Representation of Power in Media to Cast a Negative Light on Obama's 2016 Presidential Election Race: A Discourse Analysis of "Lame duck…"

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Résumé : « Lame duck ... » est une analyse politique au sujet de la course électorale présidentielle 2016 d'Obama, publié par CNN, sur leur site électronique sous forme de nouvelles en ligne, le 13 juin 2015. Le but de cet article est de mettre en évidence le pouvoir des médias pris en compte dans cet article. Le cadre théorique utilisé pour le décodage a été la Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), théorie de Van Dijk (2001). L'analyse de la langue au niveau de la micro-analyse, l'emploi de la prosodie sémantique négative des unités lexicales étendues, a été étudiée pour révéler comment le pouvoir des médias dans les discours des nouvelles a été en mesure de jeter une lumière négative sur la course électorale présidentielle 2016 d'Obama. Alors qu'au niveau de la macro-analyse, le choix du sujet a été étudié pour voir comment CNN a manipulé le lectorat, l'échec d'Obama, et sa quasi-défaite au cours des 18 prochains mois des élections présidentielles. Les résultats ont révélé que le pouvoir des médias, reflété dans cet article, a tenté de saper le rôle politique d'Obama et de démoraliser ses partisans, en révélant son échec et quasi-défaite lors des prochaines élections présidentielles.

Mots-clés: discours des médias, le pouvoir et les médias, l'analyse critique du discours, CDA, la prosodie sémantique.

Introduction

"Lame duck…", one of CNN's online news article, published by Collinson[1] on June 13, 2015, (see the article in Appendix A) is a political

[1] Stephen Collinson is a senior enterprise reporter for CNN Politics, covering the 2016 presidential campaign and politics across the United States and around the world. (http://edition.cnn.com/profiles/stephen-collinson#about).

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analysis that satirically revolved around how Obama seemed to be on the verge of losing power to reassume office in the 2016 presidential election race. As Bump (2015) discussed in the Washington Post, although Obama was prohibited to run for re-elections, he could have run for a third term and even be successful.[2] But the idiomatic headline "Lame duck: Democrats clip President Obama's wings" suggests that the media casts a strong negative light on the whole event and highlights his failure.

Media Discourse

The term "Media" was introduced to the public, when mass communication started giving ground to its various models via the Internet, through the low cost of electronic communication. It has come to mean the technologies of communication and the public & private corporations that use them. For example, Shaw et al. (2000)[3] gave a good example of President Clinton's the Starr report (1998), which was made available online to journalists and the public simultaneously. Within two days, almost twenty-five million people had accessed it. This reflects a changing model of news production and dissemination and reveals a more active reader approach to news through new electronic means of communication that result in different patterns of interaction among interlocutors. Since then, the discourse of online news has become a news genre by itself. Similarly, Brown & Duguid (2000, *ibid*.) added that although meaning can be inferred from the form and the distribution, efficient communication mainly relies on how much is left unsaid.

Moreover, media discourse is manufactured for the public, on record, spoken or written interaction, through broadcast platform. O'Keeffe (2013)[4] considered it crucial to continually assess the messages that are consumed from the manufactured mass media, and study its production at a literal and an ideological level. When she said that media discourse was public, she also meant that it fell under the study of many conversation analysts who were interested in it as a form of institutional talk, which could be compared with other forms of talk, both ordinary and institutional. The fact that media discourse was on record made it attractive for discourse analysts; because newspapers, radio stations, television programs and so on were easily accessible online. O'Keeffe added that major advances in technology have greatly offset the transitory factor that used to relate to media discourse. At the same time, she considered that the analyses of media language and discourse are not deprived of risks:"linguistic analysis of newspaper media is very often sceptical, and

[2] Philip Bump (July 28, 2015). "So, could Barack Obama actually win reelection in 2016?" https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/

[3] Aitchison, J. and Lewis, D. (2004).*New Media Language*, pp.95-101, USA: Routledge.

[4] O'Keeffe, A. (2013). "Media and discourse analysis". In Gee, J.G. & Handford, M. (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, p.441.London: Routledge.

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linguists sometimes see themselves as policing the subtle manipulation of language to distort reality."[5]

Power and media

Power of media, as Van Dijk (1996)[6] discussed, is the social relation between a powerful group that controls the actions and the minds of the less powerful. Power of media is symbolic, persuasive and manipulative. Mediated information is biased or concealed in such a way that it can manipulate the minds of the readers by changing their knowledge and beliefs to its interest and communicate beliefs implicitly.

Thus, to interpret the persuasive nature of news media, one needs to know how the strategy of that discourse relates to its institution, and the structural properties of news reports manipulate their readers.[7] So one important strand of research in media discourse, as discussed by O'Keeffe (2013)[8], is critical discourse analysis (CDA).

Critical discourse analysis

CDA, as Van Dijk (2001)[9] suggested, is a discourse analytical research that studies how social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are ratified, reproduced, and resisted by text and discourse in the social and political context. Analysts seek to expose and resist social inequality. They look at how discourse structures are employed in the reproduction of social dominance, in various genres and contexts i.e. news report. When scholars studied the vocabulary in CDA, it reflected power, dominance, hegemony, ideology, class, gender and inequality. The most important part here is power in terms of control. Powerful groups who have scarce social resources (i.e. force, money, status, fame, knowledge, information) can also have access to specific forms of discourse (i.e. politics, media, or science) and are able to control the minds, knowledge and opinions of others as well as their actions.

Moreover, to understand how texts affect readers, in his CDA approach, Van Dijk (2001)[10] developed two types of analyses: a) Micro-level analysis of the text where language use, discourse, verbal interaction (in terms of syntax and lexis) are analyzed for implicit connotations, and b) Macro-level analysis at the global level of discourse, which looks at topics as: power, dominance, and social inequality, and at who controls them and how editors decide what news

[5] *ibid.*
[6] Van Dijk, T. A. (1996). "Power and the news media". In Paletz, D.L. (Ed.), *Political Communication in Action*, pp. 9-10. Cresskill, N.J. :Hampton Press.
[7] *Ibid*, pp.10-11.
[8] See footnote 5.
[9] VanDijk, T. (2001). "Critical discourse analysis". In Schiffrin, D., Tannen, D. & Hamilton, H. (Eds.). *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis*, pp. 352-355. USA: Blackwell.
[10] *Ibid*., p.356.

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topics will be covered and when. Van Dijk (1985)[11] drew that one can find the main theme or topic of the discourse usually in titles, headlines, or by initial thematic or final summarizing sentences, in a specific semantic choice that reflects the author's style and voice.

Semantic prosody

Martinez and Schmitt (2012)[12] argued that when studying language in depth, one finds out that it is made up of a great deal of formulaic language that behave as individual words, matching a single meaning or function to a form, although that form consists of multiple orthographic or phonological units (i.e. idioms, collocations, phrasal verbs, fixed expressions…) These formulaic sequences do more than just carry denotative meaning and realize pragmatic function; to Schmitt (2010)[13] they can often have a type of register marking called *semantic prosody*, a means of showing a speaker/writer's attitude or evaluation. *Semantic prosody* could be positive, for example, in collocations that form around the word *provide* (provide information, provide services); as well as it could be negative, such as the verb *cause* that frequently has a negative evaluation (cause pain, cause inflation). Moreover, to Stubbs (2004)[14], this classic distinction of syntax (how language units relate to one another), semantics (how linguistic signs relate to the external world), and pragmatics (how linguistic signs relate to their users, here expression of speaker attitude) aimed at making the lexico–grammatical boundary more explicit. Its occurrence is reflected widely in general English, in broad varieties (e.g., journalism) restricted to specialized text-types (e.g., recipes: finely chopped; or weather forecasts: warm front); and it has profoundly influenced dictionary design as Cowie (1998) and language teaching as Hunston (2002)[15].

Methodology

The aim of this analysis is to interpret the persuasive nature of the news media (CNN) language and its power to control the readership in the "Lame duck…" So Van Dijk's (2001)[16] *Critical Discourse Analysis* (CDA) is adopted and the corpus is studied for implicit connotations at the following two levels:

[11] Van Dijk, T. (1985). *Handbook of Discourse Analysis: Dimensions of Discourse*, vol. 2, p.115. London: Academic Press

[12] Martinez, R. and Schmitt, N. (2012). "A phrasal expressions list". In *Applied Linguistics*, 33 (3), pp.299–320. UK: Oxford University Press.

[13] Schmitt, N. (2010). *Researching Vocabulary: A Vocabulary Research Manual*, 1 (17), p.120. New York: Macmillan.

[14] Stubbs, M. (2004). "Semantic preference, discourse prosody, and extended lexical units". In Davies A. Elder, C. (Eds.) (2004), *The Handbook Of Applied Linguistics*, (pp.121-122). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing UK

[15] *Ibid*, p.122.

[16] See footnote 9.

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Analysis at the micro-level.To unveil the writer's attitude or evaluation against his target, president Obama, the nature of the semantic prosody of formulaic language employed in the article was studied, namely:

- Idioms
- Collocations
- Phrasal verbs

Analysis at themacro-level. At this level the following criteria were studied:

- the main news topic of this discourse at the global level
- who controls it?
- the reason for covering it at that period of time,
- the anticipation of the headline to the major theme.

At the end, the 2 levels were crosschecked to form a unified whole.

Results

To unveil the writer's attitude or evaluation against his target, president Obama, we performed an analysis at two levels; so implicit connotations and the communicative purpose were also evaluated.

At the micro-level analysis, the negative semantic prosody of formulaic language was studied. As seen in tables 1, 2, 3, the mapped formulaic sequence subsets, as idiomatic expressions, collocations, and phrasal verbs, were grouped by patterns; and the theme of each expression was indicated in a separate column.

Table 1. ***Extracted idioms in negative prosody***

Idioms	Theme
Pattern: nominal (Adj+Noun)	
1."Lame duck"	Ineffectual politician
2."a last-ditcheffort"	Final effort in a difficult situation
Pattern: verbal idioms	
3."Democrats *clip* President Obama's *wings"*	Irreversible power limitation
4."the president … *placing* his personal prestige *on the line …"*	To put the reputation at risk
5."but he [Obama] *came up empty-handed*"	Failure
6."he … *seemed loath* (Adj.) to*go the extra mile*"	No pursuit, reluctant to exert more effort

As illustrated in Table 1, the extended lexical units of negative prosody are pertinent to the formulaic sequence subset, idioms, in different patterns (for ease of reference these units are marked with numbers). The meanings of the

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mentioned idioms were retrieved from Seidl & McMordie (2003)[17] and New Oxford, (2010)[18]. The first pattern was the nominal idioms (Adj .+ Noun). The writer opens up the headline with 1."Lame duck" (Adj. + Noun), which means a person or enterprise that is not a success and that has to be helped. In politics, "Lame duck" is often referred to politicians who are known to be in their final term of office, when colleagues and electors look toward a successor. As Van Dijk (1985)[19] opined, headlines usually introduce the highest topic in media discourse; here it is clear how the reporter anticipated the theme of failure on one hand and sparked the reader's curiosity through political satire on the other. The image of a lame duck with clipped wings is a satire that fits Obama's political role back then; as well as it sheds a negative light on the period preceding the U.S. 2016 presidential election. Moreover, another nominal idiom is 2."a last-ditch effort" (adj+noun) that occurred in "The President… placing his personal prestige on the line in *a last-ditch effort.*" It means that one's last defence or effort is in a difficult situation, as in a near defeat state, a situation that fits Obama's. Moreover, the second pattern was the verbal idioms. It opened up in the headline, 3."Democrats *clip* President Obama's *wings*", the verb "clip" is so sharp, it means to cut short or trim with shears or scissors, indicating an irreversible power limitation. Beyond its literal meaning, to "clip someone's wings" is an idiomatic expression, which means to limit a person's power or influence so as to slow down his/her action or plans. When his own party, the Democrats clips President Obama's wings, it yields a negative connotation of being in a near defeat status in his re-election race. In the opening of the article, the writer says: 4."The president… *placing* his personal prestige *on the line*… to convince… Democrats to give him the power…". This informal verbal idiom, "To place or lay something on the line" means to put something (as reputation/career) at risk. The double-edged sword here is first, that as long as he seeks/asks for power it suggests that he doesn't have it; second, he is placing his present status as a president at stake by taking the risk of getting rejected. Moreover, the consequence of this component (4) comes out negatively in 5."But he [Obama] *came up empty-handed*…" which means failure to achieve what someone expected, due to a problem or a situation that presents unexpectedly. There is an apparent use of negative connotation embedded in this idiom, Obama failed to get his party's approval on giving him power, so his mission was unfruitful. We realize that the failure connotation is adding up. The last idiom is 6. "he… seemed loath *to go the extra mile*" that occurred in "But the fact that he has only 18 months to go in office and has often seemed loath *to go the extra mile* to build coalitions on Capitol Hill [congress] may have caught up with him." The expression "to be loath" (V seem +Adj. loath) means to be reluctant, unwilling, resistant; and the idiom "to go the extra mile" means to be assiduous in one's attempt to achieve

[17] Seidl, J. & McMordie, W. (2003). *English Idiom Dictionary*. (5th ed.) Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press.
[18] *New Oxford American Dictionary*. (2010). (3rd ed.).
[19] See footnote 11.

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something. So the two expressions in one extended unit reflect a negative sense, the President didn't take the initiative for his success, he seemed reluctant to exert more effort to build alliances on Congress, in that limited time.

Table 2. ***Extracted collocations in negative prosody***

Collocations	Theme
Pattern: (Verb+Noun) 7."It may go down as the day Barack Obama could *no longer defy* political *gravity*."	Helplessness
8."[Democrats] mostly Voted *to repudiate* The *agreement*"	Rejection, abandonment
Pattern: (Adj. + Noun) 9."Globalization-*weary* House *Democrats"* tired of Globalization issues	Disappointment
10."*setback*… (N) for America's *economy* and its place in the world"	Difficulty
11. "he [Obama] is on an *unstoppable slide*"	preventable cline
12."his *muscular* use of executive *power* on issues such as immigration and climate change"	eversal tire of inability

As illustrated in Table 2, the extended lexical unit of negative prosody is pertinent to the formulaic sequence subset, collocations in different patterns.

The meanings of the collocations are retrieved from (Oxford, Collocations, 2002)[20] and (New Oxford, 2010)[21]. A negative connotation, in the (Verb+Noun) collocations pattern, opens up in the subheading 7."It may go down as the day Barack Obama *could no longerdefy political gravity*." "No longer defy" (V) means to lose the ability to challenge, combat, stop; "gravity" (N) means the severity and magnitude of a certain situation, in this case the political. This means that the near future may witness the President won't be able to challenge political severe situation leading him to a state of helplessness, in the magnitude of unequal forces. So the association of the Verb+Noun enforces the negative connotation with respect to his success, Obama being on

[20] *Oxford Collocations Dictionary: For students of English*. (2002). UK: Oxford Univ. Press.
[21] See footnote 18.

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the loser side. The (Verb+Noun) collocation 8."[Democrats] mostly voted *to repudiate the agreement.*…" where the verb "repudiate" means to reject, abandon, when used with the noun "agreement" it means to refuse the fulfilment of an agreement. The outcome was a sharp and final refusal, Obama failed to get his party's approval on giving him power of negotiation. So his own party rejected him, here another sign of failure is prevailed. The (Adj.+Noun) collocation, 9."Globalization-weary House Democrats", where the adj. "Globalization-weary" preceding the noun "Democrats" means tired of Globalization, occurred in "to convince globalization-weary House Democrats to give him the power", is an embedded message that the House Democrats, Obama's party are fatigued of Globalization issues coinciding with his office. An "economic setback" (Adj.+Noun) collocation is mapped in 10."to repudiate the agreement -- a setback… (N) for America's economy and its place in the world." "Setback"(N) means difficulty, hindrance, and disappointment in economy. "Setback"(N) collocates with adjectives i.e. economic, financial, military… Here although "setback"(N) and "economy" (N) occur as nouns, the underlying meaning of expression (10) is "to repudiate the agreement is an *economic setback*…" A difficulty in the American economy would sound a nationwide critical issue, leaving a detrimental effect on the reader. Another (Adj+Noun) Collocation is 11. "he [Obama]is on an *unstoppable slide.*" "Unstoppable" (Adj.) means irrepressible, uncontrollable; and "slide"(N) means decline, collocating together means that "he is on a continuous irreversible downfall, heading to the bottom, as if taking a nosedive," a strongly negative indicator. This same idea is extended in the next collocation (Adj.+Noun) "muscular power" satirically occurring in: 12."his *muscular* use of *executive power* on issues such as immigration and climate change". "Muscular" (adj) means powerful; "Executive power" (Adj.+Noun) means having the power to put actions, plans or laws into effect. So executing his presidential powerful authority on issues as immigration and climate change following serious issues as difficulty in (10) "America's economy and its place in the world" sounds like an obvious reversal satire of his state of inability in executive management.

Table 3. ***Extracted phrasal verb in negative prosody***

Phrasal verb	**Theme**
Pattern: (V+Adv.+Prep.) 13."Capitol Hill may have *caught up with* him."	A damaging effect

As illustrated in Table 3, the extended lexical unit of negative prosody is pertinent to the formulaic sequence subset, phrasal verbs. The phrasal verb 13."caught up with" in the consequence of the component "[He] seemed loath to go the extra mile to build coalitions on Capitol Hill may have *caught up with* him" reflects lethally a negative meaning. This phrasal verb "to catch up with

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someone" means to overtake and affect someone in a negative way to start having a damaging effect (Seidl & McMordie, 2003; New Oxford, 2010), specially if the police or people in authority catch up with someone, they finally find out that they have done something wrong and punish them (*Oxford Phrasal Verbs, 2002*). When the president runs short of time and is reluctant to work hard to build coalitions on Congress this would end up leaving a damaging effect on his re-election race. As if it is the peak of the failure connotation.

Finally, the formulaic sequence subsets, in different patterns, mapped in this news discourse, dealt with salient themes such as: irreversible power limitation, failure, decline in value, inability, near defeat and risk factor. These themes revealed negative semantic prosody. The communicative purpose of which was to shed a negative light on Obama's 2016 presidential election race.

The Macro-level analysis

Van Dijk's (2001) critical discourse analysis (CDA) at the macro-level (the global level) looked at the main news topic of this discourse, as well as who controls it and why it is covered at this period of time. As discussed earlier, the headline here anticipated the major theme of the discourse, Obama's failure in the upcoming elections, summarized as, "Lame duck: Democrats clip President Obama's wings". The reporter draws the satirical image of a *lame duck,* which represents a politician, in this case Obama, who is in his final term of office; and whose own party put an end to his privileges *clipping his wings,* they limit his power or influence so as to slow down his action or plans. When his own party, the Democrats, clips his wings it means he is in a definite irreversible defeat position in his re-election race. The power controller here is CNN; the manipulated group comprises of the readership, Obama and his supporters. This power effect intends to demoralize Obama, undermine his political role, by revealing his failure and near defeat in the upcoming 18 months of presidential elections to his supporters and the readers. Furthermore, to support the theme of failure, the writer hints to *political concession*[22] mixed with satire in the components of this article. When the writer satirically says: "Until now, Obama has defied expectations that he is on an unstoppable slide to becoming a president, partly through his muscular use of executive power on issues such as immigration and climate change" he means that instead of exercising his executive powers as a president on issues that concern nationwide, Obama is busy with issues as immigration and climate change. This means, he has not defied his status as a future U.S. President in the limited time he is left with, which by itself is an indicator of getting into a state of political concession. Given that the power of media is persuasive and manipulative on the public, the timing of this article is 18 months prior to 2016 U.S. presidential elections, which occurred in "But the fact that he has only 18 months to go in office."

[22] In politics, concession is the act of losing candidacy publicly, the failure or cessation to challenge an election (*New Oxford*, 2010).

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In conclusion, the results obtained at the two levels yielded a common resolution supporting the criterion validity of both analyses. The linguistic analysis at the micro-level revealed the negative semantic prosody of the extended lexical units, in idiomatic expressions, e.g. *Lame duck, clip …wings*, phrasal verb *catch up with* and collocations *Obama… is on an unstoppable slide*. The covert communicative purpose of this choice dealt with themes as, irreversible power limitation, failure, decline in value, disappointment, near defeat and risk factor in his re-election. The communicative purpose of this choice was to lead the reader to associate the negative connotation to Obama's political role in 2016 presidential election race. The macro-level analysis revealed the main news topic of this discourse, anticipated in the headline "Lame duck…" to engrain the theme of failure on one hand and to spark the reader's curiosity and political satire on the other. The media power was controlled by CNN, addressed to the readership, comprising of Obama and his supporters, to undermine Obama's political role and demoralize his supporters, by revealing his failure and near defeat in the upcoming presidential elections. Van Dijk was true when he said that power of media manipulates the knowledge and beliefs of the readership to its interest.

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Appendix A

Lame duck: Democrats clip President Obama's wings

By Stephen Collinson, CNN, June 13, 2015

Washington (CNN) It may go down as the day Barack Obama could no longer defy political gravity.

The President went all in Friday, placing his personal prestige on the line in a last-ditch effort to convince globalization-weary House Democrats to give him the power to negotiate the world's biggest trade pact, a vital building block in his legacy. But he came up empty-handed when his own party mostly voted to repudiate the agreement -- a setback that could have profound implications for America's economy and its place in the world, as well as how Obama's two terms are seen by history.

Until now, Obama has defied expectations that he is on an unstoppable slide to becoming a president, partly through his muscular use of executive power on issues such as immigration and climate change. But the fact that he has only 18 months to go in office and has often seemed loath to go the extra mile to build coalitions on Capitol Hill may have caught up with him.

Retrieved 15/6/2015 from:

http://edition.cnn.com/2015/06/12/politics/trade-deal-obama-defeat-democrats/index.html?utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=feed&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+rss%2Fcnn_topstories+%28RSS%3A+CNN+-+Top+Stories%29

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