

Gender and Politics: Exploring Language Features in the 2024 U.S. Presidential Debate

Gender dan Politik: Menelusuri Fitur Bahasa dalam Debat Presiden AS 2024

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ABSTRACT

Abstrak

Debat presiden merupakan acara dengan risiko tinggi di mana para kandidat secara strategis menggunakan bahasa untuk membujuk audiens, menegaskan otoritas, dan membangun persona di mata publik. Debat Presiden AS tahun 2024 antara Donald Trump dan Kamala Harris menarik untuk dianalisis. Penelitian ini menggunakan analisis deskriptif-kualitatif dengan teori fitur bahasa Jennifer Coates (2004) untuk mengungkap fitur bahasa yang digunakan oleh kedua kandidat dari video debat yang diunggah oleh kanal YouTube *The Wall Street Journal*, mengeksplorasi jenis-jenis yang dominan, fungsinya, dan bagaimana penggunaan bahasa tersebut selaras dengan strategi komunikasi politik mereka. Dalam 196 set data - Harris menggabungkan perintah dan arahan dengan fitur bahasa wanita seperti pembatasan dan respon minimal. Selain itu, Trump berkomunikasi dengan fitur bahasa pria yang dominan, ditandai dengan seringnya penggunaan umpatan dan bahasa tabu di samping pertanyaan dan pujian langsung. Temuan ini menyoroti pengaruh gender terhadap pilihan Bahasa yang menunjukkan adanya persinggungan antara gender, bahasa, dan kekuasaan.

Abstract

Presidential debates are high-stakes events where candidates strategically use language to persuade audiences, assert authority, and build their public personas. The 2024 U.S. Presidential Debate between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris provides a compelling context for analyzing gendered language. This study employs qualitative-descriptive analysis with Jennifer Coates' (2004) theory of language features to uncover the linguistic features employed by both candidates from the debate video uploaded by *The Wall Street Journal* YouTube channel, exploring the dominant types, its function and how their use of language aligns with their political communication strategies. Within 196 datasets - Harris combines commands and directives with traditionally women's language features like hedges and minimal responses. In addition, Trump communicates in a dominant men's language features marked by frequent use of swearing and taboo language alongside direct questioning and compliments. The findings highlight gender's influence on language choices, revealing the intersection of gender, language, and power.

1. Introduction

Rizky Alida

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Language is a fundamental tool for communication, intertwined with culture, identity, and social structures. It not only facilitates the exchange of ideas, but it also acts as an instrument for adopting and challenging cultural norms and power dynamics. It depicts how communication varies across individuals coming from various speech groups. Social elements and traditional values are fundamental variables that determine how languages function within a society (Joseph et al., 2022, p. 285). Gender, as a social construct, profoundly influences linguistic behavior, shaping how men and women communicate and how their speech is perceived.

Gendered language features as a social context, can be studied through sociolinguistics as this study provides critical understanding regarding the connection between language, gender, and identity (Rizki et al., 2023, p. 181). Sociolinguistics views language as a social practice, and gender as something that is “done” or performed rather than a fixed concept (Coates, 2004, p.138). According to (Juwita et al., 2018, p. 45), it may categorize men and women based on differences in linguistic styles, habits, and physical attributes.

Scholars have long recognized that men and women speak differently. While these distinctions are not universal, they provide important insights into gender roles, societal expectations, and power dynamics. According to Joseph et al. (2022, p. 285), one notable difference between men and women is the way they speak. Previously, theoretical sociolinguists asserted that women are more linguistically polite than men. The rigid social order requires women to be more careful about preserving appropriate speech. Nevertheless, these specific speech limitations resulted in a power disparity between men and women. Robin Lakoff (1975) identified ten women's language features that demonstrate inferiority regarding the way they communicate using language. Women, for example, prefer to employ tag questions such as “right?” expressing thoughts because of a lack of authority to freely express themselves, resulting in encouraging them to get permission from people in order to remove their hesitation about the degree to which their communication is appropriate in society. In comparison, Coates (2004, p. 97) argued that men tend to dedicate close attention to details and explain the application of taboo words using such stronger expletives such as “damn” and “shit”.

Historically, societal constructions of gender have positioned men as more suitable for roles of leadership and authority, often associating such positions with traits traditionally deemed masculine—such as assertiveness, rationality, and control (Pillado, 2023, p. 235). In contrast, women in power have frequently been perceived as deviating from conventional, traditional, feminine ideals (Hapsari et al., 2022, p. 196). This ideological bias has contributed to the systemic exclusion of women from full participation in the political sphere, resulting in a longstanding underrepresentation of women in positions of political leadership.

However, in recent decades, there has been a significant shift due to an increasing presence of women in political spheres, including Hillary Clinton's candidacy as the first female presidential nominee from a major political party in the United States in 2016, and more recently, Kamala Harris's selection as the first female Vice President of the United States in 2020. Harris sustained political prominence, particularly as a candidate in the 2024 presidential election against former President Donald Trump, symbolizes a greater cultural shift in gender roles and political engagement. This framework serves as a firm foundation for studying gendered language use in political settings.

The relationship between language and gender has long been a central concern in sociolinguistics. Foundational frameworks by scholars such as Robin Lakoff (1975), Deborah Tannen (1990), and Jennifer Coates (2004) have guided numerous studies that investigated how men and women employ distinct linguistic strategies shaped by social roles, power dynamics, and cultural expectations. This review synthesized recent research that applies these frameworks across political, cinematic, and digital media contexts, with a focus on how gendered language features manifest, overlap, and evolve in varying discursive environments.

In the political setting, Bagaskoro (2022) examined Joe Biden and Kamala Harris's statements, highlighting context-sensitive gender-specific variations in Biden's directness and Harris's use of hedges and intensifiers. Similarly, Siregar and Suastra (2020) found Clinton exhibiting Lakoff's female features while Trump employed Coates' male features during the 2016 U.S. debate. According to Siregar and Suastra (2020, p. 3), such women figure like Clinton exploited intensive adverbs - particularly attitudinal disjuncts - to establish authority as part of gendered norms.

Gendered language features also appear in the creative media. Dinata et al. (2023) found Ellen DeGeneres and Will Smith adapting cross-gender features in *The Ellen Show*. Similar variation was discovered by Setyadi and Ekawati (2021) in *A Star Is Born* movie, where the two leads displayed distinct features based on the social and emotional circumstance. Another study in movie settings, Zansabil (2023) showed that in *The End of the F**ing World** movie, both male and female characters employed assertive, constructive, and otherwise nuanced language, demonstrating that speech patterns go beyond binary conventions. Pade and Ntou (2022) noted both adherence to and divergence from gender norms in *A Haunted House 2*, while Seliyanti et al. (2022) discussed how gendered roles affected speech in *Hidden Figures*. Due to emotion and power dynamics, Afief, Qomariana, and Widiastuti (2023) discovered that both male and female characters in *Do Revenge* employed characteristics typically connected with the other gender. In *The Prince & Me* and *Cruella*, Dewati and Wulandari (2023) and Kiranidewi et al. (2023) established similar findings, demonstrating the importance of context and character roles in forming speech.

In digital content, Karjo and Wijaya (2020) observed that female *YouTube* influencers tended to employ politeness and expressive adjectives in their online promotional material, while male counterparts tended to utilize slang and directness (pp. 209-210). Ningrum et al. (2023) also discovered that although male *TikTok* influencers utilized straightforward and factual communication, female influencers emphasized rapport talk and hedges. Likewise, However, Hidayati (2022) observed an opposite pattern in *Tekotok* animation, whereby female characters spoke aggressively and dominantly, challenging social norms.

These previous studies demonstrate a continuing presence of gendered language features across a range of communication contexts. Together, these studies highlight that while gendered language features - such as hedges, intensifiers, taboo words, and polite forms - remain widely observed, they are far from deterministic. Rather, they are influenced by the interaction between the speaker's identity, the communication objectives, the audience's expectations, and the social and political context. Examining gendered language patterns becomes even more relevant in formal political contexts where power is reportedly balanced, such as the U.S. presidential debate.

The following example is Kamala Harris' utterance in the 2024 U.S. Presidential Debate.

"I believe in what we can do to strengthen our small businesses."

In this case, Harris employs “**I believe**” to soften the tone and draw hedges, conveying confidence in the speaker's own point of view while still acknowledging the possibility of opposing opinions. Furthermore, Donald Trump uses an interesting example in the same debate, which is described in the following utterance.

*"She's a **Marxist**. Everybody knows she's a **Marxist**. Her father's a **Marxist**."*

The use of the term “**Marxist**” demonstrates a pattern of repetition, profanity, and the use of forbidden words, all of which employ inflammatory and taboo language which directly confront opponents to existing domination.

Despite the candidates shared institutional responsibilities during the debate, such findings show notable differences in their language choices considering that they present unscripted, spontaneous interactions where candidates require using language to justify their positions, answer questions, and exhibit leadership. such as that conducted on the 2016 Clinton-Trump debates, where neither candidate had served in the presidential office. In contrast, the current study concentrates on candidates with prior executive experience: Trump as former President and Harris as Vice President - offering a new perspective on how institutional authority and political accomplishments influence gendered use of language.

By examining how both draw on their leadership legacies in debate, This study aims to identify the linguistic features that correlate with women's and men's language as represented in the utterances of Kamala Harris and Donald Trump throughout the debate, and then investigate the dominant gendered language features employed by each candidate while exploring their rhetorical and communicative functions within the context of political discourse while trying to discover the intersections between gender, language and power in political settings.

2. Method

The primary data sources of this study were spoken data taken from a prominent American news coverage, *The Wall Street Journal's YouTube* channel entitled “Full Debate: Harris vs. Trump in 2024 ABC News Presidential Debate” - which can be accessed at this direct Youtube link https://www.youtube.com/live/VgsC_aBquUE?si=jUbHRbEJSXnMcRGh, and the written data of the debate in the form of transcription were taken from the *ABC News* official website. The debate was held at the National Constitution Center in Philadelphia on September 10, 2024, and was hosted by *ABC News*. The form of literature, such as journals, books, and relevant articles are also used to support the primary data.

This study employed a descriptive-qualitative approach, which focuses on collecting and analyzing data in the form of words and sentences to address the research objectives. The data were derived from debate transcripts of Kamala Harris and Donald Trump in the 2024 U.S. Presidential Debate, emphasizing a comparative analysis of their linguistic features. As states in Miles et al. (2014, p. 237), qualitative data were treated as rich sources of description and explanation of human communication. The analysis applied the principles of qualitative content analysis to interpret the symbolic meanings embedded in the debate utterances, particularly those reflecting gendered aspects of diction, within the contextual background of each speaker's discourse.

The data collecting approach included downloading the 2024 U.S. Presidential Debate video from *The Wall Street Journal's YouTube* channel, carefully watching and paying attention to Kamala Harris' and Donald Trump's spoken words, and referring to the transcript from *ABC News'* website. Further, references to language features related to men and women were used for guidance in the investigation. Extensive notes were recorded on utterances demonstrating these language features, with essential utterances and words in the transcripts underlined and highlighted.

The analysis included multiple steps, including identifying women's and men's language features using Jennifer Coates (2004) theory and investigating the implications and functions of the prominent features discovered in the study. To present the analysis, both formal and informal methods were used. The formal method was used to show numerical data in the form of a table, whereas the informal method was used to explain the findings.

3. Findings and Discussion

Jennifer Coates (2004, p. 110) stated that women and men use various conversational methods due to distinctive linguistic features. These features include seven key aspects: minimal responses, hedges, tag questions, questions, commands and directives, swearing and taboo language, and compliments. The presence of these patterns is not static since they are socially constructed and reflective of broader gender ideologies (Dewati & Wulandari, 2023, p. 1). One prominent feature is the use of *minimal responses* - such as *mhm*, *yeah*, or *right* - which women tend to employ more frequently and with greater sensitivity to timing which presents attentiveness. In contrast, men often use minimal responses less frequently than women in order to assert conversational control.

Furthermore, *hedges* - like *I think*, *sort of*, *maybe*, and *you know* - are used more frequently by women. While earlier interpretations by Lakoff (1975) suggested hedging signaled tentativeness or a lack of assertiveness, subsequent research, particularly by Holmes & Wilson (2022), emphasizes their multifunctionality. Hedges can express politeness, soften statements, or even mark confidence depending on their context (Afief, N., Qomariana, Y., & Widiastuti, 2023, p. 60). Therefore, although women use hedges more often than men, these features may serve to facilitate interpersonal rapport rather than indicate linguistic weakness.

In addition, the use of *tag questions* also tends to be more frequent in women's speech. Lakoff considered them a sign of tentativeness and showed that tag questions serve both modal and affective functions. While men use tag questions mainly to seek confirmation, women use them to maintain interactional harmony.

Moreover, *questions* - are used differently by women and men. Women generally ask more questions in informal contexts as a strategy to engage others, invite participation, and sustain dialogue. In contrast, men tend to ask questions more often in formal or competitive settings, where questioning functions as a tool for asserting dominance or evaluating others.

Another significant difference is the use of *commands and directives*. Men are more likely to use direct, aggravated commands, such as imperatives or statements of necessity (*you need to do this now*), which reinforce hierarchical relationships, while women more often use mitigated directives, employing modal verbs (*could*, *might*), inclusive forms (*let's*), or hedging adverbs (*maybe*) to suggest rather than impose actions.

Additionally, the essence of using *swearing and taboo language*. Men typically swear more frequently and with greater intensity, particularly in all-male settings, as part of constructing masculine identity. Women, however, tend to swear less, especially in public or mixed-gender conversations, due to prevailing social expectations around femininity and propriety.

Another feature, the use of *compliments*. Women are more likely to give and receive compliments, particularly on appearance, as a means of expressing solidarity and positive politeness. Men, on the other hand, tend to give fewer compliments and when they do - they typically focus on achievements or possessions rather than personal attributes (Dinata et al., 2023, p. 2480).

There are considerable differences between same-sex and mixed-sex talks, according to Coates (2004). In all-women talk, features such as collaborative topic formulations and minimal responses dominate, creating what she calls a “supportive” environment (p. 134). Male talks, particularly in all-male settings, frequently center on “verbal sparring” and “holding the floor,” which encourage display of humor or competence (p. 145). However, these characteristics can deliberately evolve in formal or high-stakes situations, like presidential debates. Depending on the audience, women may adopt direct styles or assertiveness to establish credibility, while men may adopt polite strategies. This adaptability is consistent with the dynamic model of gendered language, which posits that speakers actively perform and alter gendered speech according to the objectives of interactions.

3.1 Findings

This section presents the analysis of language features used by Kamala Harris and Donald Trump in the 2024 U.S. Presidential Debate. Grounding on Coates (2004) theory of language features, this study discovered that out of 7 features, there are only 6 features employed by both candidates.

3.1.1. Minimal Responses

Minimal responses, also known as back-channel in Coates (2004, p. 87) involve short, non-committal replies that indicate listening but do not elaborate, or simply associated with assertiveness. Such examples include “yes,” “no,” “uh-huh,” “right,” and other similar expressions that suggest the listener is present in the discourse but does not contribute significantly to its content. Minimal responses can signal active listening but are typically non-committal, providing little or no feedback that would change the direction or depth of the conversation. The example of minimal responses in Kamala Harris utterances is presented in data 1.

- 1) *Trump* : “I have been a leader on fertilization IVF and the other thing they not you should ask”
Harris: “**Come on, okay.**”

In the provided political exchange, Trump delivers a provocative and emotionally charged monologue accusing Harris of supporting late-term and even post-birth abortions. Her reply - “**Come on, okay.**” - is brief and strategically minimal. The phrase “**Come on**” conveys dismissal or disbelief toward Trump’s claims, suggesting that his assertions are exaggerated or baseless. It indirectly questions his credibility without engaging in a confrontational rebuttal. Following it with “**okay**” further mitigates the tone, allowing her to maintain composure and project authority without appearing aggressive.

The example of minimal responses in Donald Trump utterances is presented in data 2.

- 2) *"I don't care I don't care what she is I don't care...I don't know I don't know..."*

In this utterance, Donald Trump uses repetitive phrases like *"I don't care," "I don't know,"* and *"that's up to her"* multiple times to present uncertainty. Trump repeated *"I don't care"* indicating a lack of personal investment or strong opinion in the topic under discussion.

- 3) *"I have nothing to do with project 2025 uh that's out there I haven't read it I don't want to read it purposely I'm not going to read."*

The *"uh"* in this utterance represents a filled pause, indicating deliberation, planning, or transition. While minimal responses are usually associated with backchanneling cues like *"yeah," "mhm,"* or *"right"*. Trump's *"uh"*, followed by *"that's out there"*, helps him shift attention away from the document (Project 2025) and toward a framing that implies detachment and lack of responsibility. The use of minimal language and abrupt sentences (e.g., *"I haven't read it. I don't want to read it. I'm not going to read."*) further supports a style of strategic minimalism in order to avoid elaboration when the topic is controversial or damaging.

3.1.2. Hedges

Women employ hedges to convey uncertainty regarding their statements or to soften the impact of their propositions Adi et al. (2024, p. 165). Typically, hedges are used when both women and men are unsure whether their assertions will be accepted by others, although they can also function as a strategy of politeness. The example of Kamala Harris's use of hedges during the debate is presented in data 4.

- 4) *"I think the American people believe that certain freedoms...should not be made by the government."*

The phrase *"I think"* implies doubt or subjectivity in the assertion. Kamala Harris is expressing her viewpoint, but she is not claiming it as definitive truth or statistics. The usage of *"I think"* implies that her belief is up to discussion or that it is simply their personal perspective, rather than an absolute reality.

The example of hedges used by Donald Trump during the debate is presented in data 5.

- 5) *"I think it's the US best interest ...to stop all of these human lives from being destroyed."*

Donald Trump employs the qualifier *"I think"* to position the remark as a personal opinion rather than an objective or absolute reality. This is especially important in political debate, as speakers must frequently balance power with flexibility to discussion or interpretation.

3.1.3. Tag Questions

According to Holmes (1984) as cited in Coates (2004, p. 92), while women employ more tag questions than males, this should not be regarded as a sign of hesitation or weakness. Rather, tag questions can be a strategic tool to balance assertiveness with politeness, especially in public or mixed-gender settings. According to Dinata et al. (2023, p. 2840), men also use tag questions, but often with different functions - such as to engage in competition, argue a point, or issue commands - to serve diverse discursive goals depending on gender, context, and intention.

However, in the 2024 U.S. Presidential Debate, neither Kamala Harris nor Donald Trump appeared to use tag questions in their responses or interactions. This absence may be attributed to the formal, high-stakes nature of the debate setting, where directness, authority, and clarity often take precedence over interactive or cooperative features like tag questions. In such settings, rhetorical questions, assertions, and direct challenges are more commonly employed to project strength, decisiveness, and ideological conviction - traits often prioritized in political performance and public persuasion. As a result, while tag questions can be powerful in everyday or conversational contexts, they may be strategically avoided in debates where every utterance is aimed at establishing control, credibility, and voter appeal.

3.1.4. Questions

Coates (2004, pp. 130-131) states that women tend to use more questions in conversation than men, but not necessarily to seek information. Often, their use of questions functions as a device to include others in conversation, to prompt engagement, or to maintain rapport. While rhetorical questions are not exclusive to women, their use in this context reflects a relational strategy. In other words, women tend to use a different pattern, often incorporating question tags to soften the tone to seek affirmation. In addition, Coates observed that men generally ask direct, straightforward questions when they seek information or clarification - often marked by its directness and focus on obtaining specific answers, reflecting a more assertive approach in communication. The examples of two questions-in one context used by Kamala Harris is presented in data 6.

- 6) *"I know there are so many families watching tonight who have been personally affected by the surge of fentanyl in our country that bill would have put more resources to allow us to prosecute transnational criminal organizations for trafficking in guns drugs and human beings but **you know what happened to that bill?** Donald Trump got on the phone called up some folks in Congress and said kill the bill and **you know why?** because he'd prefer to run on a problem instead of fixing a problem."*

In this utterance, Kamala Harris uses two rhetorical questions - "**But you know what happened to that bill?**" and "**And you know why?**". These questions are not genuine inquiries seeking information. Instead, they function as rhetorical and strategic tools used to assert a position, guide audience interpretation, and emphasize a point. When Harris asks, "**You know what happened to that bill?**", she is not expecting a literal reply but rather drawing the audience into agreement and building a shared narrative. The second question, "**You know why?**", works similarly. It primes the audience for the emotional and moral core of her argument: that Trump allegedly prefers to exploit problems rather than solve them. This allows Harris to frame the

opposition's motivations as politically opportunistic, using a concise and emotionally impactful setup.

The example of how Donald Trump employed direct questioning during the debate is presented in data 7.

- 7) *"So she just started by saying she's going to do this she's going to do that she's going to do all these wonderful things **why hasn't she done it?**"*

In this utterance, Donald Trump uses the phrase "**why hasn't she done it?**" at the end of his talk. He used this word to restate his argument and ask for confirmation from the audience. This challenges opponents while engaging the audience, a hallmark of competitive conversational style.

3.1.5. Commands and Directives

Coates (2004, pp. 94-96) noted that men often use commands and directives than women to assert dominance, particularly when interacting within same-sex groups. They are more likely to employ direct commands as a way to achieve their goals. However, the findings show several examples of how Kamala Harris used command and directives.

- 8) *"I have a plan let's talk about our plans and and **let's compare the plans!**"*

The phrase "**let's compare the plans**" in this utterance acts as a call to action, encouraging a comparison that places Harris' plan in a potentially favorable light, while also actively involving others in the discussion. The rising intonation and the imperative form serve to engage the audience or the opponent and move the conversation forward in a constructive, evaluative direction.

- 9) *"I absolutely support and over the last four years as vice president private healthcare options but what we **need to** do is maintain and grow the Affordable Care Act."*

In this utterance, Harris uses "**need to**" to add a sense of urgency or inevitability to the directive without sounding forceful. The structure implies that maintaining and expanding the ACA is not just a suggestion, it is the rational, necessary course of action. This helps Harris frame her stance where assertive women are often unfairly judged as emotional or aggressive. Thus, the phrasing not only conveys conviction but strategically manages tone and audience reception.

The example of Donald Trump's use of commands and directives during the debate is presented in data 10.

- 10) *"**I'm going to build it again** it's going to be bigger better and stronger."*

In this utterance, the phrase "**I'm going to build it again**" shows the direction of his plan, pointing to the future. It establishes the idea of a tangible outcome, with Trump positioning himself as the leader who will initiate and direct this rebuilding process. The use of "**again**" suggests something that had been previously built, likely referring to something from his previous presidency (possibly infrastructure or a metaphor for restoring America's strength). The adjectives "**bigger,**" "**better,**" and "**stronger**" serve as directives to elevate expectations and frame the goal in grandiose

terms. These words are not just descriptive; they are persuasive, intended to evoke a sense of improvement and superiority over the past.

3.1.6. Swearing and Taboo Language

One notable language feature of men is their use of swearing and taboo language. According to Coates (2004: pp. 97-98), men often employ language that can come across as impolite, rude, or inappropriate. Coates states that swearing is traditionally associated with masculine speech styles, serving functions such as expressing aggression, building solidarity, or asserting power - particularly in all-male groups. Women, on the other hand, have historically been socially discouraged from using strong taboo language, especially in public or professional contexts, as it may conflict with gendered expectations of propriety, politeness, or emotional control. As for the example, Kamala Harris does not use explicit swearing or taboo words in her statements throughout the debate. Some of it can be seen in data 11.

- 11) *"Frankly the American people are exhausted with **this same old tired Playbook**."*

In this utterance, Harris's use of *"same old tired Playbook"* in reference to Trump's policies is a rhetorical move designed to critique his approach as stale, ineffective, and repetitive. It suggests that his policies are no longer relevant or capable of addressing new challenges, positioning Harris as someone who will bring fresh, effective leadership. The phrase is strategically vague, allowing for broad criticism without needing to engage with specific policy debates, while tapping into voter fatigue.

- 12) *"Let's understand how we got to where we are. Donald Trump, when he was president, negotiated one of **the weakest deals you can imagine**."*

In this utterance, the word *"weakest"* is a superlative adjective that intensifies the negative judgment without resorting to profanity. Adding the phrase *"you can imagine"* personalizes the judgment, inviting the audience to internalize and visualize the severity of the criticism. Rather than using explicit swear words like *"a terrible deal"* or *"a damn disaster"* - which might provoke negative reactions, she chooses the more socially acceptable, yet still highly critical phrase *"the weakest deal you can imagine"* to maintain credibility, professionalism, and authority while delivering a powerful rebuke.

In addition, Trump tends to use a lot of swearing and taboo language during the debate which can be seen in the examples below.

- 13) *"We have inflation.....this has been a **disaster** for people for the middle class but for every class."*

The word *"disaster"* in this utterance is categorized as a taboo word, but it is emotionally charged and conveys strong negativity. It heightens the sense of urgency and failure, aiming to emphasize the severity of the situation. This aligns with Coates's observation that men often use assertive and provocative language to dominate conversations or critique opponents.

- 14) *"If she ever got elected, she'd change it and it will be the end of our country she's a **Marxist** everybody knows she's a Marxist her father's a Marxist."*

By repeating the term "**Marxist**" three times, Trump emphasizes the label to solidify the association in the audience's mind to attack and mock Harris's character and ideology. Calling someone a Marxist, especially in an American political context, is a strong ideological attack. The term is loaded with negative connotations, suggesting radicalism, anti-capitalism, and opposition to democratic values. This tactic discredits Harris and evokes distrust or fear among certain voter groups.

3.1.7. Compliments

Compliments are expressions of praise or approval that serve various social purposes depending on the context and the speaker's gender. Not just women, men also use compliments while producing a language. Coates (2004, pp. 98-100) states that compliments are a notable aspect of conversational dynamics that can vary significantly between men and women. However, women in leadership roles often need to assert their competence without seeming arrogant, so they frame accomplishments in contexts that highlight public service, justice, or communal benefit - as Harris presents in her utterances during the debate in the data 15 and 16.

- 15) *"I'm **the only person on this stage who has prosecuted transnational criminal organizations for the trafficking of guns drugs and human beings.**"*
- 16) *"**We have created over 800,000 new manufacturing jobs.**"*

The first utterance "***I'm the only person on this stage who has prosecuted transnational criminal organizations...***" - is a clear self-compliment, a rhetorical move in which Harris highlights her unique accomplishments. While traditional compliments often focus on appearance or character traits, especially in women's conversational patterns (Holmes, 1995 as cited in Coates, 2004, pp. 99-100), political speech often involves professional self-praise, framed as evidence of credibility, competence, and experience. Harris positions herself as uniquely qualified and action-oriented, emphasizing not just that she has experience, but that her experience is exclusive - "***the only person on this stage.***" This sets her apart from other candidates - Donald Trump and serves to subtly criticize her opponents' lack of similar credentials without directly attacking them.

The second utterance - "***We have created over 800,000 new manufacturing jobs.***" - is a collective compliment. By using "we", Harris includes her administration or political team, aligning with a cooperative discourse style which serves as a rhetorical form that praises group achievement while still implicitly reinforcing the speaker's leadership role in that achievement.

In addition, Donald Trump also employed many compliments during the debate as can be seen in data 17 and 18.

- 17) *"We did a **phenomenal** job with the pandemic."*
- 18) *"I went to the Wharton School of Finance and many of those professors the top professors think my plan is a **brilliant** plan."*

In Trump's utterance above, compliments are often self-directed or aimed at highlighting achievements, such as how good he was while handling the Covid-19 pandemic and how other professors in Wharton School of Finance praise him for his plan. This aligns with Coates's observation that men's use of compliments may function as a way to assert dominance or reinforce status rather than as a tool for creating relational bonds.

3.2 Discussion

This section presents the classification and implication of the dominant language features used by Kamala Harris and Donald Trump in the 2024 U.S. Presidential Debate.

3.2.1. Classifications

The use of Kamala Harris and Donald Trump's language features presented in a formal method to classify the findings in numerical data.

Table 1
The Total Classification of Jennifer Coates' Language Features (2004) Used by Kamala Harris and Donald Trump in the 2024 U.S. Presidential Debate

No	Language Features	Kamala Harris	Donald Trump
1	Minimal Responses	12	7
2	Hedges	19	15
3	Tag Questions	-	-
4	Questions	2	4
5	Command and Directives	50	25
6	Swearing and Taboo Language	-	26
7	Compliments	10	17
	Total	102	94

The classification of the language features employed by Harris and Trump during the debate, reveals nuanced gendered performances that reflect both traditional norms and adaptive rhetorical strategies. Coates (2004, pp. 86-100) outlines a distinction between gendered language features commonly assigned to women - such as hedges, minimal responses, tag questions, and questions - and those typically associated to men, including commands and directives, and taboo language. When mapped onto the debate data, this framework reveals the dynamic ways in which public figures perform and navigate gendered identities.

From the classification presented in **Table 1**, it is evident that both Harris and Trump adopted a variety of gendered language features, albeit with distinct preferences and frequencies. These variations are not merely stylistic choices but represent more profound socio-pragmatic factors related to the way political identity, power, and gender are performed.

To start with, minimal responses are typically associated with active listening and support, features often correlated with women's communication style (p. 132). Harris' higher use of minimal responses (n=12) implies a deliberate focus on collaboration, engagement, and attentiveness which is probably intended to communicate empathy and emotional intelligence - a tactic whereby she resonates with audience sentiment and improves her approachability without compromising her authority. By contrast,

Trump's lower use of minimal response (n=7) indicates a more assertive and self-centered attitude that is consistent with a typically masculine style of turn-taking.

Furthermore, hedges (e.g., "I believe," "I think") are employed to soften statements, signal uncertainty, or indicate politeness. Harris' greater use of hedges may align with social expectations of female speech being more tentative or accommodating (p. 125). Hedging, however, can also be interpreted as strategic diplomacy in political debate, which is a strategy to avoid stating absolute declarations. Harris' slightly higher usage (n=19) aligns with traditional expectations; her frequent hedging can also be interpreted as a rhetorical device to convey analytical nuances and purposeful caution in a politically charged situation. Trump's hedging, albeit less obvious, challenges the stereotype that male political discourse is invariably straightforward or aggressive by showing that even powerful speakers can choose to use mitigation to negotiate complex rhetorical situations.

The absence of tag questions - a stereotypically feminine feature used to soften statements or seek agreement - indicates that neither candidate exhibits this trait in a high-stakes debating setting. This reflects the formality and adversarial aspect of political discourse, when both genders avoid explicit respect in order to portray authority and power (p. 127).

Asking questions in a debate may serve various functions - such as challenging the opponent or as a rhetorical device. Trump's slightly higher use of questions (n=4) may indicate strategic provocation as it is related to masculine language (p. 144), while Harris's more measured use of questions (n=2) further reinforces her focus on control and structured message delivery.

A particularly striking contrast emerged in the use of commands and directives. Commands and directives are traditionally connected to male dominance and authority (Pade & Ntou, 2022, p. 2574) Harris's significantly higher use of this feature (n=50) disrupts gender expectations, indicating her assertive performance of leadership and control. It implies an intentional effort to project herself as an authoritative figure, challenging stereotypical assumptions about female politeness and submission. Trump's lower relative use of commands and directives (n=25), although still substantial, may indicate a strategic softening or shift from his earlier, more aggressive debating style.

In addition, swearing is a strong marker of men's language features, often indicating power, informality, or emotional intensity (p. 147). Trump's substantive use of taboo language (n=26) appeals to those who value honesty and directness while also reinforcing his "anti-establishment" image. On the other hand, Harris' complete avoidance reflects professionalism and discipline, which is in line with the social norm that expects female politicians to maintain decorum and respectability. This contrast underscores the gendered expectations of public decorum, where women are subjected to harshly judged for using such language (Pade & Ntou, 2022, p. 2572).

Moreover, Trump's higher use of compliments (n=17) compared to Harris (n=10) may seem counterintuitive, considering that compliments are frequently linked to female speech in relation to their relational function (Holmes, 1995) in Coates (2004). In informal or appearance-related situations, women have historically used compliments to show support and sustain social relations. However, in this political debate, Trump appears to use compliments performatively - meant to charm audiences and reassure alignment by highlighting personal accomplishments. In addition, Harris' use of compliments likely signals genuine acknowledgment or attempts to foster solidarity, consistent with a relational communication style.

Her compliments function less as personal flattery and more as strategic declarations of collective or institutional accomplishments, aligning with a relational yet authoritative tone. However, in political communication, compliments may be used intentionally to gain favor, soften criticism, or build alignment with particular audiences. While both candidates use compliments to establish credibility, Trump centralizes the self as for his ego, while Harris emphasizes the impact of policies and shared progress. This contrast reinforces the idea that compliments, though traditionally and historically associated with femininity, are contextually redefined to serve distinct political identities and objectives (Dewati & Wulandari, 2023, p. 10).

3.2.2. Implications

3.2.2.1. Challenging Gender Norms

Kamala Harris challenges traditional female-associated speech style by using a high number of commands and directives, suggesting a deliberate strategy to establish authority and position herself as an equal to her male opponent. Her speech exhibits a hybrid or adaptive style by combining traditionally women's language features (hedges, minimal responses) with masculine features (directives) (Coates, 2004, pp. 137-145).

3.2.2.2. Reinforcing Masculine Norms

Donald Trump's dominant use of swearing and compliments presents his performance of masculinity as aggressive, confrontational, and populist. His comparatively lower number of commands and directives compared to Harris may reflect a shift in tone or context-sensitive moderation in a formal context.

3.2.2.3. Gendered Strategic Adaptation

The findings suggest that both speakers modify their language features in response to the limitations of political performance as well as their gendered identities. Harris appears to adapt by combining warmth and authority, while Trump leans into his established persona, using provocative language to maintain dominance.

4. Conclusion

This study examined the gendered language features employed by Kamala Harris and Donald Trump in the formal-stakes context of the 2024 U.S. Presidential Debate using Jennifer Coates' (2004) framework. The comparative analysis demonstrates that both candidates selectively employed linguistic strategies that reflect not only their gendered identities but also their rhetorical objectives. While Harris employed a hybrid communicative style combining traditionally masculine features (e.g., commands and directives) with feminine styles (e.g., hedges and minimal responses), Trump's language more consistently remained to masculine norms due to his frequent use of direct questioning and taboo language, while still incorporating elements such as compliments and hedges to manage appeal to broader and diverse audiences.

Importantly, presidential debates present a unique insight into the social realities of a specific country. The debate topics are grounded in real-life issues across political, economic, cultural, and social dimensions, indicating the discourse is highly authentic. This authenticity arises from the natural and spontaneous context of the event. Candidates are required to respond in real time, using language that is both strategic and performative to convey their positions and ideology. As presidential candidates

with prior executive experience - Trump as a former president and Harris as vice president - their interactions represent competition not only of policies but also of leadership behaviors. One might expect that such equal footing would lead to comparable linguistic behavior, particularly in terms of assertiveness, command, and engagement. However, the findings reveal that distinct language choices are formed, determined by underlying gendered norms and expectations. Despite their shared status, biological and social factors continue to shape how individuals express languages and political identity. This supports the notion that language reflects not only role or power, but also socially constructed gender identities which aligns with previous statement proposed by (Joseph et al., 2022, p. 286).

Furthermore, their previous leadership roles contributed to the debate dynamic. Each candidate drew upon their previous experience in government to gain credibility and attack the other's track record, integrating personal backgrounds and political legacy into the language choice of the debate. These references not only legitimized their stances but also influenced the tone and content of their arguments, illustrating how historical retention and political capital interact with gendered discourse.

This study confirms that gendered language use in political debates is a performative, context-dependent act. The findings also aligns with Coates's statements (2004, p. 100) which reveals how even in situations where institutional power is equal, gender continues to influence communication strategies and language choices. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of how gender, language, and power function within formal democratic settings and underscore the importance of sociolinguistic studies in analyzing the discourse of political debate. Future studies might build on these insights by looking into audience perception, media framing, or the role of multimodal features such as tone, gesture, and visual presentation in support or challenge gendered speech norms.

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