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## To er is human: Silent pauses and speech dysfunctions of the 2004 US presidential debates.

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**To er is human: Silent pauses and speech dysfunctions of the 2004 US presidential debates.**

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**Abstract**

It has become fashionable, even axiomatic in some circles today, to suppose that politics is all about form, not content—it's not what they say but the way that they say it. It ought to follow that the most powerful politicians should be the best speakers, so this paper takes as its starting point the 2004 US presidential debates. These televised confrontations, where each candidate has to react to new questions as well as to counter his opponent, are notoriously high-risk, and present considerable opportunities for various speech "dysfunctions". These are analysed in relation to media reaction and public perception of the outcome.

**Résumé**

Aujourd'hui, pour certains, il est de bon ton, voire axiématique, de penser que la politique est devenue plus une question de forme que de fond—« ce n'est pas ce qu'ils disent mais la façon dont ils le disent ». Suivant cette logique, les politiciens les plus influents seraient les meilleurs orateurs, ainsi cet article prend comme point de départ les débats présidentiels lors des élections aux Etats-Unis en 2004. Les candidats s'affrontent en direct devant des millions de téléspectateurs, tels des gladiateurs armés de mots. Cette situation à haut risque entraîne de nombreuses « dysfonctions » du discours qui n'échappent ni aux médias ni aux électeurs. Nous analysons ici ces dysfonctions et tentons de les mettre en relation avec la prestation de chaque candidat telle qu'elle est perçue par le public.

Posted on HAL (Hyper Article en Ligne: <http://hal.archives-ouvertes.fr/>) by Alex Boulton.



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## Introduction

When it comes to language, everyone is an expert. In a very real sense we all have “perfect” linguistic competence, and we generally recognise “good” language when we see it. And, more importantly, we are sensitive to “poor” language: we love to complain about other how other people speak and write. Inevitably, much comment is given to celebrities, not least to politicians: one of the most scandalous things about Watergate at the time was the quantity of “expletives deleted” in Nixon’s transcripts, while the current US President has come in for a lot of folk linguistic criticism, even giving rise to a new coinage, “Bushisms”. While some serious research has been conducted on such issues (e.g. A. Cienki, 2002), public perceptions remain largely intuitive and personal, as people twist the facts to fit their perceptions and prejudices rather than adjusting their ideas in the light of new facts. In their introduction to *Language Myths*, L. Bauer and P. Trudgill (1998)<sup>1</sup> remind us that many common beliefs about language have little or no basis in actual (linguistic) fact but, as the saying goes, the truth never got in the way of a good story, and language is no exception.

Politicians are undoubtedly aware that the public (wittingly or unwittingly) attaches great importance to their speech—witness Margaret Thatcher’s reported modification of her own speech (J. Wilson, 2001). Political parties need public support to gain and stay in power and so have little choice but to act accordingly, spending vast sums of money on public image. In the 2004 US presidential elections, the main parties are estimated to have spent over a billion dollars, perhaps as much as \$10 million dollars a day in the final two weeks (M. Vella, 2005). Among the most public events in American politics are the televised Presidential Debates, which have been pitting the two main candidates against each other in full public view since the 1960s (see A. Schroeder, 2001, for a review). They are widely watched, with the first one in the 2004 series attracting 63 million viewers—more than ever before<sup>2</sup>. This is no doubt in part because they provide a rare opportunity for the public actually to see the candidates in direct and open conflict; the fact that they are not addressing each other directly but via an interviewer only adds to the possibilities for “unmitigated disagreement” (D. Greatbatch, 1992, reported in C. Kakavá, 2001). The debates also attract extensive media coverage, much of which is on form rather than on content: this includes perceptions of the candidates’ linguistic performance.

This paper begins then with a survey of the public and media reaction in the US to the 2004 debates. It would be nice to think that the candidates would be judged on the content of what they said rather than anything else, but the particular nature of these debates means that image plays an important part. According to *The New York Times*:

The candidate who voters perceive as the winner will probably be chosen not on the substance of what he says, but on the cut of his jib. The subtle style cues of gesture, posture, syntax and tone of voice account for as much as 75 percent of a viewer’s judgment about the electability of a candidate... The mano a mano is about style—those nonverbal messages that speak to hearts, not heads<sup>3</sup>.

While not perhaps wishing to go quite so far, it could certainly be that “subtle style cues”—including speech—do affect the viewers’ judgement. We therefore decided to compare the general reaction against an analysis of the candidates’ performance in the two podium debates for traces of some of the most salient language “dysfunctions”, which can be

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<sup>1</sup> Relevant chapters from this collection include Jean Aitchison’s “The media are ruining English”, J.K.

Chambers’ “TV makes people sound the same”, and John Algeo’s “America is ruining the English language”.

<sup>2</sup> Alessandra Stanley (14 Oct 2004) “Bush smiles, but laughter falls short”, *The New York Times* (<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/14/politics/campaign/14teevee.html>).

<sup>3</sup> Alex Williams (26 Oct 2004) “Live from Miami, a style showdown”, *The New York Times* (<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/26/fashion/26DEBA.html?ex=1253851200&en=dbab9146e8854d3f&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland>).

defined quite simply as “interruptions in the speech flow” (S. Merlo and L. Mansur, 2004: 490). As Bush was widely deemed to have lost the first debate by a wide margin, and the second by a smaller one, it might be predicted that he exhibited considerably more speech dysfunctions than Kerry in the first debate, and only marginally more in the second.

A brief discussion of the status of such dysfunctions may be useful before we begin, as it is not uncontroversial. The very words “dysfunction” and “dysfluency” are not neutral, even as used by researchers in the field. One recent paper for example reports on a subject whose “proportionately few hesitations... manifest his high level of well formedness and literacy” (C. Suleiman *et al*, 2002: 281); another claims quite simply that “disfluency in spontaneous speech is the outcome of a speaker’s indecision about what to say next” (M. Gósy, 2001: 57). M. Darot and M. Lebre-Peytard (1983: 102) sum up this position: “les hésitations sont considérées comme des ‘ratés’ qu’un discours normé ne saurait contenir”; but they go on to say that “elles constituent pourtant, par excellence, un ‘trait d’oralité’. Tous les locuteurs s’en servent, quels que soient leur âge, leur profession et leur milieu socioculturel.”

S. Merlo and L. Mansur (2004: 490) go further, claiming that not only are dysfluencies not necessarily a sign of failure, but they may in fact aid communication in at least some cases: they are “common in oral language and may not be seen as defects, errors, deficiencies, or inadequacies. Disfluencies make up part of language production in a very positive way, because they help the speaker to produce a better discourse in both content and form”. (Irony insists I point out that these authors are writing in the *Journal of Communication Disorders*.) Similarly, it has been found that filled pauses such as *oh* and *er* can actually increase comprehension (J. Fox Tree and J. Schrock, 1999: 283); others have argued that *er* should be considered as a proper word no different from any other item in the mental lexicon (R. Shillcock *et al*, 2001); certainly *er* is one of the commonest items in the spoken corpus of the *Bank of English*, about 2% of all text (G. Kjellmer, 2003).

In short, we need to be prudent in any analysis of speech dysfunctions. In particular, a phenomenon such as a silent pause may be perceived in some cases as a dysfunction, in others as an aid to effective discourse. In the case of filled pauses, for example, J. Fox Tree (2001) finds a difference between *uh* (having a beneficial effect on comprehension) and *um* (having no effect); this implies that *uh* is a discourse-structuring device while *um* may be a feature of dysfluency. However pleasing this model may appear, there seems to be no objective scientific means of distinguishing two corresponding types of silent pauses, and studies to date that have attempted to discriminate the two have relied on the researchers’ or, more reliably, public perceptions, even while admitting the failings of such a subjective approach. D. Duez (1991: 12), for example, classifies silent pauses into different categories while freely admitting that it is almost impossible to “définir des critères distinctifs des différents types de pause”. As there seems as yet to be no ideal solution, we take the avowedly naïve approach here by limiting ourselves to what can be measured: no attempt is made to distinguish the types of pauses subjectively. Besides our main focus on silent pauses—a “fundamental element” of discourse structure (D. Duez, 1991: 9) and the commonest of speech dysfunctions (M. Gósy, 2001)—we also briefly consider filled pauses, repetitions and syntactic errors (false starts, repairs, performance errors, etc.), as well as speed of utterance.

### 1) Public and media reactions

In the 2004 election campaign there were four debates in total: the first (PD1) and last (PD2) featured the two presidential candidates on a stage, with questions asked by an experienced journalist in front of a studio audience; the third was a more informal “town-hall” style debate, with an invited audience asking the questions; the other was between the vice-presidential candidates. We shall concentrate here on the first format as it allows us to compare performance between the two main candidates on two separate but formally almost

identical situations.

The rules of the debates were hammered out by the two sides in agreement with the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD); they are extremely detailed, specifying even the size and position of the podiums on the stage<sup>4</sup>. Neither candidate was aware of the exact questions in advance, although it was agreed that PD1 would concentrate on foreign affairs, PD2 on domestic issues. While therefore theoretically unscripted, this does not of course mean the debates were unprepared: “Both men came armed with what appeared to be well-practiced lines as they sought to deliver the kind of memorable remark—like Ronald Reagan’s “there you go again”—that would assure them prominent spots in news accounts of the debate<sup>5</sup>.”

The attention to detail shows that the two parties take the debates very seriously, and not without reason. In a *Time* poll of over 1000 voters just before the debates<sup>6</sup>, about 85% claimed they intended to watch at least one. 69% of undecided voters said the debates could be a deciding factor in their choice; and even among decided voters, nearly a quarter claimed they might change their minds as a direct consequence of watching the debates. Although daily trackers<sup>7</sup> tended to show little overall change in the immediate aftermath of each debate, this did not stop *The New York Times* from claiming that “if Mr. Bush loses the election, he will have to blame, at least in part, his own debate performance<sup>8</sup>.”

### 1.1) Perception of general performance

As this last quotation suggests, the general perception was that Bush came off worse in the debates; indeed, the various polls were virtually unanimous in giving all three debates to Kerry (table 1). Although these results derive from quite different methods and samples<sup>9</sup>, those polled generally claimed Kerry had “won” PD1; this finding was repeated for PD2, although by a smaller margin overall. In the series of debates as a whole, a *Time* poll of registered voters gave Kerry the overall debate win by 57% to 27%<sup>10</sup>.

POLL	PD1		PD2	
	KERRY	BUSH	KERRY	BUSH
CNN / USA Today / Gallup	53%	37%	52%	39%
CBS	44%	26%	39%	25%
ABC	45%	36%	42%	41%
Time	59%	23%	37%	28%
Newsweek / MSNBC	61%	19%	44%	36%
AVERAGE	52%	28%	43%	34%

**Table 1: Who won the debates?**

<sup>4</sup> Home page of the Commission on Presidential Debates: <http://www.debates.org/>.

<sup>5</sup> Adam Nagourney & Robin Toner (14 Oct 2004) “The 2004 campaign: The overview; in final debate, clashes on taxes and health care”, *The New York Times* (<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/14/politics/campaign/14debate.html?hp>).

<sup>6</sup> Poll: Campaign 2004 (24 Sep 2004) *Time* ([http://www.time.com/time/press\\_releases/article/0,8599,701890,00.html](http://www.time.com/time/press_releases/article/0,8599,701890,00.html)).

<sup>7</sup> Charting the campaign daily tracking poll, *The Washington Post* (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/elections/2004/charting.html>).

<sup>8</sup> James Bennet (14 Oct 2004) “The 2004 campaign: The scene; Act 3, wherein Bush turns that frown upside down”, *New York Times* (<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/14/politics/campaign/14mood.html>).

<sup>9</sup> For example, *CNN* polled only those who watched the debates, while *Time* magazine polled a sample of voters regardless of whether or not they watched; *ABC* surveyed a more pro-Republican sample, while *CBS* tested only uncommitted voters.

<sup>10</sup> Diana Pearson (16 Oct 2004) “Presidential race deadlocked”, *Time* (<http://www.time.com/time/election2004/article/0,18471,725047,00.html>).

Of course, each camp's official website was quick to claim its own candidate the undisputed winner after each debate, extensively but selectively quoting media reports to back its own view<sup>11</sup>—a cliché perhaps, but the media are an inevitable part of the political landscape, to ignore at one's peril. A trawl of the major papers at the time nonetheless reveals a general consensus of opinion on the candidates' performance: after PD1, for example, Kerry seemed "succinct and sharp", or "calm and authoritative", while Bush seemed "smug and contemptuous", "snippy and peevish", "tense or impatient or peeved or even a bit miffed that he even had to be up there on the stage with Kerry".

There are two main points to be made here. Firstly, the media are considerably interested in image: according to one survey<sup>12</sup>, 43% of all media coverage concentrated on the performance of the candidates rather than on issues or policies. Partly for this reason, media coverage of the campaign in general attracted extensive criticism, not least from the media themselves: a survey<sup>13</sup> conducted two weeks before the election found that nearly three quarters of journalists were dissatisfied with media performance. However, the blame does not lie entirely with the media as they are courted by the candidates themselves: a political consultant is quoted in *The New York Times* as saying, "I think they [the candidates] are both aware that this is more about your 'Q factor' than about scoring a debate... It's much more like being a host of a television show<sup>14</sup>."

Secondly, descriptions such as the above are in part at least a rather subjective affair, so any interpretation or opinion needs taking with a healthy pinch of salt. How do we arrive at the opinion that one person is "sharp", another "plaintive"? Of course there is no simple answer, leaving ample space for political and ideological bias as the viewers fit the facts to their prejudices, and this has to be allowed for. Traditionally, the American media have been hung with a "liberal" label, but in fact there is evidence that greater coverage is given to right-wing issues, which are also presented in a more positive light (see A. Franken 2003 for a liberal take on this). When it comes to the 2004 presidential debates, however, this trend seems to have been reversed according to one media watchdog<sup>15</sup>, with twice as many negatively biased articles about Bush as about Kerry. It is worth noting that, of the top 10 papers with the biggest circulations<sup>16</sup>, only the *Chicago Tribune* at number 8 officially endorsed Bush<sup>17</sup>, while some of the most prestigious explicitly endorsed Kerry later on (e.g. *The Washington Post*<sup>18</sup>, *The New York Times*<sup>19</sup> and *The Detroit Free Press*<sup>20</sup>). By 23<sup>rd</sup>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.georgewbush.com/News/Read.aspx?ID=3712> and [http://blog.johnkerry.com/rapidresponse/archives/cat\\_debates.html](http://blog.johnkerry.com/rapidresponse/archives/cat_debates.html) after the first debate, for example.

<sup>12</sup> Project for Excellence in Journalism (2004) "The debate effect: How the press covered the pivotal period of the 2004 presidential campaign", (<http://www.journalism.org/resources/research/reports/debateeffect/default.asp>).

<sup>13</sup> Committee of Concerned Journalists (2004) "CCJ Member Survey: Journalists Not Satisfied With Their Performance in the Campaign" (<http://www.journalism.org/resources/research/reports/campaign2004/ccjcamp2004/CCJcampsurvey.pdf>).

<sup>14</sup> Alex Williams (26 Oct 2004) "Live from Miami, a style showdown", *The New York Times* (<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/26/fashion/26DEBA.html?ex=1253851200&en=dbab9146e8854d3f&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland>).

<sup>15</sup> Project for Excellence in Journalism (2000) "The last lap: How the press covered the final stages of the presidential campaign", (<http://www.journalism.org/resources/research/reports/campaign2000/lastlap/default.asp>); (2004) "The debate effect: How the press covered the pivotal period of the 2004 presidential campaign" (<http://www.journalism.org/resources/research/reports/debateeffect/default.asp>).

<sup>16</sup> According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations (<http://abcas3.accessabc.com/ecirc/newsform.asp>).

<sup>17</sup> Editorial (17 Oct 2004) "George W Bush for president", *Chicago Tribune* (<http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/opinion/chi-0410170332oct17,1,3673281.story?coll=chi-news-hed&ctrack=1&cset=true>).

<sup>18</sup> Editorial (24 Oct 2004) "Kerry for president", *The Washington Post* (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A57584-2004Oct23.html>).

October, Kerry had taken 35 papers which had supported Bush in 2000, while Bush had only won endorsements from 2 formerly Democratic papers, a 3-2 majority in terms of circulation<sup>21</sup>.

### 1.2) Perception of linguistic performance

As far as the candidates' speech is concerned, on the whole Bush is often seen as more a "regular guy" (D. Spalding-Andréolle, 2001), while Kerry is perceived as a linguistic elitist (M. Vella, 2005), not least because he speaks French. There may be some grounds for such judgements, but they should not be accepted unquestioningly. For example, an article in *The New York Times*<sup>22</sup> just before the elections claimed that "Mr. Kerry has been doing what he can to seem more down to earth. He uses more contractions and drops G's, T's, and N's, making 'does not' sound like 'dudnt,' and 'government' comes out, as it might have in the Old West, 'guvmint.'" Even without quibbling with the linguistic naïveté of such judgements (the G isn't "dropped", rather an alveolar is substituted for a velar nasal), it isn't clear that such features represent a verifiable change in Kerry's speech as much as a *perceived* change—he certainly "dropped the 'G'" weeks earlier in the first presidential debate (e.g. *something*). Similarly, the entire concept of "Bushisms" was invented by a journalist, and despite the plethora of websites subsequently devoted to the President's gaffes, this does not prove whether Bush is in fact significantly more prone to such slips than anyone else. In other words, it is certainly possible that journalists start out with their opinions and seek supporting evidence rather than starting with the evidence and working backwards<sup>23</sup>. According to Mark Liberman, Professor of Linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania, "you can make any public figure sound like a boob, if you record everything he says and set hundreds of hostile observers to combing the transcripts for disfluencies, malapropisms, word formation errors and examples of non-standard pronunciation or usage<sup>24</sup>"—or indeed any other speech dysfunctions.

This does not necessarily imply a deliberate smear campaign, as such reactions can be well below the level of consciousness. There is a complex interaction between language and people: distinctive speech characteristics of an unpopular individual or group are likely to be perceived negatively and, conversely, any users of such traits are likely to be perceived negatively for that reason alone.

While sites such as the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania<sup>25</sup> were set up during the campaign to check the exaggerations, distortions, accidental slips and outright lies of the candidates, no such fact-checker exists for language, leaving the media to invent the stories they wish based on intuition and subjective political opinion. A *New Republic* reporter comments:

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<sup>19</sup> Editorial (17 Oct 2004) "John Kerry for president", (<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/opinion/17sun1.html?oref=login&oref=login&hp=&oref=login&pagewanted=1>).

<sup>20</sup> Editorial (4 Oct 2004) "Endorsement: On Iraq, national security, the economy and more, John Kerry would offer more effective leadership", ([http://www.freep.com/voices/editorials/eprez4\\_20041004.htm](http://www.freep.com/voices/editorials/eprez4_20041004.htm)).

<sup>21</sup> Greg Mitchell (23 Oct 2004) "Daily endorsement tally: On 'Super Sunday,' Kerry makes huge gains", ([http://www.editorandpublisher.com/eandp/news/article\\_display.jsp?vnu\\_content\\_id=1000683265](http://www.editorandpublisher.com/eandp/news/article_display.jsp?vnu_content_id=1000683265)).

<sup>22</sup> Jodi Wilgoren (22 Oct 2004) "Kerry on hunting photo-op to help image", *New York Times* (<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/22/politics/campaign/22kerry.html?pagewanted=1&ei=5090&en=8048218ed97e18d5&ex=1256184000&partner=rssuserland>).

<sup>23</sup> Mark Liberman (12 Oct 2004) "Policy vs 'character'", *Language Log* (<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/001556.html>).

<sup>24</sup> Mark Liberman (25 oct 2005) "Wilgoren invents a trend", *Language Log* (<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/001595.html>).

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.factcheck.org/article271.html>.

One of the curiosities of political journalism is that reporters tend to be assiduously even-handed about matters of policy (which can revolve around disputes over objective fact) but ruthlessly judgmental on questions of character (which are inherently subjective). In fact, most reporters don't know or care much about policy. They see politics primarily through the lens of the candidates' personal traits<sup>26</sup>.

This is as true of language as any other perceived "character trait", and so linguists tend to have mixed reactions to such media attention: on the one hand, glad of public interest in all matters linguistic; on the other, an instinctive scepticism of the folk linguistics involved, and dismay at the frequent lack of professional journalistic rigour. But undoubtedly more important is the possibility that people are electing presidents partly or even chiefly according to their media presentation skills, of which language is a part<sup>27</sup>. Liberman again sums up the paradox:

As a linguist, I reckon it's good for business. As a citizen, I think it's bad for the country. There's nothing wrong with paying attention to the phonetics of rhetorical effectiveness. But this is the proper study of linguists and (advisors to) politicians, not voters at large—except insofar as it may help to avoid being manipulated. So the rest of you should go read some policy statements and discuss them with your friends and neighbors<sup>28</sup>.

Bearing all of this in mind, we turn now to the media's judgement of the candidates' specifically linguistic performance in the two debates. Tellingly, after PD1, the *CNN* poll found "Kerry's chief strength: 60% said he expressed himself more clearly than Bush did<sup>29</sup>." *The Washington Post* found that Bush did more "stammering and pausing" than Kerry, sounding "plaintive and anxious" with his "sloganeering<sup>30</sup>". *The New York Times* quotes a range of sources, from a Hollywood acting coach saying that Bush's voice "has a vaguely metallic quality that he must not allow to grow shrill. It should be incisive, not cutting [*sic*]," to the renowned linguist George Lakoff, who claimed Kerry had a tendency to ramble and should learn to avoid hedges and phrases like *I believe* or *I think*. This is expanded on by a political scientist who says that to appear authoritative, Kerry should avoid speaking in "parenthetical phrases" and using too many illustrative examples within a sentence: "The language of decisiveness is subject, verb, object, end sentence"; he also claimed Kerry should avoid words like *gilded* and *panoply* that might appear in the SAT exam<sup>31</sup>. Maybe the advice was noted: a live webcast of PD1 by a *New York Times* correspondent begins with the words, "Kerry is starting out with crisp punchy sentences<sup>32</sup>."

Comments in the second debate also looked at voice, coming to similar conclusions: *CNN*'s live coverage had Candy Crowley claiming Kerry was "articulate" and "the best

<sup>26</sup> Jonathan Chait (12 Oct 2004) "The invention of flip-flop", *The New Republic* (<https://ssl.tnr.com/p/docsub.mhtml?i=20041018&s=chait101804>).

<sup>27</sup> Bill Poser (12 Oct 2004) "How to decide who to vote for", *Language Log* (<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/001617.html>).

<sup>28</sup> Mark Liberman (3 Oct 2004) "The rhetoric of silence", *Language Log* (<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/001520.html>).

<sup>29</sup> Special report (1 Oct 2004) "Poll: Kerry tops Bush in debate", *CNN* (<http://www.cnn.com/2004/ALLPOLITICS/10/01/debate.poll/index.html>).

<sup>30</sup> Tom Shales (1 Oct 2004) "Blue vs. Red: The Debate Wasn't Exactly a Tie", *The Washington Post* (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A64102-2004Oct1.html>).

<sup>31</sup> Alex Williams (26 Sept 2004) "Live from Miami, a style showdown", *The New York Times* (<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/09/26/fashion/26DEBA.html?ex=1253851200&en=dbab9146e8854d3f&ei=5090&partner=rssuserland>).

<sup>32</sup> Katharine Q. Seelye (30 Sept 2004) "Live webcast", *The New York Times* ([http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/politics/20040930\\_SEELYE\\_LIVE/index.html?oref=login](http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/politics/20040930_SEELYE_LIVE/index.html?oref=login)).



debater”, while *The Washington Post* noted Bush was “oddly giggly<sup>33</sup>”. *The New York Times* drew attention to Bush’s “more jerky style and the varying rhythms of his speech<sup>34</sup>,” his “voice is rising, almost to a shout<sup>35</sup>.”

Even allowing for possible political bias in these reports, they are remarkably consistent: Bush’s language performance was considerably less well received than Kerry’s in PD1, though the gap narrowed in PD2. In the second part of this paper, we take a closer look at some linguistic aspects of the two candidates’ performance in an attempt to see if there may be some scientific basis for such judgements. Having highlighted the subjective nature of media judgements in this area, it perhaps bears pointing out that linguistic analysis is on quite a different footing; Liberman again:

Speech patterns can be accurately described, both in particular cases and in statistical aggregates. While many aspects of speech patterns are politically trivial, others may be relevant to voters’ choices, if only to counter the effects of (negative or positive) stereotypes on communication across regions, subcultures and classes. And people are interested in such things, so they’re going to notice them and talk about them in any case.

In other words, if someone’s going to do it, it might as well be linguists.

## 2) Speech dysfunctions

The two debates under study had the candidates standing at individual podiums on a stage facing both interviewer and studio audience; they did not know the questions in advance, and the audience was requested to remain silent throughout. Each question was addressed to one candidate for a 2-minute answer, following which the other candidate had the right to a 90-second reply; at the discretion of the interviewer, this could be followed by a further 30-second intervention from each candidate before moving on to the next question.

The primary focus of our study was on the 30s follow-ups, as we anticipated they would include more features of spontaneous speech than the full 2-minute answers. There were two main reasons for this: firstly, the candidates were thought likely to be more confrontational in responding to each other rather than to a neutral interviewer; secondly, they were likely to be well briefed on probable questions from the interviewer (and hence on their own answers), but in the 30s turns would be responding to less predictable allegations from the other candidate.

All the 30s exchanges were transcribed and treated in full; there were twelve of these in the first debate, eight in the second. The original video and sound recordings were obtained on line from *The Washington Post* website<sup>36</sup>; these were downloaded into Audacity, providing spectrograms helpful in timed pause analysis<sup>37</sup>. The transcripts used for the analysis were based on the official ones<sup>38</sup>, adapted as necessary.

### 2.1) Silent pauses

Following D. Duez (1982), silent pauses are taken to be those which are indistinguishable

<sup>33</sup> Tom Shales (14 Oct 2004) “Round 3: Bush grins, spins but doesn’t win”, *The Washington Post* (<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A31374-2004Oct14.html>).

<sup>34</sup> Alessandra Stanley (14 Oct 2004) “Bush smiles, but laughter falls short”, *The New York Times* (<http://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/14/politics/campaign/14teevee.html>).

<sup>35</sup> Katharine Q. Seelye (13 Oct 2004) “Live webcast”, *The New York Times* ([http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/politics/20041013\\_SEELYE\\_LIVE/index.html](http://www.nytimes.com/packages/html/politics/20041013_SEELYE_LIVE/index.html)).

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/mmedia/politics/093004-15v.htm> for PD1 and <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/mmedia/politics/101304-15v.htm> for PD2.

<sup>37</sup> The open source software can be downloaded free from <http://audacity.sourceforge.net/>.

<sup>38</sup> Commission on Presidential Debates: <http://www.debates.org/pages/debtrans.html>.

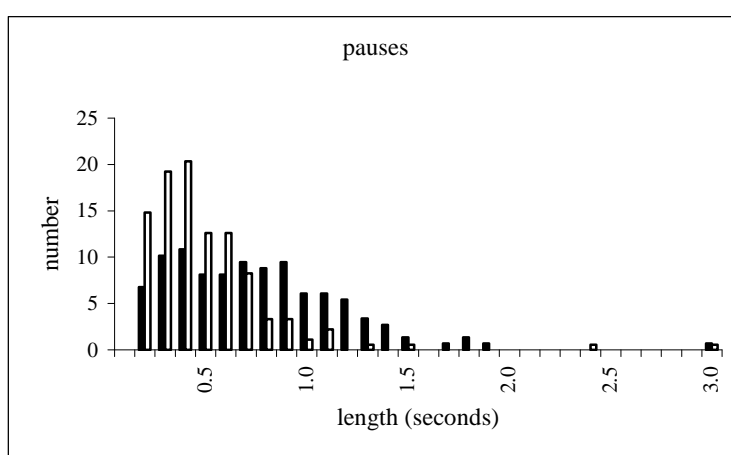
from background noise. First of all, those over 200ms were used to divide the 30s turns into speech segments, which allowed a number of initial statistical comparisons (table 2).

		n° of pauses	total pause duration	average pause duration	total speech duration	average speech duration	total time	% total pause
		a	b	c	d	e	f	g
				$b \div a$		$d \div (a+1)$	b+d	$b \div d$
BUSH	PD1	97	77.80	0.80	286.60	2.63	364.40	21.35%
	PD2	61	42.57	0.70	171.05	2.48	213.62	19.93%
	COMBINED	158	120.37	0.76	457.65	2.57	578.02	20.82%
KERRY	PD1	107	58.54	0.55	268.76	2.26	327.30	17.89%
	PD2	82	41.43	0.51	201.65	2.24	243.08	17.04%
	COMBINED	189	99.97	0.53	470.41	2.25	570.38	17.53%

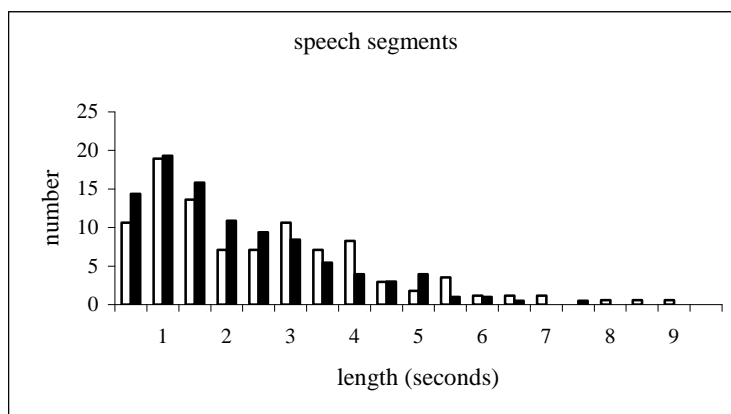
**Table 2: Silent pauses >200ms in 30s turns (duration in seconds)**

Over all the 30s turns in the two debates, it is clear that Kerry pauses rather more frequently than Bush, 189 times against 158. On the other hand, Bush's pauses were far longer on average (762ms against 529ms), representing 20.8% of his turn, while Kerry's accounted for only 17.5%. It further appears that both candidates seem to reduce silent pausing in PD2. The number of pauses would be misleading here as there were only eight exchanges in PD2 as against twelve in PD1; but they were considerably longer in PD1, represented a greater proportion of the total turn time, and occurred more frequently (although this last result is not statistically significant). Whatever basis we take, Kerry pauses less than Bush in both debates, with the gap narrowing in the second; this would correspond to the perception that Kerry won the first debate by a large margin, the second by a narrower one.

The main overall features may be visualised better in the following graphs. Figure 1 shows the number of pauses according to their length, grouped into 100ms bands; figure 2 shows the number of contributions in 500ms bands.



**Figure 1: Length of pauses in 100ms bands (Bush black, Kerry white)**



**Figure 2: Length of speech segments in 500ms bands (Bush black, Kerry white)**

An unpaired  $t$ -test shows both sets of patterns are significantly different, although at different levels: for length of speech segments,  $p < 0.05$ , while for length of pauses,  $p < 0.0001$ . It seems then that each speaker has his own significantly different characteristics, although pauses vary far more in terms of length and duration than speech segments do. This might seem to make sense, as there is a limit to how long one can talk with a single breath, while pauses are potentially unlimited in duration. That said, none of the pauses was very long in the event, and on average considerably shorter (Bush 0.76s; Kerry 0.53s) than the speech segments (Bush 2.57s; Kerry 2.25s); unsurprisingly, the standard deviation for the pauses was also lower (Bush 0.35s; Kerry 0.44s) than for the speech segments (Bush 1.45s; Kerry 1.18s).

Although Bush hesitates more often and for longer than Kerry during his turns, he is generally quicker off the mark at the start of his interventions: looking just at the 30s contributions over the two debates, Kerry is on average twice as slow to start as Bush (814ms after the end of the moderator's question vs 389ms for Bush). Bush in fact starts his turn before the previous speaker has finished on 8 occasions, something Kerry only does once. This is either to start without being invited or actually to interrupt the interviewer, both of which are against the rules. This may be one explanation why Bush hesitates more during his turns: he starts to speak before he knows what he is going to say, perhaps to stake his claim in a show of strength. For example, in PD1 when Bush demands the right to a 30s rebuttal ("I think it's worthy for a follow-up"), Kerry replies, "Sure, let's change the rules..." (reported in official transcript as "crosstalk").

## 2.2) Speed of articulation and other features

We decided next to look at speed of articulation. M. Liberman<sup>39</sup> had done a rough-and-ready calculation of the number of words each candidate used in PD1 from the official transcripts, finding that Kerry used 15.8% more words than Bush. Given that the rules of the debates were fairly stringent to guarantee equal time, several obvious explanations are possible: Kerry talked faster, used shorter words, or spent less of his time in pause. Liberman suggests the main explanation is that Kerry used shorter pauses than Bush, which we have already seen to be the case for the 30s turns. However, he also suggests that between pauses, Bush actually talked faster.

We decided to test this by looking at the number of words used in each 30s turn (table 3), bearing in mind still that there were fewer in PD2 as there were only eight exchanges instead of twelve in PD1. In his turns, Bush averaged 193.80 wpm and Kerry 188.72; the slight difference can be statistically ignored. As Liberman's contention was that Bush talked faster

<sup>39</sup> Mark Liberman (3 Oct 2004) "The rhetoric of silence", *Language Log* (<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/001520.html>).

between pauses, we removed pause time from each turn to leave only actual articulation time. On this basis, Bush does talk slightly faster, averaging 244.77 wpm against Kerry's 228.82; although a relatively small difference (6.9%), it is significant at the  $p < 0.05$  level.

	BUSH			KERRY		
	PD1	PD2	TOTAL	PD1	PD2	TOTAL
words	1161	706	1867	1020	774	1798
wpm (turn)	191.16	198.30	193.80	186.98	191.05	188.72
wpm (speech time)	243.06	247.65	244.77	227.71	230.30	228.82

**Table 3: Speech speed in 30s turns**

A number of other features attracted our attention (table 4), although they received rather more brief and informal attention, the idea being only to see if they would tend to support or undermine our findings so far.

	BUSH						KERRY					
	FP >200	FP <200	REPEAT	PHON REP	SYNTAX	TOTAL	FP >200	FP <200	REPEAT	PHON REP	SYNTAX	TOTAL
PD1	13	8	16	14	29	80	2	0	3	1	1	7
PD2	2	3	3	3	12	23	6	4	1	1	1	13
TOT	15	11	19	17	41	103	8	4	4	2	2	20

**Table 4: Other dysfunctions in 30s turns**

Filled pauses (FP) were characterised by *er* or *erm* on nearly every occasion here. We looked first at those over 200ms in duration; even the longer ones are fairly short, with none lasting more than 600ms. Although silent pauses below the 200ms threshold had been found to be identical for the two candidates, this was not the case for shorter filled pauses, which we therefore included in our analysis. In total, filled pauses were over twice as frequent for Bush (26) as for Kerry (12), although the number is still relatively low. Interestingly, Bush used them less in PD2 than PD1, Kerry more frequently.

Non-stylistic repetition (columns 3 and 4) may also be considered a form of hesitation or filled pause. This may be in the form of entire words or phrases, as words can occur up to four times in a row (e.g. *it's it's it's it's not what the American people thought they were getting*), or alternatively, it may concern only word-initial phonemes or syllables ("phon rep", e.g. *it's a b-big mistake*). Both of these phenomena were quite frequent in Bush's speech but virtually absent in Kerry's (36 vs 6 overall), but again Bush reduced them significantly in PD2, from 30 to 6. While we did not measure extended syllables (where a vowel is lengthened in hesitation), we would predict similar results: more frequent for Bush, but fewer in PD2 than PD1.

The final type of speech dysfunction we looked at concerns syntax, although again, the very notion of "dysfunction" is problematical: errors, "loin d'être des ratés, révèlent des aspects fondamentaux de l'organisation du discours oral et constituent des points privilégiés d'observation de la construction interactive du sens" (J-M. Debaisieux, 2001: 53). Indeed, listeners may be completely unaware of them and consider them "perfectly acceptable communicative acts" despite their being ill-formed (J-M. Debaisieux and J. Deulofeu, 2001: 69). We nonetheless decided to include them in our study precisely because they are *perceived* as dysfunctions, although we were careful not to include obvious stylistic reformulations and clarifications in our tally (such as "he said that, my opponent said

that...”). As there were relatively few syntactic dysfunctions of any type, we grouped them all together into a single category. These include grammatical slips and non-standard usage (e.g. “that’s why it’s essential that we make sure that we keep weapons of mass destruction out of the hands of people like Al Qaida which we are”) and syntactico-semantic slips (e.g. “we must have China’s leverage on Kim Jong Il besides ourselves”), false starts (e.g. “it will remain strong for my w- [watch] so long as I’m the president”), changes of direction (e.g. “I work with director Mueller of the FBI comes into my office”), repairs (e.g. “the wrong war at the wrong time at the right / wrong place”), and so on. Again Bush improves over time (29 instances down to 12), but Kerry has almost no such features (only one in each debate).

Overall then, as with silent pauses, Bush exhibits significantly more of all of these features than Kerry, but reduces them considerably from PD1 to PD2. On the other hand, Kerry actually increases his use of some of these features in PD2, so the gap narrows quite remarkably: Bush had over 11 times as many such features than Kerry in the first debate, but less than double in the second.

### 2.3) Pauses and spontaneity

So far we have been concentrating on the 30s exchanges, partly on the assumption that they would contain more dysfluencies: they were likely to be more spontaneous in the heat of the conflict, while the 120s answers, although not perfectly prepared, would represent a more carefully considered public image presentation based closely on briefings (cf. D. Spalding-Andréolle, 2001). Although the idea is not crucial to the analyses so far conducted, it is perhaps worth exploring in rather more depth, especially if we turn it round and propose that speech dysfunctions may be a reasonable predictor of spontaneity. To do this, we compared some of the overall results for the 30s exchanges against those obtained for some of the 120s answers given directly to a new question from the interviewer. We took two consecutive 120s contributions from each speaker in each debate, one near the beginning, one near the end. (As each speaker remained fairly constant, we have merely provided the averages of the eight minutes for each in table 5 below.)

	BUSH			KERRY		
	average pause duration	average speech duration	% total pause	average pause duration	average speech duration	% total pause
30s	0.76	2.57	20.82%	0.53	2.25	17.53%
120s	1.04	1.98	33.83%	0.53	2.41	17.57%

**Table 5: 30s / 120s / SO**

We did not look in depth at filled pauses as there were very few of these, corresponding with D. Duez’s (1982: 27) finding that they are “almost completely absent in political speeches” of the scripted or more prepared kind. But the results for silent pauses over 200ms certainly seem to show some interesting differences: Kerry does not vary significantly from the 30s to the 120s responses ( $p > 0.05$ ). On the other hand, Bush’s silent pauses become longer and his speech segments between pauses become shorter, with the pauses therefore inevitably occupying a greater portion of his total speaking time; these differences are significant at the  $p < 0.0001$  level. We conducted a further relatively informal experiment to push this further, looking briefly at two extracts (total three minutes) of Bush’s State of the Union Address from 28<sup>th</sup> January 2005—entirely scripted, no doubt well-rehearsed, and read

from a teleprompter<sup>40</sup>. We found the tendency continued: yet longer pauses (1.27 seconds) and even shorter speech segments (1.87 seconds), 39.6% of the time being spent in silent pause.

If Bush at least paused considerably more in the allegedly careful speech of the 120s answers, it follows from this that there is no simple causative link along the lines of, “the more you pause the less well you are perceived”; in other words, the poor reception of Bush’s performance cannot just be because that he pauses too much. But it may be that he misuses silent pauses, especially in discourse which is intended to appear spontaneous, and especially in direct comparison with Kerry in these debates.

One very important implication is that silent pauses are not necessarily a “dysfunction” in any negative sense as they can serve to structure discourse. In this usage, pauses tend to be more frequent and longer during spontaneous speech; M. Darot and M. Lebre-Peytard (1983: 104) also find that “le ralentissement du débit, l’usage de silences plus ou moins sciemment calculé aident le locuteur à ‘bien parler’ et donnent une impression d’aisance.” In other words, the poor reception of Bush’s performance may not be that he hesitates too much, but that he overuses discourse-structuring pauses compared to Kerry. This brings us back to a caveat at the start, namely that there are different types of pauses which would need further analysis than is possible here.

## Conclusion

Let us now summarise the most important findings we have seen:

- Along an alleged spontaneous/prepared continuum from the 30s exchanges to the 120s answers and even on to his State of the Union Address, Bush’s silent pauses lengthen, speech segments shorten, and pauses occupy more of the total speaking time; the change is slight for Kerry.
- In the 30s exchanges in both debates, Bush’s silent pauses are significantly longer, more numerous, and take up more of his total speaking time than Kerry’s; Bush has significantly shorter silent pauses at the start of his turns than Kerry; Bush talks slightly but significantly faster between pauses than Kerry; Bush exhibits more of the other features of speech dysfunction taken as a whole than Kerry.
- From PD1 to PD2, both candidates reduce the number and length of pauses, and both reduce the overall number of other speech dysfunctions; the change for Bush is quite dramatic, while that for Kerry is less marked, even worsening slightly on some counts (e.g. filled pauses >200ms).

One implication is that even such a formalised situation as this does allow for a measure of spontaneity: while candidates are no doubt unsheathing a number of prepared phrases and slogans for a soundbite-hungry media, they are also confronting each other directly in the heat of the moment in the 30s turns. The varied response format seems important in allowing different facets of the candidates’ personality to show through: a simple question-and-answer structure between the interviewer and each candidate would no doubt limit the performance to a more image-conscious, semi-prepared presentation.

Secondly, taken as a whole, these data correspond to the public and media perception that Kerry performed considerably better than Bush in PD1, but only slightly better in PD2. As both candidates “improved” overall, it seems that both learned from the first experience, and

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<sup>40</sup> Available from the White House website: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2003/01/20030128-19.html>. We only tested Bush as there was no significant difference for Kerry between the 30s and 120s situations. Besides, no Kerry speech now will ever be quite the same thing as the President’s annual State of the Union Address.

felt more comfortable on the whole in the final debate.

Although a comparison allowing for the *perception* of pauses would undoubtedly be more sophisticated, it may be inferred that simple pause duration can be a reliable indicator of effective political discourse, at least in situations such as these televised debates. We would not however wish to attribute too great an importance to such phenomena: although Kerry won the debates, Bush won the presidency a few weeks later. The political predictions are perhaps best left to models based on economics, candidates' relative height, number of letters in their surnames, quantity of hair, wives' cookie recipes, and the outcome of the Redskins' last home game before the election.

Various interpretations and explanations can of course be put on all of this: "The trick", according to J. Wilson (2001: 411), "is not to lose linguistic rigor for the sake of socio-political claims, but equally not to simply continue producing language-based analyses which do not fully consider why, in social and political terms, specific linguistic choices have been made." For example:

- Kerry's less varied performance might suggest he is less flexible, or that he is less easily influenced; this would be ironic, given the "flip-flop" label hung on him by the Bush camp, and the perception that it is Bush who is unwavering or intransigent.
- It may be that Bush was more heavily influenced by his recent experiences on the stump, longer pause times during the more prepared 120s answers reflecting anticipated audience reaction; the absence of applause may even have had a disconcerting effect on him in PD1 in particular.
- It may be that the two speakers simply have different speaking styles, or that they are affected differently by their relative status: Bush in a position of power as current president (referring to Kerry as "my opponent" 37 times, a word Kerry could never use), Kerry as the contender (obliged to refer "president Bush", "the president" or "this president" over 150 times in the two debates).

This last possibility would correspond with D. Duez's (1991) findings that the challenger in political debates has to sell him/herself more by conveying a maximum of ideas, while the incumbent's track record is known, and increased pausing is used to present a more "solemn" image. In her analysis of French presidential candidates, she found:

En 1974, Mitterrand et Krivine sont dans l'opposition, ils tirent parti au maximum de leur temps de parole pour accumuler les arguments, leur vitesse de parole est rapide [*sic*], leur temps de pause relativement peu élevé ; Pompidou (1973) et Mitterrand (1984) sont en revanche Présidents de la République et au faite du pouvoir. Ils usent de silences nombreux et longs. Il ne s'agit pas pour eux de persuader mais de trouver un équilibre entre ce qui est dit et ce qui est non dit. Le silence devient alors symbole de pouvoir (D. Duez, 1991: 149).

If this may be a partial explanation for Bush's longer and more frequent pauses, or even a deliberate strategy on his part, it seems to have back-fired to judge by the public reaction to PD1 in particular. But whatever the explanation, it seems a reasonable conclusion that the negative media reaction given to Bush's performance in the debates may be partly attributable to the speech "dysfunctions" discussed. These most notably include an inappropriate use of silent pauses (longer but less frequent in the 30s responses at least), which could be considered aggressive or peevish. While he reduced them in the second debate, so did Kerry, although by a smaller margin, thus narrowing the gap in the final debate—just as the media coverage and opinion polls suggest.

It would of course be far too simplistic to suggest that speech dysfunctions alone are responsible for audience reactions. Quite apart from the serious attention that is paid to the

underlying political ideas, visual cues and other language features also play a part<sup>41</sup>, and a more delicate analysis of different types of pauses would undoubtedly reveal much subtler differences. Nonetheless, it seems that in this particular case at least, silent pauses alone may be a useful indicator of the public perception of the outcome of such political performance.

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<sup>41</sup> See A. Cienki (2004) for models of Bush and Gore's gestures in the 2000 debates; M. Saraceni (2003: 12) for the "abundance" of "characteristics of right-wing rhetoric" in Bush's speeches after 9/11; Cameron Marlow for an informal analysis of lexical features of the 2004 debates, and an interesting algorithm for unusually high occurrence of noun groups (1 Oct 2004. "Presidential debate analysis", *Overstated* (<http://overstated.net/04/10/01-presidential-debate-analysis>; <http://overstated.net/projects/debates/index>).



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