturings, as well as his imperialistic attitudes and flagrant xenophobia, are revealed through his verbal habits. For example, his over-abundance of inclusive pronouns --'our country', 'our borders', 'our citizens' --implicitly reasserts his narrow, exclusivist nationalistic sentiments and, by extension, his prescriptivist immigration policies. Based on knowledge of Trump's egregious personality, his history of repeated divisive comments and whether his usage of these pronouns is done intentionally or not, listener/reader can easily infer that the alternation of inclusive and exclusive pronouns is strategically done. Arguably this is a superficial expression of superiority and power, designed to placate or deceive. In other words,

when he intends to scare and intimidate other leaders and instill in them this feeling of imminent fear and danger, he uses the pronouns 'we', 'our', 'us', in the exclusive sense of the word, i.e. he excludes himself and his country since it is implicitly known by world leaders that America and the American president are immune from any threat, and that the only susceptible victims are the world leaders and their countries. For example: 'But each day also brings news of growing dangers that threaten everything *we* cherish and value'; 'To put it simply, *we* meet at a time of both immense promise and great peril'. In the previous examples, Trump used the pronoun 'we' to mean 'you' since what Americans value and cherish is protected politically and militarily. When his intention is to praise himself and America and the Americans, he uses the pronouns in the inclusive sense of the word where he means America and the Americans, i.e. 'we' the Americans, not *you* the rest of the world, who deserve the credit for whatever good has happened around the world. For example: 'Companies are moving back, creating job growth, the likes of which *our* country has not seen in a very long time, and it has just been announced that *we* will be spending almost \$700 billion on our military and defense. *Our* military will soon be the strongest it has ever been'; '*We* the people'; 'Generations of Americans have sacrificed to maintain the promise of those words, the promise of *our* country and of *our* great history'; 'In Syria and Iraq, *we* have made big gains toward lasting defeat of ISIS. In fact, *our* country has achieved more against ISIS in the last eight months than it has in many, many years combined. *We* seek the deescalation of the Syrian conflict, and a political solution that honors the will of the Syrian people'; '*We* have invested in better health and opportunity all over the world', 'In fact, *we* pay far more than anybody realizes'; '*We* cannot let a murderous regime continue these destabilizing activities while building dangerous missiles, and *we* cannot abide by an agreement if it provides cover for the eventual construction of a nuclear program'. All pronouns used in the previous examples refer to America, the American government and the American people who are credited for the wide variety of the good deeds described above.

This is matched by the crude moral polarities between good and evil, progressive and retrograde, within which he orientates America's ideological (colonial?) mission: the 'righteous' versus the 'wicked', the 'peaceful' and 'free' versus 'the valley of disrepair' (note the abstract, quasi-religious vocabulary); 'terrorists' and 'extremists' versus peacemakers, diplomats, and healers; criminality and 'danger' versus 'dreams' and 'opportunity'; the 'beautiful' versus 'violence, hatred, and fear.' In his repeated allusions to self-defense ('we must defend our freedom', 'defend our borders', 'defend our sovereignty' etc.), he implicitly portrays America as a victim, which forms the foundation of what becomes a dehistoricized and self-congratulatory commentary on America's precarious survival in the world, despite being one of the world's foremost military, economic, and imperialistic powers. He goes on, in a style comparable to that of a utopian manifesto, to speak of integration, coexistence, diplomacy, peace, and progress, and while such ideals are commendable in themselves, he reclaims them as uniquely 'western', or specifically 'American' values, in effect fortifying this masturbatory, self-congratulatory, and quite obviously dehistoricized account his country's cultural, ethical, and political contribution to the world, full of vacuous idealizing and flagrantly, abstractly simplified polarizing. Examples of his shameless dehistoricizing include his claims

that 'in America, we do not seek to impose our way of life on anyone' and, perhaps more shockingly, his claim that, following both World Wars, '[America] did not seek territorial expansion or attempt to oppose and impose our way of life on others' --clearly in contradiction with history given America's imperialistic carve-up of Korea in the 1950s; it's ideological opposition to communism that resulted in the Vietnam War and America's spurious fabrication of a government in South Vietnam; the US invasion of Panama, the Persian Gulf War, its interventions in Bosnia and Herzegovina in the 90s, in the 2000s the Invasion of Afghanistan, the infamous invasion of Iraq, and its continuing military and economic support for the maintaining of a settler-colonial Israeli state in Palestine. In rewriting, reconceptualizing, or omitting, American military and political history post-1945, Trump in effect lionizes America and Americans, presenting both as the exemplar of peace, progress, humanity, and democracy despite the fact that American forces have killed an estimated 20 million people in its wars, invasions, and occupations post-1945, and has been at war a total of 214 years in the 235 years of the country's existence.

Moreover, in his vague, fleeting, defensive acknowledgment of the wars America has participated in or instigated, he not only conceptualizes military aggression and colonial intervention as self-defense (thereby alluding to moral justification), but romanticizes war, murder, violence, and territoriality, speaking of sacrifice and valour, using emotive words such as 'devoted', 'righteous', 'principled', and 'victorious', as well as oxymoronic notions such as righteous violence and principled killing or the idea that peace is predicated on war. He inverts the offensive/defensive, moral/immoral, victim/victimizer dichotomy, as well as euphemizing military aggression in words such as 'security' or 'defense' (often used as a pretext for degrading the internal power structures of countries that differ ideologically or politically from America). In using such vocabulary, he is laying the groundwork for the eternal moral justification of all America's historic, contemporary, and forthcoming wars, invasions, and colonial practices. His omission of 70 years of U.S. history, and indeed his idealized fictionalizing and sentimentalizing of 235 years of U.S. history and domestic/international policy is contrasted by his narrow fixation on isolated incidents in North Korea --the Otto Warmbeir case for instance. Though tragic, Trump is using this incident to further (and justify) his provocations and dangerous incitements to nuclear war. He couches his representation of the North Korean regime in idiosyncratically hyperbolic accusations and colloquialisms --'twisted', 'reckless', 'deadly abuse' --as well as resorting to yet more infantile name-calling: 'Rocket man'. Once again, Trump exaggerates the threat posed to the West by what is, in reality, a small, reclusive, and geographically divided country. He moralizes, urging other the United Nations to deter, or defeat, North Korea, which becomes a platform from which he urges allied countries to attack, impose sanctions upon, or otherwise involve themselves militarily in countries that do not share or conform to western ideology and western political structures such as Iran which he accuses of 'mass murder' and jockeying for the 'death of America' and 'nations in this room'. He sensationalises the threat posed by North Korea and Iran in an attempt to justify military involvement and present the historically and contemporarily colonial West as the weak and plaintive victim: 'we cannot allow it [North Korea, Islamic regimes] to tear up our nation, and indeed to tear up the entire world'.

Dysphemism (exaggerating the bad qualities of your opponents to achieve a goal) is rhetorically used via political and moral polarities. Calling the North Korean president a "rocket man" and accusing Iran of 'mass murdering its people' is but one example of Trump's many ad hominem as well as his specious moralizing, which together act as a pretext for further aggression towards the country. In an extraordinary moral reversal, he also implies that *not* going to war, *not* imposing military rule, and *not* imposing crippling economic sanctions on such countries/regimes, contradicts the ethos and the moral/humanitarian obligations of bodies such as the United Nations. Further evidence of his nativist, anti-humanitarian policies can be seen in his portrayal of the refugee crisis that has emerged, in fact, from decades of western colonialism and ideological imperialism in the Middle East. When talking about immigration and refugees, instead of asserting America's moral and humanitarian obligations to displaced peoples, he represents America as an exploited, 'burdened' country, not as an affluent, culturally ubiquitous, self-sufficient county with major trade links with economic superpowers such as China and colonial influences/legacies in a number of weaker countries degraded and divided by America's ideological and/or military presence. Once again, he presents America as the valiant victim, the moral aggressor and those countries destroyed, divided or otherwise weakened by western military intervention as nefarious victimizers.

There are certainly narcissistic elements within Trump's speech. In order to legitimize and promote himself as a leader and to give credibility to his ideas, he portrays as the moral arbiter of the world, a man for whom divisiveness and explicit or implicit racism, sexism, xenophobia, and ethnocentrism should be not only tolerated but celebrated as a kind of 'truth' or honesty, and whose rise to the presidency should be regarded as providential. Fallacies are easily detected in his arguments. For example: 'For decades the United States has dealt with migration challenges here in the Western Hemisphere'; 'The Venezuelan people are starving, and their country is collapsing'; 'The socialist dictatorship of Nicolás Maduro has inflicted terrible pain and suffering on the good people of that country'; 'Major portions of the world are in conflict, and some, in fact, are going to hell'; 'Fortunately, the United States has done very well since Election Day last November 8'; 'Out of the goodness of our hearts, we offer financial assistance to hosting countries in the region', and so forth. These are indeed all examples of his politics of distraction, his flagrant ad hominem combined with his self-aggrandizement and fascistic fear-mongering all attempts to justify and celebrate his presence in the White House. In fixation and frequent derogatory commentaries on the crises, outrages, and upheavals experienced in other countries do not imply humanitarian concern but are far more self-serving in their intent. The sensationalism, pathos, and hyperbole with which he narrates the problems of other countries are in effect an invitation to the American people to contemplate the comparative stability and comparative peace of America -- which, quite possibly, in the mind of President Trump is in the most Messianic sense attributable to him and him alone.

## Conclusion

The speech, then, is characterized by the following rhetorical strategies: pathos, euphemism, sentimentality, sensationalism, and hyperbole, all of which are complemented by the content of Trump's speech which amounts to historically illiterate

idealizing and hypocritical moralizing, the inversion of moral and ethical polarities, and the strenuous, sensationalized, and tiresomely protracted or repetitive representation of isolated incidents in enemy states such as the murder of Warmbeir by the North Korean regime, all the time censoring, re-authoring, or else romanticizing America's 235 year political and military history. As in the majority of his speeches, the success and influence of his arguments are predicated on the extent to which he can elicit an *emotional* rather than intellectual reaction from his audience, and the extent to which he can present himself as a force for good, not in and of itself, but *in comparison* to other leaders and nations –hence his reliance on *ad hominem*s. The 'power' structures at work in his speech are easily dismantled by anyone with a working knowledge of history, politics, and rhetoric, and as such the rhetorical power or influence might well be regarded as commensurate to the ignorance of his audience.

His discourse can easily be characterized as hegemonic, discriminatory, and entrepreneurial, where outcomes are always measured by or conceptualized as winning or losing. In this sense, there is no existence of what is called 'grey area' which is a successful strategy in politics and diplomacy. Some may conclude that Trump, as a businessman, is considered a burden for American diplomacy and foreign policy since his goal is to consolidate chauvinism in a world where politicians in secular democratic countries ordinarily or more commonly engage in the more nuanced rhetoric of diplomacy and compromise. There is no simple and banal national 'we' in in Trump's rhetoric, but a kaleidoscopic abundance of conflicting and antagonistic 'we's. Heads of states in general and Gulf states in particular are targeted by Trump's speech. They are perceived as working for Trump's, and this gives rise to vertical communication. In this type of communication, heads of states must listen to and obey the master, subordinating other nations to the will and the ideologies of Trump who represents, at least in his own estimation, the world's moral and political authority ahead of his competitors. Exploration of the above mentioned examples indicates that similar contextual variations happen with other deictic notions in the like 'nation', 'people', 'history', and so forth.

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