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Does Politics Trump Gender?

A Study of Linguistic Features Among American Voters During the 2016 Presidential Election

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Abstract

In this essay, the usage of several linguistic features of 13 members of a televised political discussion are studied. The members of the discussion were private citizens, and not political experts. This particular discussion was filmed during the 2016 American presidential election, just before the second national debate between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. The studied linguistic features are: hedges, tag-questions, interaction and humor. By categorizing the members in three categories; age, gender and politics, this essay is able to investigate the results of the televised discussion by each category, and compare them to each other. The central question of the essay is if gender is a bigger divide regarding these linguistic features, than political views. The result shows that while gender still is the biggest divide regarding hedges, there are some specific elements where politics seems to trump gender.

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1. Introduction

The 2016 presidential election in the United States was filled by scandals, accusations, 24-hour news coverage and what seemed to be a polarized population. According to an article by *New York Times*' editorial board, the election tapped into anxiety, racism, bigotry and misogyny. Old rules did not seem to apply, as more extreme candidates elevated to the national scene (The Editorial Board 2016). It was also an election that involved leaks of classified or personal material, suspicion of Russian interference and a growing mistrust of the main stream media. Moreover, *fake news* and *filter bubbles* became terms that would be associated with this election period. Fake news, are fake storylines that are shared via social media with the purpose of being interpreted as real, with the intention of swaying the electorate one way or the other. Filter bubbles, occurs when people only follow news outlets that share their personal political values, this phenomenon is further fueled by personalized online advertisement. These circumstances created an election that was unlike any other before it (Anand 2017).

In this essay, American citizens will be linguistically studied while speaking about the subject of this extraordinary election, in a televised discussion. This essay will study the political conversation and relate the discussion to gender, age and political views.

1.1 Background

A lot of research has been conducted over the years regarding gender and language. In this essay, gender will be compared to political views. The studied material is a televised focus group where a moderator questions American citizens regarding the general presidential election of 2016, between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump. Perhaps being a Trump supporter will transcend gender, when it comes to linguistic features? The timing of the recording is an interesting period, just days after the notorious "Trump tape" was released, where the eventual winner of the election, Donald Trump, was caught using derogatory language about women. This sparked a national debate about both gender inequality and Trump's moral values. The fact that the recording is done in this special period of time, perhaps does not make it representative of the entire election period. However, it is done in a time, which might go down in the history books, as the period when USA was the most polarized since the Civil War.

1.2 Aim and Research Question

The aim of this essay is to investigate several sociolinguistic features in the unique setting that a televised *focus group* provides. Furthermore, this essay will investigate and compare language with regard to gender, age and political ideals, and try to link certain linguistic features, such as *hedges*, *tag-questions*, *interruptions* but also the use of humor, to these categories.

As the title of this essay implies, the main research question is: how are the linguistic features *hedges*, *tag-questions*, *interruptions* and *humor* displayed in relation to political views, gender and age?

2. Material & Method

2.1 Material

The studied material is a recording of a *focus group*, aired on CBS's *Face the Nation* on October 8th 2016, with moderator John Dickerson. A *focus group*, as this essay will keep referring to, is a term used in television when citizens are handpicked by the network to participate in a group discussion where they are expected to share their thoughts and values about politics. Focus groups are often diverse in terms of gender, age and political views and are led by a moderator. There are thirteen participating citizens in the group, six women and seven men. Although their ages are not revealed, there are four members that are probably over 60 years old, four that are under, or around thirty, and the rest are considered middle aged. They are sitting in two rows, seemingly in random order, with the moderator standing in front of them. The moderator, although providing questions, is generally acting passively, and does not interrupt or opine the discussion, apart from a few instances, when he wants to make things clear, "just to be clear, who do you mean?". He mixes open questions with asking questions to specific members of the group. The recording, available on the website of *Face the Nation*, is divided into two parts, 29 and 26 minutes long. It is recorded on the day before the second, of a total of three, presidential debates in the 2016 election between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton. It was published on October 9th 2016.

There are, however, some issues concerning the material, specifically the categorization of the members. The members of the focus group never reveal their occupation, which makes the

possibility of a category for *class* impossible, which could have contributed to explaining certain linguistic features. Furthermore, the categorization of *age* is approximately made, because the participants do not reveal it. The older members of the group tended to lean towards voting for Donald Trump, with only one clear exception. Some *middle aged* members could have been placed in the *young* in the *young* category; it is a close call, but it was settled that they are slightly older than the youngest members of the focus group. Others, on the other hand, might be qualified to be placed in the *senior* category, but remains *middle-aged*. However, there is a clear gap between the *young adult* and *senior* categories, which makes it possible to investigate eventual differences in language via the *age* parameter. The group is not equally divided in gender, with seven men and six women.

Most members of the focus group never give a clear statement on who they are going to vote for. Only a few of the members say that they are sure about their upcoming decision. Two members, for instance, never actually say that they are supporting Trump, but are categorized as such, nonetheless. The reason that they are put in the Trump-category, is based upon what they say throughout the discussion. One member said that she could never vote for Clinton, but is not entirely sold on Trump either. Moreover, they would not like four more years of Obama, and one member says that the Democratic party is going in the complete opposite direction from what he would like his country to take. In other words, the categories “Trump and Clinton” could also mean “leaning Trump or Clinton”.

2.2 Method

2.2.1 Data Collection

This study is performed using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The quantitative method involves counting the number of times hedges, tag-questions, interactions and humor are used during the 50 minutes of the televised focus group. The qualitative method means evaluating the usage of said linguistic features and to supply examples and quotes from the members of the focus group.

2.2.2 Transcription

A simple method of transcription is used, where spoken language is transformed into conventional written English. In some instances, parenthesis will be used when further information is needed, such as laughter or to mark where an interruption occurs. When the speakers make a pause, it will be transcribed as three periods (...).

2.2.3 Analysis

In this essay, I will be studying certain linguistic features to see how they are used differently related to the gender, age and politics of the speaker. As a result from this, I will be able to see which “category” uses the most hedges, humor, tag-questions and to which degree each group interacts.

The focus group will be divided into three categories. First of all, the gender role will be examined to see if male and female speech differ from each other. Secondly, the participants will be examined by politics, that is if they claim to, or seem to, be voting Trump, Clinton or if they are undecided. Furthermore, the group will be categorized by age, where they are divided as young, middle aged, and senior. Finally, the possible category of *race* or *ethnicity* will not be studied. This decision was made for two reasons, the limitation of this report and the fact that there are only two *African-Americans* and one *Hispanic* member of the focus group, the rest are *Caucasian*. Here is a table of the 13 members, and the categories they belong to:

Table 1. Group members & categories

| Member | Female | Male | Trump | Clinton | Undecided | Young | Middle-aged | Senior |
|----------|--------|------|-------|---------|-----------|-------|-------------|--------|
| Alex | | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | | |
| Bess | ✓ | | | ✓ | | | | ✓ |
| Brittany | ✓ | | | ✓ | | | ✓ | |
| Charlie | | ✓ | | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| Christy | ✓ | | | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| Melissa | ✓ | | ✓ | | | | ✓ | |
| Michael | | ✓ | | ✓ | | | ✓ | |

| Member | Female | Male | Trump | Clinton | Undecided | Young | Middle-aged | Senior |
|---------|--------|------|-------|---------|-----------|-------|-------------|--------|
| Nick | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | ✓ |
| Ouida | ✓ | | ✓ | | | | | ✓ |
| Patrick | | ✓ | | ✓ | | ✓ | | |
| René | ✓ | | | | ✓ | | ✓ | |
| Steve | | ✓ | ✓ | | | | | ✓ |
| Thomas | | ✓ | | | ✓ | ✓ | | |

The material will be analyzed regarding how female/male, young/middle-aged/senior and Clinton/Trump/undecided use the following features: hedges, tag-questions, interaction, interruptions and usage of humor. First of all, hedges, tag-questions, and interruptions will be counted and accounted for. Instances of humor will be counted when the speaker or any other participant laughs, failed attempts of using humor are vague and problematic to interpret, and the notion of such instances will therefore be excluded from the study. Interaction is a bit problematic, since the group mostly talks about the issues presented by the moderator, rather than asking and engaging with each other. However, there are instances where they, in some form or another, interact with each other. In this study, *interactions* will be defined by members mentioning other members' names and following up on a previous statement. *Interruptions*, in this study, are defined by members interrupting each other or answering questions directed to other members.

2.3 Validity and reliability

Internal validity concerns whether or not a not a correct conclusion can be drawn regarding method and material used in a study. If there are errors in the working process or if the method is not applicable on the material, it would make the result invalid. *External validity*, on the other hand, regards whether or not the result can be applied on other people than those in the investigation (Bell 2005). Regarding *internal validity*, the *age* category has its problems. It is sometimes difficult to draw the line for the *middle-aged* category. However, the decision was made by estimating the age of the members, and drawing the lines at about 30 years of age as the lowest and 50 years as the highest.

Regarding *external validity*, it should be clear that a televised *focus group* is not representative of everyday conversation. This makes *external validity* problematic, because the results of this essay might not be directly applicable on normal situations. Furthermore, there are only thirteen members of the group, to claim that the results of this essay would be applicable on gender, politics or age groups in their entirety, would therefore be incorrect. As previously mentioned, this election represents a time where America was divided, which is important to keep in mind, when interpreting its result in the future. *Pew Research Center* presented research on the topic of polarization, that claims that Republicans and Democrats have grown increasingly negative towards the opposite party and its candidates, and that polarization is now at an all-time high (Gramlich 2016). A focus group, while interesting, is a problematic material to study when it comes to *interaction*. After all, there are no moderators in everyday conversations. On the other hand, interaction and interruptions might be more inspired and powerful, when used in such a special situation.

Internal reliability regards, for this essay, that the transcription is successfully and justly performed. Bell (2005) writes, that a question that produces different answers depending on the occasion, is no more reliable than a clock which runs ten minutes early on one day, and ten minutes late on another. The purpose of this study is to, as clearly as possible, represent the language used in the focus group in an impartial manner. *External reliability* regards whether the methodology used in this essay can be used in other studies as well. The method used is collecting and counting hedges and tag-questions, along with observing and accounting for usage of humor, which is determined by when the studied people laugh, and finally to count the number of interactions and interruptions. This method can be used in other observations and situations.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Hedges

A definition of *hedges* is needed in order to interpret the usage of them, and to understand their function. Hedges are words or phrases, such as *I think*, *I'm sure*, *you know*, *sort of*, *like* and *perhaps*. Jennifer Coates (2004) writes that the function of hedges is to express certainty or uncertainty in conversation. By using hedges, the speaker can either strengthen or weaken his or her ownership of an opinion. However, it is not necessarily the word(s) itself that

determines whether or not its function is of strength or weakness, because the same hedge can function as both, depending on the situation. Holmes (1990), exemplifies this by showing the hedge *I think*, in two different contexts. First by a child in school, and second by an interviewee on television:

“It’s got some writing on it *I think*”

“*I think* that’s absolutely right”

In this example, the first quote represents hedging that shows weakness, while the second represents hedging showing strength. Two major elements that separate these two quotes are speaker and situation. Simply reading written language, thereby, can be problematic when trying to define specific hedges. In general, hedges can be interpreted as signs of weakness, more often than signs of strength. According to Robin Lakoff (1975), hedges can function in a way that prevents the speaker from fully committing to an opinion.

Hedges can also function in a manner that presents the speaker as genuine and trustworthy, for example “as far as I am concerned” and “honestly”. Moreover, hedges are often linked with *politeness*. Sirma Wilamová (2005) gives several examples of when hedges function politely, “if you like”, “nothing personal”, “please”. Furthermore, it can be used in a way that grants the recipient more time to answer a question, “I must ask you”, “I just want to know”. Finally, hedges can function as an indicator of power, “you don’t mean to tell me”, “to tell you the truth”.

3.2 Tag-Questions

Tag-questions are questions that are added to a sentence, such as *isn’t it?* and *didn’t they?* At times, tag-questions can function in very similar ways as hedges. Holmes (1990), writes that *isn’t it* and *sort of*, can sometimes be hard to categorize, regarding if they are tag-questions or hedges. Depending on the situation, the expressions can function as either one. Furthermore, the word *okay*, can function as both a tag-question and a hedge, depending on its intonation. Holmes (1990) also writes, that even an expression like *eh*, can be interpreted as a tag-question, depending in the intonation. Furthermore, dialects may determine whether or not words or expressions function as tag-questions. Much like using hedges, using tag-questions, while expressing one’s own opinion, can be interpreted as the speaker questioning their own

opinion. Tag-questions will be used to a higher degree when the speaker is reluctant to give a direct answer to a question (Lakoff 1975).

Lakoff (1975) writes about the difference of tag-question usage between men and women, and claims that women use it as a way of expressing politeness or uncertainty, to a higher degree than men, and in this manner avoid forcing an agreement from the addressee. Tag-questions, however, can also be used to express certainty, and are used by a speaker as a way of demanding confirmation to a proposition. Research has shown that a conformational form of tag-questions is used more by men, than by women (Coates, 2004).

3.3 Gender

There is research claiming that there are differences between same-sex and cross-sex conversation (Coates 2004). Considering the demographics of the focus group studied in this essay, the notion of *mixed conversation* is relevant, regarding gender. According to Coates (2004), men use more strategies that are associated with conversational dominance. A common way of dominating a conversation, is to interrupt others, and thereby depriving them of their right to speak. Furthermore, men seem to adept competitive conversational strategies, while women use a more cooperative approach to discussion.

Conversation is essentially based on turn-taking. A turn is, according to Stenström (1994), everything the current speaker says before the next speaker takes over. The turns can vary from a single word to entire monologues. When a turn begins to resemble a monologue, the speaker is more likely to use hedges. Stenström (1994) uses the example of over using the hedge *I mean*, during a turn, to indicate that the speaker's mind is occupied with planning what to say next.

3.4 Humor

Humor can be difficult to define, and detect in conversations. Humor can be irony, banter, teasing and sarcasm. Sometimes it is easy to detect, for instance when someone is telling a joke. It can also be universal at times, while highly personal at others. In this essay, however, humor will be defined by laughter, whether it comes from the speaker or the entire group.

The reasons for using humor in interaction can be many. According to Norrick (2009), research in sociolinguistics shows that making jokes can work as a strategy for enhancing intimacy, controlling conversation and negotiate identity. Furthermore, it can be an indicator

of *power*. Norrick (2009) writes that women and men tend to use humor differently, just as people in a position of power tend to use it differently than those without power. Humor can also work as a rational process, since some jokes require the recipients to have knowledge regarding its origin. By using such jokes, the speaker can find common ground with some recipients, while excluding others. Humor, thereby, can be of an inclusive or exclusive nature, and a method to demonstrate group membership, and can often function in a way that invites other speakers into the conversation (Norrick 2009).

3.5 Interruptions

Interruptions can, as stated earlier, be used to gain a dominant position in a conversation. According to Stenström (1994), there are three common reasons why people interrupt each other. First of all, to add something to the ongoing discussion, before it is too late. Secondly, the interrupter thinks that the other speaker has finished his or her argument. Finally, the interrupter can feel that he or she is more informed than the other speaker seems to realize, and does not need the other speaker to finish explaining something that the interrupter already knows.

Zimmerman and West (1975), conducted research on eleven mixed-sex conversations. They claim that interruptions sometimes can be viewed as violations of a speaker's rights. Furthermore, their research shows that male-female interruptions are more common, than interruptions within same-sex conversations. The research also states, that males were guilty of 96% of all interruptions.

Wardhaugh (2006) writes, that skillful speakers can conduct themselves in a manner that reduces the risk of being interrupted. For instance, a skillful speaker can avoid being interrupted by a listener that might think the speaker has finished his thought, which otherwise is a usual cause for interruption. However, circumstances beyond the speaker's control can still allow interruptions to happen, regardless the skills of the speaker, such as phones ringing or someone knocking on the door, etc. Nevertheless, the risk of being interrupted is smaller when the speaker has high conversational skills.

3.6 Speech Community

“Language is both an individual possession and a social possession” - Wardhaugh (2006)

According to Marcyliena Morgan (2004), people belong to several different speech communities. An individual can belong to many speech communities, but in some cases only identify with one of them. The formation of a community can revolve around a shared set of norms, knowledge, beliefs and values. Politics is mentioned by Morgan as a factor that communities tend to form around (Morgan 2004). Speech communities are hard to define, since they vary in size and numbers, from Nation states to small sub-cultures. However, Morgan (2004) writes about the importance of knowledge within the community, so that members can identify outsiders from insiders, and those in “contact zones”. Politically speaking, Republican and Democratic voters, thereby, could form two communities, whereas the undecided voters would be in contact zones, in varying degrees.

Wardhaugh (2006) writes that speech communities can be temporary. Furthermore, a community is defined by its relationship to other communities. Common exclusiveness, thereby, can be a factor that creates communities. With this in mind, communities within the *focus group* could be formed in relationship to the republicans, democrats or both. What community an individual belongs to, during a specific occasion, depends on if the person identifies with X or Y. If a moderator, for instance, asked members of a group a *yes or no* question, then the members of the group could possibly form communities that are results of the question asked (Wardhaugh 2006).

4. Results

In this chapter, the results from the studied material will be presented. To illustrate certain linguistic features, examples from the transcription will be presented in the form of quotes.

4.1 Hedges

The table below consists of the most frequently used hedges found in the studied material, along with the number of times they were used, and by categories, politics, gender and age:

Table 2. Hedges

| Hedge | Clinton | Trump | Undecided | Female | Male | Young | Middle | Senior |
|--------------------------|---------|-------|-----------|--------|------|-------|--------|--------|
| well | 10 | 6 | 0 | 12 | 4 | 2 | 9 | 5 |
| I think | 11 | 16 | 9 | 23 | 13 | 6 | 19 | 11 |
| You know | 4 | 5 | 7 | 14 | 2 | 0 | 11 | 5 |
| I mean | 2 | 6 | 3 | 11 | 0 | 0 | 8 | 3 |
| In fact* | 1 | 6 | 0 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 1 | 6 |
| Kind of | 1 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 5 | 2 |
| Really | 6 | 7 | 7 | 10 | 10 | 5 | 9 | 6 |
| A little bit | 5 | 4 | 1 | 3 | 7 | 0 | 8 | 2 |
| Sort of | 3 | 0 | 1 | 1 | 3 | 1 | 2 | 1 |
| Total | 43 | 54 | 30 | 80 | 47 | 14 | 72 | 41 |
| Hedges per person | 8,5 | 13,5 | 7,5 | 13,5 | 6,5 | 4,5 | 12 | 10,5 |

*also counted *the fact that*

There is a clear divide between the member's political views regarding the use of hedges. However, the divide in gender is greater. Trump-supporters and women are the most frequent users, while young, male and undecided voters are the least frequent. The average amount of hedges used, per person, is 9,5. The categories that are closest to this average are *Clinton-supporters* (8,60) and *seniors* (10,25). Regarding the gender, the hedges *I mean* and *you know*, represent the largest divide, with a total of 25 times used for women, compared to two by men. These are both hedges that can represent uncertainty, which coincides with previous

research by Lakoff (1975). According to Holmes (1990), however, *you know*, does not necessarily represent uncertainty, it can actually be used to express certainty. It can have an emphatic function to reassure the addressee of the validity of the opinion. However, the result of this essay shows that political views also can be an indicator regarding usage of hedges, although not to the same degree as gender.

Regarding the category of politics, the *Trump-supporters* use significantly more hedges than *Clinton-supporters* and *undecided voters*. The hedge *in fact*, or *the fact that*, is used six out of seven times by Trump supporters. This hedge is associated with certainty or persuasiveness, and is used by Steve and Ouida, who are also members of the *senior* category, three times each.

The fact that the group *undecided* never used the hedge *well*, is interesting, since it is used a total of 16 times by the other groups. The *undecided voters* do not have to defend a standpoint in the same manner as those who claim allegiance to a candidate or a political party. However, *well* is often used when a Clinton or Trump supporter talks about the opposing candidate or party.

Quotes 1 - 2:

1. Well, you know, I mean I, I just, I just can't respect a man like that –
Brittany
2. Well, I'm a traditional southern democrat, and basically I kinda like to support the party but... I don't really know what they stand for anymore
– *Nick*

Both of these quotes, contain further hedges. Throughout this study, there is a reoccurring pattern, that hedges occur when the members are talking about the opposing candidate, as a way of softening their critique. Thereby, the function of the hedges used is often to express *politeness*. Lakoff mentioned that hedges can function as a way for the speaker, to not fully commit to a statement, and thereby avoiding conflict (Lakoff 1975). *Well* is one example, when that seems to be the intention of the speaker.

The one hedge that is used most by *undecided*, is “you know”. They seem to use it when they are talking about their political values and positions.

Quotes 3 – 4:

3. A Democrat is, you know, no longer a Democrat – *René*
4. Um, you know, I consider myself an independent, I generally, I generally vote republican, based on my, on my thoughts about economics – *Christy*

You know can have different functions. In the way in which René uses it, its function is to keep the attention, and engaging other in the conversation. In Christy's example, it functions more as a sign of uncertainty. In the answer that follows, she repeats herself twice, which is also a sign that she is not sure of what to say, or how to express herself.

There can be several reasons as to why the *young* members use the least amount of every single counted hedge. First of all, they tended to talk less than the other members. Secondly, they are only three members. Finally, two of the members, Alex and Thomas, seem to be less engaged in the topics that are discussed. Both of them, for instance, were supporters of Bernie Sanders, and seem more interested in the issues associated to that campaign. Furthermore, Thomas remains relatively inactive throughout the discussion, and there is only one account where he uses hedges.

Quote 5:

5. *Frankly, I think, if Hillary Clinton were to do everything that she has said she would do in the campaign, really fighting climate change, really fighting... against money in politics, I... she would 100% have my vote. But it's what she says behind closed doors that now have been officially released that-- I don't trust her to do that.*

In this quote, Thomas is emotionally engaged in the topic of discussion, and thereby he might speak more freely, and uses the hedges *frankly, I think* and *really*. Although Alex says he is supporting Hillary Clinton, he seems to share political values with Thomas, and they are similar in their participation in the discussion and usage of language.

The clearest difference of hedges used is between men and women. There is, however, one clear exception within women; Bess. Bess only uses four hedges, and is relatively inactive in

general during the discussion. She is the only one within the *senior* category that supports Hillary Clinton, while the other three express support for Trump.

There are, especially, four hedges that are more frequently used by women: *well, I mean, I think* and *you know*. *Well* and *you know* have already been accounted for, but the other two have similar functions. *I mean* is never said by a man in this focus group. Here are some examples of when women tend to use that hedge

Quotes 6 - 8:

6. I mean, for me, I feel as though I do live the American dream, my American dream - *Melissa*
7. Yeah I think the comments were very disgusting, I mean nothing Trump says makes me feel like, maybe I could get used to this guy – *Brittany*
8. So there is going to be some type of violent change in this country and in the long run, that could be good, that could be actually a good thing, I mean.... All of us here have strong opinions about America... - *René*

In René and Melissa's quotes, they use *I mean*, in an inclusive manner, in René's case it even leads to, "all of us here". Melissa seems to use it so that she does not offend those with different opinions, in the discussion about the American Dream. Without "*I mean, for me, I feel as though*" the others could interpret her statement as more of an argument that the American Dream is alive and well. In René's case, she seems to use *I mean*, when she is at risk of being perceived as radical, extreme or at least different from the others. She might have realized that she used strong language, or expressed a strong opinion, and therefore added the final part of the quote, as a way to stay included within the group.

There are several other hedges used in the recording of the focus group, but less frequently used. They include: *perhaps, in my opinion, I guess, let me tell you, as far as I'm concerned, whatever, frankly, somewhat* and *anyway*. Here are some examples of when and how these hedges are used. *Let me tell you* is used twice, both times by Ouida, and both times in instances where it gets personal.

Quotes 9 - 10:

9. *...and also, let me tell you what to me... the fact that, nobody is concerned about closing, they don't think that's a big deal closing the boarder. - Ouida*

10. *Well, let me tell you, I was afraid to come, because my kids warned me the trouble I'd be in if I said what I really thought. - Ouida*

When Michael used the hedge *frankly*, it is clear that he was preparing to say something controversial, that might start an argument.

Quote 11:

11. *I quite frankly, and people would disagree with this, I think Donald Trump is a racist and I don't budge at all when, when I say that. - Michael*

And Michael also uses *as far as I'm concerned* and *I guess*, in the same sentence, when expressing his personal opinion.

Quote 12:

12. *Every American politician, as far as I am concerned, are to some degree disingenuous, maybe even to some degree lies, um, so, I have a little bit more patience with that, I guess. - Michael*

Really might be the most problematic hedge of them all. It is used in a variety of different ways, and sometimes it is hard to determine whether it functions as a hedge, a tag-question or neither. It is also the most evenly divided hedge between the categories.

4.2 Tag-Questions

Tag-questions were used a total of four times. Three of those by a Trump-supporter and one by an undecided member. Not a single tag-question, thereby, was uttered by a Clinton-supporter. Moreover, none of the men used tag-questions, while only two women used them.

Quotes 1 – 4:

1. *So I'm for Trump, uh, the democratic party for me, is far from what America use to be like, you know what I mean? – Ouida*
2. *Yes, when you look at that, uh, I mean, what was that? That was nothing. - Ouida*
3. *If the country is not safe, you're not gonna have, you're not gonna worry about the economy or education or anything else. Okay? – Ouida*
4. *I don't think we have been Americans since World War Two, you know what I mean? - René*

Ouida uses all her tag-questions when speaking about Hillary Clinton or the Democratic party. First of all, she uses “you know what I mean?” when speaking about the Democrats being “far from what America used to be”. Her second tag, is said when she expressed her disappointment regarding the FBI-investigation into Clinton’s e-mail servers. Finally, she uses the final one when talking about border security, “If the country is not safe, you’re not gonna have, you’re not gonna worry about the economy or education or anything else, Okay?”. As previously mentioned, tag-questions can be a sign of the speaker questioning their own opinion (Lakoff 1975). Furthermore, Ouida is using *okay?* as a tag-question, a word which could also be a hedge in a different situation. According to Holmes (1990), it is the pronunciation or the context, that determines whether the word *okay* functions as a hedge or a tag-question, in Ouida’s case, it is pronounced as a question.

4.3 Interaction and interruption

There were a total of six interactions and four interruptions. Interactions are counted as a member mentioning another member by name, agreeing or disagreeing with another member or following up on another member's reasoning. Interruptions are counted when a member directly interrupts another member, or taking the floor, without being addressed by the moderator, and change the topic of discussion.

Agreements

Agreements in this context, are instances where the members state that they are agreeing with other members of the focus group. Here is a list of all the agreements:

1. René agrees with Steve, "I agree with, what's your name?"
2. Michael agrees with Charlie, "I'm sorry I forgot your name? (Charlie), I agree with Charlie".
3. Michael agrees with Steve "I'm gonna jump in here, you're a conservative, I'm a progressive, we completely one thousand percent agree"
4. René agrees with Michael, "propaganda is an excellent way to describe it"
5. Nick agrees with Steve, "I agree with that, because I can tell you from personal experience"
6. Steve agrees with several members, "Michael and Ouida and Melissa have said all the same things that I've been feeling and it goes back to money in politics."

Apart from Steve agreeing with three other members, four out of five agreements are made across the political categories. There are, however, no instances of women agreeing with other women, or a man agreeing with a woman (apart from Steve agreeing with several members). The members, thereby, only agree with men.

Interruptions

The moments when members either directly interrupt each other, or answer questions directed at other members, will be counted as *interruptions*. These instances were the following:

1. Thomas interrupts to give his opinion, after Melissa claimed that both candidates scared her, “if I would jump in, uh, as a progressive, I want to vote against more war, I want to vote for policies that are strength through peace, not peace through strength, and I don’t have a plausible candidate to vote for...”. Steve, then, answers Thomas “well I have to, have to really disagree because we have Hillary’s track record of being very hawkish”.
2. René interrupts Charlie as he is speaking about his disappointment towards President Obama’s economic policies, “I completely disagree, he is the only President who ever lowered the deficit by over a trillion dollars...”
3. Ouida interrupts “I just wanna say one quick thing, I don’t think they care, I don’t think they care! I don’t think it would matter one way or the other to them...”
4. Alex takes the floor, “what gives me hope is all of us across the aisle agreeing with, with, uh, the citizens united mistake. That’s something that we can do as America, uh, again that’s something that can jumpstart this American dream.”.

When René interrupts Charlie, to express her disagreement, there is no *humor* involved. The same can be said about Steve’s answer to Thomas. These are rather rare occasions in this study. Steve uses the hedge *really*, to soften his disagreement, while René does not use a hedge or repeat herself. Alex, however, is trying to find common ground within the group, by mentioning all the members as a whole, and presenting a mutual political position. *Citizens United*, or *money in politics*, actually becomes the topic around which all members find common ground, and becomes a reoccurring topic throughout the whole discussion, since it was first brought up by Steve.

Arguments

First of all, the interaction mentioned above, by Thomas, turned into an argument by Steve. The argument between Thomas and Steve is based on the two opposing ideas “peace by strength” and “strength by peace”. The second, and final argument, is performed by Michael and Steve. Michael argues, “well anyway, I was gonna say I’m very happy to hear that Steve

is going to vote for Hillary Clinton, because... I've never heard Donald Trump say anything about putting people on the supreme court who will overturn Citizens united", Steve answers, "just to correct Michael, my new friend here...". Although Michael and Steve are the members that are interacting the most, they always keep a humorous and polite *tone*.

Steve, René and Michael represent all three political categories, and are the most active speakers throughout the discussion. Steve find himself in both of the two occurring arguments. Furthermore, frequency of interactions does not differ to a large degree when it comes to *gender* or *age*. Here is a table displaying interactions between the members, by their political views:

Table 3. Interaction between the *political* category

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| Trump - Trump | 2 |
| Trump - Clinton | 2 |
| Trump - Undecided | 1 |
| Undecided - Undecided | 1 |
| Undecided - Trump | 1 |
| Undecided - Clinton | 1 |
| Clinton - Clinton | 0 |
| Clinton - Trump | 1 |
| Clinton - undecided | 1 |

There was no interaction amongst Clinton supporters. However, interactions across the other political categories were evenly spread, with one interaction between each category, and two interactions from Trump to Clinton supporters along with two amongst Trump supporters themselves. In over 50 minutes of recorded conversation, there is not a lot of interaction between the group members, which is probably a result of having a moderator that drives the conversation.

4.4 Humor

Humor was used a total of five times during the session, four times by men, and one time by a woman. Furthermore, it was used by two Clinton supporters, two Trump supporters and once by an undecided voter. The only instance of members exchanging humorous comments in

their conversation with each other, was done between members of different political categories.

Thomas is the first member to use humor, when he says, in the very beginning, that on a typical Saturday he would, “probably just be looking at what Trump recently said”. As this is in the very beginning, Thomas immediately distances himself from the Trump supporters in the group, even though he was only the third person to speak, and thereby did not know who and how many they would be.

Steve is the second member to use humor, “and I’m surprised because I think from my perspective that’s a conservative ideal, as opposed to progressive, I’m sure the progressives would disagree”. Michael used humor in the discussion that he had with Steve. The sentence, “well anyway, I was gonna say I’m very happy to hear that Steve is going to vote for Hillary Clinton...”, generated laughter from all members. Steve’s reply, calling Michael “my new friend”, also produced some laughter. These two members are clearly in disagreement with each other on most political issues, but by using humor they keep a friendly and unifying tone on the discussion. Wardhaugh (2006), writes about *positive face* and *positive politeness*, where speakers seek approval from others, and seek to achieve solidarity. Steve and Michael represent an example of this.

Alex uses humor, when talking about his support for Bernie Sanders, “well, uh, first of all what gave me up was Bernie Sanders campaign, um, but moving beyond that, let’s move on”, putting emphasis on the last three words. This could be interpreted in different ways, but it seems to be a case of using humor as a way of dealing with disappointment. Furthermore, it is a way for Alex to identify himself, and inviting others to identify, with a set of political ideals.

Melissa uses humor when explaining why she would rather have Trump “stopping and helping” in the event of car trouble, than Clinton, “well, he clearly likes women...”, this sparked the biggest laugh of the session. Melissa had been uncomfortable, in that she was never going to vote for Clinton, but had some issues with Trump. This joke, perhaps, functioned as a relief of tension.

When explaining why he would rather have Clinton as a neighbor, Patrick says, “Everywhere Trump goes he drives down the property value so...”. This is the most *critical* form of humor used in the discussion, and is rather the opposite of *politeness*. Patrick had previously stated that he could never vote for Trump. Unfortunately, this joke is made right at the end of the session, so any potential outcome from this joke cannot be studied. Nevertheless, Patrick is the only member that uses humor in a way that could be read as being exclusive towards other members.

5. Discussion

This discussion will be conducted through the following categories: *politics*, *gender* and *age*. There are, however, parts of the discussion that cannot be contained to just one of these categories, for instance the usage of humor in general. First of all, the moderator uses humor initially, although just the one time. Alex says that he would probably be at home playing video games on a typical Saturday, and Dickerson asks him which game and which version of that particular game to, “get that important information out of the way”. Even though Dickerson does not use humor after this, he used *positive politeness* which generated laughter from the group and created a setting of politeness for the discussion (Wardhaugh 2006). Furthermore, there are instances where the discussion can be placed within all these categories. The group found common ground with the subject of *money in politics*, where they all seem to share the same opinion. Some members returned to the subject, perhaps as a way of keeping a feeling of togetherness. Steve, who was the first to bring it up, later returns to the subject, “Michael and Ouida and Melissa have said all the same things that I’ve been feeling and it goes back to money in politics.”. Furthermore, Alex takes the floor by saying that the shared agreement about money in politics, gives him hope, rather than returning to issues where the members disagreed. In this example, the group unifies regardless of politics, gender and age.

Sociolinguistic features related to Politics

Undecided voters used less hedges than Trump and Clinton-supporters. This could be explained by the undecided not having to distance themselves from opinions that could offend the opposite voters. Lakoff (1975) writes that hedges can function as a sign that a speaker is unwilling to fully commit to an opinion, this might be a less common phenomenon for undecided voters. The two types of hedges that the *undecided* used the most, however, were hedges that could have multiple purposes: *you know* and *really*. This could be a sign of their uncertainty, they are undecided, after all. Furthermore, they only used the hedge *well*, once. This hedge is most often used in the beginning of an answer about a political issue, such as, “well, if you look at the, look at the FBI-investigation” – Ouida. As *undecided voters*, they might not feel obliged to defend a candidate or a political party. This could be the reason why

they almost never started a sentence with, *Well...* This might be a result of the undecided not having any political opposition to which they seek to keep a positive face and polite tone.

Tag-questions were not used often, and only by a few members. However, the category most represented in using them, were Trump-supporters. Ouida is the most frequent user, and her tag-questions often seem to imply insecurity, “If the country is not safe, you’re not gonna have, you’re not gonna worry about the economy or education or anything else, okay?” Could it be, that this is because it is actually not her opinion, but rather something she has been told? When speaking on boarder security and how the country is not safe anymore, or the Democratic Party, “bringing Armageddon”, it sounds like information one could get from certain media outlets with questionable motives. After all, *fake news* and *information bubbles* were storylines throughout this election (Anand 2017). As Holmes (1990) wrote, *okay*, can function as either a hedge or a tag-question, depending on context and pronunciation. Ouida is a frequent user of *okay*, both as hedges and tag-questions.

A majority of agreements were made across the political category. This could be a sign of the members seeking common ground and set a polite tone on the discussion. However, there is one interruption that stands out, from this otherwise polite discussion, when René interrupts Charlie. René and Charlie are both *undecided*, which could be an answer to René using a sharper tone, as both members were *undecided* and therefore not seeking to unify across political lines.

Ouida’s interruption seems to be made out of anger or desperation, and is not directed at any specific member or constellation within the focus group. It could, however, be directed at the state of the Nation and the National discourse in general, which again was represented by polarization and negative campaigning, as portrayed in *The New York Times* and *The Harvard Review* articles mentioned earlier in this essay.

Michael and Steve use humor as a tool to negotiate the tone of the discussion. As a result of using humor, Steve is able to call Michael “my new found friend”, because their disagreement has been conducted in a tone of politeness. Furthermore, Michael and Steve have the most interactive relationship in the focus group, which could also be a result of their usage of humor. Michael and Steve’s humorous interaction is an example of Norrick’s (2009) statement, that humor can work as a strategy for enhancing intimacy, controlling conversation and negotiating identity. Although he did not get a lot of laughs, Steve was the member that first used humor. Was it a coincident that Michael later found himself discussing policies with Steve, while also using humor himself? Humor seem to have acted as a gateway into more serious conversations, and allowing that conversation to be about serious issues.

There is an issue with Patrick's joke about Trump driving down the market value of his neighbors, and that is; was it even a joke? Patrick does not laugh when he says it, so it could just be a statement. However, it is this author's opinion that it was a joke, of a more aggressive nature than any other jokes made by other members.

Alex, although being one of the least active speakers, attempts to unify the group at two occasions. First when he talked about *citizens united* and how everybody in the group agreed on that issue, and secondly when humorously encouraging the Bernie Sanders supporters to "move on".

Sociolinguistic features related to Gender

Both Holmes (1990) and Lakoff (1975), claim that women tend to use hedges that are associated to uncertainty, more than men. These claims are confirmed in this essay, as women used more than double the amount of hedges. Furthermore, the hedges *You know, I think, I mean* and *well*, are used by women a total of 60 times, compared to 19 times by men. Men, however, are the majority in using *in fact, a little bit, sort of* and *kind of*. The latter three of these can have similar functions, that is to distance the speaker to an opinion. *In fact*, however, is used in an opposite way, to state an opinion as a fact and thereby becomes an indicator of power (Wilamová 2005). Steve used *in fact* to explain that America is still a great country, while Ouida used it to state that nobody was concerned about boarder security. Both these examples are not factual, but rather opinionated, but the hedges put more power into the statements. Moreover, only women used tag-questions, and coincides with Lakoff (1975), in that women use tag-questions associated with uncertainty.

Melissa's joke, about Trump liking women, might be a way of her dealing with the fact that she is considering voting for this candidate, regardless of his comments on women. Melissa had previously commented on the leaked *Trump tape*, "I'm mixed between feeling it's inappropriate but then I also think of *locker room talk*", and later said that the first thing she thought was, "Isn't Bill Clinton the same type of man?". In these quotes, Melissa's hedges might indicate that she is not fully committing to an opinion, since it regards Trump's much debated views on women (Lakoff 1975). Apart from Melissa's joke, no other women in the focus group used humor, while a total of four men did.

Sociolinguistic features related to Age

When taking the three categories into account, Bess is singled out within the *senior* category, as she is alone in supporting Clinton as the other *seniors* support Trump. This might be an answer to her being inactive throughout the discussion. Her lack of hedges might imply that she does not speak her mind, as much as the others. Bess, thereby, might not have found a suitable *speech community*. Besides her lack of hedges, she was, along with *young* Alex and Thomas, the most inactive speaker in general.

Regarding hedges, it is notable that the *young* category used less than half the amount compared to either of the *middle aged* or *senior* categories. They were the minority in every type of hedge. *Senior* and *middle age*, however, used about the same amount, where *middle age* was a clear majority in using the hedges *a little bit*, *you know* and *I think*. While *seniors* were a majority user of *in fact*, which is a hedge that indicates power (Wilamová 2005). Thomas and Alex are amongst the most inactive speakers of the group. They are also the youngest members. The third *young* member, Patrick, is also a relatively inactive speaker. However, they do get engaged occasionally, and when they do, they tend to use hedges to the same degree as everyone else. Furthermore, not a single tag-question was used by a *young* member. The only instance where *young* was in a majority, was *interruptions*, where they accounted for two out of four interruptions. When Alex interrupts to take the floor, he does so with the intent of unifying the group and keeping a *positive polite tone* (Wardhaugh 2006):

“what gives me hope is all of us across the aisle agreeing with, with, uh, the citizens united mistake. That’s something that we can do as America, uh, again that’s something that can jumpstart this American dream.” - Alex

6. Conclusion

The result of this study shows that politics trumps gender, but only in some cases. The divide in gender, regarding usage of *hedges*, *tag-questions*, *interaction* and *humor*, is still greater than the political divide. Humor was used mostly by men, but across the political categories. Tag-questions were only used four times, all by two women, who supported Clinton and Trump. As far as interactions went, the majority of agreements were made across the political categories. The two most notable disagreements were a woman disagreeing with a man, and a man disagreeing with another man. Throughout the discussion, there seemed to be a common goal of the participants, to keep a polite tone, especially towards those of different political beliefs.

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