

A Taxonomy of Tweets

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In this lesson, students will be introduced to messaging strategies that one researcher suggests our 45th President uses to frame public debate through tweets. Goals of the lesson include developing media literacy as well as the disposition to follow the actions of elected officials. The lesson builds off of cognitive linguist George Lakoff's recent work (read below).

Concepts Addressed: civic participation (following the actions of elected officials) and media literacy.

Vocabulary: taxonomy (the classification of something), preemptive framing, diversion, trial balloon, deflection, salient exemplar – see Handout 1 for explanations of the terms.

Procedures

1. Preparing to Teach: teachers should listen to NPR's "On the Media" interview with George Lakoff at <http://www.wnyc.org/story/taxonomy-trump-tweets/> Focus on the descriptions of the categories of tweets that are part of his taxonomy.
2. Contextualize the lesson: tell students that the use of Twitter by a President to influence and communicate his messages to the American people is a new phenomenon in American politics. Intrigued by this development, a cognitive linguist ("Distinguished Professor" George Lakoff - retired from University of California, Berkeley) analyzed tweets from President-elect Trump and created a taxonomy or classification of tweets. The taxonomy is important to consider as it helps us understand how those who use social media might be trying to manage public debate and influence thinking. Knowing what any writer or speaker is trying to do (rhetoric) helps us to decide what level of scrutiny we should apply to information and how we might navigate through competing information or misinformation to decide what is believable.
Important goals of this lesson are to (a) help students understand that one responsibility of American citizens is to follow the actions of elected officials and (b) to develop their literacy skills by making them aware of strategies that writers and speakers use as they argue and try to influence others.
3. Distribute copies of **Handout 1: Taxonomy of Tweet Strategies**. Ask students to read Handout 1 with the purpose of understanding the suggested strategies.

4. Formative Check for Understanding: place student in pairs or small groups and ask them to take turns explaining each category of tweet strategy and offer hypothetical examples (not from Trump's tweet...other possible examples of them in use) as evidence of their understanding. Those not explaining should suggest ways revise explanations and examples in ways that improve understanding.
5. Formative Feedback: Ask volunteers to share their explanations and examples with the whole class. Correct misunderstandings.
6. Distribute copies of **Handout 2: Analyzing Tweets** (you may want to cut each case on the handout out and distribute as a set). Ask students to work in pairs or small groups to match each Case (#1-5) with a strategy described on Handout 1 - George Lakoff's "taxonomy of tweets." Emphasize that the students need to use language from tweets to explain their matches.
7. Invite volunteers to share their matches and explanations.

Debrief: Just because a researcher concludes that our President's tweets reveal patterns of strategies that are being used to shape debates and influence thinking, one need not agree. Ask students...

1. if they believe that their analyses lend support for Lakoff's taxonomy (noting that it is a small sample of tweets),
2. to list and explain some positive and negative aspects of elected or appointed officials using Twitter,
3. if tweeting is an appropriate method for a President to communicate his points,
4. to explain why it is or is not important to follow our President's tweets,
5. how the information relating to the taxonomy of tweets (media literacy) offered by George Lakoff might be important for citizens living in a democratic society.

Extension: Goals of this lesson included developing media literacy and the disposition to follow the actions of elected officials. Invite students to continue following the President's tweets and report back on strategies that are used or new ones that might be evolving.

Handout 1: Taxonomy of Donald Trump's Tweeting Strategies (according to cognitive linguist George Lakoff)

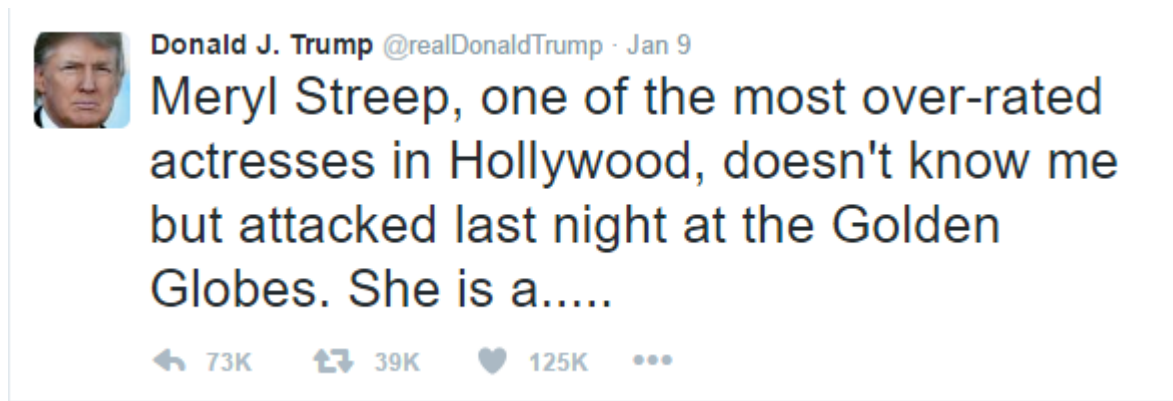
1. Preemptive Framing – devising the manner in which the tweeter wants a topic or issue to be understood *before* others get a chance to frame the discussion around the issue. Framing is a strategy used to avoid focusing on something that may make the tweeter or his decisions look bad.
2. Diversion – in this strategy, a major issue comes up but the tweeter brings up a different issue designed to divert attention away from the major issue. The goal is to get people to talk about the diversion rather than the major issue that the tweeter is trying to avoid.
3. Trial Balloon – in a trial balloon, the tweeter throws out an idea that is sometimes controversial to see how people react in the hope that their reactions will offer guidance on how to act.
4. Deflection – when deflection is used, the tweeter attacks the messenger or person who is criticizing him in an attempt to undermine the credibility of the critic. The hope is that the public does not take the criticism as seriously as it may deserve to be taken.
5. Salient Exemplar (extrapolating from specific to general) – a salient exemplar is a strategy in which the tweeter takes a specific single case or episode and suggests that it applies broadly e.g. to everyone who shares characteristics similar to the person involved in the case or episode.

Handout 2: Analyzing Tweets

Case #1

Trigger: Actress Meryl Streep criticized Donald Trump for the manner in which he has mimicked disabled people which giving her awards speech at the Golden Globes dinner.

Tweet Response:

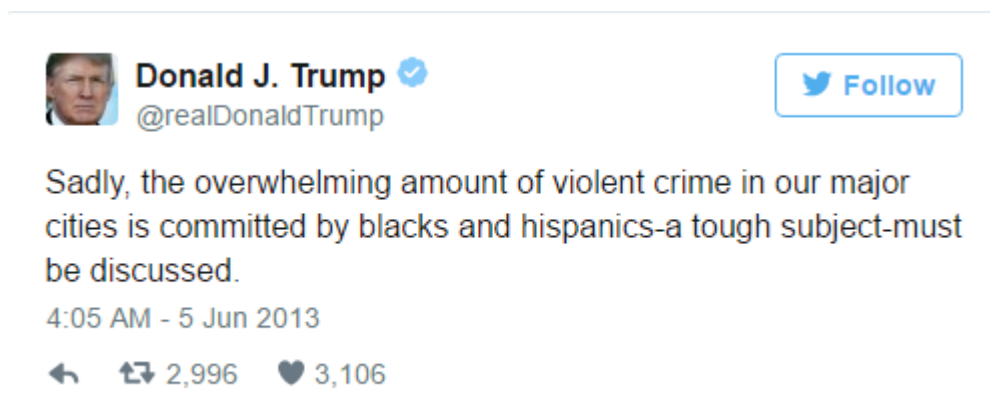


Question: Which (if any) strategy on George Lakoff's taxonomy of Trump tweets is used here? Use evidence from the tweet to support your response.

Case #2

Trigger: In 2013, President Barack Obama announced that there were "huge drops in the murder rates" in cities like New York, Los Angeles and Dallas.

Tweet Response:



Question: Which (if any) strategy on George Lakoff's taxonomy of Trump tweets is used here? Use evidence from the tweet to support your response.

Case #3

Trigger: unclear but likely the threat of nuclear proliferation (expansion of nations that have nuclear weapons).

Tweet Response:



Donald J. Trump ✓
@realDonaldTrump

Follow

The United States must greatly strengthen and expand its nuclear capability until such time as the world comes to its senses regarding nukes

Question: Which (if any) strategy on George Lakoff's taxonomy of Trump tweets is used here? Use evidence from the tweet to support your response.

Case #4

Trigger: CNN reported that BuzzFeed published unverified memos alleging that the Russian government has compromising personal and financial information about Donald Trump.

Tweet Response:



Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump · Jan 12

.@CNN is in a total meltdown with their FAKE NEWS because their ratings are tanking since election and their credibility will soon be gone!

38K 36K 128K

Question: Which (if any) strategy on George Lakoff's taxonomy of Trump tweets is used here? Use evidence from the tweet to support your response.

Case #5

Trigger (what provoked the tweet): the media reported that Russians hacked the Democratic National Committee and used information to undermine Hillary Clinton and get Donald Trump elected.

Tweet Response:



Donald J. Trump @realDonaldTrump · Jan 7

Only reason the hacking of the poorly defended DNC is discussed is that the loss by the Dems was so big that they are totally embarrassed!

↳ 25K ↻ 20K ❤️ 85K ⋮

Question: What (if any) strategy did Donald Trump use in this tweet to respond to the trigger? Use evidence from the tweet to support your response.