

Words Matter: Appraisal Theory in Action During the 2024 Harris-Trump Presidential Debate

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Abstract

This study applies Appraisal theory, a component of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), to analyze the evaluative language used by Kamala Harris and Donald Trump in the 2024 U.S. presidential debate. The research focuses on three key subsystems of Appraisal theory i.e., attitude, engagement, and graduation to explore how both candidates express emotions, engage with opposing views, and amplify their positions. A qualitative approach was employed, analyzing the debate transcript in terms of evaluative patterns. The findings reveal contrasting communication strategies: Harris frequently used affect and judgment to convey empathy and moral responsibility, while Trump amplified his judgments to criticize opponents and institutions. These evaluative strategies reflect broader ideological divides and highlight the emotional and rhetorical tools politicians use to influence public perception. The study contributes to the understanding of political discourse in a polarized context, offering insights into the dynamics of contemporary U.S. political rhetoric.

Keywords: Appraisal theory, SFL, U.S. presidential debate, evaluative language, Kamala Harris, Donald Trump.

Introduction

The 2024 U.S. presidential debate between Kamala Harris, the Democratic nominee, and Donald Trump, the Republican nominee, offers a compelling case study for analyzing the intricacies of political discourse. This debate, situated in a deeply polarized political environment, was marked by significant rhetorical exchanges that reflected not only differing policy stances but also divergent communication styles.

This study employs Appraisal theory, a key component of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), to examine the evaluative strategies used by Kamala Harris and Donald Trump during the 2024 U.S. presidential debate. Appraisal theory, developed by Martin and White (2005), is a linguistic framework that analyses how speakers express their attitudes, engage with multiple voices, and amplify or mitigate the force of their evaluations. The theory consists of three major subsystems i.e., attitude, engagement, and graduation which allow analysts to explore how language conveys emotions, judgments, and stances toward others and the world. The framework is especially relevant in political contexts, where language functions not only to inform but also to persuade and shape public opinion.

Research Context and Rationale

The U.S. political landscape in 2024 was highly polarized, with significant divisions between the Democratic and Republican parties. This polarization was evident in both candidates' rhetoric during the debate. Kamala Harris, serving as Vice President under the Biden administration,

emphasized unity, competence, and moral responsibility, positioning herself as a continuation of the Biden presidency's policies, which focused on addressing economic inequality, healthcare reform, and climate change. Donald Trump, on the other hand, drew heavily on populist rhetoric, similar to his approach in the 2016 and 2020 elections, criticizing the political establishment and portraying himself as an outsider who would "drain the swamp." His discourse was marked by direct attacks on his opponent, the media, and the political elite, using a range of linguistic strategies to appeal to his base of supporters.

Given this context, the 2024 debate provides a fertile ground for applying Appraisal theory to understand how both candidates utilized language to express their evaluative positions. Harris and Trump's contrasting communication styles and ideological stances offer insights into how attitude, engagement, and graduation are strategically employed in political discourse to appeal to voters' emotions, values, and beliefs. This study seeks to provide a detailed analysis of these linguistic strategies, offering a nuanced understanding of the debate's dynamics and its potential impact on public opinion.

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to the field of political discourse analysis by applying Appraisal theory to a high-stakes, contemporary political event. While Appraisal theory has been widely used in various political contexts, including presidential debates, election speeches, and media coverage, its application to the 2024 U.S. presidential debate offers new insights into how evaluative language functions in a deeply polarized political climate. The contrasting communication styles of Kamala Harris and Donald Trump, representing different ideological camps, provide a rich context for exploring the interplay between language, power, and persuasion.

Moreover, this study contributes to the growing body of literature on the role of emotional and evaluative appeals in political discourse. As previous research has shown, political leaders increasingly rely on *affect*, *judgment*, and *graduation* to connect with voters on an emotional level, especially in an era of widespread media consumption and social polarization. By analyzing the rhetorical strategies used in the 2024 debate, this study aims to shed light on the linguistic mechanisms that shape public perception and political engagement.

In conclusion, the application of Appraisal theory to the 2024 U.S. presidential debate offers valuable insights into the evaluative strategies used by political candidates to persuade and mobilize voters. Through a detailed linguistic analysis, this study seeks to enhance our understanding of political communication in an era of increasing polarization and emotional appeals.

Literature Review

Appraisal theory has garnered significant scholarly attention, especially regarding its application in political discourse. The theory's focus on evaluative language offers a nuanced framework for analyzing how speakers express emotions, judgments, and attitudes, making it particularly relevant for analyzing the rhetorical strategies of political figures. Over the past decade, numerous studies have explored the role of Appraisal theory in political speeches, debates, and other forms of discourse, especially in polarized environments like election campaigns. This literature review provides research on the use of Appraisal theory in political discourse, with a particular focus on election debates, leadership rhetoric, and media framing of political figures.

According to Martin and White (2005), the three primary subsystems of Appraisal i.e., *attitude*, *engagement*, and *graduation* allow for a detailed understanding of how political figures negotiate interpersonal meanings. *Attitude* captures how speakers evaluate phenomena in terms of *affect* (emotion), *judgment* (morality/ethics), and *appreciation* (aesthetic evaluation). *Engagement* deals with how speakers position themselves in relation to other voices, either dialogically engaging with or rejecting alternative views. Finally, *graduation* modulates the intensity of those evaluative meanings, either amplifying or downscaling their force.

One of the most widely studied subsystems in Appraisal theory, *attitude*, has been the focus of several studies on political discourse. According to Ahn (2010), *affect*, *judgment*, and *appreciation* are essential for political figures to establish an emotional connection with their audience, making their policies appear personally relevant. Ahn's study on South Korean presidential speeches illustrates how political leaders leverage *affect* to evoke empathy, while *judgment* is used to critique opponents on moral and ethical grounds.

A study by Bednarek and Caple (2014) explored *attitude* in news media reporting of political events, showing how media outlets use *affect* and *judgment* to shape public perception of politicians. They found that media often amplifies negative judgments of political figures, framing them in ways that align with specific ideological biases. This study is crucial for understanding how *attitude* is not only a tool for politicians but also for media outlets to construct narratives around political figures. Similarly, Chen (2017) analyzed the use of *attitude* in Chinese political discourse, specifically focusing on President Xi Jinping's speeches. The study found that Xi often used *affect* and *appreciation* to emphasize China's cultural and historical achievements, thereby constructing a positive narrative of national pride. Xi's use of *judgment*, meanwhile, was more subdued but aimed at foreign nations, subtly critiquing their policies without direct confrontation. This strategic use of *attitude* allows Xi to foster unity within China while maintaining a diplomatic stance internationally.

In Western political discourse, a study by Boréus (2014) on European right-wing populist parties illustrated how *attitude* is deployed to amplify fear and uncertainty among the electorate. Right-wing leaders often use *affect* to evoke fear of immigration and economic insecurity, while *judgment* is used to frame liberal political elites as corrupt or disconnected from the concerns of ordinary citizens. Boréus argues that *attitude*, particularly *negative judgment*, plays a critical role in shaping populist rhetoric, contributing to the polarization of political discourse.

The *engagement* subsystem of Appraisal theory, which deals with the interaction between different voices in discourse, has become increasingly relevant in the context of political debates and media interactions. Political figures often navigate between presenting their own views as authoritative (*monoglossia*) or acknowledging alternative perspectives (*heteroglossia*).

A comprehensive analysis by Lemke (2012) explored the *engagement* subsystem in the context of U.S. presidential debates. Lemke found that candidates who successfully use *heteroglossia*, acknowledging their opponents' perspectives while countering them effectively, often gain an advantage in debates. Barack Obama, for example, frequently employed *heteroglossic* strategies in the 2012 U.S. presidential debates, acknowledging economic concerns raised by his opponent while affirming his administration's solutions. This strategy enabled Obama to appear both open-minded and authoritative, enhancing his credibility among undecided voters.

Similarly, Cheng and Kong (2019) explored the use of *engagement* in Hong Kong's legislative debates, where pro-democracy and pro-Beijing factions often clash. They found that pro-democracy politicians tend to use *heteroglossia* to engage with public concerns about Chinese

interference, acknowledging fears while advocating for autonomy. Pro-Beijing politicians, on the other hand, tend to adopt *monoglossic* strategies, presenting Beijing's policies as indisputable facts. Cheng and Kong argue that *engagement* plays a pivotal role in how political figures align themselves with or against various ideological positions.

The *engagement* subsystem has also been applied to media discourse. Montini (2017) examined how different news outlets use *engagement* to frame political controversies, such as the Brexit referendum. Pro-Brexit media tended to employ *monoglossic* strategies, presenting Brexit as the only viable solution to reclaim national sovereignty. Conversely, anti-Brexit media used *heteroglossia* to engage with concerns about economic and social consequences. Montini's study highlights how *engagement* in media discourse can shape public perception by either reinforcing or challenging dominant narratives.

The *graduation* subsystem of Appraisal theory, which modulates the intensity of evaluations, has been instrumental in understanding how political figures amplify or downscale their rhetoric. According to White (2012), political figures frequently use *graduation* to emphasize the urgency or significance of their policies, particularly during election campaigns.

Souto-Manning (2014) analyzed the use of *graduation* in Brazilian presidential debates, finding that candidates often use intensifiers to amplify their achievements or to dramatize their opponents' failures. For example, then-President Dilma Rousseff used superlatives like "the best healthcare program" to elevate her government's achievements, while her opponent used terms like "utter failure" to describe her economic policies. This amplification through *graduation* heightened the stakes of the debate, making it a crucial tool for candidates to sway public opinion.

In the context of U.S. political discourse, Smith (2020) examined how Donald Trump used *graduation* in his 2016 and 2020 presidential campaigns. Trump frequently employed superlatives, such as "greatest," "biggest," and "most successful," to amplify his self-presentation as a successful businessman and political outsider. At the same time, he used negative *graduation* to downscale his opponents' credibility, referring to them as "disasters" or "total failures." Smith's study highlights how *graduation* can serve as a polarizing rhetorical tool, reinforcing stark contrasts between political figures.

Similarly, Thompson (2019) explored how *graduation* is used in European Union (EU) political discourse, particularly in speeches surrounding the Eurozone crisis. EU politicians frequently used *graduation* to intensify the perceived urgency of economic reforms, with terms like "critical" and "unprecedented" appearing frequently in their speeches. Thompson argues that *graduation* serves as a key tool for political figures to manage public perceptions of crises, elevating the significance of their proposed solutions while downplaying alternative approaches.

Beyond political speeches and debates, the application of Appraisal theory to media framing of political figures has gained traction. A study by Wang (2016) on Chinese media's portrayal of international political figures found that the media often uses *appreciation* and *judgment* to frame foreign leaders in ways that align with the Chinese government's geopolitical interests. For example, U.S. leaders were often framed negatively through *judgment*, while Russian leaders were framed positively through *appreciation* of their economic and military strength.

Similarly, Kress and van Leeuwen (2017) examined the use of *graduation* in Western media coverage of the Syrian refugee crisis. They found that certain outlets used *graduation* to amplify fears about the influx of refugees, employing terms like "flood" and "wave" to intensify the

perceived threat. This use of *graduation* shaped public perceptions of the crisis, contributing to the rise of anti-immigrant sentiment in several European countries.

Recent studies have also explored the role of Appraisal theory in the evolving landscape of social media. According to Knight and Hunter (2021), platforms like Twitter and Facebook offer politicians new ways to engage with the public using the evaluative resources of Appraisal theory. Their study of U.S. politicians' Twitter use during the 2020 elections found that both Democratic and Republican candidates frequently used *attitude* and *graduation* to amplify their emotional appeals and critiques. For example, Donald Trump's Twitter feed was characterized by heightened use of *judgment*, often condemning opponents as "corrupt" or "weak," with superlative *graduation* terms such as "total disaster" or "biggest fraud" to emphasize his criticisms. In contrast, Joe Biden's tweets exhibited a more measured use of *affect* and *judgment*, with phrases like "restoring the soul of America" to appeal to voters' emotions and evoke a sense of moral duty and unity (Knight & Hunter, 2021).

Social media's interactive nature also offers opportunities for *engagement*. According to Giannoulis (2020), social media allows political figures to engage in dialogic interactions with voters, thus providing a direct space for *heteroglossic* negotiations. Political figures can engage with user-generated content, responding to both supportive and critical voices. This dialogic nature allows politicians to appear more responsive and interactive, positioning themselves in alignment with or against various perspectives circulating on social media platforms. However, Giannoulis also notes that while social media opens up the possibility for more *heteroglossia*, it often amplifies *monoglossic* tendencies, particularly through algorithms that promote content confirming users' existing biases.

A similar study by Al-Gamdi (2022) focused on the use of *graduation* in political discourse on social media during the 2022 French elections. The study found that far-right candidates often employed high-intensity *graduation* terms to amplify perceived threats from immigration and globalization, using words like "invasion" or "crisis" to stir anxiety. This study underscores how the affordances of social media encourage amplification through *graduation*, which can contribute to heightened polarization and echo chamber effects.

The literature also extends beyond specific debates and social media interactions to broader examinations of leadership styles in political discourse. Several studies have applied Appraisal theory to understand the evaluative strategies of political leaders across different cultural and political contexts. A study by Cavallaro and Vezzali (2017) examined the leadership styles of European politicians through the lens of *attitude* and *engagement*. They found that populist leaders like Matteo Salvini and Marine Le Pen used *judgment* extensively to criticize the political elite, framing themselves as defenders of the "ordinary people" against corrupt, immoral institutions. This populist use of *attitude* enabled these leaders to foster a strong emotional bond with disenfranchised voters.

In contrast, centrist politicians like Emmanuel Macron employed more *appreciation* and *affect*, focusing on the positive potential of their policies rather than engaging in direct moral critique of their opponents. Macron's discourse emphasized competence and pragmatic solutions, with calibrated use of *graduation* to moderate the intensity of his statements. Cavallaro and Vezzali argue that such differences in evaluative strategies reflect broader ideological divides, with populist leaders relying more heavily on emotional and moral appeals to galvanize support, while centrist politicians adopt more measured, rational stances.

Likewise, Rayson (2021) explored leadership styles in Southeast Asia, focusing on how *attitude* and *graduation* are deployed by leaders like Indonesian President Joko Widodo and Filipino President Rodrigo Duterte. Widodo's speeches were characterized by a positive use of *appreciation* and *affect*, emphasizing economic growth and social cohesion, often downscaling negative evaluations through *graduation* to avoid conflict. Duterte, in contrast, frequently amplified *judgment*, particularly in his controversial anti-drug campaign, using terms like "destroy" and "eliminate" to signal his uncompromising stance on crime. Rayson's study highlights how *graduation* and *attitude* can serve as tools for leaders to signal their priorities and moral compass, aligning themselves with specific voter groups.

Li and Zhu (2021) analyzed speeches from the United Nations General Assembly to assess how world leaders utilize *engagement* to either acknowledge global challenges or assert unilateral policies. The study found that leaders from Western countries, such as those in the European Union, often adopted *heteroglossic* strategies, acknowledging alternative perspectives on issues like climate change and global security. In contrast, leaders from more authoritarian regimes, such as Russia and North Korea, tended to rely on *monoglossia*, presenting their policies as non-negotiable and closing off alternative viewpoints. Li and Zhu argue that such differences reflect broader political orientations, with democratic leaders being more dialogic and authoritarian leaders emphasizing control and certainty.

In another study, Oyebode (2022) focused on *engagement* in African political discourse, specifically analyzing how leaders negotiate internal and external pressures in their rhetoric. The study found that African leaders frequently oscillate between *heteroglossia* and *monoglossia*, depending on the audience. Domestically, they adopt *heteroglossia*, acknowledging diverse ethnic, economic, and political concerns, while in international forums, they shift to *monoglossia*, asserting national sovereignty and resisting Western influence. This flexible use of *engagement* enables African leaders to navigate complex domestic and international political landscapes.

To sum up, the above literature review reveals a rich and evolving body of work that applies Appraisal Theory to political discourse across various contexts. Researchers have demonstrated how the subsystems of *attitude*, *engagement*, and *graduation* serve as critical tools for political figures and media outlets to shape public perception and influence political outcomes. While Appraisal theory has provided powerful insights into the evaluative aspects of political language, the research also highlights areas for future expansion, particularly the incorporation of multimodal analysis and deeper engagement with socio-political contexts. Overall, Appraisal theory remains a valuable framework for understanding the intricate dynamics of political rhetoric in an increasingly globalized and media-saturated world.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a qualitative approach, employing Appraisal theory as the primary analytical framework. The data consists of transcripts of the 2024 U.S. presidential debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump taken from ABC News website. The debate transcript will be analyzed in terms of the three key subsystems of Appraisal theory: attitude, engagement, and graduation. The analysis will focus on identifying linguistic patterns that reflect how the candidates express emotions, judgments, and stances toward each other, the electorate, and broader societal issues.

Appraisal Theory

Appraisal theory is an integral part of Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), a linguistic framework developed by Michael Halliday in the 1960s. Appraisal theory was developed primarily by James R. Martin and Peter R. White in the 1990s, building upon Halliday's interpersonal metafunction, which focuses on the relationship between speakers and listeners or writers and readers in discourse. Appraisal theory extends the interpersonal metafunction by offering a more detailed account of how language expresses attitudes, evaluations, emotions, and social relationships.

This theory explores how people use language to negotiate and express feelings, judgments, and evaluations, often in persuasive or argumentative contexts. Appraisal theory focuses on three major domains: attitude, graduation, and engagement (Martin & White, 2005). These categories help break down the ways in which language reflects and constructs interpersonal meaning, making appraisal an essential tool in analyzing the evaluative dimensions of discourse.

The Key Components of Appraisal Theory

Appraisal theory identifies three interconnected systems: attitude, engagement, and graduation. Each of these plays a role in how speakers and writers express their interpersonal relationships and evaluations of the world.

1. Attitude

Attitude refers to how speakers or writers express feelings, judgments, and evaluations through language. This system is divided into three subtypes: *affect*, *judgment*, and *appreciation*.

Affect: Affect deals with the emotional response of the speaker or writer. It includes expressions of happiness, sadness, fear, anger, and other emotions (Martin & White, 2005). For example, in the sentence, "She felt incredibly happy after receiving the news," the word *happy* conveys an affective attitude, indicating the speaker's positive emotional state.

Judgment: Judgment refers to the evaluation of people's behavior in terms of morality, ethics, or social norms (Martin & White, 2005). It can be either positive or negative, and it can evaluate individuals in terms of their abilities, social esteem, or social sanction. For example, "He is a trustworthy leader" conveys a positive judgment, evaluating the person's competence and reliability.

Appreciation: Appreciation focuses on the evaluation of objects, events, or phenomena. It involves aesthetic, practical, or intrinsic value judgments (Martin & White, 2005). For example, "The architecture of the building is breathtaking" shows an appreciation for the aesthetic qualities of the structure.

Together, these three subcategories capture a wide range of evaluative meanings that are fundamental in everyday communication. Attitude helps build solidarity between speakers and audiences by reflecting shared values and emotions.

2. Engagement

Engagement refers to how speakers and writers position themselves in relation to other voices, perspectives, and viewpoints within a discourse. It deals with the ways in which language either includes or excludes alternative viewpoints, thus aligning or misaligning the speaker with various ideological positions. According to Martin and White (2005), engagement can be broadly divided into two categories: *monoglossia* and *heteroglossia*.

Monoglossia: Monoglossic utterances present information as if it were factual, without reference to alternative viewpoints. For instance, the statement “Climate change is a fact” implies certainty, avoiding the acknowledgment of other perspectives or doubts.

Heteroglossia: Heteroglossic utterances, on the other hand, open up a space for different perspectives or voices. This can be done either by endorsing or rejecting them. For example, the phrase “Some scientists argue that climate change is caused by human activity” acknowledges the existence of other viewpoints. Heteroglossia allows speakers to manage the complexity of discourse by engaging with multiple perspectives, showing varying degrees of certainty or openness to alternatives.

3. Graduation

Graduation refers to the ways in which speakers scale or intensify their evaluations, making them stronger or weaker, more or less forceful. Graduation works at two levels: *force* and *focus*.

Force: Force involves scaling the intensity of feelings or evaluations. This can be achieved through adverbs and adjectives that amplify or mitigate the evaluation (Martin & White, 2005). For example, the phrase “The movie was absolutely amazing” intensifies the evaluation of the movie using the adverb *absolutely*. Conversely, “The movie was somewhat interesting” weakens the evaluation by scaling it down with the word *somewhat*.

Focus: Focus deals with the sharpening or softening of categories, allowing speakers to either broaden or narrow the boundaries of a category. For instance, saying “She is sort of an expert” softens the category of “expert” by using *sort of*, while saying “She is definitely an expert” sharpens the category.

Graduation is crucial in fine-tuning the evaluative stance of the speaker, enabling them to adjust the strength or specificity of their judgments and attitudes.

Appraisal theory is particularly useful in the analysis of texts and discourses that involve persuasion, evaluation, or the negotiation of interpersonal relationships, such as political speeches, media articles, and academic writing. It helps analysts understand how language is used to align audiences, express attitudes, and manage interpersonal meanings.

For instance, in political speeches, leaders often use appraisal resources to convey solidarity with their audience, express strong judgments about their opponents, and construct their own identity as competent and morally upright. The analysis of such speeches through the lens of appraisal theory reveals how politicians use affect, judgment, and engagement strategies to persuade their audience and assert their authority (Martin & White, 2005).

Similarly, in media discourse, appraisal theory helps uncover the ideological positions embedded in news articles. Media outlets often express evaluations of political events, public figures, or social issues through appraisal, subtly guiding readers toward particular interpretations. By analyzing the affect, judgment, and engagement strategies employed, one can discern how media narratives are constructed and how readers are positioned in relation to the information being presented (White, 2003).

Conclusion

Appraisal theory offers a comprehensive approach to understanding how language expresses evaluation, emotions, and interpersonal relationships. Through its three key components i.e., attitude, engagement, and graduation, appraisal theory provides insight into the evaluative dimension of language and how speakers negotiate meaning in relation to their social and ideological positions. As such, appraisal theory plays a pivotal role in discourse analysis,

allowing researchers to uncover the nuanced ways in which language shapes social interaction, persuasion, and identity construction.

Analysis and Discussion

The U.S. presidential debates are highly charged rhetorical events where candidates not only present their policies but also performatively negotiate relationships with voters, challenge their opponents, and assert their competence. The 2024 presidential debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump provides an ideal context for analyzing language through the lens of Appraisal theory. In this analysis, the three main categories of appraisal theory i.e., attitude, engagement, and graduation will be applied to specific excerpts from the debate to explore how both Harris and Trump use language to express evaluative meanings and construct interpersonal relationships with their audiences.

1. Analysis of Kamala Harris's Statements

Affect and Attitude

Harris begins her argument by grounding her identity and values in her middle-class upbringing, stating, "I was raised as a middle-class kid." This statement serves as an emotional anchor, appealing to voters' experiences and aspirations. By positioning herself as relatable, she establishes a connection with working-class Americans, thus evoking positive feelings of solidarity. She also expresses her positive emotional stance towards the American people's "ambition, aspirations, and dreams," framing her policies as a reflection of these values. She explicitly discusses her plans for an "opportunity economy" and articulates specific policies such as a \$6,000 child tax credit and tax deductions for small businesses. These statements are framed positively through appreciative language, reinforcing her commitment to uplift the middle class and small businesses. Harris's mention of her second mother, a small business owner, adds personal resonance and reflects her emotional connection to her policy proposals, thus strengthening her affective appeal. She directly labels Trump's actions as incitement, stating, "the president of the United States incited a violent mob to attack our nation's Capitol." This strong evaluative statement reflects her moral judgment of Trump's behavior, aiming to elicit a sense of outrage among the audience. By emphasizing the injuries and deaths of law enforcement officers, she appeals to the affective dimension of appraisal, seeking to evoke empathy and condemnation towards Trump. She employs a more composed and rational emotional tone. She begins her rebuttal by stating, "Yet again, I said it at the beginning of this debate, you're going to hear a bunch of lies," which communicates frustration but remains grounded in her commitment to factual discourse. Her emphasis on "strength" and "international rules and norms" positions her as a steadfast leader who prioritizes stability and diplomacy.

Judgment and Engagement

In her critique of Trump, she employs judgmental language to assess his policies. She states, "My opponent has a plan that I call the Trump sales tax, which would be a 20% tax on everyday goods." Here, she uses negative judgment to paint Trump's economic proposals as detrimental to the middle class, characterizing them as a tax burden. By employing the heteroglossic structure, she acknowledges Trump's perspective but counters it with her evaluation, thus engaging with the opponent's voice while asserting her stance. Harris counters by labeling Trump's approach as "using race to divide the American people," which is a moral condemnation of his political tactics. She highlights historical injustices associated with Trump, framing him as a candidate who undermines democratic values. By invoking incidents such as the Central Park Five, Harris

establishes a narrative of Trump as a figure who exploits racial tensions, thus appealing to the audience's sense of justice and fairness.

Graduation

Harris's statements exhibit varying degrees of intensity, particularly when she claims that Trump's policies could lead to a deficit of \$5 trillion. The use of quantifiable data serves to intensify her arguments and reinforces her credibility as a candidate who relies on economic analysis rather than rhetoric. Moreover, she strategically employs phrases like “the largest child tax credit that we have given in a long time,” which magnifies her proposed benefits and enhances the persuasive appeal of her policies.

2. Analysis of Donald Trump's Statements

Affect and Attitude

Trump's rhetoric is characterized by strong affective expressions aimed at evoking fear and concern among voters. His claim that "we have millions of people pouring into our country from prisons and jails, from mental institutions and insane asylums" reflects a negative emotional stance toward immigration. By using extreme language, he seeks to instill a sense of urgency and danger, aligning his narrative with a traditional Republican platform that emphasizes law and order. Trump's assertion that “we had a terrible economy because inflation has... probably the worst in our nation's history” employs judgment to evaluate the current economic situation. This negative assessment not only frames Harris's leadership negatively but also portrays Trump as a necessary corrective force. His frequent use of absolutes, such as “the worst” and “dangerous,” showcases his attempt to dominate the emotional landscape of the debate. Trump demonstrates a combative and assertive tone, particularly when he discusses Russia and Ukraine. Phrases like “he would have been sitting in Moscow much happier” and “that war should have never started” reflect a dismissive attitude towards Harris and her administration. His remarks about Putin, such as “he's got nuclear weapons,” evoke a sense of fear and urgency, aimed at illustrating the danger of a perceived weak U.S. response.

Judgment and Engagement

Trump's engagement strategy leans heavily towards monogloss, asserting his viewpoints while dismissing Harris's claims. For instance, he states, “Number one, I have nothing to do... with Project 2025. That's out there.” This statement not only attempts to deflect criticism but also positions him as an open book, contrasting with Harris's accusations of dishonesty. When he describes his economic plan as “brilliant,” he employs positive judgment to assert authority and confidence, framing his proposals as not only viable but superior. However, his dismissive tone toward Harris's critiques — referring to them as “sound bites” — reflects a lack of engagement with her arguments, positioning her as uninformed or irrelevant. Trump employs aggressive and accusatory language, particularly when questioning the prosecution of individuals involved in the protests in Minneapolis and Seattle. His use of rhetorical questions, such as “When are those people going to be prosecuted?” creates a confrontational tone. He positions himself as a victim of political maneuvering, claiming that he “had nothing to do with that,” which attempts to distance himself from the January 6 incident and shift blame onto Nancy Pelosi and local authorities. This is indicative of the judgment appraisal, where he seeks to assess the actions of others negatively to reinforce his own stance. Trump frequently critiques Harris's capabilities, branding her as “the worst vice president in the history of our country” and a “horrible negotiator.” This not only reflects a negative judgment of her competence but also serves to

discredit her credibility. By linking her failures to significant events (like the Ukraine invasion), Trump seeks to create a narrative that positions him as the more capable leader.

Graduation

Trump utilizes forceful language to amplify his arguments, claiming, "I created one of the greatest economies in the history of our country." The use of superlatives in his statements aims to cement his legacy while discrediting the current administration. His emphasis on the success of his economic policies and the alleged failures of Harris's administration illustrates his strategy to assert dominance through graduation, making his claims more compelling and authoritative.

3. The Dynamics of the Debate

Throughout the debate, both candidates strategically navigate the systems of Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation, reflecting their political agendas and emotional appeals. Harris aims to connect with voters on a personal level, using narratives and policies that resonate emotionally and intellectually. In contrast, Trump relies on fear-inducing language, monoglossic assertions, and superlative claims to dominate the emotional tone of the debate.

Harris's use of appreciative language aims to create a vision of hope and unity, encapsulating her campaign's focus on inclusivity and support for the middle class. Her critiques of Trump are sharp yet anchored in her narrative, suggesting a clear contrast in their proposed visions for America. Conversely, Trump's discourse is characterized by aggression and a defensive posture, primarily targeting Harris's credibility and framing his policies as necessary for national safety and prosperity.

4. The Implications of Appraisal in Political Discourse

The application of Appraisal theory to this debate reveals how both candidates construct their identities and engage with voters through language. The choices they make in terms of Attitude, Engagement, and Graduation have significant implications for their persuasive power. Harris's emotional appeals and personal stories foster a sense of connection and relatability, whereas Trump's authoritative stance and fear-based rhetoric may galvanize support among constituents who prioritize security and strength.

Understanding these dynamics allows us to appreciate the complexity of political discourse, where language serves as a tool for not only conveying information but also manipulating emotions and perceptions. As voters navigate these messages, their interpretations are shaped by the appraisal resources employed by candidates, influencing electoral outcomes.

Trump's Assertion of State Rights:

Former President Trump states, "It's a lie. I'm not signing a ban." This assertion immediately establishes a clear judgment against Vice President Harris's claims about a national abortion ban. His use of "lie" is an emotionally charged term that not only negates Harris's assertion but also casts her in a negative light, invoking distrust in her integrity.

Trump's emphasis on state rights further showcases his attempt to align himself with populist sentiments: "We've gotten what everybody wanted. Democrats, Republicans, and everybody else." Here, he seeks to present himself as a unifier, using appreciation to appeal to a broad audience. This positions him as a leader who listens to the public and acts accordingly.

Harris's Response on Women's Rights:

Vice President Harris counters Trump's claims by articulating her support for *Roe v. Wade*: "I absolutely support reinstating the protections of *Roe v. Wade*." Her statement reflects a strong affective stance, emphasizing empathy for women's experiences. Harris's use of "insulting to the

women of America" invokes a sense of collective outrage, framing Trump's policies as harmful and oppressive. This tactic aligns her with feminist values, appealing to an emotional response from her audience.

Moreover, Harris states, "The majority of Americans believe in a woman's right to make decisions about her own body." Here, she employs engagement by positioning herself in alignment with public sentiment, thereby strengthening her argument against Trump. By referencing public opinion, she attempts to legitimate her stance as a reflection of democratic values, contrasting it with Trump's perceived extremism.

Trump's Dismissal of Legislative Efficacy:

Trump asserts that Harris "will never get the vote. It's impossible for her to get the vote." This declaration employs a judgment of incapacity, portraying Harris as ineffective. Trump's rhetoric here is indicative of his broader strategy to undermine Harris's credibility, suggesting that her ambitions are unrealistic. He employs a dismissive tone that not only attempts to belittle Harris but also seeks to instill doubt in the audience regarding her capabilities.

In contrast, Harris asserts her leadership experience: "I know there are so many families watching tonight who have been personally affected by the surge of fentanyl in our country." This statement serves to establish her credibility and connect with voters on a personal level. By referencing families affected by the opioid crisis, Harris taps into a shared emotional experience, creating an impression of compassion and understanding.

Trump's Use of Fear and Extremism:

Trump's claim that "the country is being lost" and "we're a failing nation" utilizes affective language to create fear. His rhetoric suggests an existential threat, which can mobilize his base by appealing to their anxieties about societal change. Phrases like "Venezuela on steroids" serve to exaggerate and dramatize potential outcomes of Harris's policies, effectively utilizing graduation to heighten the emotional impact of his message.

Harris's response to Trump's extremism involves a strategic refutation of his claims, stating, "Coming from someone who has been prosecuted for national security crimes." By framing Trump as a criminal, she positions herself as a candidate of law and order, contrasting his alleged lawlessness with her commitment to justice. This engagement tactic reinforces her stance as a responsible leader who prioritizes democratic principles.

Thematic Patterns

Gendered Dynamics in Political Discourse

The debate showcases a noticeable gender dynamic, with Trump frequently employing aggressive and dismissive rhetoric toward Harris, which can be seen as a manifestation of patriarchal norms in political discourse. His repeated interruptions and attempts to dominate the conversation reflect an archetypal power struggle that has often characterized male-female interactions in political arenas.

In contrast, Harris maintains a more composed demeanor, often redirecting the discussion back to policy rather than engaging in personal attacks. Her approach exemplifies the use of affect and judgment to portray her as a responsible and empathetic leader. This distinction in communication styles underscores broader societal expectations of gendered behavior in politics, where women are often scrutinized for assertiveness while men are typically rewarded for it.

The Role of Misinformation

Misinformation is another critical theme in the debate. Trump's repeated claims about Harris's positions, such as "she's been against [fracking] for 12 years," serve to mischaracterize her stance and rally his base against her. This tactic reveals a strategic use of engagement, as he attempts to align public perception with his narrative while undermining her credibility.

Harris's response to misinformation reflects her attempt to clarify and counter these claims. When she states, "That's not true," she aims to rectify the narrative while also demonstrating her awareness of the audience's concerns. This interplay highlights the complexities of truth-telling in political discourse and the challenges faced by candidates who must navigate a landscape rife with falsehoods.

The analysis of the 2024 presidential debate between Vice President Kamala Harris and former President Donald Trump through the lens of Appraisal theory reveals significant insights into the nature of political discourse. The interplay of judgment, affect, and engagement elucidates the strategies employed by both candidates to assert their positions, sway public opinion, and navigate the complexities of a highly polarized political landscape. Trump's rhetoric often employs fear, exaggeration, and dismissive judgments, aiming to establish dominance and undermine his opponent. In contrast, Harris's discourse seeks to appeal to empathy, credibility, and shared values, positioning her as a champion for the American public. The gendered dynamics at play further underscore the challenges women face in political arenas, where assertiveness can be met with hostility. Ultimately, this debate exemplifies the power of language in shaping political narratives, influencing voter perceptions, and constructing identities within the electoral arena. As the 2024 election approaches, understanding these dynamics becomes increasingly crucial for both candidates and voters alike, as they navigate the ever-evolving landscape of American political discourse.

Conclusion

The 2024 presidential debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump illustrates how Appraisal theory can be used to analyze political discourse, shedding light on the evaluative choices that shape the candidates' rhetorical strategies. Through the categories of *attitude*, *engagement*, and *graduation*, we see how Harris and Trump use language to position themselves, critique their opponents, and influence the audience's perception.

Harris's discourse is characterized by emotional engagement, a willingness to consider alternative viewpoints, and a measured approach to criticism, while Trump's language is marked by amplified evaluations, a rejection of opposing perspectives, and a focus on strength and decisiveness. These contrasting styles reflect broader ideological divides in American politics, with each candidate using language to appeal to different segments of the electorate.

By applying Appraisal theory to this debate, we gain a deeper understanding of how language functions as a tool of persuasion in political discourse. Both Harris and Trump use evaluative resources to negotiate power, express their values, and construct relationships with voters. This study reveals the complexity of political rhetoric and highlights the importance of language in shaping public opinion and electoral outcomes.

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