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## The 'wells', 'looks' and vibe of Australian debating: language to look for on Sunday

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I would never claim to be a *suppository of wisdom* but speaking off script can get a polly into trouble. And, well, look, *shit happens* in debates.

This means it's worth flagging some differences in the way in which pollies and parties debate and some language strategies to look for on Sunday.

### Party differences in past debates

I used a text analysis tool called Linguistic Inquiry Word Count (or LIWC) to analyse Australian election debates between 1998 and 2013. LIWC notes differences in texts and speakers across 70 linguistic and psychological categories. With a nod to Dale Kerrigan, LIWC seeks to link quantitative results with the vibe.

It's worth saying at the outset that there aren't many significant differences in debate language when you compare the ALP and the Coalition on the whole. The differences emerge more saliently with the individual pollies. Yet, there are a few nuanced differences between the parties, so let's start with these.

There is a slight difference in the way in which the ALP and the Coalition use pronouns in election debates. The ALP uses slightly more pronouns (i.e. 15% of the total word count) to the Coalition (14.5%). This can lead to any number of interpretations, including an image of greater authenticity.

Heading toward a more nuanced interpretation, the ALP tends to refer to *you* and *we* (and related first-person, plural words) more than the Coalition, who for their part tend to use *I* (and related first-person, singular words) more than the ALP.

This usage hints at a few things debate-wise. The ALP speak with a level of underlying confidence as this is linked to use of *we*-words and a few other LIWC categories. The Coalition, for its use of *I*-words, but also more negation, hint at being less confident speakers.

On Sunday, keep an eye out for words like *could*, *should* and *would* as well as a spike in words like *he* or *she* because in politics these words have been linked to evasiveness and pollies getting "economical with the truth". Ted Cruz uses a lot of words like these and consequently fed into the narrative Trump created for him as "Lying Ted".

The ALP has used these *could*-, *would*-like words ever-so-slightly more than the Coalition in past debates. Lastly, it's worth noting that LIWC suggests the ALP tends to frame its debate narrative in terms of "achievement" and the Coalition in terms of "power".

But how have the individual pollies fared in terms of language use?

## Individual differences in past debates

At the outset, Tony Abbott and Julia Gillard emerge as the least confident debaters in terms of language use. However, it's more complicated than this, so let's see this through.

Abbott was, by and far, the most negative debater in these contests. He also showed, relative to the other pollies, a heightened concern with power. This can actually reflect insecurity in a candidate.

Gillard used first-person pronouns more on the whole than any of the other debaters since 1998 and this has hinted at a lack of confidence in US political contests. This confidence interpretation is enforced with her prevalent use of words like *think* and *know* alongside *could* and *would* words, the latter noted above as being linked to a certain evasiveness for some pollies.

Yet, merely noting Abbott and Gillard as "unconfident" speakers doesn't tell the whole story and undersells their strengths as debaters. Both, from 1998 to 2013, are the most prolific users of language linked to the extensive analysis of debate topics. Abbott was the most prolific user of adjectives to categorise these topics and Gillard was the prolific speaker in her use of language associated with insight and analysis.

Also, it's worth noting in light of all the past talk of the 'Real Julia' that LIWC analysis suggests she emerged as the most 'authentic' speaker in the debates (Kevin Rudd was a close second). And, I know what you're thinking, but no Abbott didn't emerge as the least authentic; this honour actually goes to Kim Beazley and Mark Latham.

Once again, we should balance out Beasley's and Latham's debating weaknesses and

strengths (in terms of LIWC). Latham was seemingly very good at affiliation, demonstrating a commitment to allies and social relationships, and this is often viewed as a positive candidate attribute. Beazley was the least concerned with power, once again a good attribute for a candidate.

I should add as a caveat that these text analysis tools can be crude measurements of public discourse but do aim to capture the vibe. To these ends, when one is looking to do a quick and down and dirty analysis, a man's (or woman's) text analysis tool is his castle.

## ‘Look’, words to watch out for on Sunday

For the Coalition, of course, the buzz words are quite clear. Barring a shift in tactics, we might expect to hear lots about *jobs*, *growth* and *tax*. These were the most commonly occurring words in the budget speech. The Coalition's slogan *jobs and growth* was uttered 13 times.

The ALP, on the other hand, has been using more nuanced language in setting out its vision. For instance, the ALP has two slogans this election cycle: *We'll put people first* and *100 Positive Policies*. The latter wasn't mentioned at all in the budget reply and the former was uttered a single time, at the conclusion of the speech.

Many are surprised to learn that the most commonly used noun in the ALP's budget reply (after variations of *Australia(n)s* and the *ALP*) was *billions*. This was used to highlight, subtly, the extent of the Coalition's cuts to the "people" being "put first".

Two more subtle words to look out for on Sunday are *look* and *well* at the start of a pollie's answers. These discourse markers are pollie stalwarts, figuring prominently in debates and public discourse more generally.

*Look* and *well* serve a range of functions when they appear before a pollie's answer. Pollies use them to buy time and gather their thoughts (e.g. *look* [I have something to say but I don't know what]), to ignore or contravene what's just been said (e.g. *look* [I know you asked about asylum seekers but let me tell you about the pretty flowers in my garden]) or grandstand (e.g. *look* [jobs and growth, people first, blah blah blah]).

So, well, let's look to Sunday and measure the vibe of this mob. After all, politics is 10% brains, 95% muscle and the rest is good luck.

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