Conceptual Metaphor and Personal Pronouns in political discourse: The US 2008 Presidential Debates

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Background: The Third 2008 Presidential Debate

- Last debate between Barack Obama and John McCain (15 October 2008) about domestic issues (taxes, health care, world financial crisis);

- **Joe the Plumber [JTP]** mentioned many times: based on a real person, Joe Wurzelbacher, but recontextualized metaphorically and metonymically to represent all Americans;

- Obama met Wurzelbacher three days before debate; JTP told him about concern (un-American) over proposed democrat tax plan of taxing incomes of over $250,000/year;

- McCain strategically recast exchange to **delegitimize** Obama’s tax and health care plans depicting them as fundamentally immoral and un-America and to **legitimize** his own policies and worldview;

- JTP embodies “a working-class white everyman” both in debate and in mass media discussions (Crowley 2009).
Are Political Debates a specific genre?

- In debates candidates aim to demonstrate knowledge about issues and ability to speak “one-to-one to ordinary folk” (Myers 2008);
- Debate discourse is “representative of the supra-individual level” in that the campaign team of the various candidates “has constructed strategic ways of framing issues verbally for the campaign” (Cienki 2005);
- **Hybrid genre**: political interviews + speeches (Halmari 2008);
- mixed **register**: formal, serious, informal joking, prepared and reused statements, some spontaneous responses (Cienki 2005);
- Debates provide “insight into what the candidates are like and how they think on their feet” (Myers 2008);
- **Not really debates**:
  - little direct interaction between the two candidates and with audience;
  - topics, questions and times always predetermined;
  - highly regulated by two campaign teams and Committee for Presidential Debates (Myers 2008).
In political discourse

• Linguistic forms employed to frame political messages, ideology and moral worldviews;
• Politicians perceived as more persuasive “when their metaphors interact with other linguistic features to legitimize policies” (Charteris-Black 2005);
• As in other fields of political action, candidates make use of various rhetorical “appeals” and stylistic devices such as metaphor and metonymy;
• Other linguistic forms used strategically
  ➔ pronouns (which can also be used metaphorically)
  ➔ terms of address and personal reference
• Speakers involved in a balancing act between positive- and negative-face strategies (Chilton 2004), making different linguistic choices: 1st person pl. vs. sg. pronoun over the singular; avoiding reference to face-threatening elements; referring to them indirectly (pronouns, terms of address, etc).
Chilton’s (2004) Cognitive Approach to political discourse

- Chilton (2004) interprets political texts as the “intersecting” of various **cognitive** and **deictic** dimensions exploited through language use;

- The three axes – **space**, **time** and **modality** – combine to form spatial metaphors “conceptualising the speaker’s and/or hearer’s relationship to the interlocutor(s), to their physical location, to the point of time of the ongoing utterance, and to where they are in the ongoing discourse”;

- How these coordinates are accessed by speakers and/or hearers, occurs through the (strategic) use of linguistic expressions, such as prepositions, **pronouns** and modals in combination with “frame-based [cognitive] knowledge”.
Cognitive Metaphor Theory

• Metaphor treated as basic mechanism of the mind rather than purely linguistic or (unusual) literary phenomenon Lakoff & Johnson (Metaphors We Live By, 1980);

• Conceptual metaphor creates correspondence between different conceptual domains, so that forms of reasoning from a source domain can be used in another one (Lakoff 2002);

• In CMT known source domain is mapped onto another conceptual domain (Chilton 2008; Lakoff & Johnson 1980):
  ➡️ **Life is a journey**
  ➡️ **Love is war**
  ➡️ **Labor(u)r is a resource**

• For the American political system, cognitive models applied to morality on the basis of two interpretations of **Nation As Family** metaphor (Lakoff 2002); their different conceptualizations determine “which metaphorical ways of thinking and morality have priority” in US political discourse (Cienki 2005a).
Lakoff’s (2002/1996) Moral Politics

- Lakoff applies CMT to US political system using cognitive models of morality based on two competing “idealized” (Cienki 2005) interpretations of the Nation As Family metaphor;

- Various interpretations exploited predominantly in conservative and liberal political worldviews in the US political system;

- Unconscious cognitive models are fundamental to understanding (and reproducing) politics, exactly as in other areas in our lives;

- Cognitive models help us to “fill in” (Lakoff 2002) what is not explicitly said in political discourse;

- Conservative and, to a much lesser degree, liberal political actors consciously draw upon the models linguistically to articulate a unifying system of moral and family values in their political rhetoric.


Strict Father Morality

- **Strict Father** [SF] model shapes the conservative worldview (in US politics);

- Based on notion that a child should never be coddled so that the development of certain morals (or virtues) is encouraged: **self-discipline, self-reliance** and **respect** for legitimate **authority**;

- A child raised in such an environment will naturally become **self-reliant** later in life;

- Natural disdain for “meddling” parents (=government) who assert their authority when they have no business doing so;

- Strong belief that the rich should have moral authority over the poor;

- The **American Dream** myth: “America is truly a land of opportunity whereby anyone with self-discipline and can, through hard work, climb the ladder of success” (Lakoff 2002 [1996])
Nurturant Parent Morality

- **Nurturant Parent** [NP] model shapes the liberal (or progressive) worldview and moral values very different from SF model;

- This model strongly based on basic childhood experiences of **being cared for** and **cared about**;

- a child grows (or, **is nurtured**) through interaction and care, thereby instilling a strong sense of **empathy** for others and **potential** for achievement and enjoyment;

- Empathy is viewed metaphorically as “the capacity to project your consciousness into other people so that you can feel what they feel” (Lakoff 2002 [1996]: 114)

- Children raised according to such a model develop a strong sense of community and, consequently, feel responsibility for those members of the community who need help (Lakoff 2002 [1996]: 118).
SF vs. NP Morality in Politics

MORALITY IS FAIR DISTRIBUTION

LIBERALS (PROGRESSIVES)

➡ federal government seen as a strong, nurturant parent that provides basic needs to all of its citizens, especially those in need;

➡ social programs both help and strengthen people, and consequently they are seen as civic duty and are conceptualized metaphorically as investments;

➡ taxation is seen as a sort of “moral accounting” and civil duty: they have received nurturance from their parents, so they owe the same to other children if needed (Lakoff 2002).

CONSERVATIVES

➡ social programs are seen as unnatural and immoral as they “coddle” people who should be learning to fend for themselves.

➡ natural consequence of the “myth of America as a Land of Opportunity”, or the American Dream (Lakoff 2002)

➡ taxation is seen as a form of moral punishment for making more money and realizing the American Dream (i.e., “for doing what, according to the American Dream, they are supposed to do” (Lakoff 2002)),

Tuesday, April 16, 13
Pronouns I

Pronominal use in politics is closely tied to the notions of identity and ideology:

- PNs can indicate (or obscure) collectivity and individuality (Fairclough 2003), or they can be used for ‘self’ or ‘other’ referencing or as a way to polarize representations of ingroups and outgroups (Van Dijk 2001);

- The meaning of PNs is highly influenced by the social and political ‘spaces’ within which people and groups are positioned or position themselves (Chilton & Schäffner 1997);

- Their choice and interpretation mediated by a number of different social and personal factors including (in)formality, status, solidarity, power, class, sex and race (Wilson 1990);
Pronouns II

• PNs can be located on a **distancing scale**: “a pronominal window into the thinking and attitude of politicians towards particular political topics and political personalities” (Wilson 1990);

• 3rd person PNs can indicate closeness and/or distance in relation to ‘self’ and ‘other’ referencing and its distance from the ‘**deictic centre**’ – of which I and its variants can be considered the centre – of the distancing scale (Chilton 2004; Wilson 1990)
Terms of Address & Personal Reference

Pronominal use closely tied to terms of address and personal reference.

• terms of address used when speaking to a person being named (addressee): as with the vocative and the 2nd person pronouns (Murphy 1988: 318);
  ➡ use of vocatives can be an “audience-engagement strategy” (Halmari 2008: 263)

• personal reference used when the person named (referent) is not being spoken to;

• in (presidential) debates conversations roles (speaker/addressee/referent) are not so clear-cut:
  ➡ opponent rarely addressee and often referent
  ➡ audience (or moderator) more often the addressee

• these relationships influence pronominal choices
Data in 3rd Presidential Debate: References to ‘Joe the Plumber’

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Time/1:29:45 | 6:03 (6.7%) | 1:45 (1.9%)
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Joe wants to buy the business that he has been in for all of these years, worked 10, 12 hours a day. And he wanted to buy the business but he looked at your tax plan and he saw that he was going to pay much higher taxes.

You were going to put him in a higher tax bracket which was going to increase his taxes, which was going to cause him not to be able to employ people, which Joe was trying to realize the American dream.

Now Senator Obama talks about the very, very rich. Joe, I want to tell you, I'll not only help you buy that business that you worked your whole life for and be able -- and I'll keep your taxes low and I'll provide available and affordable health care for you and your employees. And I will not have -- I will not stand for a tax increase on small business income.

That's 16 million jobs in America. And what you want to do to Joe the plumber and millions more like him is have their taxes increased and not be able to realize the American dream of owning their own business.
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Example 2: Obama

Now, the conversation I had with **Joe the plumber**, what I essentially said to him was, "Five years ago, when **you** were in a position to buy **your** business, **you** needed a tax cut then."

And what I want to do is to make sure that **the plumber, the nurse, the firefighter, the teacher, the young entrepreneur** who doesn't yet have money, I want to give **them** a tax break now.

And that requires **us** to make **some important choices**. [...]

[...] And I'm happy to talk to you, **Joe**, too, if **you're** out there. Here's **your** fine -- zero. **You** won't pay a fine, because... // Zero, because as I said in our last debate and I'll repeat, **John**, I exempt small businesses from the requirement for **large businesses that can afford to provide health care** to their employees, but are not doing it. // So here's what **we** do. **We** exempt small businesses. In fact, what, **Joe**, if **you** want to do the right thing with **your** employees and **you** want to provide them health insurance, **we'll** give you a 50 percent credit so that **you** will actually be able to afford it.
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You know, when **Senator Obama** ended up his conversation with **Joe the plumber** -- **we need to spread the wealth around**.

In other words, **we're going to take Joe's money, give it to Senator Obama, and let him spread the wealth around**.

**I want Joe the plumber to spread that wealth around.**

**You** told **him you** wanted to spread the wealth around.

The whole premise behind **Senator Obama's** plans are **class warfare, let's spread the wealth around.** **I want small businesses -- and by the way, the small businesses that we're talking about** would receive an increase in their taxes right now.

Who -- why would **you** want to increase **anybody's** taxes right now? Why would **you** want to do that, **anyone, anyone** in America, when we have such a tough time, when **these small business people, like Joe the plumber**, are going to create jobs, unless **you take that money from him and spread the wealth around**.
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Who -- why would you want to increase anybody's taxes right now? Why would you want to do that, anyone, anyone in America, when we have such a tough time, when these small business people, like Joe the plumber, are going to create jobs, unless you take that money from him and spread the wealth around.
Example 3: McCain

You know, when Senator Obama ended up his conversation with Joe the plumber -- we need to spread the wealth around.

In other words, we're going to take Joe's money, give it to Senator Obama, and let him spread the wealth around.

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Considerations 1: conceptual metaphors

‘JTP’ is recontextualized according to different worldviews:

• **for McCain**: ‘JTP’ is a metaphor for all working class Americans trying to realize the American Dream;
  ➡ ‘JTP’ represents all small business owners and “millions of others like him”, who are self-disciplined and hard-working;
  ➡ Obama is a meddling parent who, immorally, wants to take JTP’s money away through taxation by “spreading the wealth around”, thus keeping ‘JTP’ from realizing the American Dream.
Considerations 2: conceptual metaphors

- for Obama: ‘JTP’ naturally fits within his all-encompassing vision of America
  - ‘JTP’ is the same as others (“the plumber, the nurse, the firefighter, the teacher, the entrepreneur” vs. McCain’s “small businesses”): particularizing synecdoches serve a “leveling” function (Reisigl 2006: 603), which allows Obama to extend his message of unity to everyone;
  - Anyone who needs help deserves it and should be helped but not without first making “some difficult choices”, which is an “investment” for the future.
Considerations 3: Pronominal use

Pronouns used strategically by both candidates to frame and legitimize their political message and moral worldview (in their presentation of ‘JTP’):

- **McCain** uses pronouns more strategically (and more deliberately) than Obama;
  - both 3rd person and 2nd person pronouns use for both distance and negative other-presenting (vs. Obama) and closeness and positive self-presenting (vs. ‘JTP’ and the audience);
  - Pronominal choice highly tied to terms of address and personal reference, which allow McCain to distance himself further from Obama (Sen. Obama, he, You) and create more closeness to Joe (Joe, my friend, my old buddy)
Considerations 4: Strategic use of pronouns

- **Obama** use of pronouns seems to fit with his general use of pronouns in the debates and his campaign speeches:
  - He tends to use 1st person Pl over Sg pronoun: positive self- and other-presenting within an overall empathy-building message of unity (Boyd 2009, In press; Suleiman & O’Connell 2008);
  - 2nd person *you* is used to both legitimize and (re)contextualize: to frame his original exchange with the real Joe; to recontextualize McCain’s Joe discourse and to directly address an extended (all-encompassing) Joe group.
- 3rd person Sg pronouns are often have a plural (or collective) meaning: McCain: “Of course, I've talked to **people like Joe the plumber** and tell **him** that I'm not going to spread **his** wealth around.”
Preliminary Conclusions

• ‘Joe the Plumber’ was recontextualized by McCain and, consequently, recontextualized by Obama to represent two fundamentally different moral views of American politics;

• In the turns dealing with Joe in the debate the differences between how the SF and NP morality models conceptualize MORALITY AS FAIRNESS come to the forefront;

• Strategic use of pronouns, terms of address and personal reference combine to further underline these differences as well as to frame the candidates’ individual (political) messages and moral worldviews;

• Future research should concentrate on the use of conceptual metaphors in the entire debate (as well as the other two debates) to establish how conceptual metaphors are used to reflect the two models.
References


Example 4: McCain

Of course, I've talked to people like Joe the plumber and tell him that I'm not going to spread his wealth around. I'm going to let him keep his wealth.
[And of course, we're talking about positive plan of action to restore this economy and restore jobs in America. That's what my campaign is all about and that's what it'll continue to be all about.]

[But I want to give every American family a $5,000 refundable tax credit. Take it and get anywhere in America the health care that you wish.] Now, my old buddy, Joe, Joe the plumber, is out there.

Now, Joe, Senator Obama's plan, if you're a small business and you are able -- and [you're] -- the guy that sells to you will not have his capital gains tax increase, which Senator Obama wants, if you're out there, my friend, and you've got employees, and you've got kids, if you don't get -- adopt the health care plan that Senator Obama mandates, he's going to fine you.

Now, Senator Obama, I'd like -- still like to know what that fine is going to be, and I don't think that Joe right now wants to pay a fine when he is seeing such difficult times in America's economy. Senator Obama wants to set up health care bureaucracies, take over the health care of America through -- as he said, his object is a single payer system. If you like that, you'll love Canada and England. So the point is...