

TRABALLO FIN DE GRAO

GRAO EN LINGUA E LITERATURA INGLESAS

Título do traballo:

The Importance of Non-verbal Communication in Presidential Debates: An Analysis of Trump vs. Harris

Autor/a:

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Santiago de Compostela, 13 de Xuño de 2025

Curso académico: 2024-2025

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In this paper, an analysis will be conducted on the importance of non-verbal communication in political debates. In public speaking, most of the weight of communication lies on non-verbal language (Mehrabian, 1972). In a context like political debates, the importance of non-verbal communication is even greater, as it is essential for ensuring that the orally transmitted message resonates with and has an impact on the audience. Gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice can either reinforce the orally conveyed message or contradict it as Riggio and Feldman (2005) explained. Politicians are instructed in this field from the outset; they are taught to use their bodies as instruments of persuasion to sway the audience in their favor.

The objective of this paper will be to analyse how non-verbal communication is used in U.S. presidential debates, and how they influence the audience, focusing on the 2024 Trump vs Harris presidential debate. The paper will be divided into two main parts. In the first part, I will define the concept of non-verbal communication and the different elements that comprise it; and I will undertake a thorough revision on relevant literature on the role of non-verbal communication in American politics throughout history, with particular attention to presidential debates, using sources such as *Nonverbal Communication*, Mehrabian (1972) or *Applications of Nonverbal Communication*, Ronald E. Riggio and Robert S. Feldman (2005). The second part will consist in an in-depth analysis of the distinctive non-verbal skills used by both the candidates in the presidential debate between Donal Trump and Kamala Harris in the 2024 elections, where I will apply the methods and concepts presented in the background literature section of the thesis. This will be complemented by an examination of a selection of press articles on the event, published in major American newspapers, *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*, immediately after the debate, focusing the attention on their evaluation and analysis of the candidates' non-verbal communication style.

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Abstract

Título en galego: A importancia da Comunicación Non-verbal nos Debates Presidenciais: Unha Análise de Trump vs. Harris.

Título en español: La Importancia de la Comunicación No-verbal en los Debates Presidenciales: Un Análisis de Trump vs. Harris.

Título en inglés: The Importance of Non-verbal Communication in Presidential Debates: An Analysis of Trump vs. Harris.

Abstract:

In this paper, an analysis will be conducted on the importance of non-verbal communication in political debates. In public speaking, most of the weight of communication lies on non-verbal language (Mehrabian, 1972). In a context like political debates, the importance of non-verbal communication is even greater, as it is essential for ensuring that the orally transmitted message resonates with and has an impact on the audience. Gestures, facial expressions, and tone of voice can either reinforce the orally conveyed message or contradict it as Riggio and Feldman (2005) explained. Politicians are instructed in this field from the outset; they are taught to use their bodies as instruments of persuasion to sway the audience in their favour.

The objective of this paper will be to analyse how non-verbal communication is used in U.S. presidential debates, and how they influence the audience, focusing on the 2024 Trump vs Harris presidential debate. The paper will be divided into two main parts. In the first part, I will define the concept of non-verbal communication and the different elements that comprise it; and I will undertake a thorough revision on relevant literature on the role of non-verbal communication in American politics throughout history, with particular attention to presidential debates, using sources such as *Nonverbal Communication*, Mehrabian (1972) or *Applications of Nonverbal Communication*, Ronald E. Riggio and Robert S. Feldman (2005). The second part will consist in an in-depth analysis of the distinctive non-verbal skills used by both the candidates in the presidential debate between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris in the 2024 elections, where I will apply the methods and concepts presented in the background literature section of the thesis. This will be complemented by an examination of a selection of press articles on the event, published in major American newspapers, *The New York Times* or *The Washington Post*, immediately after the debate, focusing the attention on their evaluation and analysis of the candidates' non-verbal communication style.

Palabras chave: non-verbal communication, body language, political debates, non-verbal cues, decodification, signals, meanings.

1. Introduction

The study of non-verbal communication started with Darwin's *The Expressions of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872), but it was not thoroughly investigated until the 1950s and 1960s (Patterson et al., 2023) through the works of figures such as Paul Ekman, Judith A. Hall, Mark L. Knapp or Albert Merhabian.

The study of non-verbal communication caught my attention while attending a lecture on body language and voice at the University of Santiago de Compostela. During this class the professor explained different basic aspects of non-verbal communication and then challenged us to interpret the different messages transmitted by the people who appeared in some images. To my surprise, most of the class answered correctly to the exercise, making it seem so easy to read people's body language. Then, many questions arose in my mind: Why did we all associate a specific meaning with certain non-verbal cues? Where did this seemingly innate association come from? What factors did we unconsciously base our assumptions on to determine whether the people in the images felt one way or another? How many meanings we are not aware of could we convey through our body language?

It was after that lecture that I decided to write my thesis on non-verbal communication, so I may find an answer to all my questions. Later on, I decided to narrow the study to non-verbal communication in the field of political debates. I made this decision after recalling an interview I had seen on the news, where an expert analysed Trump and Biden's body language during their debate on June 27, 2024. After much thought, I finally decided to slightly change the approach and focus on the Trump vs. Harris debate instead. In this way I would be able not only to study non-verbal communication on political debates, but also to find out if there were any differences regarding gender. Through the completion of this thesis I want to discover to what extent can non-verbal communication influence the opinion of the audience or even change their perception of a candidate. I also want to find out to what extent politicians are aware of the effect of their non-verbal cues and make use of them to cause the effect they want on the voters.

When I began writing this dissertation I found out that it was a relatively recent field of study and that, even though there were many publications on the topic, there also existed many limitations. As an illustration, it is still difficult to associate a non-verbal cue with a concrete meaning, since many other factors may influence the real decodification of it. Context, culture

or even gender can condition the correct interpretation of body language, so the same cue may not always imply the same meaning.

The objectives of this thesis are to revise previous works on the topic of non-verbal communication, and to find out the different limitations the study of non-verbal language may have. Furthermore, I would also like to understand the different categories in which non-verbal language can be classified, and its possible functions. Then, I aim to find out the weight body language has in the field of presidential debates and what different cues can imply in this context. To finally end up discovering how politicians may be making use of it to achieve the response they want from the audience.

To accomplish all these objectives I will divide the content of the thesis in four major parts. Through the first part (section 2.) I will explain the actual meaning of the concept of non-verbal communication, how it can be classified and what are its major functions. Through the next part (section 3.) I will introduce the role of non-verbal communication in the field of presidential debates and campaigns. In this second section of the content I will be referring to different aspects such as: (3.1.) the effect non-verbal language may have on the audience, (3.2.) the differences in body language that may exist between male and female candidates, and (3.3.) some current evidence on the role of non-verbal communication in presidential debates. The following section (4.), deals with the introduction of television debates in the context of American presidential elections. Through this section I will describe the impact of the introduction of televised debates to the study of body language (4.1.), and revise some of the most outstanding debates in the history of the US (4.2.). The last section of the dissertation (5.) will be divided into two subsection. In the first one (5.1.) I will focus on the portrayal of Trump and Harris's communicative styles in the media. Afterwards, I will close this paper with an exhaustive analysis of the non-verbal communication in the debate that was held on September 11, 2024, between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris (5.2.).

In order to complete all these sections, I have decided to follow the next methodology. I started by making a revision of previous works on non-verbal communication, selecting the works of some of the most remarkable authors who have studied the topic. I continued by reading works on non-verbal communication especially focused on its role in presidential debates and campaigns. Afterwards, I tried to find some examples in which the role of non-verbal language was clearly relevant for the opinion the audience had about the candidates of the debate. Thereafter, I focused on the portrayal the media made of the concept of non-verbal communication, especially attending to the cases of Donald Trump and Kamala Harris individually. I read about the general impact body language had on their careers, how they were

usually portrayed and what were some of the debates in which their non-verbal communication stood out the most.

Finally, and using all the previous study as a basis, I proceeded to carry out my own analysis of the debate that took place between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump on September 11, 2024. In order to select the excerpts to analyse I watched the entire debate in the YouTube web of the ABC News, choosing up to ten moments in which I considered that non-verbal language acquired a notable role. I then reviewed the ten moments I had highlighted, discarding those that were too similar or did not provide much noteworthy information, until I was finally left with 6 examples. After having read information about Trump and Harris's non-verbal communication for the previous section of the thesis, I found out that some of the most commented moments of the debate coincided with some of the excerpts I had selected. At that point I provided a detailed description of each excerpt, analysing the different meanings each cue could have. Following that, I classified Trump and Harris's non-verbal style following the classification made by Mark Knapp in 1972 and which I had previously explained in section 2.2. of the dissertation. To conclude this part of the thesis I ended up making a short summary of the general aspects that characterise their non-verbal communication, so it serves as a recapitulation of all the previous information.

Following this methodology and structure, the role of non-verbal communication in presidential debates should be clearly explained, letting us know which are its advantages and disadvantages, and how politicians may play with it in order to achieve their objectives.

2. Non-verbal communication

In order to open this thesis it is important to begin with a brief introduction to the main concept I will be analysing: non-verbal communication. In this regard, this section will be structured in three sub-parts. In the first part, I will provide an introduction to the definition of non-verbal communication following the studies of Albert Mehrabian (1972). In the following section, I will provide a classification for all the different non-verbal cues that can be found, following the work of Mark Knapp (1972). Finally, I will be talking about some of the major functions of non-verbal communication in everyday life. All these concepts will be useful for understanding the next major section of the thesis, related to the role of non-verbal communication in presidential debates.

2.1. What do we mean by non-verbal communication?

The concept of non-verbal communication encompasses all those aspects which are different from written and spoken language and are used to communicate a message, including sight, facial expressions, gestures, posture or the use of space, among others. As Mehrabian (1972) stated in his book *Nonverbal Communication* (p.2), these non-verbal elements contribute heavily to the final significance of a message. Non-verbal communication includes both intentional and unintentional cues. While some behaviours are consciously controlled (gestures or facial expressions), others are subconscious (micro-expressions, sweating). The process whereby we interpret the meaning behind other speakers' non-verbal cues and serves as a means of obtaining information is known as the *decoding process*, but we may not always succeed in decoding the message correctly.

This lack of mutual understanding is quite common when talking about the relation between non-verbal communication and the cultural interpretation of certain cues. While some gestures such as looking in the eyes while talking or greeting with the hand are seen as positive or neutral gestures in some cultures, they can acquire a negative connotation in others. These misunderstandings may arise through different cues, let us take the following examples as an illustration: we know that looking in the eyes when having a conversation is seen as a positive behaviour in American culture, since it may denote attentiveness. On the other hand, in Asian culture, it would be interpreted as a sign of rudeness. In the case of greeting with the hand, in cultures such as Asian or American this gesture is seen as neutral, without possessing negative connotations, while in Nigerian culture it is perceived as an offensive behaviour. Taking all this

into consideration, we should bear in mind that non-verbal behaviours must be decoded taking into account not only the context in which they are produced, but also the cultural background of the person who produces and receives them.

The scientific discipline which studies this specific type of communication is known as *kinesics* and its origin is quite recent. It has been considered a science only since the 1950s, following the studies of Ray Birdwhistell, especially after the publication of his book *Introduction to Kinesics* (1952). Kinesics's main goal is to interpret the underlying meaning conveyed through body language, overcoming one of the major difficulties in this field, which is to discern between those gestures that truly express a meaning and those which do not (Fast, 1970). Different analysts have shown interest in this discipline, but some of the most important figures may be Ray Birdwhistell, Paul Ekman or Albert Mehrabian. These intellectuals will set the base over which I will write this thesis.

2.2. Classification of non-verbal communication

The different signals and cues that constitute non-verbal communication can be classified into 8 different types. This classification results from the work of the scholar Mark Knapp described in his book *Nonverbal Communication in Human Interaction* (1972), who outlined the following categories:

1. *Kinesics*: which studies the messages conveyed by facial expressions, gestures and body movements. We can make a further classification into four different subcategories among the cues included in kinesics, following the studies of Paul Ekman and Wallace V. Friesen (1969): (1) *emblems*, which are a “small class of nonverbal acts that can be accurately translated into words” (Mehrabian, 1972, p.3), and which would include cues such as raising the middle finger to someone as an insult, or raising the index and the middle finger as a symbol of victory. (2) *Illustrators*, which are those gestures used to emphasise verbal messages, there are five different types of illustrators: (2.1) *batons*, used to emphasise certain words (pounding the fist on a surface while saying “we must take action now” to put the stress on the word “now”), (2.2) *deictic movements*, used to point to objects which we may be referring through our verbal message, (2.3) *kinetographs*, that are specific gestures used to represent bodily actions, (2.4) *iconic gestures*, used to represent size or shape, (2.5) and *rhythmic movements*, used to mirror the rhythm of something. (3) *Regulators*, category which includes those acts and gestures used to initiate and end speech in a social context. (4) And *adaptors*, which involve those behaviours related with the satisfaction of bodily needs.

2. *Proxemics*: which has to do with the way in which we make use of the space in order to communicate a message. For example, stepping back when someone approaches too much to communicate that we are not comfortable with being so close.
3. *Haptics*: which has to do with the way in which we use touch to communicate with our addressee. For example placing our hand on someone's shoulder to communicate support.
4. *Paralinguistics*: which is especially related with verbal communication and refers to those vocal cues (like pitch, tone, speed or volume) that help to transmit a specific message, such as raising our voice to indicate that we are getting angry or speaking quickly to indicate urgency.
5. *Oculesics*: which deals with how we use our eyes to communicate a message. For example, if we slightly close our eyes when listening to someone's speech, we may indicate that we are paying attention and analysing what is being said.
6. *Chronemics*: that has to do with the way in which our use and perception of time can transmit different meanings. For instance, in many cultures arriving late at a place can be seen as a disrespectful behaviour.
7. *Physical appearance and artifacts*: which deals with the way in which we adorn ourselves in order to communicate something. This involves the way in which we are dressed, our makeup, hair or even the jewels we wear. For example, dressing in a suit for a job interview to communicate professionalism and confidence.
8. *Environmental factors*: which are associated with the way in which the environment and the conditions in which we communicate can support or alter our message. As an illustration, couples usually prefer to talk in dim lighting spaces which are perceived as more intimate. We can also see an example in the selection of a round table instead of a rectangular one to communicate that everyone seated there is at the same level regarding power or status.

To summarise, we find eight major categories in which Mark Knapp divided all the possible cues of non-verbal communication: kinesics, proxemics, haptics, paralinguistics, oculesics, chronemics, physical appearance and environmental factors. On account of this classification the study and decodification of non-verbal signals has been facilitated. Nonetheless, it is also important to remember that the study of a discipline such as non-verbal communication is quite recent, so the improvement or extension of previous theories and classifications should always be over the table. In the next section I will analyse the possible

functions of non-verbal language and how it can express different meanings, depending not only on the context, but also on the intentions of the sender.

2.3. Major functions of non-verbal communication

Non-verbal and verbal communication are inherently intertwined, making clear distinctions almost impossible. Both types are tied together when conveying a message and in this thesis, I will study how they relate in the process of communication. It must be noticed that, as verbal signals, non-verbal cues do not always convey the same meaning, so their interpretation may vary depending on multiple factors such as context, culture or the intentions of the sender.

Following the classification made by Paul Ekman (1965) we can identify the following ways in which non-verbal and verbal communication interrelate and in which non-verbal cues acquire different functions:

1. Non-verbal signals can be used to repeat what the verbal message has already transmitted, making it clearer. An example of this function can be found when someone asks us how to get to a particular place and, while we are verbally explaining the route, we are also signalling the direction with our hands.
2. Non-verbal communication can result in a conflict with verbal communication when transmitting two contradictory messages. This can be seen when someone who has to make a presentation in front of an audience trembles and sweats at the same time that he states that he is not nervous. In this case the physical behaviour would be transmitting the opposite message as the words. So, how do we decide what to trust? In these situations, Hall and Schmid Mast found out that “people turn relatively more to nonverbal cues when they want to know how a person is feeling and more to verbal cues when they want to know what a person is thinking” (Knapp et al., 2013, p.18).
3. Non-verbal communication can complement verbal information, resulting in more reliable messages. This can acquire great importance when, for example, applying for a job. In this situation we must make sure that what we are verbally stating is being complemented by our non-verbal behaviour.
4. Non-verbal cues can substitute verbal messages that are quite clear. For instance, if we get home with a really bad face, it would be clearly transmitting that something awful has happened to us.
5. Non-verbal behaviour can also be used to accent or moderate our verbal message. When reproaching some attitude we may move our hands or raise the volume when we want to highlight some specific part of the speech.

6. Non-verbal communication can also be used to regulate what we transmit through verbal messages. For instance, we may want to indicate that we are about to change the topic of our speech with a change in posture, or to express that we want to talk by raising the index finger.

To recapitulate, non-verbal behaviours can fulfil different functions depending on the intended message and on the way they complement verbal messages. It is essential to consider factors such as context or culture, which may have a heavy weight in the process of decoding and transmitting information. In this regard, we must not take for granted that the same non-verbal cues will always be understood in the same way by all the addressees. In the following sections of this dissertation, we will analyse how non-verbal cues function as a way of engaging the audience in the context of presidential debates, until concluding with an analysis of the debate between Donald Trump and Kamala Harris, during their candidacy for the presidency of the United States.

3. Role of non-verbal communication in political debates and campaigns

In this section I will be analysing the role of non-verbal communication in regard to presidential debates, specifically its role in seducing the public and to what extent it can affect political campaigns. Through following sections we will also get to know some of the most relevant examples of debates which got to be quite popular owing to the role non-verbal language played in them, using as examples figures such as: Barack Obama, John F. Kennedy or Richard Nixon among others.

To begin with this section, I will determine what makes non-verbal communication so important in the context of presidential debates. As I have previously explained, non-verbal cues hold a large part of the final meaning of our communication. In the context of presidential debates, the opinion of citizens is really influenced by the non-verbal behaviours of the candidates. This influence is highly remarkable on those citizens who have relatively little knowledge of political issues or who do not have a deeply rooted ideology, so the way in which candidates are presented in the debate may lead them to lean towards one party or the other. Even those voters who do have a wide knowledge on the subject rely most of their opinion on non-verbal cues when they get distracted (Dumitrescu, 2016). Candidates are aware of the importance of their performance during debates, seeing them as an event which provides both participants with an exclusive stage to engage with the audience (Druckman, 2003).

3.1. Effect of non-verbal communication on the audience

Taking what has previously been said into consideration, we may ask ourselves which are those features that make a candidate more attractive than others. Some studies have discovered that

there are some specific cues that make the audience lay towards one aspirant over the other. Usually, voters prefer to trust those candidates who have a similar physical appearance to theirs. In relation to this idea, we have what is known as the *halo effect*, a “tendency of better-looking individuals to be evaluated more positively” (Dumitrescu, 2016). Competitors are judged with regards to their physical image, including the way in which they dress or style their hair. A well-groomed and confident appearance is usually related to traits that a leader must possess, making it easier for the audience to feel preference for that candidate. On the other hand, an untidy appearance may be related to incompetency, potentially backfiring on the competitor.

This cause-effect relationship is also connected to the concept of the *nonverbal expectancy violations* process, which Druckman (2003) explains as a system by which candidates are predicted to behave following certain expectations: if candidates accomplish those assumptions, they are rated positively, and negatively if the opposite happens. For example, in the context of political debates, candidates are expected to respect speaking turns and to address the other with respect. If that does not happen, the opponent who disobeys this social norm may be harmed by being perceived as impatient or incapable of maintaining control in serious situations.

In addition, we should also take into account other cues, such as facial expressions, posture or even background visuals. Participants of a debate must show confident attitudes and countenances, which help to mitigate “feelings of threat and anger in viewers” (Dumitrescu, 2016), and are related with the values that a good leader must possess.

Despite the fact that non-verbal behaviours clearly affect the opinion of the audience, further studies are needed, analysing how candidates’ behaviour and looks may have an impact on the public. It is a wide field of study, which needs a lot of research and which, since kinesics is a relatively recent science, has less information collected.

3.2. Non-verbal communication and gender

When dealing with presidential debates, it is also interesting to pay attention to the way in which gender may affect the perception of a candidate’s body language. It has been proved that “gender-based differences exist in the transmission and decoding of nonverbal cues” (Druckman, 2003). For instance, we can state that it has been discovered that male candidates seem more attractive in political debates when they possess a stoic demeanour or use dominant hand gestures such as confident, dynamic or rapid movements (Druckman, 2003). On the other hand, women are preferred to present a more familiar and tender image, without losing their confident behaviour and active style. Another illustration of these differences can be found on the duration of eye-contact considered to be appropriate, or on the number of smiles produced

during the process of communication. While women are more likely to maintain eye-contact over a longer period of time or do more mutual gazing when talking, it has been found that men do more mutual glancing when listening (Druckman, 2003).

The communication of emotions is another key point to signal differences in gender. While women tend to communicate more feelings related to fear or sadness, or to smile more during the communicative exchange, men are more likely to repress certain behaviours that could express feelings associated with weakness or even happiness through the use of smiles, and tend to produce more non-verbal cues (mainly through facial expression) related with anger or toughness (Druckman, 2003).

3.3. Current evidence on the role of non-verbal communication in presidential debates

Through the following sections I will analyse the actual role of non-verbal communication in presidential debates and on the perception of the audience.

In the context of presidential debates, it has been discovered that candidates who are lagging behind in a debate frequently behave in ways that reflect “physical weakness, pronounced stress, and evasive or fearful behaviour” (Dumitrescu, 2016). On the other hand, candidates who may be winning show behaviours related with feelings of confidence, transmitted through a raised position of the head, relaxed lips or smiles (Druckman, 2003).

Furthermore, body posture can also be a sign of confidence, which may cause different reactions in the audience’s perception. For example, an expansive body posture can produce a submissive response in the audience, due to the attitude of dominance it denotes, which can be an advantage during presidential debates. Whereas a contractive body posture (crossed arms or legs, or lowered head denoting submissiveness) has its advantages in moments of negotiation, even though this would not be the case in debates (Druckman, 2003).

When talking about body posture and the use of space to communicate, another important aspect when dealing with presidential debates would be the physical distance between candidates. In this regard, we can establish a distinction based on 3 different categories: personal distance, social distance, and public distance (Wasike, 2019). *Personal distance* (between 1.5 and 4 feet) would not be seen as a correct separation between candidates in a debate. This distance is usually established between people who maintain a close relationship. It is applied when talking to friends or to family, so it would be regarded as a violation of personal space when dealing with contexts such as debates, where this short space between competitors could result in being intimidating or violent. *Social distance* (between 4 and 12 feet) would be the ideal distance among candidates in a debate, in order to show respect.

And finally, *public distance* (more than 12 feet), which is the ideal one for encounters between candidates and the public (Wasike, 2019), and it could also acquire special importance when candidates make promises or talk about delicate matters.

4. Televised debates in American presidential elections

To illustrate all the previously mentioned examples and to understand the importance of debates in political campaigns, especially the role non-verbal communication displays in them, we must first understand the origins of these events. In this section I will briefly analyse the role of non-verbal communication in three important and well-known debates which took place in the United States during the 20th and the 21st centuries.

In the first political campaigns, televised debates were not part of the campaign platform. The introduction of televised presidential debates began with the debates held between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, known as *The Great Debates*. The Great Debates were a series of four debates between these two candidates that took place in 1960. Although other debates did not take place until 1976, the debates between Nixon and Kennedy marked a turning point in the history of US political campaigns.

The example of Nixon and Kennedy not only serves to highlight the importance of debates during political campaigns but also helps to illustrate the importance of television as a broadcasting method. A significant difference was found in the opinions of voters who followed this debate on the radio, favouring Nixon, and those who followed it on television and favoured Kennedy. Although conclusive results have not been obtained, due to the influence of many extraneous factors, it is generally assumed that what led those who followed the debate on television to support Kennedy was his image and body language, while those who could not see the candidates, but only listened to their speeches, leaned towards Nixon (Druckman, 2003).

4.1. The impact of televised debates

Taking this example as a basis for the following section, we can affirm that television played and continues to play a very important role during political campaigns. Its introduction marked a turning point as, thanks to television, debates were able to reach a greater number of spectators. Also, thanks to television, non-verbal language began to gain more relevance in the political field. The broadcast images made it possible to observe each one of the candidates' gestures. This meant that they were judged not only by their words and ideas, but largely by their image as well. Candidates were aware of this change, so they also began to use body language and appearance as tools for persuasion.

We must also keep in mind that despite their great impact, presidential debates are not considered to be a tool to change the minds of those voters with a very strong ideology who

already favour one of the candidates even before the debate has started. Debates are especially aimed at those members of the audience who are undecided or who do not know much about what each candidate has to offer. It is precisely this latter section of the audience who would be most influenced by the non-verbal communication of the representatives of each party since, as the saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. Consequently, televised debates play a major role in political campaigns, providing candidates with equal opportunities and space to engage their audiences. It is the perfect setting in which to showcase their best gestures, attitudes, and behaviours, often relying more on their image than on their words. Furthermore, voters themselves appreciate televised debates, where they would find it easier to spot potential fallacies (Bourchas & Gioltzidou, 2024).

4.2. Some significant televised debates in US presidential elections

To illustrate the importance of non-verbal communication in presidential debates and how it can affect the way in which the audience perceives a candidate, I am going to analyse some of the most well-known debates, starting from the already mentioned debate between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy. Continuing with the debates that took place between George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, or Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton.

- **The Nixon-Kennedy debates (1960)**

Starting with the Nixon vs. Kennedy debate, as I have previously mentioned, it is believed that non-verbal language played a really important role in it (Druckman, 2003). Despite the fact that it could not be empirically demonstrated, television played a major part and greatly influenced the audience. It constituted a starting point which made it perfectly clear that the audience actually pay attention to the appearance of candidates.

Kennedy showed a strong and young image, representing renewal and prosperity, which had an effect on the audience and tipped the balance in his favour. On the other hand, Nixon, who had just left the hospital due to a knee injury when the debate took place, had a sick image. He looked pale and tired in opposition to Kennedy's image. Furthermore, Nixon refused to wear makeup, while Kennedy accepted it, making him look more attractive for the audience. During the debate, Nixon seemed to sweat a lot more and did not make much eye contact with the audience or the camera, which made him seem to be uncomfortable in that environment. In contrast, Kennedy made eye-contact with the audience and the camera and was much more relaxed, giving him an image of strength and self-determination. It was due to all these details, that the audience who was following the debate on television thought Kennedy to be the clear winner of the debate, while those who listened to it on the radio thought just the opposite (Druckman, 2003).

- **Bush vs Clinton (1992)**

Another clear example of the importance of non-verbal communication in presidential debates is reflected in the second debate between George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, which took place in 1992. During this debate Clinton seemed to be the clear winner, not only due to his speech, but also due to the contrasting non-verbal behaviour he had in comparison with Bush.

During the debate, both candidates were asked about the national debt and, while answering the question, Clinton obtained a clear advantage over Bush. On the one hand, Clinton remained calm and made sure to show empathy towards the audience and towards those who were suffering because of the debt. Due to his non-verbal behaviour, Clinton was able to connect with the audience, shifting the momentum in his favor. He remained calm and firm, at the same time he addressed the audience by turning his body towards them. On the other hand, Bush showed a series of cues which made him look nervous and insecure while standing in front of the audience. After being asked, Bush revised his watch, which was interpreted as a sign of discomfort, suggesting that he was willing to leave the stage. Later, in the debate, when more questions continued to be asked, Bush let us see other cues of unease such as hiding his hand in his pocket, touching his own hands or avoiding eye-contact, which clearly showed signs of lack of confidence and restlessness (St. Sauveur, 2019).

- **Clinton vs. Trump (2016)**

Another famous presidential debate where non-verbal communication played a major role is the Hillary Clinton vs. Donald Trump debate, which took place in 2016. This debate was extremely interesting because it did not only show usual differences between candidates' non-verbal behaviours, but it is also a depiction of the different cues displayed in debates by candidates of different genders.

During the debate some significant differences were observed between both candidates (Wasike, 2019). While Clinton put more emphasis in engaging the audience and showing affinity, Trump remained more disconnected. Clinton was able to establish this empathy with the viewers thanks to cues such as smiling or maintaining more eye contact, behaviours which are usually related to women, as I have explained in previous sections. On the other hand, Trump showed a more menacing attitude, depicted by cues such as showing his lower teeth, not smiling or avoiding eye-contact with Clinton, but maintaining it with the audience, to make it clear that he was ignoring her. Regarding body posture, Clinton showed a more expansive posture than Trump, showing dominance and determination. While this expansive posture is not usually well seen when coming from women, who are expected to act in a more delicate

and tender manner, viewers did not punish Clinton for that but tilted the balance in her favour (Wasike, 2019).

One of the most remarkable moments during the Clinton vs. Trump debate is related to the physical proximity between candidates. Trump was harshly criticised because he was considered to be approaching Clinton too much while she was speaking, overcoming some of the limits set by society. After the debate, Hillary Clinton commented that “her skin crawled when she sensed Trump behind her, even calling him a creep for doing that” (Wasike, 2019). She was aware of the negative impact this had caused on the audience and took advantage of it even after the debate pulling off a masterstroke.

5. Non-verbal communication in Trump vs Harris

When dealing with the role of non-verbal communication during presidential debates, the way in which the media transmit candidates’ messages acquires great importance. In this section it will be conducted a study on the way in which the press constructs the image of candidates through the portrayal of their non-verbal cues.

The impact of the media to create the public image of politicians has been widely studied and some results have stated that “visual media can shape our view of the world and impact our emotions in profound ways” (Callaham, 2023). This statement can acquire particular importance in the field of presidential debates, due to the huge impact the opinion of the media can have on the audience, who mainly base their decisions on what they are shown (Van Remoortere & Walgrave, 2023).

In a study conducted by Hopmann et al. (2010) in which they analysed the path of eight parties during an election campaign, they found that the more television and press exposure a party receives, the more likely it is that the audience will vote in its favour (Van Remoortere & Walgrave, 2023). This phenomenon could be explained by the fact that it is more common for citizens to vote for those parties they are familiar with and from which they possess enough information to have the feeling that they know the candidates well (Van Remoortere & Walgrave, 2023).

However, the impact of the press does not always have to be positive. Candidates participating in a debate are perfectly aware of this and understand the importance of making a good impression and winning over not only the audience, but also the media. Van Remoortere and Walgrave (2023), based on the studies of Beigel (1973) and Richey et al. (1967), recalled the importance of making a good first impression since, if candidates make an unfavourable first impression when taking the podium, it will be much more difficult to reverse it. They also stated, following the studies of Anderson (1965) and Koenigs (1974), that "negative trait-

descriptions are more influential than comparable positive trait-descriptions", so candidates must keep their guard up throughout the debate. A single misstep and a bad image could haunt them for the rest of their careers.

For all these reasons, the role of the media is of great importance. After a debate, the press and audiovisual media will be responsible for relaying everything that happened to the public. At this point, body language will take on great importance, by exposing certain behaviours that may have gone unnoticed by those members of the audience who were following the debate in real time. Leading TV stations like CNN draw attention to certain attitudes, for instance by making declarations such as "despite weeks of preparation and practice with debate sparring partners, candidates often revert to nervous tics under the harsh glare of spotlights." (Abdullah, 2012), causing the public to be more attentive to those small clues which reveal candidates' nerves; or "voters tend to see aggressive debating tactics as bullying" (Abdullah, 2012), making these types of tactics more obvious and more likely to be criticised.

Closely linked to the importance of the press and media in general in political debates is the concept of *media framing* or in this case, *political framing* which "refers to the process by which politicians, campaign strategists, and media outlets shape public perception of issues, policies, and candidates" (Rajan & Murphy, 2025). We have previously discussed the power of the press to shape public opinion, however, it is also of great importance to highlight the fact that, on many occasions, this influence can be consciously carried out. Rajan and Murphy stated that "different media outlets often apply their own criteria when fact-checking, which can result in variations in how factual information is presented" (2025). This means that, on some occasions, the content offered by the media may have passed the ideological filter of the writer of the article or even of the newspaper itself. In this way, the press would be exercising a certain narrative control, becoming a means of tipping the balance in favour of one of the candidates (Rajan & Murphy, 2025). By acting as a bridge between the candidates and their voters, it is quite clear how much power the press wields when it comes to naming a winner after a presidential debate.

In the following subsections of this thesis, all the previously mentioned information will be illustrated through the analysis of two specific candidates, Donald Trump and Kamala Harris. I will start by portraying the way in which the media perceived their non-verbal behaviour individually and how they portrayed it (5.1.). And then, in the last section of the thesis (5.2.) I will conduct an in-depth analysis of the non-verbal language both, Trump and Harris, shown during the 2024 debate.

5.1. Trump and Harris's communicative styles in the media

Through this section I will focus on the comments some of the most important newspapers had made along the years about Donal Trump and Kamala Harris's non-verbal language, to later focus on their non-verbal language during the debate of September 2024. The newspapers I have selected for this section are The New York Times, The Guardian, The Washington Post and The Associated Press. After having read multiple articles in which body language was mentioned I selected those in which non-verbal communication played a more important role, and also through which the difference between gender could be spotted.

The key role of non-verbal communication in political debates is now undeniable, and candidates are perfectly aware of this. The way they present themselves and the image they want to portray become more and more important than their spoken messages. Therefore, they surround themselves with expert advisors to help them project an image of sincerity and concern, especially when this is not the case (Pease & Pease, 2006). If we pay attention, we can decipher certain patterns in politicians' behaviour during debates, as if they were performing a pre-established choreography. Pease & Pease, from the New York Times, highlighted the fact that multiple presidents always used their hands to represent the size of a problem: "France's President Chirac, U.S.A.'s President Ronald Reagan, and Australia's Prime Minister Bob Hawke all used their hands to reveal the relative sizes of issues in their mind" (2006). Details like these are what the media focuses on when describing a candidate's non-verbal style. Through the examples of Donald Trump and Kamala Harris, it will be shown the different aspects the press chooses to portray and how to transmit them to the audience.

A) Donal Trump's non-verbal communication in the media

Starting with Donald Trump's case, we find a figure whose non-verbal behaviour is characterised by dominant and wide gestures, an imposing use of the space, and the use of many exaggerated facial expressions. These aspects make his behaviour worthy of closer examination, due to its generally overstated nature.

As a result, many comments of his non-verbal language have been made in the press. Collet, from The Guardian, highlighted Trump's use of a slow, carefree gait to captivate the audience and create a dominant image of power over his opponents, Hillary Clinton in this case: "His entry into the debating hall was ponderously slow – noticeably slower than Hillary Clinton's. Psychologists have discovered that people who move and speak slowly are generally seen as bigger, more substantial and more powerful" (2016).

Trump tries to maintain the same authoritarian image he brings to the stage during the entire debate. His limited use of smiles has also been highlighted, which, as we saw in previous sections, is often avoided by men during debates, as they typically prefer to display other types

of emotions more closely related to power and strength, rather than emotions like joy, which can be associated with weakness (Druckman, 2003). Thus, the already mentioned reporter from The Guardian highlighted:

Trump's facial demeanour was almost the exact opposite of Clinton's. He hardly produced any smiles at all – just the occasional wry half-smile of self-congratulation when he thought he'd notched up another point in his favour. That's because smiling is basically an appeasement signal, and the last thing that Trump wanted to do is appease anyone in public, least of all Clinton. (Collect, 2016)

Collet was not the only one to notice this detail. Uhrmacher and Gamio (2016), reporters from The Washington Post, also mentioned the way Trump reflected feelings of anger and authority to win over the audience: "For Trump, anger helps establish dominance and has a strong appeal, especially for disaffected voters (...) Americans are often drawn to the candidate who appears stronger" (Uhrmacher & Gamio, 2016).

Trump also resorts to other cues typically used by men. He maintains a spread posture to denote dominance and uses dominant hand gestures, which are often seen as attractive behaviour for his gender (Druckman, 2003). Thus, some reporters wanted to dedicate a few lines in their articles to draw attention to these behaviours. The Washington Post used Trump's debate against Clinton as an illustration to highlight that "Trump repeatedly pointed at Clinton as he lobbed accusations at her, a gesture Givens called 'aggressive in all cultures.' He also compared Trump's snorts with 'a bull in attack mode'" (Uhrmacher & Gamio, 2016). Furthermore, Collet also highlighted other cues typically displayed by Trump such as "the narrowed eyes, the lips clamped tightly together and the occasional jut of the chin" (2016). He called all those cues *macho signals*, and explained that they are behaviours usually displayed by those who are comfortable exercising power and dominance over others. Other behaviours Trump showed during the debate against Clinton that Collet commented on are: "Trump jabbed his index finger accusingly at Clinton" (2016) or "There were also occasions when Trump came in for criticism, and where he reacted by licking or pursing his lips" (2016), highlighting that this last cues could denote Trump's discomfort with his opponent's words.

B) Kamala Harris's non-verbal communication in the media

Trump's non-verbal communication is more emphasised when comparing it to Kamala Harris's cues. Her style is characterised for being more tender and familiar, while maintaining her confident and active attitude. As a woman, she is expected to communicate a wider range of emotions (Druckman, 2003), and she makes good use of such expectations. Kamala has called the attention of different newspapers due to her expressive gestures and faces. One of the most

commented examples of her non-verbal behaviour took place during the debate on September 11, 2024, against Donald Trump. The screen was divided in two during all the debate, which allowed the audience to closely monitor the non-verbal behaviour of both candidates not only while they were talking, but also while their opponent talked. Thanks to this split screen, the press was able to draw a fairly clear comparison between the non-verbal language of one candidate and the other.

Reporters from The Washington Post dedicated an article to the topic, in which they drew a fairly clear comparison between the non-verbal cues Trump used versus that of Kamala. They highlighted the fact that Harris turned towards Trump to directly address him, while he remained looking ahead during the entire debate. Or even the fact that she displayed many more expressive faces than her opponent, such as wide smiles and laughs, nosing her head, squinting or frowning at him, etc. While Trump remained expressionless and displayed disapproving facial cues (McDaniel & Stevenson, 2024).

The power of her facial expressions reached such importance that The Guardian wrote: “‘He’s the former reality television star, but she clearly understood the power of the medium,’” wrote the New York Times. ‘Her expression was her rebuttal’” (Addley, 2025). Many newspapers drew attention to Kamala’s remarks with headlines such as: “Scoffs, smiles, squints: how Kamala Harris’s face spoke volumes in Trump debate” (Addley, 2025) from the Guardian, “For Harris and Trump, facial expressions did much of the talking during presidential debate” from The Associated Press (2024), or “In Debate With Trump, Harris’s Expressions Were a Weapon” from The New York Times (2024).

When analysing Harris’s non-verbal communication in comparison with her opponent’s we should bear in mind that they are not only two completely different candidates, but they also belong to two opposite genders. In this regard, it has been suggested that women are able to spot more non-verbal cues than men and decode the meaning hidden behind them (Pease & Pease, 2006). The New York Times wrote about this phenomenon, stating that women are able to spot more contradictions between someone’s words and their non-verbal communication, by using a very widespread term *women’s intuition* (Pease & Pease, 2006). The reporter continued saying that women are naturally more skilled at reading the no-verbal language of others: “women have between fourteen and sixteen areas of the brain to evaluate others’ behavior versus a man’s four to six areas” (Pease & Pease, 2006).

In this way, Harris was not only able to read beyond Trump’s expressions, but she also used her body to catch the audience’s attention and to make them believe that her opponent’s statements may not always be correct. The Associated Press (2024) wrote: “At various points

she looked amused or befuddled by whatever Trump was saying, as if wordlessly saying he was lying”. She basically uses kinesics and oculesics to convey different messages. Many newspapers had listed her expressions to draw attention to Kamala's ability to convey numerous emotions in relatively short periods of time. Addley (2025), from The Guardian, wrote about many of these cues such as the “shake of the head”, her “skeptical slow-blinking squint through heavy lashes”, her “amused scoff” or her “leaning back and squinting with one hand on her chin” for example.

However, her transparency and her use of non-verbal language has caused mixed reactions from the audience. Some have praised her ability to transmit through her body language, while others have criticised her attitude as exaggerated and lacking in truth and seriousness. The Guardian commented that for Republicans, Harris’s behaviour turned out to be a “pantomimic and inauthentic” (Addley, 2025) performance. But they also highlighted some positive comments such as Stephen King’s tweet saying “He got more time than she did... but she didn’t need more time. Her face said it all” (Addley, 2025) or even the reporter’s own perception “Kamala Harris’s face kept saying, ‘Go ahead, Donald, have your tantrum, and then the adults will speak’” (Addley, 2025).

All things considered, we can state that the importance the press gives to non-verbal communication in presidential debates is enough to dedicate entire articles to commenting solely and exclusively on candidates’ non-verbal cues. Through their comments and opinions, newspapers shape the public’s opinion, significantly influencing how they view politicians. Presidential candidates are perfectly aware of the power of their body language and the press, which is why they use debates as a showcase to project an image they believe will seduce the audience, swaying them in their favor. In the next section of this paper, I will thoroughly analyse the nonverbal language of Kamala Harris and Donald Trump during the debate that took place on September 11, 2024, and the meaning or image they managed to convey with it.

5.2. Trump vs Harris 2024: An in-depth analysis of non-verbal communication

Through this final section of the dissertation I will undertake an in-depth analysis of the non-verbal language of Donald Trump and Kamala Harris during the debate that took place on September 11, 2024. In this part, I will study the non-verbal communication of both candidates by selecting different clips from the debate. I will then conduct a general analysis of their body language, following the different categories into which it can be classified, following Mark Knapp’s (1972) approach, studied in section 2.2. Finally, I will close the section with a brief summary of the conclusions drawn from the analysis of their non-verbal communication: what

they intended to convey, how we could interpret their cues, what possible role the gender of both candidates may have played, etc.

I will start by analysing different moments during the debate in which non-verbal language acquired great significance. I will analyse six different excerpts of the debate, where I will try to explain the meaning that the candidates may have tried to convey.

- **Excerpt 1: Entrance on the stage**

The first clip that I am going to analyse coincides with the moment in which both candidates enter the stage:



Clip 1

Through this short excerpt, we can begin to get an idea of how the debate will unfold over the next hour and a half. We can see how Kamala Harris is the first one to get to the midpoint between both lecterns. At this point she seems to make a small pause, as if she were going to wait for her opponent to come closer to greet him. However, she ends up picking up the pace and heading to Donald Trump's podium, which seems to catch him by surprise. Once she arrives where Trump is, Kamala extends her right hand to her opponent. Both candidates exchange a brief handshake and then she heads to her place.

This gesture acquires great relevance when we get to know that Trump has avoided greeting his opponents in multiple debates. He did not share a handshake with Biden in the debate that took place on June 27, 2024; and neither did he shake hands with Hillary Clinton in the debate which was held on October 9, 2016. Harris may have expected the same to happen with her when realising the slow pace of her rival, so she decides to confront the problem directly and take control of the situation.

Through this moment Kamala makes clear that she intends to be an active opponent who will not remain seated while Trump displays attitudes that could be interpreted as dominant or disrespectful. A few seconds later, the mediators greet both opponents. Trump answers with a

soft smile, with both lips closed, and avoids seeming excessively expressive. On the other hand, Kamala shows a broad smile, showing all her teeth and even squinting her eyes. From the very beginning they both make clear what is the attitude that is going to characterise them throughout the debate. Trump will seem cold, serious and even aggressive at some point; while Kamala will interpret an active role, while remaining familiar and expressive.

- **Excerpt 2: Harris’s reaction to Trump’s statement: “she is a Marxist”**

The next excerpt I will be analysing has caught the attention of many newspapers like The Washington Post and has been widely commented. At this point, Trump is accusing Kamala of having changed the ideology she defended three years ago and now adopting Trump’s philosophy. He finally ends-up saying “she is a Marxist, everybody knows she is a Marxist, her father is a Marxist professor in economics, and he taught her well” (ABC News, 2024).

Clips 2 and 3 reflect the reaction of Harris to Trump’s first accusation, about her changing her mind repeatedly. It can be clearly appreciated how Trump continues to speak without changing his appearance. He speaks continuously, with a very serious face and moving only his right hand in order to emphasise his statements. On the opposite side, we have a really expressive Kamala, who does not try to hide her reactions. The same happens in the fourth clip, in which Harris openly reacts to Trump calling her a Marxist.



Clip 2

Clip 3



Clip 4

If we analyse Kamala’s body language in-depth we will find many different cues in very short periods of time. In clip 2 we can see Harris moving her head from one side to another, articulating “that’s not true” with her mouth, as the same time she raises her right hand. Through this behaviour she is trying to deny Trump’s words and to show that she openly disagrees with what he is saying. She ends up looking down, while she continues to shake her head and tighten her lips. Harris knows that it is not her turn to rebut what her opponent has just said, but no words are needed, she makes it all clear through her face.

In the third clip we see how at the beginning, her face denotes an attentive attitude. Harris is listening to Trump with open nostrils, furrowed brows and half-closed eyes. This expression is usually associated with paying attention, and in this case we see how she is interested in what her opponent is going to say next. After listening to what Trump had to say, Kamala openly laughs at him, showing all her teeth and even squinting her eyes. With that gesture Harris seemed to be trying to portray Trump as an unreliable source, whose statements are almost ridiculous from time to time.

Later on, after Trump called her a Marxist, she nodded while showing her teeth in an open smile, with her eyes widely open and her brows raised. With that facial expression she is showing surprise to what her opponent has just called her but also showing interest on what he may be going to say next. This second meaning seems to be a little overacted due to her next pose, portrayed in clip 4. She softly lowers her chin holding it with her right hand, she squints her eyes and furrows her brows, while she keeps her mouth tense and half-opened. This position conveys that she is listening attentively, while her mouth and eyes denote that she disagrees with Trump’s words, even finding them funny.

- **Excerpt 3: Trump’s reactions to Harris’s speech**

The third moment of the debate I will be analysing focuses on Trump’s reactions to Harris’s words:



Clip 5



Clip 6



Clip 7

Through these short clips we can see a clear contrast between Harris and Trump. He seems to be the opposite regarding non-verbal communication. Trump is presented as an expressionless person, he barely reacts to Kamala's words, and we have to be really attentive if we want to catch some of his facial cues.

In clip number 5 we can highlight the gesture he makes with his mouth, and which he repeats multiple times throughout the entire debate. He moistens his lips with his tongue while Harris speaks, letting us glimpse his lower teeth. This gesture could be decoded as a signal of disdain or threat, clearly not a friendly expression. Through the sixth clip another unfriendly expression is reflected. Trump raises his brows and opens his eyes looking to the top right corner. This expression is usually associated with boredom. Through it Trump may seem to be discrediting Harris's words. This could be reinforced by what is shown in the seventh clip, where we can see how Trump brings his lips together as if he were going to give a kiss, which can be a sign for introspection, and remains looking straight even though Harris has turned her body to directly address him. Through his position, Trump gives the impression of ignoring what she has to say.

- **Excerpt 4: Harris's reaction to Trump's "they are eating the dogs"**

The fourth excerpt from the debate I will be analysing has also been widely commented by the press. This moment of the debate went viral due to Trump's statement (referring to the immigrant population): "they are eating the dogs, the people that came in, they are eating the cats, they are eating the pets of the people that live there" (ABC News, 2024).



Clip 8

In light of this statement Kamala Harris reacts with a loud laugh while she seems to gesticulate “oh come on” with her mouth. Through her laugh, the articulation of her lips, and her squinted eyes we get to know that she cannot believe what her opponent has just stated. After having laughed openly, she tries to regain composure and pay attention to what Trump is saying. This time, she is listening to him with her chin slightly raised, squinted eyes, the frown with a mocking expression, and her lips still showing a soft smile. She seems to be denoting that she is waiting for her opponent to say another thing which may result in laughs. She finally ends up tilting the chin downwards, bringing the eyebrows together and opening the eyes, cues that are usually decoded as a posture of sadness or of expressing compassion. In this regard, she may be infantilizing her opponent, making him seem an unreliable person.

- **Excerpt 5: Trump asking Harris to be silent**

To continue with the analysis, I will now focus on one of the moments of greatest tension, when Trump asks Harris to be quiet and let him continue speaking.



Clip 9

At this point of the debate Trump makes a statement that provokes the reaction of Harris: “She was big on defund the police” (ABC News, 2024). When pronouncing that statement, Kamala seems to try to rebut what he has just said, while shaking her head and laughing, looking towards him and then down again, as in an attempt to contain the laughter. It is at that moment that Trump responds: “wait a minute, I’m talking now, if you don’t mind please, does that sound familiar?” (ABC News, 2024). After hearing his words Kamala starts shaking her head, while laughing and lifting her gaze towards him, with her eyes widely opened and her brows raised, denoting a big surprise. We can see her surprise in her frozen expression, as if it took her a few seconds to process what had just happened. She maintains her brows raised and her eyes open, while she seems to produce a tense smile showing all her teeth, at the same time she raises her right hand. Harris seems to want to add something, but after seeing Trump’s reaction (he stops talking again and directs his eyes towards where she is, even without turning his head or torso), she decides to remain silent and looks down again, without stopping shaking her head and tightening her mouth as a sign of restraint.

Kamala raises her head again, just to pay attention to what her opponent continues saying, but we can still find some cues denoting surprise in her face such as her quick blinking, her brows moderately raised or her tense mouth. That response struck Harris unexpectedly, since it was the first time during the debate that Trump directly addressed her while talking. Trump’s attitude could be interpreted as a powerful behaviour, similar to what we see between parents and children when they are being scolded; but it could also be interpreted as an arrogant and disrespectful attitude towards his opponent who, through her facial cues, clearly shows that she cannot believe what just happened.

- **Excerpt 6: Trump’s reaction to Harris’s attack**

Finally, the last excerpt I am going to comment on deals with Trump’s reaction to Harris’s words, when commenting on his weakness regarding national security.



Clip 10

Clip 11

When Kamala says “Donald Trump is weak and wrong on national security” (ABC News, 2024), Trump expresses his disagreement through his body language (Clip 10). He

expels air abruptly through the mouth while smiling and tilting the head to the right. When he turns his head back to the front, Trump looks down with his eyes closed and his eyebrows raised, his lips together forming a half-smile and shaking his head. This gesture may suggest that Harris's statements seem really absurd to him, even making him laugh. Him looking down while raising the eyebrows and shaking his head could indicate that Trump completely disagrees and that he even finds what Kamala is saying somewhat embarrassing.

We can see that after letting out a sort of snort and lightly laughing at what his opponent says, Trump resumes his serious demeanor. Clip 11 makes it clear that Trump is still not looking at her at any moment, even when she is directly addressing him with her body turned towards him. The fact that he ignores her in that way may be intentional in order to discredit her and diminish the seriousness of her words. This tactic reminds us again of those used by parents when they do not want to listen to what their children are saying, and it may be somewhat infantilizing her.

To continue with this analysis, and after having focused on specific moments of the debate, I will now analyse the non-verbal communication that characterises each candidate following the classification established by Mark Knapp (1972). According to Knapp we can classify non-verbal communication into 8 different categories: kinesics, proxemics, haptics, paralinguistics, oculosics, chronemics, physical appearance, and environmental factors. Through this section we will see how these aspects influenced the performance of both candidates, favoring them at times, but also working against them at others.

Starting with kinesics, it is easily noted that Harris expresses many more emotions through her face and gestures than Trump. She denotes surprise by raising the brows and opening the eyes, she shows open laughter leaving all teeth visible, or frowns and squints her eyes showing that she is paying attention to what her opponent says. She also uses both hands when talking, moving them up and down or sideways, occasionally even using them to point. On the other hand, we find an expressionless Trump, who offers a cold and serious expression, from which it is difficult to interpret any emotion. From time to time, when his opponent is talking, he raises his eyebrows and opens his eyes to show boredom or disagreement. He tends to lick his lips, revealing his lower teeth, and he almost always uses his right hand while speaking. If anything is clear in both candidates' use of their nonverbal language, it is that Kamala is much more direct and transparent when it comes to showing her emotions, while Trump opts for a more serious and expressionless attitude.

Regarding proxemics, both candidates are conditioned since they have to remain behind their lectern during the debate. However, we can highlight some aspects such as the fact that

Harris does turn her body towards Trump when addressing him, making it more clear that her statements are directly addressed to him. On the other hand, Trump does not turn his torso towards Kamala at any time, even when asking her to remain silent, he addresses her looking ahead. His behaviour makes clear how little importance he attaches to the fact that Harris is located at the next lectern, he focuses on his own words and aspect.

Continuing with their use of para-linguistic cues we could state that they are again somehow limited by the time they are given to speak, which makes them usually speak at a brisk speed, so they are able to explain anything they deem necessary or important. Both candidates raise their voices when they want to emphasise what they're saying, or even when directly attacking the other's party. They also use short pauses before or just after saying something important, to capture the audience's attention and keep them engaged.

Concerning oculosics we can again see a clear difference between both candidates. Harris usually uses her eyes to convey different emotions. She squints them when she is paying attention and reflecting about what is being said, she opens them when she feels surprise towards a statement, and she uses them to turn her gaze towards Trump when directly addressing him. On the other hand, Trump makes much less use of his gaze. Most of the times when Kamala takes the floor he remains with his eyes half-closed looking ahead as if he were introspecting, but not listening to his opponent. When he uses his eyes it is to denote expressions such as boredom or disagreement, so he raises his gaze to the upper right side, before lowering it back to his lectern and back to the front. One of the moments where his gaze stands out the most is when he asks Kamala to remain silent so he can finish speaking. At that point, Trump directs his eyes towards her, but keeps his head and body facing forward, so he does not make direct eye contact with Harris.

With regard to physical appearance both candidates are dressed in a formal and elegant manner. Harris wears a dark suit with a white shirt, which gives her seriousness and credibility. In addition, she wears discrete jewels and a pin representing the flag of the United States, making her seem as a patriot and a candidate who deeply loves her country. She is perfectly well made up and with her hair styled in an elegant and natural way. On the other hand, Trump wears a lighter blue suit, with a red tie and a white shirt. He wears the colour of the party and the flag, he also wears the pin on the left side of his chest, just like Harris, that is, both candidates wear the flag over the heart. He also seems to be wearing some makeup and his hair is combed naturally. Both present a respectable image that gives them credibility, making it easier for the audience to listen and trust what they say.

Regarding haptics and chronemics there is not much to say, except that, due to the norms of the debate, they are not allowed to be touching each other and they are obliged to respect the time they are given to talk.

Finally, to close this part of the analysis I will mention some important aspects of the last category, the environmental factors. In this regard, we can highlight details such as the appearance of the flag's colours in the ribbon at the bottom of the screen. Furthermore, the background in front of which the candidates speak is a neutral navy blue that is not meant to draw attention. The rest of the set is empty; it is a debate attended by no audience, so the spotlights fall solely on the candidates. The stage is set up so that the eyes are unconsciously drawn to the candidates, avoiding any distractions.

To summarise the different aspects analysed in this section, we can conclude that both candidates present very spotable differences in their non-verbal language. While Kamala Harris uses a much clearer expression, in which we can decipher her emotions through her body; Donald Trump has a more serious and cold demeanour, through which it is difficult to discern any type of emotion. This corresponds quite well with what is usually seen as appropriate for each gender. As we have seen in previous sections, women are generally expected to be much more expressive, in addition to having a broader range of emotions (Druckman, 2003). Men are generally preferred to show less expression and emotions related to anger or dominant attitudes (Druckman, 2003). Both candidates seem to be aware of this and make the most of the tools they have, becoming a clear example of the power that non-verbal communication can achieve in the context of political debates.

6. Conclusions

After the debate took place, the media flooded social network with comments about who had won the debate. Many thought Harris was the clear winner of the debate. She managed to remain calm and make Trump look ridiculous on many occasions, due to her responses to his attacks. The Spanish national television (RTVE) published an article after the debate talking about this, in which they commented on a survey published by CNN: “among voters who watched the debate, 63% of the 605 participants said that Harris has a better intervention in the debate, compared to 37% who opined that Trump was the best of the two” (RTVE.es, 2024).

What these percentages show is that the non-verbal communicative style of both candidates played a key role on the audience’s views. Trump tried to use his characteristic *macho signals* to proclaim himself the winner, but this only made him look like a prey that Harris was about to hunt. He performed in a very defensive manner, which helped Harris to be seen as being in control and keeping calm, typical characteristics of what RTVE called a “commander in chief” (RTVE.es, 2024).

Even though the final result of the elections contrasted with the result of the debate, it was proved before everyone’s eyes that non-verbal communication has great importance in presidential debates. In many occasions, this war of words acts as a stage on which candidates must demonstrate their skills for the presidency of the US. Therefore, a calm and confident attitude will prevail over a nervous and defensive one. Despite Harris being the clear winner of the debate “the history of the elections in the United States indicates that candidates who triumph face-to-face do not always win the elections” (RTVE.es, 20024).

After having studied this topic, it is time to resume the objectives stated in the first section of the thesis. From the very beginning I wanted to understand the different categories and functions in which we could classify non-verbal communication. This objective has been achieved through the study of the theories of Mark Knapp (1972) and Paul Ekman (1976). Knapp provided 8 different categories in which we could classify the different cues of non-verbal communication, with their respective subcategories. For his part, Ekman presented 6 different scenerios in which non-verbal communication could acquire different meanings standing out for its importance.

The next objective was to know the weight non-verbal language could have on presidential debates and if politicians make use of this tool to sway the audience in their favour. Even though it may be difficult to determine with complete accuracy how much weight non-verbal communication has in debates when it comes to influencing the audience, we can state

with absolute certainty that it is of great importance. Through the review of different important debates along the history of the US, it has been proved that the audience do pay attention to things such as body posture, the use of the hands and the face to convey meanings and even to the way candidates dress. Furthermore, we have discovered that there are certain social constraints regarding the gender of the candidates. While women are expected to perform a friendly while self-confident attitude by the audience, men are preferred to remain emotionless and strong. These differences among genders were perfectly portrayed in the debate between Kamala Harris and Donald Trump. Both candidates were aware of how the audience expected their non-verbal behaviour to be and furthermore, they are usually advised by a specialised team. Trump remained expressionless and indifferent to Harris's words, while Harris chose a more familiar attitude, but showing at the same time that she was there to fight for her party.

Moreover, the importance of non-verbal communication in presidential debates was reinforced by the media. The topic acquires such importance in these contexts that prestigious newspapers such as The New York Times or The Washington Post dedicate entire articles to commenting on the candidate's non-verbal language.

However, I have also found some limitations in the study of non-verbal communication. The first one appeared when I discovered that it is not possible to associate a particular meaning to the same cue in every context. Factors such as culture, age, gender or context may influence the decoding process of a particular behaviour, giving it different meanings in each case. Therefore, establishing an exact correspondence between behaviour and meaning is very difficult, if not impossible.

Another limitation I encountered was to describe how does non-verbal communication influence on the opinion of the audience in presidential debates. It is easy to say, that it plays an important role on shaping the public's opinion, but it is really difficult to determine how it may affect each member of the public. Here factors such as culture, gender, or context come into play again. The same cue can be interpreted as positive by a percentage of the audience and as negative by the other. A clear example of this was seen through the figure of Kamala Harris; while some praised her behaviour and considered her the winner of the debate, others criticised her for having overacted.

For future studies it would be interesting to carry out an analysis taking into account more than one debate, so the different results could be contrasted, resulting in more reliable hypotheses. It would also be interesting to analyse the impact that the candidates's non-verbal language has on different members of the audience, and why those cues that are so attractive to some, have the opposite effect on others. Furthermore, a study concerning the way in which

politicians are taught how to use their non-verbal communication as a tool to engage the audience could also provide really useful information.

It is important to continue with the study of the influence of non-verbal communication, not only in the context of presidential debates, but also in everyday life. Non-verbal language has a huge weight in our interpretation of different messages, and most of the time we are not aware of its effects. Politicians make use of this and try to use their body language to convince us of their worth as future presidents. If we knew more about this topic, it would be easier to us to spot fallacies or traps set to make us fall into their nets. Moreover, understanding how our brain works and how it can interpret different cues may be useful for other contexts. It could be helpful in educational context, since if we get to know which cues help to reinforce our message and make it clearer it would be easier for students to understand the meaning of what they are being taught. It would also be helpful in marketing, so salespeople could understand what image and behaviours make them look more attractive to increase their sales. Along with these, many other sectors would benefit from understanding more about non-verbal communication, making it a useful tool that could facilitate everyday interactions.

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