

Methods of dogwhistling

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Dogwhistling and coded messages

Dogwhistling

This is a talk about **political dogwhistling**.

We'll get to what this is and how it works in a moment.

Examples, though, are ready to hand.



Donald J. Trump
@realDonaldTrump



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Peter Dutton:

“Well, for many people, they won’t be numerate or literate in their own language, let alone English, and this is a difficulty ... These people would be taking Australian jobs, there’s no question about that, and for many of them that would be unemployed, they would languish in unemployment queues and on medicare and the rest of it.”

Donald Trump:

“When Mexico sends its people, they’re not sending their best. They’re not sending you. They’re not sending you. They’re sending people that have lots of problems, and they’re bringing those problems with us. They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists. And some, I assume, are good people.”

Political dogwhistling gets its name from actual dog whistles:

A signal is made loudly and publicly,
to be detected and responded to by just a few.

Dogwhistling and coded messages

Code?

The language of 'code words' fits this picture, and has been widely adopted in discussions of dogwhistling.

A coded message can be distributed widely
without being widely understood.

So if dogwhistles really do work like dog whistles,
we might expect coded messages to be usual.

But recall:

Dutton:

“...they would languish in unemployment queues and on medicare and the rest of it”

Trump:

“They’re bringing drugs. They’re bringing crime. They’re rapists.”

Are we really to believe that these messages are **coded** or **hidden**?

Their racist import sits directly on the surface.

But they are at the same time not **overtly** racist,
at least not in the way a white-power organization might be.

The coded-message model explains the lack of overtness, but seems to miss almost everything else about these utterances.

Can we do better?

Deniability

Avoiding responsibility

Key to dogwhistling is **deniability**.

A speaker wants to communicate a message publicly without being **held to account** for having done so.

Code might serve this purpose;
if a message is undetected, a speaker can't be held responsible for it.

But it has a serious drawback:
it is not widely understood!

Deniability

Widespread message

Political dogwhistlers overwhelmingly do **not** want to restrict their message just to a discerning few.

Their usual goal is to be heard as widely as possible, so long as **responsibility** can be avoided.

This means designing initial messages with an eye on how they might be **challenged** as inappropriate.

The body politic has certain defenses against improper speech; these must be evaded or otherwise neutralised.

Methods

Why focus on methods?

Next: a partial inventory of **methods** used to achieve this deniability.

Although many examples involve **racial** or **ethnic** dogwhistles, the focus on methods allows for a broader net to be cast.

We should expect these techniques to be used wherever there is a need to communicate **widely** and **deniably**.

Methods

Dog whistling proper

Some dogwhistling **does** appear to involve coded messages.

Call this 'dog whistling proper'.

George W. Bush, State of the Union address 2003:

“Yet there’s power, wonder-working power, in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people”

George W. Bush, State of the Union address 2003:

“Yet there’s power, wonder-working power, in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people”

“There is power in the blood”, 1899 Hymn

“There is power, power, wonder-working power in the blood of the Lamb”

If the code is not broken, the speaker will never be challenged.

If the code **is** broken, though, deniability can vary.

Michael Gerson, Bush speechwriter:

“They’re not code words; they’re our culture. It’s not a code word when I put a reference to T.S. Eliot’s ‘Four Quartets’ in our Whitehall speech; it’s a literary reference. Just because some people don’t get it doesn’t mean it’s a plot or a secret.”

The **attempt to hide the message** is deniable;
the **message itself** is not.

Methods

Underspecification

A more common kind of dogwhistling involves **underspecification**.

A message is given whose bare words
are compatible with a range of interpretations;

typically one of these is clearly intended,
and another provides the deniability.

Sometimes what's underspecified is the content
of a **context-sensitive** term.

Barack Obama campaign ad:

“Mitt Romney. Not one of **us**.”

Working-class Ohioans?
Non-Mormons?

Donald Trump slogan:

“Make America great **again**.”

Like 1990?

1980?

1950?

1850?

Underspecification can work with **general phrases** as well.

Donald Trump slogan:

“Make America **great** again.”

Does this advocate:

pensions?

segregation?

manufacturing?

instigating coups?

Billboards from 2005 Tory campaign:

“Are you thinking **what we’re thinking?**”

What, exactly, were the Tories thinking?

If called to account, the speaker can either fill in an innocent message, or simply refuse to clarify.

Or they can double down on the dogwhistle.

Some things the Tories were thinking:

“It’s not racist to impose **limits** on immigration.”

“It’s time to put a **limit** on immigration.”

“What’s wrong with a **little discipline** in schools?”

Methods

Other people's words

A speaker can **report others** having said the target message.

Trump:

“[Vince Foster] had intimate knowledge of what was going on. He knew everything that was going on, and then all of a sudden he committed suicide. I don't bring it up because I don't know enough to really discuss it. I will say there are people who continue to bring it up because they think **it was absolutely a murder**. I don't do that because I don't think it's fair.”

The message comes surrounded by disavowal.

Methods

Predictable conflation

Another method involves exploiting (and typically reinforcing) **conflation** expected in the audience.

Mitt Romney, 2012, commenting on some of Obama's remarks:

“It’s a very strange, and in some respects foreign, uh, to the American experience type of philosophy. ... His whole philosophy is an upside-down philosophy that does not comport with the American experience.”

Conflating **nonwhite** with **foreign** has been central to anti-Obama dogwhistling.

Peter Dutton:

“Well, for many people, they won’t be numerate or literate in their own language, let alone English, and this is a difficulty ... These people would be taking Australian jobs, there’s no question about that, and for many of them that would be unemployed, they would languish in unemployment queues and on medicare and the rest of it.”

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If called to account, the speaker can simply disavow the conflation.

Dutton's remarks were anti-**bludger**, not anti-**refugee**.

Trump's were anti-**immigration**, not anti-**Mexican**.

- The idea that dogwhistling involves **hidden** or **coded** messages doesn't fit most actual cases.
- Dogwhistling is about **deniability**—avoiding having to take responsibility for one's messages.
- A **wide range** of methods can serve this end; dogwhistling is not a matter of any particular technique or topic.