Chapter 24
DICTION and the Study of American Politics

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ABSTRACT

A powerful tool for content analysis, DICTION allows scholars to illuminate the ideas, perspectives, and linguistic tendencies of a wide variety of political actors. At its best, a tool like DICTION allows scholars not just to describe the features of political language, but also to analyze the causes and the consequences those features in ways that advance our understanding political communication more broadly. Effective analysis involves helping academic audiences understand what the measures being used mean, how the results relate to broader theoretical constructs, and the extent to which findings reveal something important about the political world. This involves exploring both the causes and the consequences of linguistic choices, including by attending closely to how those texts are received by their intended audiences. In this chapter, the authors review ways in which DICTION has been used and might be used to better understand the role of political leadership, the meaning of democracy, and the effects of political language on the political behavior of ordinary citizens.

INTRODUCTION

The chapters in this volume represent an impressive array of possibilities for using DICTION to examine and illuminate American politics. Because language is at the heart of much of the political world – as Wilson Carey McWilliams put it, "politics is fundamentally a matter of speech, and in democracies, of public speech" (quoted in Hart 2002, 8) – the potential contexts for content analysis using tools like DICTION are practically boundless. Even a quick perusal of the chapters in this volume shows a nearly dizzying variety of approaches. These range from understanding various aspects of campaign rhetoric – debates, stump speeches, and other campaign communications – to many different facets of governing, including press conferences, speeches, budget communications, and many more. Access to multiple drafts of speeches even allows readers to observe White House communication efforts as they take shape. Automated content analysis also enables scholars featured here to explore topics as diverse as Bill Clinton's childhood homes or the democratic implications of university commencement addresses. The range of data analyzed is a

testament to DICTION's flexibility as a content analysis tool, its ability to open new understandings of political communication, and the creativity of the scholars using it.

At the same time, the chapters dedicated to the study of politics also highlight some important lessons – both positive and negative – for scholars hoping to use DICTION and other such tools in the future. In this sense, the chapters are doubly valuable; they both reveal DICTION's capacity to shed light on substantive elements of American political life and prompt broader reflection about its role in the study of political communication. If the goal is greater understanding of the causes and effects of political language, the study of political communication with tools like DICTION is a promising path, but it must also ground the use of the measures DICTION creates in careful theory, attend to relevant results from other corners of political science and communications, and reflect thoughtfully on the normative implications of the results.

In other words, content analysis resources like DICTION should allow scholars not just to describe the features of political language (though that is an important first step), but also to analyze the causes and the consequences of those features in ways that advance our understanding of political communication more broadly. In this new age of data in which scholars have access to more and more diverse raw material for analysis than ever before, those who use DICTION have an obligation to help audiences understand what the measures they are using mean, how the results relate to broader theoretical constructs, and the extent to which their findings reveal something important about the political world. This involves exploring both the causes and the consequences of linguistic choices, including by attending closely to how those texts are received by their intended audiences.

All of this is important because, as Roderick Hart has written, political language "is an instrument of power" (2002, 26). DICTION's contribution is that it allows scholars to take words

seriously. Researchers can explore systematically how language is used by creating quantifiable (and replicable) variables, comparing the results from one text or set of texts to others generated in different contexts or by different political actors, and combining the variables – much as we might stack building blocks – in unique and creative ways. Thus, scholars who choose to adopt DICTION can certainly make use of the five master variables – certainty, optimism, activity, realism, and commonality – and these are the constructs that much of the best-known existing research has explored, but the possibilities are also much broader than that, as the chapters in this volume demonstrate. Through lexical layering, scholars can also build their own measures of abstract ideas, operationalizing the concepts that are most useful to their theories and hypotheses. They can also generate their own dictionaries, using them to identify concrete themes and track specific, substantive terms of interest.

Such flexibility makes DICTION an extremely powerful tool, one that can gauge both the presence (and absence) of specific, politically meaningful terms and plumb the broader, less immediately obvious elements and patterns of word usage. These patterns can be described as tone, and Hart, Childers, and Lind define it as "a tool people use (sometimes unwittingly) to create distinct social impressions via word choice" (2013, 9). They assume that tone is "the product of (1) individual word choices that (2) cumulatively build up (3) to produce patterned expectations (4) telling an audience something important (5) about the author's outlook on things" (Hart, Childers, and Lind 2013, 12). Tone involves how speakers consciously or unconsciously construct their world through language. The promise of DICTION is that it allows scholars to observe these verbal patterns to illuminate the ideas, perspectives, and tendencies of political actors.

My hope in this chapter is, therefore, to ask some broader questions, both about what we have learned already and about how DICTION might be used in the future. I hope that exploring such

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