A Psycholinguistic Reading to the Recursive Facial Expressions, Palm Attitudes, Zone Distance, and Handshaking Styles in Some American Political Contexts: A Case Study

Mohammad Awad Al Dawoody

Department of English, College of Science And Humanities Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University Al-kharj 11942, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia; Department of English, Faculty of Arts, Port Said University, Egypt.

Corresponding Author:
Mohammad Awad Al Dawoody
Email: ma.abdulal@psau.edu.sa


Received Date: November 5, 2020
Accepted date: December 1, 2020
Online Date: March 5, 2021
Publisher: Kare Publishing
© 2021 Applied Linguistics Research Journal
E-ISSN: 2651-2629

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons, Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International

ABSTRACT

This study presents a psycholinguistic analysis of Donald Trump’s types of grins, palm attitudes, zone distances, and handshake styles. It is conducted within the theoretical framework of contextual congruence, stating that there should be compatibility between what speakers say and their body gestures. Delineating a character sketch for Donald Trump, 69 short videos and 116 photos were analyzed and studied carefully. 71.4% of pictures and over 62.3% of the videos showed facial gestures of fake smiles, given to particular persons, including National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, Vice-President Mike Pence, and White House Chief of Staff John Kelly. Trump was noticed with a genuine smile only when being with one of his family member, especially his daughter Ivanka. Results also revealed that except for Nancy Pelosi - the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives - Trump used to violate his political opponents’ intimate and personal zones as a kind of non-verbal political counter-attack. Results also showed that the double-handed handshake was Trump’s recursive handshake style. He used such a style to show sincerity, trust or depth of feeling towards the receiver. He repeatedly gave this kind of handshaking to some Asian leaders, who seemed totally upset from this handshaking style as Trump used to give this handshaking style in more than 30 seconds. Trump utilized all his body gestures and facial expressions to dominate not only his opponents but also his friends.

Keywords: non-verbal communication, palm power, zone distance, styles of handshaking, psycho-linguistics.

1. Introduction

Donald Trump, the 45th President of the United States, is a highly controversial figure. He received much criticism and flattery in the American social media immediately in the wake of the Corona-virus outbreak (Garcia, 2018). Trump received much criticism from his opponents for being unable to put an end to this crisis that has deeply struck the American economy and infirmed the health system. Further, he was exposed to scathing quibble for paving grounds for racism and violence against non-American citizens and for his constant humiliation to third-world countries (Baird, 2019). However, his supporters eulogized him for saving 16 American captives without releasing any of the terrorist leaders or sending huge amounts of money to rogue regimes, as his predecessor has done. He was also praised, Blount (2018) contended, for having manufacturing jobs hastily grow, the most rapid it has ever been in the last 23 years. This led the unemployment rate to go down to the lowest it has ever been for America. He was deeply applauded by his promoters for setting criminal justice reforms and putting an end to opioid abuse and sex trafficking.
Some psychologists, political commentators, and analysts, such as Okonski (2017), Benjamin (2020), Heesacker (2018) and Pettigrew (2017), asserted that Donald Trump attempted to place himself as a legendary American politician who evoked incidents to urge the Americans to support his economic plans even if they are going to sacrifice their values of liberty and democracy. Others such as, Bekafiigo, Stepanova, Eiler, Noguchi and Ramsey (2019) contended that Trump had been a manipulative, cunning person who attempted to attain his goals under any circumstances. It was quite clear when he gave his approval to the Russian President to assassinate a political dissident using banned chemical weapons.

The contrasted controversial views concerning Trump's ideologies and values stirred the researcher to examine the aspects of his personality from a psycholinguistic perspective, using Trump's body and facial gestures. Therefore, this study attempts to answer the following questions:

1. How were Trump's grins psycho-linguistically indicative?
2. What are the psycholinguistic messages conveyed by Trump's palm gestures?
3. What are the psycholinguistic interpretations of Trump's handshake styles?

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Contextual congruence

Psycholinguistics, one of the branches of applied linguistics, is an interdisciplinary field as it combines psychology and linguistics (Sedivy, 2019; Pinker, 2007; Traxler, 2011). Psycholinguistics is the study of how people produce, understand, and acquire language. Therefore, psycholinguistics involves three main domains: language production (verbal and non-verbal production), language comprehension, and language acquisition (Traxler, 2011; Warren, 2012; Sedivy, 2019). Psycholinguistics investigates (1) how words are stored in the mental lexicon, (2) how meaning is represented in the lexicon, (3) how our minds convert an idea into an utterance, and (4) how children acquire their mother tongue in a very brief span (Menn & Dronkers, 2015; Conklin, 2020; Gilquin & Cock, 2013; Meredith, 2012).

Contextual congruence (Pease & Pease, 2006; Hall, 2019; Moniz, Batista, Mata & Trancoso, 2014) is one of the trending theories in the psycholinguistic interpretation of body gestures. Congruence means that there should be compatibility between what the speakers utter and their body gestures. For example, in the critical evaluation gesture cluster, which is sometimes called the hand – to – face gesture the index finger points up the cheek while the middle finger covers the mouth and the thumb supports the chin. Besides, the legs are tightly crossed, and the arm crosses the body while the head and chin are down. This gesture indicates that the listener is defensive and critical of the Speaker. This non-verbal gesture says something like, “I don’t like what you are saying, and I disagree with you”. If this listener is asked to give his opinion and declares that he agrees with you, the listener’s non-verbal signals will be incongruent with his verbal language. The opposite of congruence is hunch (Ratner, Gleason & Narasimhan, 1998).

In addition to focusing on gesture clusters and congruence, all gestures should be considered in the context in which they take place (Warren, 2012). If, for example, someone was sitting at a bus stop with arms and legs tightly crossed and chin down and it was a chilly winter’s day, it would mean that he/she was cold, not defensive. However, if this person used the same gestures while you were sitting across a table from him trying to sell him a product or a service, these gestures would mean that the person was negative or defensive about the situation (Wozowski & Wozowski, 2018; Warren, 2012; Hall, 2019). One of the most serious mistakes a beginner in body language may make is interpreting a gesture in isolation of other gestures. For example, scratching the head can mean several things: (a) dandruff, (b) fleas, (c) sweating, (d) uncertainty, (e) forgetfulness, or (f) lying, depending on the other gestures that occur at the same time. Therefore, one must read gesture in clusters, not in isolation (Cooper, 2019; Pease, 1988).

Contextual congruence theory highlighted the correlation between one’s status and the use of gestures (Vijayavalsalan, 2012; Cooper, 2019). In other words, the person with a high social status uses fewer body gestures than that with a low social status. That is, the higher the person on the socio-economic scale, the less gesticulation they use. Another factor referred to in the same theory is the age of the Speaker. Age should be taken into account when reading body gesticulations. For example, if a five-year-old child tells a lie to his/her parent, the mouth will be deliberately covered with one or both hands. When the teenager tells a lie, the hand is also brought to the mouth like that of the five-year-old child. However, instead of the obvious hands over the mouth, the fingers rub lightly around it. When the adults tell lies, their brains instruct their hands to cover their mouths in an attempt to block the deceitful words, just as it does for the five-year-old child and the teenager. However, the hand is pulled away from the face at the last moment, and the nose is slightly touched (Pease & Pease, 2006).

3. Review of Literature

Hammack (2010) examined some of Barack Obama’s political speeches, shedding some light on the errors produced in these speeches and Obama’s body gestures. He conducted qualitative research to explain the difference between speech errors and lying in Barack Obama’s political speeches. He asserted that sincerity is the real distinction between misspeak and lying. By sincerity, Hammack meant that speech errors are made when the speakers talk about
their beliefs, but lying is detected when they talk about their suppositions. Hammack, therefore, concluded that Obama's speech errors had reflected his sincerity as he has been talking about his beliefs rather than his suppositions. Hammack's conclusions were supported by Obama's recursive use of genuine grins and open palms that indicated openness and sincerity.

Kintisch (2008) investigated the psychological implications of the repeated cues employed by some eminent political American figures, focusing on Hillary and Bill Clinton. Kintisch revealed that the critical evaluation gesture is one of Hillary Clinton's repeated body gesticulation. Hillary Clinton frequently used this gesture to suggest that she was not totally persuaded by what she was hearing. Pease and Pease (2004) investigated the recurrent body gestures employed by Bill Clinton before the Grand Jury while being questioned about his out-of-marriage affair with Monica Lewinsky. Clinton has frequently used the mouth-covering gesticulation. When uttering a lie, his brain immediately instructed his right hand to block his mouth as an attempt to stop the deceitful message.

Unlike Kintisch (2008), who concentrated on the repeated body gestures of political figures, Kyrala (2010) believed that the impact of the body gesticulations of the American politicians is much more significant than their repeated body gestures. Adopting a quantitative approach, Kyrala investigated the impact of Obama and McCain's body gesticulations on their voters in the presidential elections. Kyrala found out that the voters negatively perceived John McCain's prompt blinking and Obama's swift head movements. Kyrala anticipated that McCain, not Obama, would lose the voters' confidence because all the U. S. Presidential candidates who produced swift blinkers in the debates lost the elections.

Hö done and Levinson (2017) contended that the blink rate indicates restlessness or deep stress, particularly when it exceeds 60 blinks per minute. They pointed out that the normal blink rate ranges between 35 to 60 blinks per minute; consequently, a blink rate over 60 implies that one is going through a state of discomfort; any blink rate below 36 reveals a sheer comfortable state. Hö done and Levinson, investigating the blinking rate of Obama and McCain in their final presidential elections, concluded that Obama felt more comfortable and less stressed than McCain.

4. Problem Statement and Research Objectives

The controversial aspects of Donald Trump perplexed the psychologists, political analysts, and linguists. To delineate the dimensions of Trump's personality, this study attempts to answer the following question: What can a psycholinguistic investigation of Trump's body gestures reveal about the inner aspects of his character? To answer this question, the researcher intends to do the following:

1. To define the types of grins produced by Trump in different interactions via analyzing 21 videos and 25 photos in which Trump psycho-linguistically sent many indicative messages.

2. To analyze Trump's palm gestures via investigating 26 videos and 28 photos in which Trump unconsciously revealed different attitudes by his palm gestures.

3. To clarify and set a psychological interpretation of Trump's most frequent handshake style, analyzing 22 videos and 63 photos.

4. To finally draw a comparatively accurate character sketch for Donald Trump.

5. Research Methodology

5.1 Research design

In this study, the researcher used the mixed research design (i.e. qualitative and quantitative research designs) to approach the research questions and problem raised above. The researcher employed the qualitative design to detect Trump's deceptive messages and describe his fake smiles and handshake styles. The deceptive messages were investigated via describing the body cues indicating lying, and the fake smiles are studied via observing the body signals revealing the non-authenticity of smiles. The quantitative method was employed when the researcher began to implement some statistical procedures to define Trump's most recurrent type of handshaking and palm attitudes.

5.2 Data collection and procedures

The body language data comprise 68 videos and 116 photos in which Trump was attacking his political opponents (e.g. Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, and Joe Biden), giving weird handshakes to many political leaders and presidents, making awkward movements, giving statements about coronavirus pandemic, and producing unreasonable actions. Some of the photos and videos psycho-linguistically analyzed have been downloaded from the following websites.
6. Data Analysis and Discussion

6.1. Fake and genuine smiles

A genuine smile is characterized by (a) the presence of crow's feet (i.e. wrinkles outside the edge of the eyes), (b) the presence of closed eyes, and (c) the absence of bottom teeth. Thus, the fake smile is marked by (a) absence of closed eyes, (b) absence of crow's feet (i.e. the wrinkles outside the edge of the eyes), and (c) the appearance of bottom teeth. In a group of 21 videos and 25 photos, 71.4% of photos and over 62.3% of the videos showed facial gestures of fake smiles, given to particular persons, including National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, Vice-President Mike Pence, and White House Chief of Staff John Kelly, T. The fake smiles were noticed with particular persons, including National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, Vice-President Mike Pence, White House Chief of Staff John Kelly, Senior Policy Advisor Steven Miller, White House Communications Director Anthony Scaramucci, and Kellyanne Conway, Counsellor to the President.

Photo [1] below was taken to Vice President Mike Pence and President Trump during the first day of the 2020 Republican National Convention in Charlotte, N.C. It represented one of many photos in which Trump gave fake smiles when being with Pence. Rarely could one get a picture of Trump with Pence with a real genuine smile? It reflected Trump's state of restlessness and discomfort. Even when being with his most favourite supporters, Trump was noticed with a genuine smile only when being with one of his family member, especially his daughter Ivanka as photo [2] showed. Trump's open eyes and clear bottom teeth were quite apparent in the first photo with Pence, but with Ivanka, he emitted the closed eyes and hid his bottom teeth.

![Photo 1](https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/11/the-155-craziest-things-trump-said-this-cycle-214420)

**Photo [1]:** Vice President Mike Pence with President Donald Trump during the first day of the 2020 Republican National Convention in Charlotte, N.C., Monday, August 24, 2020

Andrew Harnik/AP.

**Photo [2]:** Ivanka Trump sitting on the American President's Chair raised eyebrows: CBS News

6.2. Zone distances before and after the coronavirus outbreak

Body gestures were interpreted side by side with zone distances. There are four-zone distances, which non-verbalists should take into consideration when interpreting body cues: (1) intimate zone, (2) personal zone, (3) social zone, and (4) public zone. The intimate zone extends from 15 to 45 centimetres. It is by far the most important zone distance used by emotionally close people, such as lovers, parents, spouses, children, close friends, and relatives. In more than 26 videos and 28 randomly selected, Trump was noticed, using his intimate zone with his close friends and family members. The only exception was with the Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau; despite the political and economic problems that have come to the surface between the two countries since Trump assumed power, Trump used to violate Justin's intimate zone [See Photo 3]. The latter seemed happy with such a zone violation, regarding that not as a lack of felicity but as a way of breaking the ice between the two countries.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vlXmiFF8yI4
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2CyMy4zpF6U
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7gDxIrS0jo
Personal Zone extends between 46 centimetres and 1.22 meters. Trump used this Zone with the persons whom he knew. This Zone is generally employed at parties, offices, social functions, and friendly gatherings. Trump repeatedly observed his personal Zone with others. The only exception was in his debate with Hilary Clinton in 2016. He violated Clinton's personal Zone three successive times when she accused him of promoting and enhancing violence and racism among the Americans [See Photo 4]. Trump used to violate his opponents' personal Zone, a matter that has never tried with Nancy Pelosi, the Speaker of the United States House of Representatives. It seemed that Trump really realized the strength of his opponent at that time; it was quite clear in photo [5] when he rejected to shake hands with her. The social Zone, extending from 1.22 to 3.6 meters, means to keep a space between yourself and other people who are not from your family. Trump urged the Americans to practice social distancing in combination with other everyday preventive actions to reduce the spread of COVID-19. However, as photo [6] shows, he himself did not observe the social distance in the press conference in which he asked the Americans to do so.

6.3 Trump and the palm power

According to many non-verbalists, open palm is associated with truth, honesty, and allegiance. They contended that one of the best ways to discover whether someone is open and honest is to look for the palm position. When someone begins to open up or be truthful, they will expose their palms. The palm gesture is an unconscious sign. When children are telling a lie, their palms are hidden behind their backs. Trump was rarely noticed with open palms. However, after probing more than 26 videos and 28 photos, it was clearly noticed that this gesture was repeatedly used when he spoke about the border security, accusing the Democrats of being responsible for the government shutdown because they refused to fund a wall at the Mexican American borders. He accused the Democrats of promoting human trafficking and drug dealing for refusing to fund the wall. It seemed that Trump really believed in the indispensability of this wall. In photo [7] below, Trump used his open palms to convey a message to the Democrats, saying that he was truly doing that for the sake of America.

The palm gestures are the most powerful body signals. There are three basic palm gestures: the palm-up gesture, the palm-down gesture and the palm-closed-finger-pointed gesture. Suppose you ask someone to pick up
a box and carry it to another location in the same room. Assume that you use the same tone of voice, the same words and facial expressions, and change only the position of your palm. The palm-up is used as a submissive, non-threatening gesture. The person being asked to move the box will not feel threatened by request. If you use the palm – down gesture, the person to whom you have directed the request will feel threatened and will be antagonistic towards you. If this person is a co-worker of equal status, he/she may reject your palm-down. As for the palm-closed-finger-pointed position, it beats the listener into submission. It is more aggressive than the palm-down gesture. The pointed finger is one of the most irritating gestures. Habitual finger-pointers should practice palm-up and palm-down positions to create a more relaxed attitude and positively affect other people.

Trump’s palm-up gesture was one of the rare gestures he emitted. He seemed that he never liked to appear submissive and week. None the less, this body gesture was just noticed for one time [see photo 8] when he preposterously rejected losing the elections and decided to ask the Supreme Court to intervene and stop voting in the 2020 election. Trump’s palm-up gesture showed him as a submissive, helpless, and antidemocratic person.

Trump’s palm – down gesture was observed repeatedly when he was talking about racial affairs. In photo [9], he used this gesture when addressing the protesters in the wake of the murder of George Floyd and nationwide outrage over police violence and aggression against Black African Americans. The palm-down gesture portrayed him as a racist president who does not care for black lives. This gesture was recursively employed by Trump when addressing Nancy Pelosi, who used to oppose all Trump’s decisions, including the government shut down [see photo 9]. As for the palm-closed-finger-pointed position, it is Trump’s all-time used gesture. In a survey of 26 videos and 28 photos, this gesture was repeated over 63%. It showed Trump as an aggressive person who sought domination over others. It added to his personality as a dictator who usually gives orders and commands. This gesture was used over 35 times in his debate with Joe Biden in the 2020 elections. Professional debate coaches train the candidates running for President to learn how to dodge questions and how to defend themselves. However, their body language gives away what a person is hiding. While Trump and Clinton were arguing about if Russia had taken part in hacking the emails of the Democratic National Committee, Donald Trump awkwardly pointed his right index finger toward the sky, thumb and middle finger lightly pinched together. Still, he also pointed his left index finger to Hillary Clinton [See photo 10]. Trump seemed to be very much grumpy. The right-hand index finger conveyed the message: “pay attention to what I am going to say”; it seemed like a yell supported by the left-hand index finger. He seemed to convey a message of admonishment, delivered in a super angry way. Unlike Trump, the Canadian Prime Minister has developed his finger pointed irritating gesture into a more assertive non-irritating thumb-on-index gesture. Trump conveyed the same message with less aggression and rudeness, just like the Canadian Prime Minister, but he failed.

Photo [7]: Trump with open palms blasting Democrats for not funding a wall on the southern border.
Photo [8]: Trump declaring with a palm-up gesture that he would go to the Supreme Court
Photo [9]: Trump with palm-down gesture attempting to suppress Pelosi, who seemed resistant
Photo [10]: Trump’s peculiar finger-pointed gesture indicating extreme anger

6.4. Attitudes transmitted via handshaking

Both the palm-up and palm-down positions play a vital role in handshaking. One of three basic attitudes is transmitted through the handshake: (a) dominance, (b) submission, and (c) equality. Dominance means that you feel that you can dominate the person you are shaking hands with. You feel that this person will do as you wish. Dominance is transmitted by turning your hand downwards in the handshake. Submission, unlike dominance, means that you get the feeling that the person you are shaking hands with is trying to submit you to his will; and therefore, you would better be cautious. Submission is transmitted when you shake hands with your palm upwards. Equality means that you feel that you and this person can get on well together. Equality is transmitted when the palms remain in a vertical position. These three attitudes are transmitted unconsciously.
6.4.1 Trump and the Handshake styles

The palm-down handshake is the most aggressive handshake style. It is attributed to the fact that this handshake style gives the receiver no chance of establishing an equal relationship. To counter the palm-down handshaking, a simple manoeuvre is to grasp the person's hand on top and then shake it. Another manoeuvre is penetrating the giver's intimate Zone and turning his palms to the vertical position. Palm-down handshaking is Trump's favourite style. He used to adopt this style with his political opponents. In photo [11], Trump gave Obama a palm-down handshake; the two parties seemed to adopt defensive postures while shaking hands. This photo portrayed the deep lack of trust for both of them. Trump pulls Obama towards him to tell him that he was the one in charge.

The glove handshake is sometimes called the politician's handshake. The initiator tries to give the receiver the impression that he is honest. However, when this style is used with a person the initiator has just met, it has the reverse effect. The receiver feels suspicious and cautious. Trump gave the glove handshake to his political supporters and to whom he could depend on them. For example, Trump gave this vigorous style of handshaking to Gorsuch, whom Trump was nominated to fill a vacancy on the Supreme Court; Trump gave him this type of handshaking to tell him that he would depend on him in the 2020 presidential elections. Gorsuch kept a distance throughout the handshake as if he were saying, "No, I would not help you" [See photo 12].

The dead fish handshake is extremely uninviting. It is universally unpopular. Most people relate it to weak character, mainly because the palm can easily be turned up. Rarely did Trump appear with this kind of handshaking; however, he gave this style of handshaking once to the French President in G20 Summit in 2017 [See photo 13]. This photo revealed the huge differences in viewpoints between the two countries on world issues, such as climate change, wars in Syria and Libya, and Trump's decision to halt many economic treaties with France.

The double-handed handshake style shows sincerity, trust or depth of feeling towards the receiver. The left hand is used to communicate the extra feeling that the initiator wishes to transmit. The left-hand takes one of four positions: wrist hold, elbow grasp, upper-arm grip, or shoulder hold. The elbow grasp transmits more feelings than the wrist hold. The shoulder hold transmits more feelings than the upper-arm grip. The initiator's left hand represents an invasion of the receiver's intimate zones. Therefore, the wrist hold, the elbow grasp, upper-arm grasp, and shoulder hold are acceptable only between close friends. Trump repeatedly gave this kind of handshaking to the Japanese Prime Minister, who seemed totally upset from this handshaking style as Trump used to give this handshaking style in more than 30 seconds [See photo 14].

Conclusion

With absolute contextual congruence, the psycholinguistic analysis of Trump's types of grin, palm gestures, zone distances, and handshake styles revealed many aspects of Trump's personality. He has never shown a genuine grin except with his daughter Ivanka; all the grins he gave were entirely fake especially with the National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, Vice-President Mike Pence, and White House Chief of Staff John Kelly. With Nancy Pelosi's exception, Trump used to violate his political opponents' intimate and personal zones as a kind of non-verbal political counter-attack. The double-handed handshake was Trump's recursive handshake style. He used such a style to show sincerity, trust or depth of feeling towards the receiver. Trump repeatedly gave this kind of handshaking to some
Asian leaders, who seemed totally upset from this handshake style as Trump used to give this handshake style in more than 30 seconds. Trump utilized all his body gestures and facial expressions to dominate not only his opponents but also his friends.

Acknowledgements
I take this opportunity to thank Prince Sattam Bin Abdulaziz University in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, alongside its Deanship of Scientific Research for all technical support it has provided towards the fulfilment of the current research

References

