

Kim VS Trump: A Hair Style Duet

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Abstract

When Donald Trump joined the international media circus of politics, first as the Republican candidate and then as the President of the US, his original hair style stirred a widespread curiosity. Then Trump appeared side by side with the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un, also the bearer of a very different yet equally unconventional hairdo. The pair formed such a suggestive diptych that I thought the powers of semiotic analysis should be summoned to inquire on that rare and relevant juxtaposition. The present article summarises the outcomes of that analysis. The conclusion suggests that Trump's hair represents a kind of 'autism in self-presentation', while in Kim's case the separation extends to his culture as a whole. In conclusion, the combined consequences of these characteristics of the two personalities lead to the hypothesis that the dialogue they have undertaken may remain less a true substantial confrontation than a mere display of contact.

Keywords: Semiotics; Donald Trump; Kim Jong-un; Phatic Communication; Semiotics of Fashion.

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A Transcultural Analysis

North Korean culture has deep roots in Eastern Asia history but has been strictly separated for about 60 years from the two communist countries which (in different degrees, ways and times) inspired its founder, that is, USSR and China, and completely shut to South Korea, against which fought a war. Isolated from the rest of the world, North Korea developed a political and social model that, today, is the only effective system cut off the global market of goods and media.¹ This represents a crucial point when we try to analyse North Korean mass culture, or (in Umberto Eco's terms), its encyclopaedia.² Since meanings are a function (among other variables) of the different cultural systems, if you can't reconstruct a given cultural system, you can't reconstruct correctly its universe of meanings. It is the main problem in *transcultural analysis of texts*. The problem is difficult to tackle because to reconstruct a whole cultural system implies to assume also its subjective values, its points of view on the various issues. And this is even more important when we deal with not totally rational instances as aesthetic values, tastes and prejudices.

Among the most culture-sensitive are, thus, aesthetic meanings, or values. Among many possible examples, we may cite that even today, though complains about cultural globalisation are quite common, the canons of feminine and masculine beauty are still different in Europe, Asia and Africa. Not to mention the tastes about food and drink. Thus, I will try to keep my interpretive hypotheses about Kim's public image perception in North Korea within the limits of what is semiotically highly probable. We will feel more at ease when considering Kim's comprehension in Western culture and media. The analysis was conducted on a series of visual and verbal texts that are listed also as web links in the Sample Texts section at the end of the article, so as to allow the reader to compare her/his own judgment to the author's.

Garments as Signs: Roland Barthes and the Semiotics of Clothing

Roland Barthes was the first to propose the application of linguistic categories to clothing, elaborating some observations by Nikolaj Trubetskoj and framing them in Saussure's theory of sign.³ According to Barthes, *dress* is the system of norms that prescribe, prohibit, recommend or disapprove manners, types and characteristics of clothing. In language, it corresponds to *langue*. *Dress* is a part of the system of social norms and rules. *Dressing* consists of the individual clothing behaviours adopted by people. Some aspects of clothing necessarily belong to dressing, like individual features, or the fact that a person is sloppy, or a man's habit of rolling up the sleeves of his shirt. Now let us start from the first point: how is the hairdo of the American President actually done?

First Level: Expression

How Donald Trump Really Does His Hair

The best verbal description I could find of Trump's hairdo has been given by a professional hairstylist:

To me, it looks like a case of the classic old 'double combover'. [...] Donald's daily hair styling routine involves some rigorous back combing, followed by teasing hair from the left of his head over to the right side - then, teasing sections from the back over the front, finishing off with an Ozone-busting fix of industrial strength hairspray.⁴

1. The isolation of North Korea, of course, is not that of Australia before James Cook's journey. There has always been some trade with USSR, China and even Western countries. However, the mass media isolation of North Korean people is as total as it can be enforced by a government in today's world.
2. Umberto Eco, *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 46 ff.
3. Nikolaj Trubetskoj, *Principes de phonologie* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1949), translated as *Principles of Phonology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) and quoted in Roland Barthes, *The Language of Fashion* (London-New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 9.
4. Max Page, "Donald Trump Hair Mystery — Combover, Toupee, Transplant, Follicle Faux Pas?," *Popdust*, (September 19, 2014), <https://www.popdust.com/donald-trump-hair-mysterycombover-toupee-transplant-follicle-faux-pas-1890068207.html>, (accessed August 8, 2017).

Here is a very rough scheme that tries to show the different steps and directions of the combing:

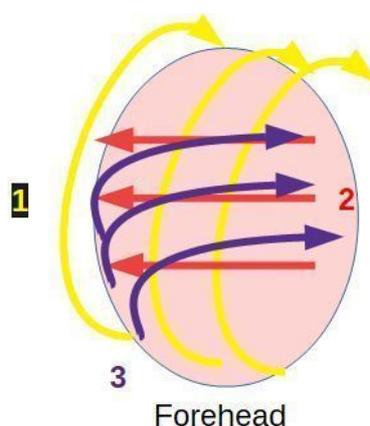


Figure 1

In short, we have three technical steps: combing, teasing and hair spraying. A procedure one can perform by himself, without the help of a hairdresser, and this point can be relevant to our analysis. That's all, as far as the expressive level of the text is concerned.

Changes and Structure of Kim's Hairstyle

The hairstyle of Kim Jong-Un is easier to decode but it has been changed many more times, though it has always kept a basic structural coherence. Here are some links that make it quite clear:

<https://kotaku.com/kim-jong-un-a-haircut-odyssey-1686943142> (Sample Texts, *Kim Jong-Un*, Ashcraft 2015); <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-45480216> (Sample Texts, *Kim Jong-Un*, BBC 2018); <https://www.euronews.com/2019/01/19/trump-and-kim-to-meet-for-second-summit-in-february> (Sample Texts, *Kim Jong-Un*, Tidey 2018).

The Origin of Kim Dynastic Costume

While Trump does his hair in a peculiar way, yet his dressing style is the business suit, and we all know the meanings (and some history) of this garment. Trump has just another peculiarity, which is not all visible: the necktie. It is kept very long, well beyond the belt, such as to cover his crotch when he's sitting. And he has the inexplicable habit of taping the skinny end of his tie to the wide one.⁵ These details will not be examined in this article.

Kim Jong-Un, instead, wears a particular suit, usually called the Mao suit, whose history and meanings are probably not so familiar to western readers. It all began in Russia, during the First World War. The Russians were somehow impressed by the uniforms of British officers, first of all Field Marshal John French, Commander-in-Chief of the British Expeditionary Force. He wore a simple and practical jacket with four large visible pockets, in light brown or field grey colours. They called this kind of military jacket French tunic. Among the first top leaders to adopt this uniform was Alexander Kerensky, the first chief of government of the Russian Republic. Lenin also had one in his wardrobe though he is usually portrayed in dark jacket, tie and waistcoat. But it was Stalin who made this tunic famous in the 1940s, so much so that its Russian nickname became *Stalinka*.⁶ It was quite natural, then, for Asian revolutionary leaders to adopt it.

5. See Scott Christian, "Donald Trump's Tie Taping Has Officially Gone Too Far," *Esquire* (March 7, 2017), <http://www.esquire.com/style/mens-fashion/news/a33689/donald-trump-tie-tape-scotch-tape/> (and especially the accompanying images).

6. See <https://namednibook.ru/stalinka.html>. As a typical Stalin portrait wearing the French tunic see: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=20072676>.

However, there is another possible origin for the Chinese version. Actually, the Chinese name (Zhōngshān zhuāng) means “Zhōngshān tunic,” from one of Sun Yat-sen’s names. And Sun became the first president of the Republic of China in 1912, before the Russians could meet John French. When Sun Yat-sen died in 1926, his protégé Chank Kai-shek continued the tradition, and Mao with and after him.



Figure 2: In this picture, taken in 1945, both Chiang Kai-shek and Mao Zedong wear the tunic⁷

It was Mao, however, that made this garment a symbol of communist China, by imposing it as the official Chinese costume for men and (this was really revolutionary) for women as well. Thus, we can say that both Stalin and Mao (whether from a unique inspiration or two independent ones) contributed to make the French tunic the uniform of communist leaders, but it was Mao Zedong who established it as the Asian communist suit. Kim Il-sung, the founder of the Korean communist dynasty, adopted the Mao suit model, usually with a darker shade of colour, declaring by this slight difference a distance between the two neighbours that has always been maintained. His son and grandson, Kim Jong-Il and Kim Jong-Un respected the tradition. Jong-un, in his turn, introduced a striped dark grey fabric that has become a standard for civil North Korean élite. More than a distance from the grandfather, who is a kind of divinity, Jong-Un probably wants to introduce a mark of innovation, as we will see in other fields.

Second Level: Content

Phatic Communion: What We Do When We Do Nothing (In Public)

What does Trump hairstyle mean? In semiotic terms, what can we say about the semantic — or content — level? In order to answer this question we need a some premises.

A hairdo is part of an individual’s public image, and is governed by the socio-cultural norms of self-presentation, while it is open to free personal variations. As to those norms, individuals are usually unaware of how they learned the basic rules of social life: the acquisition is mainly uncritical. Most of the norms have no other use besides organising our public appearance so as to be consistent with our body, the social system and the average circumstances in which we are involved. Just as there is a

7. By 傑克威克爾斯 - <http://hottopic.chinatimes.com/20151230002764-260812>, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=59320694>

grammar of spoken language, there is a grammar of social interaction.⁸ Of course speech is used in self-presentation behaviour, beyond the display of our body and other external objects like a car or jewels or clothes. Language, however, is a unique and particular tool. For instance, the use of verbal language can start only once an interaction is recognised by at least two parts, while personal image is a message in a certain way that is “always on,” it is shown to everybody in a public space.⁹ No conversation is actually started before a mutual examination by the participants. A neat and well-groomed lady may of course interact with a dirty and scrubby homeless person in the street, but both cannot ignore the social divide they are breaking.

The first function of the complex textual elements making up the public image is *phatic*, namely to show how the person relates to the norms of that particular culture and situation. The notion of “phatic communion” was first developed by Bronisław Malinowski¹⁰ then resumed and introduced in linguistics and semiotics by Roman Jakobson.¹¹ As I try to explain somewhere else¹², social semiotics can find Malinowski’s theory more useful than Jakobson’s. Malinowski sees phatic communication as a basic, though very common, function of human culture, while Jakobson seems to believe that, because they are so common and omnipresent, phatic expressions play a secondary role. Malinowski was clear in stressing the intrinsic function of social binding of phatic interaction or, as he wrote “communion”:

[...] phatic communion [is] a type of speech in which ties of union are created by a mere exchange of words [...]. Are words in Phatic Communion used primarily to convey meaning, the meaning which is symbolically theirs? Certainly not! [...] Each utterance is an act serving the direct aim of binding hearer to speaker by a tie of some social sentiment or other. Once more, language appears to us not as an instrument of reflection but as a mode of action.¹³

Malinowski seems to confine the phatic function to verbal language, but what if we (as it is normal in semiotics) extend it to all sort of non-verbal signs, such as clothing, gestures and the entire public appearance of a person?

There are few doubts that our public image is a massive source of messages. Every person’s appearance not only tells something, but actually *does something*. In social interaction omnipresent functions (above all signs of compliance with the group codes), even when running underground, are paramount. Let us just consider one the most important meanings every individual is supposed to communicate: her or his not being a threat or a danger for the community. This kind of messages are required to be constantly ‘on’ when we are in a social situation. Thus, a man in dirty and tattered clothes, wobbling and prattling, can be absolutely harmless, but he can be thought to be out of control and thus potentially dangerous or at least annoying. An Indian sadhu can be quite similar but, in his country, is considered a holy man. There are different codes in different cultures even for phatic messages.

8. Erving Goffman, *Behavior in Public Places. Notes on the Social Organization of Gatherings* (New York: The Free Press, 1963), 33.

9. The public image in direct interaction is not conveyed only via the visual channel. It also uses the acoustic (language style, idiolect, tone of voice, vocabulary, etc.), olfactory (personal smell, perfume) and tactile channels (handshake, salutations, legitimate contacts, as in a crowded subway, etc.). “Interaction (that is, face-to-face interaction) may be roughly defined as the reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another’s actions when in one another’s immediate physical presence” (see Irving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Social Sciences Research Centre, 1956), 8. Today, indirect interaction via communication devices is also usually considered, though it is not exactly the same thing.

10. Bronisław Malinowski, (1923), *The Problem of Meaning in Primitive Languages*, in *The Meaning of Meaning*, ed. Charles Kay Ogden and Ivor Armstrong Richards (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1946), 296–336.

11. Roman Jakobson, “Closing Statements: Linguistic and Poetics,” in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (New York-London: The MIT Press, 1960), 350–79.

12. Giampaolo Proni, “Linguaggio e vestito: Roland Barthes e Charles Peirce,” *Rivista Italiana di Filosofia del Linguaggio* (2015), <http://www.rifl.unical.it/index.php/rifl/issue/view/20> (accessed: April 30, 2019).

13. See Malinowski, *The Problem of Meaning*, 315.

Barthes never quotes Malinowski, but he was keenly aware of the phatic function of clothing when he wrote that dress is “the signifier of a single main signified, which is the manner or the degree of the wearer’s participation (whether a group or individual).”¹⁴ Participation, of course, is intended with respect to the social codes of self presentation. So, we must rephrase our question by asking how do Trump’s and Kim’s hairdos express their “manner or degree of participation”, that is, what do hair styles do in their phatic communication?

Why Trump is Nobody’s Model

One more point must be remarked before we can advance an answer. A celebrity, that is, a person who is closely followed and reported on by the media, not only communicates his/her participation to social codes, but has the capacity to affect them, to be a model of tradition or the setter of new or emerging trends. To be a model means to show a look which can be imitated by adopting some or all its elements. Trump hair style is too artificial, too complicated, and out of fashion. The blond dye is unnatural without being transgressive (somebody in USA called it “wheat chaff”). There is something hyperbolic in Trump’s choices that makes his hairdo a little too gaudy. Since it is improbable that he is not aware of this semantic value of his personal image, it is evident that Donald Trump *cannot be and probably doesn’t want to be a model*. To translate into words the core message of Trump’s hairdo, it says something like “I do what I like with my hair and don’t give a about what you may think about it”.

The Evolution of Kim Dynastic Hairdo

The inspiration by Mao Zedong, as for the uniform, is evident also in Jong-un’s hair style. The Great Helmsman, however, did not know hair wax. At the Singapore meeting in 2018 Kim Jong-Un appeared perfectly combed and shaved, with a very high side shave and gel or shine on his hair. Kim Jong-Un’s “manner or degree of participation” is expressed with regard to the dynasty he is the heir of. Within this lineage, he shows some personal changes, probably perceived as elements of modernisation also in his country. He appears better groomed when compared to the photos of his father and grandfather. In words, Kim Jong-Un’s public image says “I am the faithful heir of my dynasty, being at the same time respectful of their heritage yet capable of improving and modernising my appearance in harmony with the brilliant destiny of our Country.” That’s what he says to his fellow citizens. But what is he telling the Western public?

Kim’s Image for Western Eyes

The meaning we non-Koreans generally attribute to Kim’s public image is different from the North Korean audience’s standard interpretation. See as an example the BBC video report of Kim’s departure on his personal train: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-47328334>. While the official images of Kim Jong-un in Korea are for us almost humorous narratives, caricatures of communist regimes that have now disappeared, they have an official and solemn character in their proper context and circumstance. Jong-un’s chubby face and hairstyle seem to us bizarre and funny, while such a perception, for a North Korean, would constitute a serious misrepresentation.

Third Level: Advanced Meaning and Final Hypotheses

Languages with just One Speaker: Does Donald Trump Talk to his Mirror?

Languages are social constructions, they are made for people to share contents. So, languages with just one speaker should be useless. Yet, they exist, and are called *idiolects*. In 1976 Eco defined the idiolect as follows: “This code is apparently spoken by only one speaker, and understood by a very restricted audience; it is a semiotic enclave which society cannot recognise as a social rule acceptable by everyone. Such a type of private code is usually called an ‘idiolect’.”¹⁵ This is the way Trump actually uses his

14. See Barthes, *The Language of Fashion*, 13.

15. Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics* (Bloomington-London: Indiana University Press, 1976), 272.

hairstyle as a text. What lies behind his indifference for aesthetic codes is not a message. What matters is not what Trump says, but the language he uses to say it: an idiolect, to be precise an aesthetic idiolect. It is as if Trump would say: "I speak American with everyone, but for my personal image I speak *trumpish* and I speak only to Trump". Now the question is: does he know how his personal aesthetic taste is perceived, that is, interpreted, by the others? Given the peculiar character of his hairdo, and his persistence in keeping to it, the probable answer is no. Trump is aware that his personal image is original, but *he does not fully grasp what other people feel about it, and refuses to deal with it.*

This can be explained by the hypothesis of a low feedback habit. Though within the borders of normal behaviour, Trump shows the symptoms of a slight *self-presentation autism*. In other words, he does not tune his public behaviour to the aesthetic expectations of his social environment. What practical consequences could the hypothesis of Trump's self-presentation autism produce? Trump's hairdo tells us that the subject does not understand and has no interest in the aesthetic judgement of those he is talking to, and in general in their opinion on his image. Let us extend this consideration to other sides of the President's personality (a mere hypothetical extension) and ask: has this attitude advantages or disadvantages in a political environment? The implications of Trump's communicative attitude, as we have inferred from his hairstyle using the tools of semiotics, lead us to conclude that it may give him some advantages, as it confuses the opponents, but also possible disadvantages, as it creates befuddled situations for collaborators and allies. It can make the goals ambiguous and, worst of all, bring to a loss of control on critical issues. The future will tell us if these predictions will be verified.

North Korean Dynastic Language

In Kim's case, we cannot talk about an idiolect. Kim Jong-un's image evolves from that of his predecessors, and all three, as we have seen, follow the costume of the Asian communist leaders. Given the actual extension of the category, we might almost say it is an endangered language. The problem with Kim's image is that it is not understood in the West and thus the "manner or degree of participation" (and thus also the symbolic function of tradition, innovation and aesthetic example) are not understood. Worse still, most of the signs that the subject intends to express may appear at a superficial sight humorous and folkloristic. And a superficial sight is what the western mass audience gets from the media.

Aesthetic Models and Cultural Isolation

Nothing makes us understand a situation of cultural separation as clearly as the gap between different aesthetic models. While verbal discourses can be translated, albeit with some loss of meaning, aesthetic models cannot, because they express themselves with signs in which the expression does not convey only a conceptual meaning but also deep and shared feelings. We may *understand* that a food tastes good and an image looks beautiful to somebody, while we find them tasteless or repellent, ugly or childish, but such comprehension does not allow us to *experience* the specific aesthetic feeling the other experiments.

There is no equivalence between quantitative and qualitative superiority, yet it is a fact that the North Korean cultural code is shared by a minority compared to that of the increasingly interconnected global aesthetic models. As a result, Kim Jong-un's national phatic sphere, when translated into the West, is erased, and from supreme leader he becomes a pop character, that is, he is reduced to the traits perceived by mass visual culture. This may not affect the political aspects of his relations with Trump and other leaders, but it certainly weakens his ability to influence Western public opinion in the media. His traits as a smiling chubby child just out of the barbershop are not consistent with the nuclear threats he flaunts. Of course, underestimating an adversary is dangerous, but it is also dangerous not to be able to scare when the threat is adopted as a political weapon.

Contact/Conflict Displaying and the Limits of Populism

In the relationship between Kim and Trump we find a trait of infantilism that you can't cancel from their looks. It is difficult to believe that the dialogue of these characters can rise from a level of superficial staging, both when they seem to squabble and when they seem to be best friends: we witness two

aesthetics that can not converge, two systems that manifest themselves with the aspects more impermeable to mutual interaction. A discourse that seems more and more to aim at a purely phatic objective. Yet, while phatic discourse is important as a ground for social interaction, it is difficult to define it as the main goal of a summit meetings. As if Trump and Kim were only interested in showing that they are talking, but with nothing to say, and even less to do. The goal is just to be there, under the eyes of the world.

If we extend the comparison to the transcultural level, i.e. to the semiotic relationship between North Korean and Western/Global culture, we have a good example of international relations ‘across the wall’, i.e. a vision that regards the dialogue between cultures as ‘talking through a wall’, a relationship that emphasizes objective separation as a condition for negotiation. But that two subjects engaged in a dialogue must be different is just tautological. Stressing it can serve to show that you don’t need to strike a deal, which is also tautological. Dialogue cannot be just phatic, that is the fact. At least real dialogues. Dialogue requires sharing and implies openness to the discovery of the other, good or bad as it may be. Dialogue is not just phatic also in the sense that it is risky. Thus, autism and isolation cannot help to conduct it.

Here we see the logical limit of nationalist and populist ideologies: any kind of interaction involves a progressive approach. We interact with others to go somewhere, even if those ‘somewheres’ can be different and opposed. And since absolute isolation is impossible, divisive positions, even if they can have a temporary function, are only short-lived artifices of dubious effectiveness.¹⁶

Sample Texts¹⁷

Donald Trump

n.d. a popular site on Trump’s hairdo: <http://trumpdonald.org/> (accessed: September 13, 2019).

Vanity Fair. “A photo history of Trump’s hairdo.” 9/2015, <https://www.vanityfair.com/news/photos/2015/09/an-illustrated-history-of-donald-trumps-hair#2> (accessed: August 8, 2017).

Zimbio. “Prince Charles, Prince of Wales, is presented an Australian Team shirt by Australian Team Manager Gavin Dovey at SWALEC Stadium on July 6, 2015 in Cardiff, United Kingdom.” (July 5, 2015), <http://www.zimbio.com/photos/Prince+Charles/Gavin+Dovey/England+Nets+Session/QlyZuyIziIM> (accessed: August 8, 2017).

Youtube. “Donald Trump Lets Jimmy Fallon Mess Up His Hair.” (September 15, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0BYqzdiuJc> (accessed May 22, 2019).

Mitgang, Caroline. “A hairdresser explains why Donald Trump’s hair looks like that.” *Quartz* (December 18, 2015), <https://qz.com/575952/a-hairdresser-explains-why-donald-trumps-hair-looks-like-that/> (accessed: August 8, 2017).

Page, Max. “Donald Trump Hair Mystery — Combover, Toupee, Transplant, Follicle Faux Pas?” *Popdust* (September 19, 2014), <https://www.popdust.com/donald-trump-hair-mysterycombover-toupee-transplant-follicle-faux-pas-1890068207.html> (accessed: August 8, 2017).

Samson, Pete. “The truth about Donald Trump’s hair: Former hairdresser reveals the lacquer, home cuts ... and if it’s real.” *Mirror* (November 11, 2016), <http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/truth-donald-trumps-hair-former-8460049> (accessed: August 8, 2017).

16. While I was working at this article, another Trump-Kim meeting took place, in the Korean Demilitarized Zone, on June 30, 2019, with a short advice. The concrete results of this summit are still dubious, even according to international observers. See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019_Korea-United_States_DMZ_Summit (accessed: September 13, 2019).

17. Dates are in the mm/dd/yy format or in the format given by the source, when unambiguous.

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Kim Jong-Un

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BBC. "Trump receives 'warm' letter from Kim about new summit" (November 9, 2018), <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-45480216>, (accessed: May 5, 2019).

Ferrier, Morvenna. "Kim Jong-un defies gravity with new haircut." *The Guardian* (February 2, 2015) <https://www.theguardian.com/fashion/2015/feb/20/kim-jong-un-defies-gravity-itself-with-new-haircut> (accessed: April 4, 2019).

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