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Trumpian Language is Strategic Rhetoric

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Language matters.

It especially matters what language the president uses.
Communication scholars understand that rhetorical analyses often provide important insights into the political landscape that may not be possible via more traditional historical, political scientific or journalistic accounts.

Case in point: President Donald Trump’s ongoing and accelerated response to the Russia investigation and attack on the investigators, as well as his apparent choice to make the case less about potential legal indictments by instead taking his claims to the court of public opinion where the only issue may be impeachment.

Let’s review the bidding. Since being elected president of the United States, perhaps well before, Donald Trump has a track record of unethical behavior, racist discourse and disregard for the truth. Many Americans and much of the mainstream media remain perplexed that Trump gets away with this, wondering why the Republican-controlled Congress refuses to rebuke him. For those of us who study communication, the answer is obvious and more rhetorical than ideological.

Aristotle in his treatise “Rhetoric” wrote about “the available means of persuasion.” Say what you will about Trump’s incompetence as well as his despicable words and deeds. That may not matter when we have a chief executive, perhaps more than any other in history, who understands that survival and success may not depend on facts but often are linked to controlling what language infiltrates the public sphere.

Several years ago I published research introducing the concept of “language-in-use.” Using President Lyndon Johnson’s Gulf of Tonkin speeches which were intended to create a crisis, I argued that ascertaining the rhetorical effect of presidential discourse by analyzing
public opinion poll data and votes may not always be the only or best metric.

Instead, I suggested, we also need to know whether and how a president’s language is disseminated and utilized by others, including the media. After all, the use and internalization of even a few of a president’s carefully chosen code words and phrases may reflect the internalization and acceptance of his larger narratives and arguments. Just like Aristotle’s theory of argument, language-in-use enables analysts to observe how audiences fill in unspoken and missing premises, thus bolstering and amplifying a president’s message.

Not only is Trump astute about the power of language-in-use (what he calls branding), but he has mastered the art of utilizing that power to circumvent facts. His employment of phrases like “witch hunt” and “spy-gate” — along with their dissemination by Trump surrogates — seem to have had an impact, being internalized and repeated by others, thus eroding confidence in the eventual outcome of the Russia investigation.

What concerns me is this: Until Trump’s critics understand this rhetorical source of his influence, they may not be capable of discerning the best available means of persuasion, hence enabling the president to escape accountability.

It’s time, therefore, for the public and media to avoid getting ensnared in the daily Trump soap opera. In fact, the public and the media must avoid the irresistible tendency to repeat the president’s language in an endless news loop; given the research of communication scholars, all that does is further reinforce his narrative — which of course is counterproductive.
Instead, I contend that the more pertinent news and public discussion should focus on exposing the underlying rhetorical strategy behind the deluge of Trump’s statements and tweets. That’s the real story — and the one which potentially could serve an antidote to the harmful effects of Trump’s rhetoric.

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