

# Race and gender determine how politicians speak

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Race and gender influence the way politicians speak, which is not always to their advantage. Camelia Suleiman from Florida International University and Daniel O'Connell from Georgetown University in the US have come to this conclusion as a result of their findings<sup>1</sup>, published online in Springer's *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*.

Suleiman and O'Connell compared the language of male and female, and black and white politicians to determine whether ethnicity and gender play a role in the way they speak. They studied transcripts of interviews between Larry King on CNN TV and Madeleine Albright, Bill Clinton, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice. Specifically, they looked at how the politicians' speech was constructed: the number of syllables spoken, the use of interjections, interruptions, self-referent 'I', non-standard English such as 'gonna', y ' know, and laughter.

Their analysis shows that language reflects a social hierarchy that is not explicitly acknowledged. The "subordinate" roles of black race and female gender are revealed in speech patterns with "dominant" white males. And they are expressed differently in conversations with a white female, a black male and a black female. In effect, a degree of racism and sexism is reproduced by the very people who oppose these societal attitudes.

The researchers, in focusing on Barack Obama's language, in particular, found that his presentation of himself is nothing like the traditional black

political orator Martin Luther King or Jesse Jackson. Barack Obama does not deliver the poetic sermon of a past generation of African American leaders. Rather, like Condoleezza Rice, he displays self-confidence and serenity and remains calm and composed under stress. He stays focused and does not communicate obvious emotion.

According to the authors, both Obama and Rice are accomplished models of a new generation of African American leaders. It seems that they need to be even more careful about what they say than their white political colleagues, because they are judged on the use of their language differently than their white counterparts.

Reference: Suleiman C & O'Connell DC (2008). Race and gender in current American politics: a discourse-analytic perspective. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 10.1007/s10936-008-9087-x

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