

# Speech Codes and Persuasion in an American Presidential Debate

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Within the ethnography of communication (EoC), a central proposition within speech codes theory (Philipsen, 1997) is that speech codes are deployed strategically in the conduct of communication. They carry persuasive force towards the audience of a message. As Philipsen (1986) has shown analyzing a speech by then-mayor of Chicago, the speech code used by the recipient strongly affects the speech's persuasiveness. The addressed audience, decoding the speech through the code of honor, believed the speech to be a great one. Outsiders, using the code of dignity to interpret the speech, believed it was just rambling. In this paper, I show that the first Presidential Debate in the 2016 American Presidential election can be characterized based on the same contrasting speech codes: Donald Trump uses the code of honor, whereas Hillary Clinton uses the code of dignity. This may explain the highly different persuasive effects of each of their performances on various segments of American society.

To better understand speech codes as a rhetorical move, we may approach their use as a "strategic maneuver": a communicative act designed to be persuasive, while at least seemingly reasonable (Van Eemeren, 2010). This concept enables the analysis of the use of speech codes and their persuasive dimension in detail, since a strategic maneuver is analytically broken into three separated but interrelated aspects: (1) the topics which are discussed, (2) the framing of the discourse and (3) the use of various stylistic devices. When looking at speech codes from a rhetorical perspective, the effective use of a speech code should simultaneously affect the discourse with regards to each of these three aspects. Thus, EoC can benefit from work in argumentation theory to better understand the effects of speech codes on social interaction, given that speech codes carry rhetorical force.

Looking at their first turns in the debate, regarding the topics raised, Clinton talks about "equality", "fairness" and "investing" in good jobs given to people on their merits. In contrast, Trump talks about the disgrace that the "government" is not "fighting" to get jobs back from other countries. Second, they frame their turn at talk differently: Clinton suggests a world of collective decision-making about "what kind of country we want". She is also presuming "fairness" to be a common-sense value. In contrast, Trump presents a world where we have to "fight" and "win" since other countries will otherwise take advantage of us. It is about strength and courage. Lastly, Clinton emphasizes words like "fair" and "together" and labels the current unequal economy as unfair. Trump suggests that "fighting" is something good, while otherwise jobs will "flee" the country.

Thus, as I show by going through the whole debate, each candidate used a different speech code: Trump of honor, Clinton of dignity. On top of the contribution to the understanding of this political discourse, I also illustrate how the use of strategic maneuvering has given a finer granularity to the rhetorical aspects of the speech code, showing the strength of complementing EoC with finer rhetorical tools.

## References

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