The Hidden Danger of Trump: How Trump Changed the Language Game of Politics and its effect on Truth and Democracy

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Abstract: The way that Donald Trump uses language is unlike that of traditional politicians. To discover how Trump uses language differently, and what Trump means when he asserts propositions, his assertions are evaluated via Ludwig Wittgenstein’s philosophy of language. Three possible interpretations of how Trump uses language are considered: lying, truth-telling, and, most plausibly, Harry Frankfurt’s conception of bullshitting. The consequences of bullshitting in political discourse are discussed, including its attenuation of truth and democracy.

Keywords: Trump; Wittgenstein; Frankfurt; bullshit; political discourse; post-truth

To discover how language is a powerful tool with the capacity to accomplish many terrific and terrifying things, it is necessary to understand what spoken words and phrases mean. Philosophers have proposed theories of meaning to account for how language is able to achieve its goals. Of these theories, the theory by Ludwig Wittgenstein seems to best account for how all sorts of people use language in all sorts of different ways. Traditionally, politicians are a type of people who have used language in the same, specific way. However, one counterexample of a politician who uses language in an untraditional way is Donald Trump. When Donald Trump uses language, what is he trying to do? What does he mean? Trump does not mean the words that he says in the traditional way of understanding what politicians tend to mean. Furthermore, the way Donald Trump uses language is dangerous. In this essay, I establish that Donald Trump is playing a different language game from traditional politicians, and the way he uses language is unsuspectingly harmful to democracy.

According to the popular semantic theories proposed by Gottlob Frege and Bertrand Russell, a proposition’s meaning is identical to its truth-conditions. For example, the meaning of ‘Ottawa is the capital of Canada’ is that there is a city called Ottawa, there is a country called Canada, and the relation that Ottawa has with Canada is that Ottawa is Canada’s capital. This example should appear clear and obvious; however, this theory becomes myopic in many conversational contexts. For example, it would be completely ordinary for somebody to proclaim the sentence “Nice weather we’re having” on the dreariest day of the year. Such a sentence should be understood by the listener as sarcastic. Semantic theories fail to accommodate such sarcastic utterances; according to semantic theories, the speaker of the sentence communicates that the current weather is pleasant.
Wittgenstein proposed the term ‘language game’ to refer to the different purposes of language. He believed that language was analogous to a set of different tools – each with its own specific purpose. For example, someone can say “everything is going to be all right” and intend not to make a rational prediction, but to console the listener. Making rational predictions and consoling another are different language games.

“The meaning of a word is its use in the language” (Wittgenstein §43) is the phrase that best summarizes the philosophy of language of Ludwig Wittgenstein. By it, Wittgenstein proposed that the meaning of a word within a language is equal to all of its possible uses in a language game. Wittgenstein defends his philosophy using the example of the word ‘game’. The word ‘game’ is polysemous: there exists no definition of ‘game’ that incorporates all legitimate instances of the word ‘game’. From this, Wittgenstein concludes that – contrary to Fregean and Russellian semantic theories – we cannot provide necessary and sufficient conditions for the applicability of ‘game’. So, for example, soccer, baseball, Monopoly, The Legend of Zelda, solitaire, and hide-and-go-seek are considered games, despite having few common features, but swimming, cross country running, and taking BuzzFeed quizzes are activities that are not considered games. According to Wittgenstein, this understanding of when and how language-users apply the word ‘game’ is used for every word and phrase within a language and this is how people communicate. This same account can be applied for the phrase “Nice weather we’re having” as an example of the language game of sarcasm. Wittgenstein’s philosophy is admirable because, unlike Fregean and Russellian semantic theories, it illustrates that linguistic units like words and phrases can be used for purposes beside mere description. Consequently, Wittgenstein’s theory accurately reflects how people use language to communicate conversationally.

Prior to the American presidential election of 2016, there was a typical way that politicians used language which will be referred to as playing the politicking language game. Playing the politicking language game is when the candidate attempts to act relatable to their constituents; it involves question-dodging, and speaking vaguely and uncontroversially about issues, and it involves attempting to make the constituents feel as though the candidate shares their feelings about the issues. My characterization of the politicking language game likely brings many examples to mind; however, Lin-Manuel Miranda provides one of the clearest examples of this language game in his Broadway musical, Hamilton. The character based on Aaron Burr shares the following political advice with the aspiring politician, Alexander Hamilton: “Talk less. Smile more. Don’t let [your constituents] know what you’re against or what you’re for”.

Since the campaign period for the presidential election of 2016, however, there is a new language game that has been introduced to the political landscape by Donald Trump. Instead of playing the typical politicking language game, Trump uses language in a shocking and unorthodox way. Whereas politicians – like Canadian Prime Minister, Justin Trudeau – respond to questions by playing the traditional politicking language
game via answering indirectly and by sharing minimally relevant information to the
questions posed to them (Wherry), Donald Trump is much more direct in his responses.
Rather than staying moderate and responding with agreeable, vague, and loosely-related
information, Trump is known for sharing his radical positions on issues, like when he
shared his opinion on the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) during the first
2016 presidential debate by suggesting that it is “the worst trade deal maybe ever signed
anywhere”. Sharing this opinion is the opposite strategy to the ‘talk less and smile more’
strategy that Aaron Burr recommends to the titular character in *Hamilton*. Donald Trump
is not interested in talking less; he is consistently sharing his radical positions via his
Twitter account which is updated on average more than six times a day (Deron). Donald
Trump also demonstrates that he is not interested in smiling more, as evidenced by his
antagonistic policies toward Mexicans and Muslims. Given Trump's remarks and political
policies, he must be playing a completely different language game from the traditional
politicking language game.

Donald Trump, however, is not a benign renegade. Although it can be considered
admirable that he is refusing to conform to the norms of responding vaguely with
moderate positions, Trump spews false information regularly. A notable example is when
he asserted “The state of California is begging us to build walls in certain areas” (Mester
et al.). This assertion was demonstrably false because California Governor, Jerry Brown,
as well as Lieutenant Governor, Gavin Newsom, have been active opponents of border
walls, with Newsome calling the proposed wall, “a waste of money... It's nothing more
than a sixth century solution to a twenty-first century problem” (@GavinNewsom 13 Mar.
2018). Trump’s assertion invites the question: what does Donald Trump *mean* when he
says such patently false things? Asserting demonstrably false propositions does not
conform to the traditional politicking language game; therefore, Trump must be playing a
different game.

Since Donald Trump is playing a different language game, the question becomes:
what language game is he playing? I believe there are three possible answers to this
question. The first answer is that Trump is playing the *lying* language game whose
purpose is to convey false information to others to prevent them from attaining the truth.
The second answer is that he is playing the language game of *truth-telling* whose purpose
is to convey true information to others. The third (and most plausible) answer is that
Trump is playing the *bullshitting* language game whose application involves asserting
propositions without any concern for their truth.

If Trump was playing the *lying* language game, then he would have to know the
truth and be deliberately preventing others from learning the truth. This is implausible for
two reasons. The first reason is that Trump is a bad liar. In a poll conducted by Quinnipiac
University in December 2017, the most popular word to describe Trump following ‘idiot’
was ‘liar’ (Mortimer). To suppose that Trump is playing the lying language game would
be to suppose that Trump is unintelligent and naïve; since Trump is known to be a liar,
any attempt of him preventing people from learning the truth would be futile. The second reason is that the information he shares is routinely fact-checked by the media. Easily accessible websites like PolitiFact exist to expose the lies of politicians like Donald Trump, so all attempts of his to prevent people from attaining the truth are – once again – fruitless. Since Trump is considered a liar, and since the information he shares is meticulously scrutinized for its factual accuracy, it is unreasonable to think that Trump is trying to prevent people from acquiring the truth; therefore, he is not playing the lying language game.

The truth-telling language game is closely related to the lying game. For Donald Trump to be playing the truth-telling language game, he would have to believe that what he asserts is, in fact, true. It could be interpreted that Trump attempts to play the truth-telling game when he asserts, for example, that California is begging for the construction of border walls. If truth-telling is Trump’s intention, then he believes that Californians want border walls, and it is merely an accident that Californians do not actually want border walls. However, it is not possible for Trump to be playing the truth-telling game because Trump’s remarks are often inconsistent. Consider, for example, what he says about the possibility of Russia interfering with the United States’ general election: In January 2017, he commented, “As far as hacking, I think it was Russia” (Wojcik et al.). Four months later, he said “this Russia [interference] with Trump and Russia is a made-up story. It's an excuse by the Democrats for having lost an election…” (Holt) and in September, he tweeted that Russian collusion in the election was a “hoax” (@realDonaldTrump 22 Sep. 2017). Then, in February 2018, he tweeted “I never said Russia did not meddle in the election” (@realDonaldTrump 18 Feb. 2018). These quotes suggest that Trump’s intention is not to tell the truth, for he cannot be said to believe in the truth of inconsistent propositions.

Since Trump is neither lying nor telling the truth, Trump must be playing the bullshitting language game. The term ‘bullshitting’ is explicated in Harry Frankfurt’s essay On Bullshit. In this essay, Frankfurt makes the conceptual distinction between someone who lies and someone who bullshits. The liar cares about the truth in order to prevent others from learning it; the bullshitter does not care about the difference between the truth and falsity of his assertions. In an interview for Princeton University in 2005, Frankfurt says: “The liar is limited by his commitment to saying something that conflicts with the truth... Whereas the bullshitter who doesn’t care about truth can go anywhere he likes” (Harry Frankfurt ‘On Bullshit’). This remark of Frankfurt’s seems to capture how Trump is using language. Trump cannot be concerned about the truth of his assertions because so many of his assertions are inconsistent and/or unjustified. During a conversation with Prime Minister Trudeau, Trump admitted that he fabricated the fact that The United States runs a trade-deficit with Canada, without knowing whether the statement was true. Trump admitted, “I didn’t even know [the truth]. I had no idea. I just said, ‘You’re wrong’” (Kilpatrick). The fact that the United States runs a trade deficit with Canada is irrelevant;
Trump demonstrates that he is not concerned about the truth, and what he says is unconstrained by facts and falsehoods.

Another demonstration that Trump is playing the bullshitting language game is his incoherent speech as a presidential candidate from July 2016. An excerpt from that speech reads: “…but you look at the nuclear deal, the thing that really bothers me – it would have been so easy, and it’s not as important as these lives are – nuclear is powerful; my uncle explained that to me many, many years ago, the power and that was thirty-five years ago; he would explain the power of what’s going to happen and he was right, who would have thought? – But when you look at what’s going on with the four prisoners – now it used to be three, now it’s four – but when it was three and even now, I would have said it’s all in the messenger…” (Mikkelson). This excerpt is clearly not an example of playing the lying or truth-telling game because there is not a single sentence that is capable of being ascribed a value of either true or false. This excerpt does not convey any information at all, nor does it attempt to prevent people from learning what is accurate.

Saying whatever you want in spite of the truth is a violation of Paul Grice’s maxim of quality which posits: “one should not say what you believe to be false and what you lack sufficient evidence to support” (Grice 46). The violation of this maxim is significant because people assume that what they are being told is true by someone who cares about the truth. Donald Trump, however, inconsistently tells the truth and insufficiently cares about the truth. More shockingly, he was elected president of The United States partly because of his negligence towards the truth. Furthermore, since Trump’s popularity may be partially attributed to his use of the bullshitting language game and his lack of concern for the truth, it is quite plausible that other politicians will adopt Trump’s style of politicking.

The adoption of Trump-style politics is a dangerous epidemic of bullshit that undermines democracy. If our politicians adopt the bullshitting language game, they will flood our media with nonsense. The current American media can hardly keep up with all the nonsense that Trump says, as they endlessly report on his contradictions and his inappropriate antics. By endlessly reporting on Trump’s nonsense, the media outlets in America further disenfranchise American citizens. Furthermore, by disenfranchising the voters, politicians face less scrutiny of their platforms because the voters will continue to care less about the issues that are endlessly reported on in the media. Since Trump does not care about the truth of an assertion, he is liable to say whatever he wants. A large portion of what he says is defamation against media outlets that criticize him. By disparaging these media outlets, calling them “fake news” and “failing”, Trump blurs the line between credible and untrustworthy media, which causes the populace to be increasingly uninformed and disenfranchised. Ultimately, when politicians play the bullshitting language game, they undermine democracy.
When Trump’s candidacy and presidency are remembered, most people will probably think of his ardent conservatism, his foreign and domestic policy, his misogynist remarks, his scandals, and his unpredicted rise to power. His legacy will include how celebrity television hosts are able to be legitimate candidates for president of the United States, and how he won the Electoral College without winning the popular vote. However, it is vital that people remember how he introduced and normalized the bullshitting language game into American politics. Trump’s use of language is a hidden danger in comparison to the more explicit dangers he incites to America and the world. Nevertheless, this hidden danger threatens the world and political discourse because it undermines the conditions that give rise to a healthy and deliberative democracy. Others ought to consider Trump as a bullshitter rather than a liar because having insufficient concern for the truth can lead to an epidemic of bullshit which can disenfranchise voters and impede people from being engaged politically. Since democracies depend on informed citizenries, it is crucial that bullshit be excluded from politics, and that concern for the truth is preserved. By recognizing when politicians are playing the bullshitting language game, people can impede it, and that is how we ought to conduct our politics in democratic and conscientious nations.
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PAUL GIULIETTI is a member of the Huron University College graduating class of 2018. He studies psychology and philosophy and has conducted original research on *Instagram* and role-playing games. His future research endeavors include the effects of instrument-playing on muscle memory, and bullying interventions.