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Metaphorical Representation of Self and Others

A Political Discourse Analysis of the 2008 Obama-McCain Presidential Debates

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Abstract

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This dissertation investigates the conceptual metaphors used by the US 2008 presidential candidates, Sen. Barak Obama and Sen. John McCain, as they employed strategies of self-legitimization and other-delegitimization. It hypothesizes that self and other representation uses strategies where conceptual metaphors directly or indirectly help create the legitimization of the self and the delegitimization of the other. This research covers the three US presidential debates that took place from September 26 to October 15, 2008. It constitutes a part of Political Discourse Analysis. It grounds in Chilton's (2004) definition of legitimization and delegitimization and is anchored in the linguistic theory of metaphor and the Contemporary Theory of Metaphor (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980/2003; Lakoff, 1979/1993). It integrates the findings of previous relevant literature and presents the first elaborate study of self and other representational strategies and representational conceptual metaphors used by Obama and McCain in their presidential debates.

Keywords: representation, conceptual metaphor, target / source domains, legitimization, delegitimization, victimization, immoralization, illogicalization / irrationalization, hypocriticization

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Chapter 1: Introduction

On 26 September 2008, the two contenders for the United States presidency met in their first presidential debate at the University of Mississippi, Oxford, Mississippi with Jim Lehrer, Executive Editor and anchor, The Newshour, PBS as the moderator. Senator Barak Obama, the candidate of the Democratic Party and Senator John McCain, his counterpart from the Republican Party started their first 96- minute round answering questions about foreign policy and national security, including the global financial crisis. Only 4 minutes after the debate formally started, Obama launched his first metaphorical representation of self and others: "Now, we also have to recognize that this is a final verdict on eight years of failed economic policies promoted by George Bush, supported by Senator McCain …" (Obama, 2008).

Now, Obama represents himself as a jury member who makes a guilty-not guilty judgment or 'verdict' on a defendant, specifically eight years of rule by the Republican President, George W. Bush. The offense is the failure of the economic policies of President Bush as well as Senator McCain who, according to Obama, backed the same policies. The representation of the other instantaneously built up to create a certain conceptual reality for the opponent.

Senator John McCain played for a while on the bipartisan note that he was happy to see the two parties sitting together to come up with a solution package to the

financial problem. Then, at the 20th minute of the debate, he reciprocated by saying, "And Senator Obama is a recent convert" (McCain 2008), concerning Obama's change of stance from supporting to reducing government spending. For the meaning of 'convert' to hold as a change of mind requires the conceptualization of the source domain where 'convert' primarily exists and that is the domain of religion. The idea of describing someone as a convert in relation to political or economic orientation invites conceptual mapping from the source domain to the target domain of the discourse.

The analogy between Obama as the jury, the offense as the failure of economic policies, and the defendant as George W. Bush and McCain, on the one hand, and between the change of mind as the change of religion, on the other, highlighted the conceptual metaphors of the debaters. The analysis of the metaphorical representation of self and other in the political discourse of the 2008 United States presidency debates between Senator Barak Obama (D) and Senator John McCain (R) constitutes the core of this study.

This chapter tends to present an overview of the research by introducing it in general terms. Then, it pinpoints the relevance of the study and where it fits within the broader framework of cognitive linguistics, in general, and in political discourse analysis in particular. Moreover, it introduces the main argument that the strategies of legitimizing the self and delegitimizing the other are implemented through metaphorical representation of self and other. This chapter also raises

the research questions that delineate the scope of the analysis. Previous research in the field of political discourse concerning the rhetoric of political leaders, the British Parliamentary debates, and the United States presidential debates form the literature review. Finally, the chapter ends with a conclusion and a brief outline structure of the rest of the dissertation.

1.1 Overview:

There are two assumptions underlying this study. One is that language is intrinsically capable of stimulating human understanding and conceptualization of the world. The other is that the world conceptualized by the human mind takes shape according to the linguistic choices of the language users. These assumptions draw on the arguments proposed by Chilton (2004) about language. His argument stems from the theory that language has its own inner worlds and can provide the stimuli to use language independent of the outside worlds of the language users (Gärdenfors, 2002). Moreover, language is inherently political, a hypothesis argued by Chilton and traced back in the work of Aristotle. It maintains that language is political by nature as long as it serves a means of communication among people living in a 'polis' and a way to fulfill their social roles.

Given the above assumptions, this study tends to probe the inner worlds of language that interact and interrelate to serve the social purpose of the human verbal communication. The interacting inner worlds of language have the potential to produce combinations of various domains of human experiences and conceptualizations

that eventually appear in discursive manifests, including metaphor. This ability of language to produce metaphors proves pivotal to language users when they engage in a social interaction such as political discourse (Wilson, 1990). Metaphors explain meanings, reduce arguments, and transcend beyond the immediate surface structures of discourse (Searle, 1979). Metaphors shed light on specific domains of the human experience and integrate them into a whole. Metaphors have persuasive and emotional effect (Barcelona, 2003; Gibbs & Steen, 1999; MacCormac, 1985; Sopory & Dillard, 2002) that proves essential in the context of debates. Metaphors also "create realities for us, especially social realities" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 156). This is precisely what links metaphorical representation to the process of legitimization and delegitimization.

Politicians running for the presidency of the United States need to establish their own realities and the country's reality under their leadership. They also need to establish realities for their opponents. Senator John McCain describes Barak Obama in their first presidential debate on 26 September 2008: "and Senator Obama is a recent convert", concerning the change in Obama's stance from supporting to reducing government spending. On the face value, McCain's use of 'convert' indicates Obama's change of mind, but covertly, it invites religious associations about changing one's religion or creed. McCain's favoring of this particular lexical choice 'convert' – from the source domain of religion - intended

the delegitimization of the other and implied a further delegitimizing dimension.

Conversely, Obama described McCain's freeze on public spending as "using a hatchet where you need a scalpel". The metaphor characterized the differences between McCain's and Obama's world perspectives. Through the assimilation of two source domains of lumber and surgery, respectively, Obama represented McCain as someone who dealt with issues violently without having to care for intricate details. At the same time, Obama featured himself, still within the same metaphor, as attending to details and ready for compromises. This reflects an earlier view of Ricoeur (2003) that metaphor is the integrating force and the gap filler between different contexts that make the meaning of the metaphorical expression. It further argues that metaphor is not merely an exchange of words but rather an exchange of thoughts between contexts.

To this effect, this study intends to identify the legitimization/delegitimization strategies on which debaters draw their metaphorical representations and expound the source and target domains of metaphors as indicated by the conceptual mapping triggered by the lexical choices and understood by the syntactic structures, semantic propositions, and pragmatic inferences. Such an approach, as seen by Lakoff (2002) and complemented by Charteris-Black (2004), is helpful in identifying the communicative function of metaphor in the discourse. Consequently, this study aims at giving an understanding of certain cognitive linguistic tools that characterize the

political discourse of debates with the intention to illustrate how layers of underlying representations of language serve the purposes of the political actors as to the representation of the legitimate self and the delegitimate other through conceptual metaphors.

1.2. Relevance and Rationale of the Study:

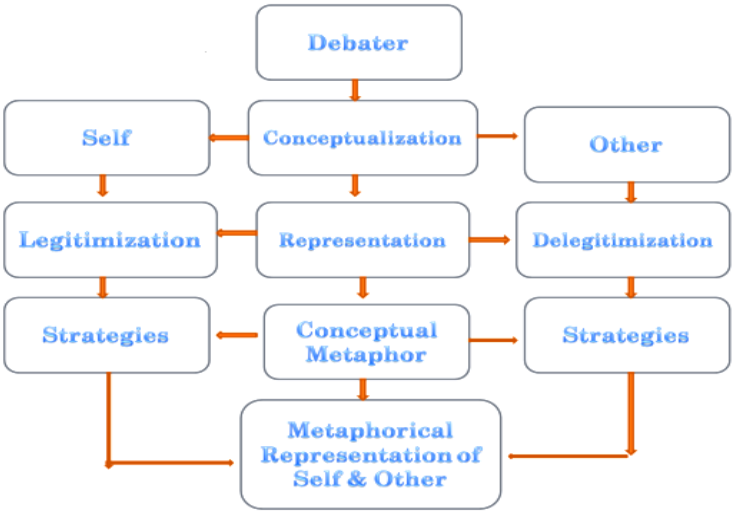
Since the use and understanding of metaphor incorporate both thought and linguistic forms, the study of both fields in an integrated fashion "can only assist us in understanding more about what we mean by meaning" (Charteris-Black, 2004, p. xiii). A linguistic study of the US presidential debates, therefore, can make the public more aware of the linguistic strategies of political actors, particularly presidential candidates. Such a study can provide future presidential candidates with deeper insight into ways of self and other representation. The research attempts to explore a dual – function of using political metaphors in legitimizing the self and delegitimizing the other. It investigates a complementary link between political discourse and language. Finally, it may contribute to form a new path of analyzing conceptual metaphor.

The reason why the scope of this study focuses on the metaphorical aspects of 2008 US presidential debates between Obama and McCain is that major metaphorical analyses of political discourse largely tackle the study of political speeches and parliamentary debates. The 2008 debates are a recent manifestation of a standing political activity that dates back to the mid nineteenth century when the first public debate in the history of America

presidency took place on 21st August, 1858 between Abraham Lincoln (R), Former United States Congressman (IL) and Stephen A. Douglas (D), United States Senator (IL). Moreover, the 2008 debates come after two terms of the Republicans' control over the US presidency from 2000 to 2008 leaving the country in two wars and a global financial crisis. Finally, the language used in the debate serves as a sample of spontaneous political discourse not forms of premeditated written texts since debate moderators make it clear that the debaters do not share the questions before the debate event.

The rationale of the study (figure 1) highlights the interrelationships that suggest the coherence of the thesis. The proposed interaction of the study elements helps identify the logical sequence of the cognitive processes of representation and conceptual metaphors that constitute the final discursive features of metaphorical representation of self and other. The theoretical explanation and the analytical component of the study address each constituent of this rationale with the intention to explore the cognitive mental designs and the linguistic manifests of the debaters. In particular, the researcher introduces these interrelations early in the study as the guiding framework or the roadmap of the whole thesis in an earnest attempt to ensure focus and consistency.

Figure 1 Thesis rationale and conceptual interrelations



1.3. Main Argument and Research Questions:

1.3.1. Main argument:

This study postulates that when political debaters make certain discursive choices to stimulate a metaphor, they do not only form the meaning of their utterances, but they also invite inferences about themselves and about others. This hypothesis argues that the metaphorical representation of the self and the other not only provides knowledge about the speaker and the opponent, but it helps create self- legitimization and other-delegitimization, as well. This argument is guided by Chilton's (2004) discursive representation and its relevant strategies to ensure the acceptance of the self and the denial of the other. It also grounds in the Contemporary Theory of Metaphor and conceptual metaphor (Lakoff, 1979/1993) with a hypothesis that representational strategies of the self and other can be realized with the use