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Trump vs Trudeau: Articulation of National Identity on Twitter

Abstract

This study focuses on articulation of national identity on social media, specifically Twitter. First, it tackles discursive and other devices employed by politicians in order to negotiate national identity on social media platforms such as Twitter. Second, the study tries to identify whether populist rhetoric strategies are adopted to disseminate political agenda through social media and if and how these contribute to the articulation of national identity. The article takes a case study of Twitter accounts of current highest political representatives of the United States and Canada, Donald Trump and Justin Trudeau, respectively. Drawing methodologically mainly on Teun van Dijk's ideological square (1998), it aims to show that national and political agendas are often intertwined and inherently connected. The findings suggest, however, that, even though the techniques are often similar, the extent and purpose of their employment varies.

Keywords: identity, social media, Trump, Twitter, Trudeau, Critical Discourse Analysis

1. Introduction

Studies on identity have become a prominent part of linguistic and social research over the last couple of decades (*cf. inter alia* Joseph 2004; Wodak *et al.*, 1999; van Dijk 2000). It is only recently, however, coinciding with the boom of social media world, that platforms like Twitter have started to factor in in the process of identity negotiation. While identity is, in essence, dynamic and fluid in the offline context, these characteristics are even more pronounced in the online world. Even though there have been some studies dealing with (micro)celebrity identity articulation on Twitter (Marwick and Boyd 2011; Page 2012) or attempts to discuss national stereotypes through language use by Americans and Canadians on Twitter (Sneffella, Schmidtke, and Kuperman 2018), there has not been, to the knowledge of the author, provided an example of a comparative study of identity negotiation by the political elites of the United States and Canada.

The juxtaposition of the United States and Canada is for various historical and geographical reasons unavoidable. Yet, both countries pride themselves on being distinctive from one another, having their own identity. However, the differences might be sometimes too subtle to discern from the outside looking in and, even though this sentiment has decreased recently, the notion that “a Canadian’s sense of identity relates to areas that demonstrate a sense of Canadian distinctiveness vis-à-vis the United States” remains present. It is still a common occurrence that Canadians “in trying to puzzle out a sense of national identity, too often reduce it to “not being American” (Nimijean 2005). Entering the campaign with a “Canada’s back?” slogan for the federal election in 2015, it was supposed to signal change in Canada’s role in global politics and was one of the key themes of a newly branded Canada (Nimijean 2018). Trudeau’s vision might roughly be summarized as seeing Canada playing a role of a “globally engaged middle power that contributes [...] to a progressive liberal internationalist agenda [and] interacts more transparently with the broader public both in Canada and abroad” (Ostwald and Dierkes 2018: 203).

On a similar note, the United States underwent a dramatic political change in 2016 after presidential election. Donald J. Trump became the 45th President of the United States and took over the Oval Office. Trump’s *Make America Great Again* slogan used during his campaign emphasized America first ideology and should, assumedly, put American citizens and American products to the forefront while at the same time it should undermine the influence of everything that is connected to the ‘other’.

Trump’s and Trudeau’s victories fit into the context of recent change of political landscape. Concomitant with the change is the shift of political discourse towards right-wing populism – the phenomenon which has been on the rise lately (for more, see for example: Wodak 2015, Wodak and Krzyżanowski 2017, Chovanec and Molek-Kozakowska 2017). As right-wing populism is something that is gaining more prominence, this paper tries to trace whether some of its strategies (such as strategically depicting the elites as being corrupted and inept as well as identifying the ‘other’ as a threat in order to legitimize one’s agenda) are adopted in addressing the audience by Trump and Trudeau. Additionally, the paper aims to observe the negotiation of national identity fabric as articulated by Donald Trump and Justin Trudeau on their respective Twitter accounts. Finally, it explores if and how the confines of social media platforms influence identity negotiation and its discourse.

2. Theoretical background and Methodology

In order to answer the posed questions concerning discursive devices employed by Justin Trudeau and Donald Trump, the present study is interpreted from the perspective of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). As “one of the most influential and visible branches of discourse analysis” (Bloomaert and Bulcaen, 2000), it looks into “opaque as well as transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control as manifested in language” (Wodak 2009: 10). Moreover, one of important perks of CDA is that it not only “constitutes situations, objects of knowledge, and the social identities and relationships between people and groups of people” (Fairclough and Wodak 1997: 258), but its focus has also recently veered to “the study of political institutions [and] research in the domain of politics [...] on rightwing populist rhetoric” (Wodak 2009: 17–18).

One of the prominent features of this populist rhetoric is the dichotomous division into ‘us versus them’ categories. Teun van Dijk (1998: 33) calls this notion an ideological square, which is defined as follows:

1. Emphasize our good properties/actions
2. Emphasize their bad properties/actions
3. Mitigate our bad properties/actions
4. Mitigate their good properties/actions

This attribution of positive qualities to ‘us’ and negative qualities to ‘them’ is a common discursive strategy employed typically to negotiate individual or collective identity. As far as the latter is concerned, this dichotomy characteristically serves as a mechanism to “emphasize national uniqueness and intra-national uniformity [and at the same time] ignore intra-national differences” (Wodak *et al.*, 2009: 4).

One way of identifying these strategies is by answering a question formulated by Reisigl and Wodak (2001) pertaining to identity politics and the inclusion – exclusion dichotomy: “by means of what arguments and argumentation schemes do specific persons or social groups try to justify and legitimize the exclusion [...] of others?” Finally, the concept of ‘othering’ frequently permeates the discourse of right-wing populists and racist groups to legitimize their ideological stances. As suggested by Cap in his Proximization theory (*cf.* Cap 2013, 2016), the speakers try to put forth their policies and proposed actions, which should appeal to the audience, by neutralizing “the growing impact of the negative, “foreign”, “alien”, “antagonistic”, entities” (Cap 2013: 293).

3. Data

Since one of the main goals of the paper is to explore the negotiation of national identity on Twitter, currently the highest representatives of two major English-speaking countries, the United States and Canada respectively, were chosen as a source for the data to be studied. The data was collected in two roughly 3 week-long periods. The first period was from August 12 to August 31 2017. The second data-collecting period took place between January 1 to January 19 2018. The former was prior to a character-limit change on Twitter which occurred gradually in November 2017. Before the change, a single tweet was limited to the maximum of 140 characters. After the change, the character count doubled to 280 characters, which potentially opened a bigger platform to spread the agenda of individual representatives and their respective countries. The paper uses data obtained from the official Twitter accounts of Donald J. Trump¹ with a Twitter handle @realDonaldTrump and the bio section stating “45th President of the United States of America”² and Justin Trudeau with a Twitter handle @JustinTrudeau and the bio specifying that the “[a]ccount [is] run by the 23rd Prime Minister of Canada and [his] staff”³ (Twitter,

1 There is another official account with a Twitter handle @POTUS which is always run by a current President of the United States (i.e. it is run by President Trump and his team at the moment). However, the data from this account was not included in this paper.

2 The presence of American flag emoji in D. Trump’s bio is another means of articulating a message to the audience. However, the analysis of this phenomenon is not part of the scope of this paper.

3 The bio section also includes the same statement in French, Trudeau thus acting in compliance with Canada’s official bilingualism policy.

Inc.: 2017). The data does not include retweets (i.e. posts created by someone else and then retweeted by Donald Trump or Justin Trudeau) nor responses to tweet directed at these two politicians, with the aim to monitor posts solely initiated by the two politicians. Also of note might be the number of followers both accounts have garnered. Donald Trump's account has roughly tenfold more followers than Justin Trudeau's, and therefore it has a bigger possibility to reach the desired national audience. However, it is important to add that neither account is followed exclusively by the citizens of the country (far from that actually) and, moreover, the follower count continuously changes.

4.1. Twitter and digital diplomacy

The inception of social media platforms at the start of the new millennium brought other channel(s) for dissemination of political agenda and eventually gave rise to a phenomenon called digital diplomacy - i.e. the practice of employing digital media for diplomatic purposes (Bjola and Holmes 2015). Originally, Twitter emerged as a micro-blogging site, giving an opportunity of "sharing values as a way of communicating our experience of the world and bonding with others" (Zappavign, 2013: 50). Consequently, the purpose of communication through the platform has broadened and it carries a strong momentum nowadays. Diverting from its initial usage, it often serves as a powerful political tool, which can help a political candidate to get into office and subsequently to spread their political agenda. As Ostwald and Dierkes point out (2018: 207), "digital diplomacy allows countries to disseminate selected elements of their brand to the segments of a target population that are most likely to engage positively." Through using language competently and appropriately, the politicians thus try to convert the linguistic capital into some actual value or to gain bigger power (Bourdieu 1977, Page 2012: 183). Indeed, the appropriateness of language use and technical affordances allow for a better or even idealized presentation of the self and thus exhibiting a positivity bias (Matley 2018: 67). At the same time, the opportunity to control the message lends itself to omission of certain topics that are deemed undesirable by the politicians. The strategic exclusion of certain topics or certain information might be as effective and as significant in seeking positive response as is actually posting some other messages.

Even though Canada has caught up to the means of diplomatic communication relatively recently, the activity and output on Twitter has gradually ramped up and it has factored in spreading Canadian identity and in increasing of national profile (Ostwald and Dierkes 2018). By the same token, it serves as an important platform for Donald Trump to deploy the American political agenda. It has gotten to the point where the boundary between Trump's personal opinions and the distribution of official American political stances is really blurred and it is often difficult to distinguish one from the other. This might, again, be done purposefully to eradicate the boundary between politicians and ordinary people as if to enhance the feeling of being 'one of the people'.

The audience is even encouraged to co-participate and to seemingly co-set the national agenda by having their say into what is going on. This is often done by inviting people to follow live streams of events or by allowing to participate in the comment section. The audience is therefore offered an opportunity to go 'back-stage' - the politicians as if performing the practice of micro-celebrity and letting the citizens in to have a peek behind-the-scenes and to discuss various matters (Marwick and Boyd 2011). Nevertheless, the access is only limited and what is going to be presented to the public is often orchestrated and meticulously managed. This strategic behavior is described by Goffman as "front stage" (1959), where the effort is made to display controlled impressions/message to the observer. As a result, despite the fact that

Twitter has some dialogic potential, it is by default non-reciprocal (i.e. when one chooses to direct a tweet at someone, it does not necessarily mean that they would respond or react in any way) and it is inevitably asymmetric (i.e. the power imbalance of offline context is predominantly maintained in the online world as well). The size of the followership is then taken “as a sign of status” (Page 2012: 183).

4.2. Twitter features - hashtags:

The practice of hashtagging, with the use of the hash sign (#), surfaced as one of the most recognizable symbols of social media platforms and it is an inherent part of (not only online) discourse these days. Naturally, it is included in politicians’ repertoire in the online context as well. Thus, it is one of the resources employed by both Donald Trump and Justin Trudeau to further their cause.

Generally, the visibility of the tweet seems to be the major reason why a hashtag is adopted in computer-mediated communication. As Heyd and Puschmann put it, it helps to create “a thematic discursive space [...] in which a smaller subset of the individuals present on the platform congregate” (Heyd and Puschmann 2016: 5). However, it is not the exclusive use of hashtags. The means of getting the message across and reaching to the audience are innumerable and the employment is rather individual and idiosyncratic. Even though there seems to be “some stability in hashtag choice and persistence despite the absence of high-level prescription as [how] to use [it], this persistence is [just] relative” (Zappavigna 2013: 88) and personal customization and modification very often prevail. Therefore, the use of hashtag occasionally includes expressive means such as irony, sarcasm, or evaluation. As a result, these simulate conversational style and facilitate “the production of utterances which are personal, informal and intimate (Scott 2015: 9). Furthermore, the emergence of a new hashtag is often motivated by “temporal and geographical context” (Page 2012: 188), whereby it refers to a relevant event or it is targeted at a certain group of people/users.

Especially the last point about geographical context as regards the use of hashtags pertains very strongly to the accounts of Donald Trump and Justin Trudeau (as will be illustrated in section 5 below). In terms of national events, the hashtags “are used to aggregate the audience’s public commentary and evaluation” (Page 2012: 190), again making the audience active participants rather than onlookers. Finally, hashtags are employed for marketing and promotional purposes, performing the front stage identity (see above) in order to interact with the audience and to make their professional agenda more visible (e.g. #MAGA, for more see below).

5. Case study

The analytical section takes a case study of Donald Trump’s and Justin Trudeau’s Twitter accounts and documents and interprets micro-linguistic features present in their tweets. Namely, it addresses the questions concerning the presentation of the in-group vs. the presentation of the out-group. Furthermore, it looks into individual devices employed to negotiate identity of a nation on a social platform like Twitter (for more background on the issue see sections 2. and 4. above). The section points out four different idiosyncrasies that stood out while comparing the Twitter accounts of Donald Trump and Justin Trudeau.

5.1. Presentation of the in-group vs. presentation of the out-group (i.e. the others)

As described by van Dijk (see ideological square above), there is a tendency in current political discourse to “de-emphasize Our bad things and Their good things” (van Dijk 2009: 70), which often leads to an intra-national polarization and to a societal rift in general. This phenomenon of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation is especially prominent in Donald Trump’s tweets:

- (1) With Mexico being one of the highest crime Nations in the world, we must have THE WALL. Mexico will pay for it through reimbursement/other. 8/27/17
- (2) We need the Wall for the safety and security of our country. We need the Wall to help stop the massive inflow of drugs from Mexico, now rated the number one most dangerous country in the world. If there is no Wall, there is no Deal! 1/18/18
- (3) A GREAT HONOR to spend time with our BRAVE HEROES at the @USMC Air Station Yuma. THANK YOU for your service to the United States of America! 8/24/17
- (4) Departing Pittsburgh now, where it was my great honor to stand with our incredible workers, and to show the world that AMERICA is back - and we are coming back bigger and better and stronger than ever before! 1/18/18
- (5) @ICEgov HSI agents and ERO officers, on behalf of an entire Nation, THANK YOU for what you are doing 24/7/365 to keep fellow American’s SAFE. Everyone is so grateful! #LawEnforcementAppreciationDay President @realDonaldTrump 1/9/18

In the tweets (1) and (2) Trump directly designates Mexico as a threat to the United States because of its crime rate and drug issues. He thus tries to legitimize one of the points from his political agenda – building of the wall between the two countries. It is a case of ascribing negative qualities to the members of the out-group. On the other hand, in the tweets (3), (4), and (5), Trump foregrounds positive qualities of the in-group. He points to the fact that American Marine Corps are “our BRAVE HEROES” (3), highlights that American workers are “incredible” (4), or mentions that the country is “SAFE” (5) and “bigger and better [...] than ever” (4).

Trudeau’s presentation of the out-group is different, though.

- (6) King Abdullah II of Jordan and I have had a great visit and meetings focused on women’s rights, development and trade. 8/29/17
- (7) My thanks to Haitian community leaders in Quebec for an informative and constructive discussion regarding asylum seekers. 8/24/17
- (8) Home in my riding of Papineau for Indian Independence Day celebrations! Long live the friendship between our two countries. 8/21/17

In the tweets (6), (7), (8) above, Trudeau in some capacity mentions members of the out-group. Nevertheless, the message is conveyed in a more friendly way. There are used constructions like “great visit” (6), “constructive discussion” (7) or there is even expressed a wish of sustained friendship (8). This rhetoric is clearly more inclusive than Trump’s, likely stemming from Canada’s efforts to brand its identity as a welcoming country. As appeared in one of the Trudeau’s tweets in January 2017, “[d]iversity is our strength” (as cited in Nimijean, 2018: 131).

5.2. Collective *we* identification with the in-group

Related to the presentation of the in-group is a dichotomous distinction ‘us vs. them’. It is based on the conceptual use of pronouns such as *we*, *us*, *our*, very often in contrast with pronouns *they* and *them*. This is a common strategy of populist discourse where politicians use *we* and *us* as conceptualized constructs where they try to present the in-group as a “homogenous entity” (Kreis 2017: 6). Additionally, they present themselves as spokespersons as if speaking on behalf of the whole nation.

- (9) We must remember this truth: No matter our color, creed, religion or political party, we are ALL AMERICANS FIRST. 8/12/17
- (10) We will push onward to victory w/hope in our hearts, courage in our souls and everlasting pride in each and every one of you. God Bless America. 8/22/17
- (11) We will push onward to victory w/hope in our hearts, courage in our souls and everlasting pride in each and every one of you. God Bless America. 8/22/17
- (12) Canada is an open and welcoming society. But just as we welcome and encourage newcomers, we are also a country of laws. 8/23/17
- (13) Canadians are keeping the people of Texas in our thoughts - we’re ready to offer any assistance needed to help recover from this disaster. 8/28/17

Admittedly, there also exists diversification of *we*. For example, in Donald Trump’s tweets, one can come across tweets referring to *we* as the nation, the Republicans (as opposed to the Democrats), people who voted me (as opposed my opponent), *etc.* See illustrative examples.

- (14) ...didn’t do it so now we have a big deal with Dems holding them up (as usual) on Debt Ceiling approval. Could have been so easy-now a mess! 8/24/17
- (15) Democrats are doing nothing for DACA – just interested in politics. DACA activists and Hispanics will go hard against Dems, will start “falling in love” with Republicans and their President! We are about RESULTS. 1/2/18
- (16) So much Fake News is being reported. They don’t even try to get it right, or correct it when they are wrong. They promote the Fake Book of a mentally deranged author, who knowingly writes false information. The Mainstream Media is crazed that WE won the election! 1/13/18

Finally, the process of polarization is more apparent from Trump’s tweets in terms of mitigating the bad properties/actions of the in-group and de-emphasizing the good properties/actions of the out-group. The following examples compare Trump’s and Trudeau’s tweets about Pakistan and their relationship to this particular country:

- (17) The United States has foolishly given Pakistan more than 33 billion dollars in aid over the last 15 years, and they have given us nothing but lies and deceit, thinking of our leaders as fools. They give safe haven to the terrorists we hunt in Afghanistan, with little help. No more! 1/1/18
- (18) Today, we join Pakistanis in Canada and around the world to celebrate Pakistan’s independence. Happy Independence Day! 8/14/17

Whereas in (17) Trump juxtaposes the good (the USA, i.e. the in-group) and the bad (Pakistan, i.e. the out-group) while differentiating between us and they and using lexical means (e.g. lies, deceit,

fools) to corroborate his claim, in (18) Trudeau does speak on behalf of Canadians (i.e. the in-group), but does not specifically label the 'other' as the out-group. It therefore comes out as more inclusive.

Analogically, there is diversification of *them* as well. It is not solely based on nationality. The divisive technique is employed in regard with the media (20) or the Democrats (21).

(20) So much Fake News is being reported. They don't even try to get it right, or correct it when they are wrong. They promote the Fake Book of a mentally deranged author, who knowingly writes false information. The Mainstream Media is crazed that WE won the election!

(21) I don't believe the Democrats really want to see a deal on DACA. They are all talk and no action. This is the time but, day by day, they are blowing the one great opportunity they have. Too bad! 1/13/17

5.3. Regional affiliation

One of the means of congregating the audience on Twitter is through regional affiliation. It is very prominently used by both Trump and Trudeau. In general, it creates a sense of an 'imagined community' (Anderson 1991) where individual users may not ever meet in person, but they can relate to each other through geographical places known throughout the nation. The following are some of the tweets from Trudeau's account (22–24) and Trump's account (25–29) highlighting this:

(22) Thanks, @MayorGregor, for your friendship, partnership, and years of service and work for people in Vancouver. Wishing you all the best. 11/1/18

(23) For more than 20 years, Judy Foote served the people of Newfoundland and Labrador with love and dedication. We'll all miss her immensely. 8/24/17

(24) It's back - we're kicking off the year with a new series of town halls across Canada. I want to hear what's on your mind, and discuss how our plan is creating jobs and building a stronger economy. First stop in Lower Sackville, NS tomorrow. Stay tuned for details and livestream. 1/8/18

(25) Luther Strange of the Great State of Alabama has my endorsement. He is strong on Border and Wall, the military, tax cuts and law enforcement. 8/14/2017

(26) Big day in Washington, D.C., even though White House and Oval Office are being renovated. Great trade deals coming for American workers! 8/14/2017

(27) ...and people like Ms. Heyer. Such a disgusting lie. He just can't forget his election trouncing. The people of South Carolina will remember! 8/17/2017

(28) THANK YOU to all of the great men and women at the U.S. Customs and Border Protection facility in Yuma, Arizona and around the United States! 8/22/17

(29) Will be going to Pennsylvania today in order to give my total support to RICK SACCONI, running for Congress in a Special Election (March 13). Rick is a great guy. We need more Republicans to continue our already successful agenda! 1/18/18

As can be seen, regional references are used abundantly by both politicians. By repeatedly referring to local communities, there is a possible intent of establishing a relationship with the audience through the 'third party'. Furthermore, it shows the knowledge and care about places that are scattered all over the country (e.g. Justin Trudeau mentions the provinces of British Columbia, Newfoundland and Labrador,

and Nova Scotia, whereas Donald Trump mentions the states of Arizona, Alabama, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina), not just interests centered around the capital of the respective country. In the end, this again presents an opportunity to as though speak on behalf of a large portion of a country, making the audience feel included.

5.4. The employment of hashtags

Another interesting dynamic in the negotiation of identity is the employment of hashtags (for more see above). To a certain extent, it serves as a tool for making the content more accessible for their respective audience. Nevertheless, it is not the exclusive purpose. The examples follow:

- (30) Happy Pride, Ottawa! Joyeuse Fierté, Ottawa! #ottpride 8/27/17
- (31) And the sunsets are pretty gorgeous too... #YXE #Saskatooning 1/11/18
- (32) We're looking for innovative solutions to shape the future of our cities – apply to be a jury member to help us pick the winners of the #smartcitiesCanada challenge. 1/8/18
- (33) I, as President, want people coming into our Country who are going to help us become strong and great again, people coming in through a system based on MERIT. No more Lotteries! #AMERICA FIRST 1/14/18
- (34) THANK YOU to all of the incredible HEROES in Texas. America is with you! #TexasStrong 8/31/17
- (35) After reading the false reporting and even ferocious anger in some dying magazines, it makes me wonder, WHY? All I want to do is #MAGA! 8/30/17

In the examples above, hashtags are mostly used as a search tool providing better navigation on the platform. However, they again shrewdly incorporate regional references of either certain regions as in (31) and (34), or they directly mention the whole country like in (32) and (33). What stands out, though, is (35) which refers to Trump's presidential campaign slogan. Even though it includes an indirect allusion to the country itself as well, first and foremost it evokes Trump's run for the office and it is readily recognized in that way. This specific hashtag is used by Donald Trump on multiple occasions in the scrutinized dataset. On the other hand, Trudeau's slogan "Canada's back?" (see above) is, notably, not brought up in the corpus of tweets whatsoever.

6. Concluding remarks and summary

This paper identified differing approaches of negotiating national identity by the highest political representatives of the United States and Canada on Twitter, Donald Trump and Justin Trudeau, respectively. The analysis showed that, even though the two generally aim to appeal to the audience to create a sense of a homogenous entity and to externally project this image of a unified nation, there is in some cases a substantial gap in the means of legitimizing their national agenda. For example, although both Trump and Trudeau try to identify with the in-group (by means of using the collective *we*), accentuate the regional homogeneity as a nation or employ similar Twitter affordances (like the hash symbol), it is only in Donald Trump's discourse that the element of 'otherness' gains in prominence. On the one hand, Donald Trump conceptually polarizes the in-group and the out-group as incompatible. On the other

hand, Justin Trudeau does to the contrary as he generally promotes the idea of diversity as a Canadian strength.

Hand in hand with the national identity construction goes the political agenda. Again, even though the effort is often made to control the message sent out, there are some instances where one can find significant dissimilarities between Donald Trump and Justin Trudeau. Whereas Trump is more direct and succinct yet unconventional with his message, Trudeau's tweets are often more polished and adhering to the usual norm, i.e. the expected. In effect, Donald Trump is pushing the boundaries of political discourse. What is then acceptable in political discourse constantly changes. In addition, the right-wing populist discourse is more pronounced and has more space to flourish in the context of social media world. It will be interesting to observe what awaits next for political discourse and identity negotiation within the confines of Twitter sphere.

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