Dictators, Terrorists, Populists: What Language Can Tell Us About Opaque and Radical Politics

Leah Windsor,
Institute for Intelligent Systems
August 25, 2017

Research funded by:
NSF-Minerva #0904909
Minerva Initiative FA9550-14-1-0308
How does language inform our understanding of the politics of dictators, populists, and terrorists?
Corpus Selection: Epistemology of Political Language and Processes

• How do we learn about political processes in opaque societies and extremist groups?
  • Computational linguistics and the “text-as-data” field are deployed across multiple issue areas in international relations research

• However, research about language and politics broadly has deficiencies which affect conclusions and generalizability of findings, including:
  • Information deficiencies
  • Document processing
  • Lack of a common platform

• Why it’s important to dig and work for broader source texts
  • Relatively few groups and regimes dominate policy space (NYT International section)
  • Generalizability!
Information Deficiencies

• Data in opaque political environments (like authoritarian regimes and extremist groups) are often difficult to obtain

• Record-keeping is irregular
  • Many environments deliberately opaque
  • Archiving not a priority (forethought and planning)
  • Technological obstacles
  • Sociopolitical obstacles (like conflict or lack of infrastructure)
  • Oblivious to obvious data sources
Document Processing

- Archived in user-unfriendly formats
  - Handwritten and/or typewritten
  - Scanned and skewed
  - Scribbles in margins
  - Formats change over time
- Automated document processing technology exists but requires labor-intensive human supervision
- Linguistic barriers
  - Non-English source languages
  - English-language bias in computational programs
  - Translations (MultiUN here)
Lack of a Common Platform

- Research often focuses on specific contexts
  - Particular leaders
  - Unique circumstances
- International organizations provide a common platform

What type of language keeps dictators in power?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stayed in Power</th>
<th>Lost Power</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa (Bahrain)</td>
<td>Zine al-Abidine Ben Ali (Tunisia)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Abdullah (Jordan)</td>
<td>Muammar Gaddafi (Libya)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bashar al-Assad (Syria)</td>
<td>Ali Abdullah Saleh (Yemen)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King Mohammed VI (Morocco)</td>
<td>Hosni Mubarak (Egypt)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (Saudi Arabia)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

More positive emotion words, and fewer negative emotion, anxious, and angry words

Twice as many negative emotion words, more risk-associated words, and more third-person pronouns

The Rise of Populism in the World

Effect of Optimistic Language on Public Opinion in Venezuela

Effect of Angry Language on Public Opinion in Venezuela

---

Gender and Recruitment to Transnational Terrorism: The Case of ISIS Jihadi Brides
Linguistic, nonverbal, and audiovisual cues can augment our understanding of politics in opaque and radical groups.
Saying and Conveying: Phase I

- FACET captures variation in facial micro-expressions for joy, anger, fear, contempt, and disgust.
- In this clip:
  - Increases in joy when discussing justice-seekers, fear when discussing affluence and consumerism, disgust at the mention of genocide and wars, and contempt for Saddam Hussein and the Iran-Iraq war.

Saying and Conveying: Phase II

• What combination of language, nonverbal, and audiovisual elements signal truthfulness versus deception?
• What multimodal elements are used for persuasion and propaganda?
• What conclusions about cognition and cognitive states can we draw from observing neurobiological responses in subjects experiencing the content of political messaging, i.e., from viewing world leaders or non-state actors?
• How do congruent or dissonant multimodal elements draw the attention of observers?
Thank you!

Leah.Windsor@Memphis.edu