

Political Discourse Strategies Used in Twitter during Gezi Park Protests: A Comparison of Two Rival Political Parties in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

Along with the growing use of twitter as a tool of political interaction, recently, there has also been an attention in the academia to understand and explain how and why politicians use twitter, and what its impact on the political outcomes are. On the other hand, there has been little analysis about the content of the tweets that politicians from different parties posted during major political events. Accordingly, this study aims to investigate the discourse strategies that the top-level politicians of the party in power and of the main opposition party in Turkey used in their tweets during Gezi Park events in the summer of 2013. Findings from a hand-coded content analysis based on Van Dijk's framework (2006) indicate that while the most frequently used strategy was actor descriptions and categorization for both parties' politicians, burden strategy and lexicalization / metaphor strategy were used significantly more by the main opposition party politicians compared to the politicians of the party in power.

KEYWORDS

Content Analysis, Discourse Analysis, Political Communication, Political Polarization, Political Use of Twitter, Social Media, Social Uprisings, Van Dijk

1. INTRODUCTION

As governments seek to increase transparency, accountability, responsiveness of public institutions, and improve government-citizen interaction, social media technologies have been increasingly utilized in the political and administrative arenas as innovative tools. Social media tools, comprising a set of Web 2.0 technologies such as social networking applications, microblogging and wikis, opens new communication and participation channels for improved public service and engagement (Oliveira & Welch, 2013; Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

Among others, Twitter, launched in July 2006 as a free website that enables social networking through short messages, offers several advantages to the individual users and government agencies.

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Serving as a microblogging site providing 140-character long postings known as tweets, people irrespective of any segment (sex, age, social status etc.) may use twitter regularly in daily life (Shi, Rui & Whinston 2014), for purposes ranging from having a social presence (Dunlap & Lowenthal 2009) to professional marketing (Rinaldo, Tapp & Laverie 2011; Fischer & Reuber 2011). In addition, twitter use during extraordinary events (i.e. natural catastrophes, crashes, civil war, social uprisings etc.) is remarkably high with broad volume and affection (Oh, Agrawal & Rao 2013) with the help of retweeting (Boyd, Golder & Lotan 2010; Ahn & Park 2015), or marking any posted topic as favorite. As such, Twitter is considered to be a platform that can facilitate a noticeable increase in social interaction (Fischer & Reuber 2011).

As forefront figures at local, national or supranational levels, politicians also benefit from the developments in social media technologies. Particularly twitter may serve well for politician and constituent interactions, and has been extensively used in political communication during national or local election times. Because twitter offers the advantage of simplicity and convenience of rapid communication to the users, it is particularly useful for the politicians to directly communicate their ideas to the larger public during election campaigns or major events (Han & Kim, 2009; Merry, 2012). As a result, twitter has been increasingly preferred as a medium of political communication over traditional media or even websites and blogs (Entman 2007; Lee 2009; Graham et al., 2014).

Along with the growing use of twitter as a tool of political interaction, recently, there has also been an attention in the academia to understand and explain how and why politicians use twitter, and what its impact on the political outcomes are (Lassen, Brown & Riding, 2010; Williams & Gulati, 2010; Golbeck et al., 2010). In addition, a few studies have focused on the content of the messages and the language behavior of the politicians on twitter, suggesting categories to characterize the main themes of the tweets sent regularly (Shapiro et al. 2012; Sobaci & Karkin, 2013; Toff & Kim, 2013). On the other hand, there has been little analysis about the language that politicians from different parties use on twitter during major political events. For example, while polarizing language is regularly used by politicians in the traditional media to clearly specify points of departure on certain issues, it is not clear whether the same language behavior is present or reinforced in social media use, especially during major political or social events (Shapiro et al., 2012). Polarizing language is defined as “supporting language for one’s self versus pejorative language for others” (Shapiro et al., 2013, p. 2).

Accordingly, this study is an attempt to shed some light on the question of how politicians communicate through Twitter during extraordinary events. Particularly, it aims to analyze the discourse strategies that top political party executives of the party in power (Justice and Development Party - JDP) and of the main opposition party (Republican People’s Party - RPP) in Turkey used in their tweets during Gezi Park events in the summer of 2013. We examine three research questions: What types of recurring speech patterns can be identified from the politicians’ discourse in Twitter during Gezi Park events? What do they reveal about the discourse strategies used by the politicians in Twitter? Do these discourse strategies differ between the politicians of the rival parties?

Utilizing Van Dijk’s (2004) discourse analysis categories, we examine the tweets sent by the top politicians of two political parties between May 30-June 30, 2013 to outline the recurring speech patterns and to identify how they establish us – others contradiction by employing certain discourse structures in their speech. We expect that the content of the tweets will present how we-other contradiction is constructed in this framework and the other is marginalized in order to legitimize their own perspective and gain the support of the public at large during the event.

The paper is organized as follows. We first present a review of the literature concerning social media use in politics and its outcomes. We then provide an overview of the Gezi Park events that took place in the summer of 2013 in Turkey and summarize related political arguments. It is followed by the description of critical discourse analysis and its relevance for our study, along with the analytical categories used to group politicians’ tweets. Next, we describe the data and the methods used in the paper. Finally, we present our results and discuss the implications of the study.

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