CHAPTER 9

Reframing the American Dream
Conceptual metaphor and personal pronouns in the 2008 US presidential debates

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Lakoff (2002) maintains that US political divisions are shaped by competing interpretations of the Nation as family conceptual metaphor, which create fundamentally different moral models for conservative and liberal politicians to articulate their values and worldviews. Such differences are realized through various underlying and surface linguistic means. Based on the 2008 presidential election debates between Barack Obama and John McCain, the work provides empirical evidence for the existence of two different morality models. From a theoretical perspective, the work argues that the family-based models are further consolidated through the strategic use of personal reference and pronouns. Moreover, it considers the importance of various recontextualization strategies used to frame the competing worldviews. Finally, the work posits that it is precisely the hybrid nature of the genre of the debate that favors the emergence of the two models, offering an innovative approach not only to conceptual metaphor theory but also to the study of the genre of political debates.

1. Introduction

The final televised debate between the 2008 presidential candidates, Barack Obama and John McCain, broadcast on 15 October 2008, focused primarily on domestic policy and the economy. During the debate, both candidates made reference to “Joe the Plumber” (JTP), a figure thrust into the spotlight in ensuing media descriptions (Rohter 2008). Although based on a real person, Joe Wurzelbacher, with whom Barack Obama had briefly spoken while campaigning in Ohio, JTP was invoked in the debate by McCain and subsequently recast as an embodiment “working-class white everyman” both in the debate and in the ensuing mass media descriptions (Crowley 2009).
In the meeting between Obama and Wurzelbacher, the latter had voiced concern about Obama’s tax plan which would have apparently affected incomes of over $250,000/year, allegedly complaining that such a plan was un-American. In the debate, McCain strategically recast this exchange as a means of delegitimizing Obama’s tax and health care plans, while legitimizing his own policies and worldview. In the subsequent turns in the debate, McCain continued to demonize Obama’s proposed policies, depicting them as fundamentally immoral and un-American, while addressing – both directly and indirectly – JTP. In this way, JTP was recontextualized as the quintessential working-class American who was only trying to realize the American Dream. While Obama also made reference to JTP in the debate, he did so less often and, for the most part, as a direct response to McCain’s constant invocations. Nevertheless, two clearly distinct JTPs emerge from the debates shaped by the candidates’ political ideals, personal message and worldviews.

2. Aims and scope

This chapter is interested in comparing the two competing notions of JTP that emerged in the debate, arguing that the differences were the result of two opposing worldviews expressed in the candidates’ discourse practices. More specifically, in line with Lakoff (2002), it is maintained that the different representations (and recontextualizations) of JTP stem from distinct family-based moral systems. Thus, while McCain’s conservative (Republican) worldview is shaped by Lakoff’s Strict Father (SF) model, Obama’s progressive (Democrat) one is shaped by the Nurturant Parent (NP) model. These models frame the various discourses and “force a certain logic” (Lakoff 2004, 17) or ways of thinking, which are clearly evident in the differing ways the two candidates recontextualize JTP. Furthermore, differences in framing are realized not only through conceptual metaphor, but also by the lexical, syntactic and pragmatic means afforded by the genre of political debate.

The main research question addressed in the work is to what extent the recontextualizations of JTP draw upon and adapt the conceptual SF and NP models and their underlying conceptual metaphors. The discourses regarding JTP, it is argued, are based on opposing understandings of “moral action as fair distribution” vs. “immoral action as unfair distribution”, which are influenced, specifically, by different conceptualizations of the Morality As Fair Distribution metaphor (Lakoff 2002, 66) and the diametrically opposed moral notions of fairness that this metaphor entails. To support this claim, the work also attempts to provide empirical evidence for the existence of certain underlying conceptual metaphors.
Chapter 9. Reframing the American Dream

These differences, it is further argued, are realized through various (surface) linguistic means. In a departure from most conceptual metaphor analyses, the chapter posits that the family-based models are further consolidated and propagated through strategic use of personal reference and pronouns determined by the two candidates’ family-based worldviews. While the metaphorical nature of pronouns has been widely noted in the literature (see, for example, Malone 1997; Wales 1996; Wodak, De Cillia, Reisigl, and Liebhart 2009), their (strategic) use in relation to Lakoff’s proposed family-based models appears not to have been fully explored. The work also highlights the importance of recontextualization as an important (re-)framing strategy. In fact, it is the combination of conceptual metaphors, linguistic features and recontextualization that frames the candidates’ discourse and, ultimately, legitimizes the candidates’ personal view of working-class Americans and the American Dream. Furthermore, it is precisely the hybrid nature of the genre of political debate that favors such recontextualization practices. In the debate, JTP comes to represent, both metaphorically and metonymically, all working class Americans according to the individual family-based frames adopted. In the next section the most salient theoretical claims are discussed.

3. Theoretical background

3.1 The genre of presidential debates

US presidential election debates have been studied from a number of different perspectives in the literature (see, e.g., Airne and Benoit 2005 for an overview of the literature; Cienki 2005a, 2005b; Halmari 2008; Myers 2008; Wilson 1990). However, while these debates are closely followed by discourse analysts, political observers and the mass media, their significance in the overall campaign remains, to a certain extent, uncertain (Myers 2008, 121). Most likely, interest in debates is inspired by the fact that they “seem to promise insight into what the candidates are like and how they think on their feet” (Myers 2008, 121), which can be used at times by (undecided) voters to evaluate candidates (Adams 2009, 184).

Debates can be seen as a hybrid genre which mixes aspects of both political interviews and speeches (Halmari 2008, 258; see also Gruber [this volume] and Fetzer and Bull [this volume]). Similarly, Myers (2008, 140) situates debates on a continuum between speeches, which are more oratorical and rhetorical, and interviews, which are more conversational and spontaneous. Such hybridity arises from the fact that presidential debates are not really debates, i.e. there is very little direct interaction between the two candidates and between the candidates, and the audience. The format, content and questions are pre-determined and
regulated by the two candidates and the Committee for Presidential Debates (Myers 2008, 124–125).

As in other forms of political (electoral) discourse, the candidates draw on rhetorical “appeals” for positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation, which may include metaphor and metonymy as determined by various ideological considerations (Myers 2008; see also Reisigl 2006 and Van Dijk 2001). In addition, the registers adopted by the candidates also shift greatly, ranging “from the more formal and serious to the occasional joking, and from statements which [are] more prepared and often reused to responses which were more spontaneous” (Cienki 2005a, 284). Such variation is due to the candidates’ conflicting desire to demonstrate their knowledge about the issues on the one hand, and to prove that they can talk “one-to-one to ordinary folk” and treat them with due respect on the other (Myers 2008, 130). Furthermore, for Cienki (2005a, 244) debates represent “the supra-individual level” because many of the issues under discussion have already been framed strategically by the campaign team.

An important factor in debates is the way participants address each other and the audience. Ostensibly, the two debating parties form a relationship of speaker/addressee, which varies according to who is speaking and who is being addressed. Other participants in this relationship are the moderator, as well as various audiences – the co-present, primary audience, a secondary audience that is watching or listening to the speech via the mass media, and a tertiary audience that watches the debates in a later transmission, on the Internet or mediated text (Reisigl 2008, 256; Boyd, 2011; for more about participant roles see Goffman 1967; Goffman and Best 2005; Levin 1985). However, since the speakers in the debate are more concerned with making appeals to their voting public and winning over undecided voters, the audience is more often the main addressee, while the opposing candidate can be either the addressee or the referent in a candidate’s projected dialogue with the audience. Such behavior is determined by a number of different factors. First, the candidates’ communication with the audience is usually one-way, since co-present audience members are rarely allowed to ask questions, and when they are, the questions have been previously scripted and approved by the campaign teams. Thus, the presidential debate can be seen as an example of what Goffman calls “platform format”, i.e. an activity enacted before an audience “whose job is it to observe, not to interact” (in Malone 1997, 9). Second, the role of the co-present primary audience is generally less unimportant than that of the much larger secondary and tertiary audiences. Third, even when the opposing candidate becomes a referent, he/she theoretically can still respond directly to the speaker.

There are two other features in the genre of (presidential) debates that need to be considered. First, the choice of reference terms plays an important role in
signaling participant relationships. Since reference terms are determined by the speaker’s attitude towards the referent and the audience (Murphy 1988, 343), they may also be used strategically to legitimize or delegitimize an adversary. Second, all participants in public discourse must maintain their “public self-image” or face (Brown and Levinson 1987, 61; see also Chilton 2004, 40–41; Goffman 1967; Goffman and Best 2005). In public encounters in general there is a tendency for a speaker to conduct himself/herself in such a way as to maintain his/her face as well as that of the other participants, which, according to Goffman, is due to the “combined effect” of the rules of self-respect and considerateness (Goffman and Best 2005, 11). In political contexts such as debates, participants are constantly trying to maintain a balance between positive-face and negative-face strategies (Chilton 2004, 40) as part of what Chilton and Schäffner (2002, 13) call a “balancing act”. Such strategies imply certain linguistic choices, such as, e.g., using the first person plural pronoun over the singular or simply avoiding reference to certain face-threatening elements or referring to them indirectly.

3.2 Metaphor in political discourse

In cognitive approaches, metaphor is treated as a basic mechanism of the mind rather than purely linguistic or literary phenomenon (Chilton 2006, 63; Chilton 2008). In such a view, first illustrated by Lakoff and Johnson in their seminal Metaphors We Live By (2003 [1980]), metaphor is seen as the result of cognitive processes through which a known source domain is mapped onto another conceptual domain (Chilton 2008, 236; Lakoff and Johnson 2003 [1980]). A conceptual metaphor creates a correspondence between different conceptual domains, so that forms of reasoning from a source domain can be used in another one (Lakoff 2002, 63). Similarly, Chilton and Schäffner (2002, 29) view metaphor in political discourse as the conceptual structure for “a systematized ideology” that can be used to create inter- and intra-textual coherence. Such coherence can arise both through the use of metaphor and certain lexical items, that, when taken together, create “a conceptual coherence through a common underlying metaphorical schema” (Chilton and Schäffner 2002, 29).

Although similar to metaphor, metonymy represents a fundamentally different process. While metaphor is primarily a way of imagining one thing in terms of another, its most important function is understanding (Lakoff and Johnson 2003 [1980], 36). In the case of metonymy the primary function is referential, i.e. “it allows us to use one entity to stand for another” (Lakoff and Johnson 2003 [1980], 36). Metonymy also provides an understanding function, as, e.g., in the metonymy The Part For The Whole, the one part that is chosen out of the many possibilities determines the focus (Lakoff and Johnson 2003 [1980]). Like
metaphor, metonymic concepts also shape not just language but also “thoughts, attitudes, and actions” (Lakoff and Johnson 2003 [1980], 39). In other words, metonymy creates a material, causal or cognitive shift between “adjacent fields of reference” (Reisigl 2006, 601).

Not surprisingly, the importance of metaphor and metonymy in political rhetoric has long been recognized (Chilton 2004), and politicians are often perceived as more persuasive when they use metaphors in combination with other linguistic means to legitimize their own policies (Charteris-Black 2005, 17) or to delegitimize those of their adversaries. Furthermore, metaphors represent ways of thinking and speaking about the world that reveal “a shared system of belief as to what the world is, and culture-specific beliefs about mankind’s place in it” (Charteris-Black 2007, 43). In politics, these beliefs are disclosed in the way that candidates frame their political message and how such models or frames “organize political thought, politics, and discourse” (Van Dijk 2001, 360). Political (and personal) values and attitudes are then transferred metaphorically to ideologies and policies (Chilton 2008, 233).

Thus, on the one hand, politicians employ traditional figures of speech as “effective rhetorical means of constructing, representing, and transforming political ‘reality’, as well as a means of political persuasion” or for positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation (Reisigl 2006, 598–599). On the other hand, deeper lexical “metaphorical mappings” can be used in quite complex ways to frame “stores of structured cultural knowledge” (Chilton 2004, 52).

A particularly insightful discussion of political discourse from a cognitive perspective can be found in Chilton (2004), who sees political texts as the “intersecting” of various cognitive, deictic dimensions exploited through language use (Chilton 2004, 204). He proposes the three axes of space, time and modality that 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” (Chilton 2004, 56). Particularly relevant for the present discussion is how these co-ordinates are accessed by speakers and/or hearers, which, in fact, occurs through the (strategic) use of linguistic expressions, such as prepositions, pronouns and modals in combination with “frame-based knowledge” (Chilton 2004, 61).

In Moral Politics, Lakoff (2002) applies conceptual metaphor theory to politics. He uses cognitive models of morality based on two competing “idealized” (Cienki 2005a, 280) interpretations of the Nation As family metaphor, which, he claims, is predominantly exploited in the conservative and liberal political worldviews in the US political system. Lakoff argues that unconscious cognitive models are fundamental to understanding (and reproducing) politics, exactly as in other areas in our lives (Lakoff 2002, 159). Furthermore, these cognitive
models help us to ‘fill in’ what is not explicitly said in political discourse. Moreover, 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 (Lakoff 2004).

The two versions of family underlying the model determine “which metaphorical ways of thinking and morality have priority” (Cienki 2005a, 280) and, consequently, how the public discourse of the Democrats and Republicans is framed (Chilton 2008, 233). The Nation As family is a natural metaphor: large social groups such as nations are conceptualized in terms of smaller ones like families or communities (Lakoff 2004, 5). Thus, on the one hand, the conservative or Republican worldview and discourse are shaped by the Strict Father [SF] model. This model is grounded in the notion that the world is a difficult and dangerous place and, therefore, a child should be raised in a traditional nuclear family by a father who has “primary responsibility for supporting and protecting the family as well as the authority to set overall family policy” (Lakoff 2002, 65–66). A child raised in such an environment, however, should never be coddled lest he/she not learn the proper morals of self-discipline, self-reliance and respect for legitimate authority (Lakoff 2002, 65–71). One of the entailments of this model is a natural disdain for “meddling” parents who assert their authority when they have no business doing so (Lakoff 2002, 79). Furthermore, according to SF morality, the rich should have moral authority over the poor, which nourishes the myth of the American Dream, according to which “America is truly a land of opportunity where anyone with self-discipline can, through hard work, climb the ladder of success” (Lakoff 2002, 83).

The Nurturant Parent [NP] model, which Lakoff associates with the liberal worldview, is based on a very different notion of parenthood (and childhood), producing different moral values. Underlying this model are the basic childhood experiences of being cared for and cared about by a caring and nurturant parent or parents. In such a view, a child grows up (and is nurtured) through interaction and care, which instills a strong sense of empathy for others and potential for achievement and enjoyment. Empathy, in turn, is viewed metaphorically as “the capacity to project […] consciousness into other people so that you can feel what they feel” (Lakoff 2002, 114). Children raised in such a model develop a strong sense of community and, consequently, feel responsibility for those members of the community who need help (Lakoff 2002, 118).

One of the central metaphors underlying these models, based on the competing notions of what constitutes fair distribution, is Morality As Fair Distribution. From this metaphor, it follows that liberals should see the federal government as a strong, nurturant parent that provides basic needs for all of its citizens. Government-supported social programs, in turn, both help and strengthen people, and
such programs are seen as a form of civic duty and conceptualized metaphorically as investments (Lakoff 2002, 179). For conservatives, however, the very same programs are seen as unnatural and immoral because they “coddle” people who should be learning to fend for themselves, which is a natural consequence of the “myth of America as a Land of Opportunity”, or the American Dream (Lakoff 2002, 181, 180). In the conservative worldview taxes are seen as a form of punishment rather than investments, and when people are taxed more for making more money they “are […] being punished for being model citizens, for doing what, according to the American Dream, they are supposed to do” (Lakoff 2002, 181, 180).

Lakoff’s family-based models have been applied to the analysis of election debates (Adams 2009; Cienki 2005a; Cienki 2005b), presidential speeches (Ahrens 2011) and Senate debates (Ahrens and Lee 2009). In two complementary studies about the 2000 presidential debates between Bush and Gore, Cienki (2005a, 2005b) found that the actual incidence of conceptual metaphors was quite low, concluding that “the genre of the political debate is not one which lends itself to the characterization of political issues, via the nation as a family metaphor, in terms of SF and NP family metaphors” (Cienki 2005a, 288). In response to this apparent lack of conceptual metaphors, Ahrens (2011) proposes a corpus-based approach aimed at uncovering patterns of lexical usage that may reflect the underlying cognitive models of the speaker.

Bar-Lev (2007, 462, 464) offers several criticisms of Lakoff’s models, noting the simplicity of the NP model compared to the SF one: “[the NP model] seems to be missing local elements (‘frames’) that are clearly necessary to explain the linguistic and cognitive behavior of liberals”. Moreover, he complains about the general lack of discourse data in Lakoff’s analysis, suggesting the need for more empirical data to support the two models (Bar-Lev 2007, 463). One of the goals of this work is to provide more empirical data to demonstrate the existence of these models.

3.3 Personal reference and pronouns

The use and meaning of pronouns in political discourse is highly influenced by the social and political “spaces” within which people and groups are positioned or position themselves (Chilton and Schäffner 1997, 216), closely tied to the notions of identity and ideology. Indeed, pronouns can be used to indicate or obscure collectivity and individuality (Fairclough 2003, 162), for referencing “self” or “others”, or as a means of polarizing representations of ingroups and outgroups (Suleiman and O’Connell 2008; Van Dijk 2001, 103). The choice and interpretation of the pronominal form is mediated by a number of different social and
personal factors including (in)formality, status, solidarity, power, class, sex and race (Wilson 1990, 45–46). To return to Goffman (1967), pronouns change according to “how people build particular types of footings or alignments not only between speakers and hearers, but also between a speaker and his or her own utterance” (Malone 1997, 44).

While the most salient pronominal distinctions in political discourse include “I” vs. “we”, inclusive vs. exclusive “we”, and “us” vs. “them”, third person pronouns can also be used in a variety of ways to create or obfuscate agency. Chilton’s approach (2004, 57–59) sheds some light on pronoun analysis. In his three-dimensional approach, pronouns are employed deictically to represent people’s position in the world on the space axis, in a process that is often called “pronominal scaling”:

The speaker (Self, which may be I or a we-group) is at here. The entities indexed by second-person and third-person pronouns are ‘situated’ along s, some nearer to, some more remote from self. It is not that we can actually measure the ‘distances’ from Self; rather, the idea is that people tend to place people and things along a scale of remoteness from the self, using background assumptions and indexical cues.  

(Chilton 2004, 58)

In Wales’s (1996, 26) equally insightful approach, pronouns are interpreted according to pragmatic and cognitive factors which are part of “ongoing discourse-world creation”. The speaker and the addressee are involved cooperatively in the creation of a discourse universe “based on the assumption of a body of knowledge, held in common to a greater or lesser degree and bearing some relationship to a ‘real’ world, ‘out there’” (Wales 1996, 26). This definition highlights the indexical function as well as the pragmatic power of pronoun distinctions: “We and they may well reflect a social and cultural climate, but as deictic elements they have the pragmatic power to delimit and oppose groups for political expediency” (Wales 1996, 61). Furthermore, the indexicality of discourse, as also noted by Malone (1997, 58), is reinforced by the pronominal choices that speakers make to “create alignments between talkers and their topics and their hearers that must be attended to in order that conversation continue”.

As far as the first person pronouns are concerned, the decision to use “I” or “we” is determined by the degree of responsibility the speaker wants to claim: “I” is used “to gain the people’s allegiance”, while “we” is often used to evade complete responsibility (Wilson 1990, 45). Thus, in her analysis of the 1996 presidential debates between Clinton and Dole, Halamari (2008, 260) notes that, “I is more transparently audience-exclusive than we, even though we is sometimes used without including the audience as in reference to ‘I and some others’”. The first person plural pronoun “we” can also convey different meanings depending on the inclusion or exclusion of the addressee(s) and whether inclusion is partial.
or total (Wilson 1990, Chapter 3; Wodak et al. 2009, 45–47), creating a sort of ambivalence that can be useful for political ends (Wales 1996, 58). Furthermore, “we” can be used for cohesive purposes, providing a sense of unity not only at the purely textual level but also pragmatically (cf. Wales 1996, 62 and Boyd 2009a, 2009b for a discussion of Obama’s use of “we”). In debates, as noted by Wilson (1990, 52), “we” can be used to “spread the load of responsibility”, a strategy he considers as “a useful ploy” since the opponent will almost certainly question any positive claims that are made.

Finally, we need to consider the fundamental differences between the first and second person pronouns as against the third person ones. While the first and second person pronouns are generally used “in the situational context, and refer normally to human beings in the ‘dialogue’” (Wales 1996, 3), third person pronouns are typically used anaphorically (or “prototypically” as Wales observes). The variable nature of the first and second person pronouns is well captured by Jakobson’s (1990) term “shifters”, since they cannot be defined without reference to the message. The third person pronoun, on the other hand, as noted by Malone (1997, 71, citing Lyons [1977, 638]), does not correspond to “any positive participant role”. Moreover, since the meaning of third person pronouns is established by exclusion from direct address, they can naturally be used metaphorically to represent others: “Their use means that ‘I’, ‘we’, and ‘you’ are defined not simply as people who are present and engaged in this interaction, but, more significantly, as people who are connected to those ‘others’ in particular ways” (Malone 1997, 73).

As already mentioned, pronouns can be used strategically in political debates in various ways. For example, an opponent can be referred to by using the third person pronoun instead of direct naming (Wilson 1990, 61), while the use of vocative forms (with the corresponding second person pronoun) is often employed to engage the audience (Halmari 2008, 263). We should recall, however, that the meaning of the second person pronoun may vary according to its location on Chilton’s distancing scale.

Pronouns can also be used strategically to create metaphor and metonymy. Chilton (2004, 56) remarks on the use of the third person plural pronoun to encourage “interpreters to conceptualise group identity, coalitions, parties and the like, either as insiders or outsiders”. Similarly, Wodak et al. (2009, 45–46) refer to the “synecdochal realizations” of “we” with a generalizing meaning: “all seem to include a second person into the ‘we’ group; that is they seem to be cases of addressee-inclusive ‘we’, whereas in fact they are addressee-exclusive”. In addition, there are “metonymic realizations” of “we” when “we pretends to include the speaker and perhaps also the addressee as well as the third persons who are not present” (Wodak et al. 2009, 46).
3.4 Recontextualization

Speakers use intertextuality to bring other voices into a discourse (Myers 2008, 134), most often through a process of recontextualization (Wodak and De Cillia 2007, 323). In the latter, elements of one social practice are appropriated within another (Fairclough 2003, 32) for some strategic or ideological purpose (Chilton and Schäffner 2002, 17). Fairclough (2010, 79) hints at the metaphorical nature of recontextualization: “A discourse decontextualised from its dialectical relationship with other elements of a field or network of social practices becomes an imaginary, very often working in a metaphorical way in the re-imagining of aspects of the field or practices it is recontextualised within […]”. Furthermore, recontextualization implies a twofold process of “suppression” and “filtering” of meanings (Chouliaraki and Fairclough 1999), making recontextualization a powerful tool in transforming discourses and creating new ones (Busch 2006, 613). This, in turn, may lead to struggles between social actors who pursue “different strategies within the recontextualized context” (Fairclough 2010, 77).

Recontextualization often occurs through the use of lexical substitution, re-semanticization and rhetorical figures such as metaphor and metonymy (Boyd 2009a; Van Dijk 1993, 261; Wodak and De Cillia 2007). Discourses can also be recontextualized in represented discourse, when speakers make reference to other speakers and contexts: “In the co-construction of meaning, the speakers recontextualize material from other contexts, usually the other speaker’s utterances, in some manner in the on-going interaction” (Johansson 2006, 217; see also Myers 2008). Important to this notion is how social actors are represented and, consequently, how “anthropomorphized social actors” are constructed (Wodak et al. 2009, 35). Finally, recontextualization is also an important part of discourse-world creation through pronominal use as we shall see in the discussion that follows.

4. Analysis

4.1 Data and methodology

The corpus data in the analysis are based on the transcript downloaded from the Commission for Presidential Debates website. Separate files containing the turns by Obama and McCain were created and a word count was performed using Wordsmith Tools 4 (Scott 2004). In addition, the video podcast version of the debate was downloaded from CBS news to determine appropriate times. The final presidential debate lasted 1:29:45, with individual speaker times almost equally
distributed between the two candidates. Table 1 shows the individual number of tokens and types used, which are quite similar.

The transcripts were subsequently searched for all turns in which JTP was mentioned (and addressed) both by name and indirectly. In fact, while the political and media analyses following the debates were focused on the number of times Joe the Plumber was mentioned directly, actual pronominal reference to JTP was much greater. Finally, the transcripts of the turns were matched with the video version to determine the total time devoted to JTP, which amounted to 7:48, or 6.8% of the total debate time. Interestingly, McCain spent three times as much time as Obama on the topic (approximately 6:03 vs. 1:45), as illustrated by the word counts in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>McCain</th>
<th>Obama</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Tokens</td>
<td>15,419</td>
<td>6682</td>
<td>7292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Types</td>
<td>2,122</td>
<td>1311</td>
<td>1382</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Token/Type ratio</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Word distribution in the final 2008 presidential debate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reference to Joe the Plumber</th>
<th>McCain</th>
<th>Obama</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joe Wurzelbacher</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe the Plumber</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal noun</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>him</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>his</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third person sg.</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you subj.</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>you obj.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>your</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second person</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>they</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>them</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>their</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other pl. nouns</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Third person pl.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First person pl.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. References to Joe the Plumber
4.2 Data analysis

We will now look at some of the relevant turns chronologically. In (1) below, the first mention of JTP, McCain recontextualizes Joe Wurzelbacher as a sort of *argumentum ad exemplum*. This turn takes place almost at the beginning of the debate (6:07), when McCain was answering a question about his economic plans:

(1) [McCain] I would like to mention that a couple of days ago Senator Obama was out in Ohio and he had an encounter with a guy who's a plumber, his name is Joe Wurzelbacher.

In this example, the full name, *Joe Wurzelbacher* is used only at the end, presumably to lend legitimacy to his words. More importantly, it is preceded by a familiar, cataphoric noun phrase *a guy who's a plumber*, which lends a more familiar tone to the entire turn. We should also note McCain's strategic use of the personal noun *Senator Obama* coupled with the third person pronoun *he*, transforming Obama into a referent in the debate and creating more distance.

In what follows, in (2) below, McCain reverts to the more familiar first name, *Joe*, as a referent, in addition to the more formal, and distance-creating, title form, *Senator Obama* we saw in (1). In the second sentence *he* now refers to *Joe* in contrast to the *he* used to refer to Obama. To create more distance, however, the deictic second person possessive *your* and subject *you* are used, transforming Obama into the addressee:

(2) [McCain] 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 [sic] the American dream.

The use of second person pronoun with no address term allows McCain to put Obama in the role of the accused and to delegitimize him further (Murphy 1988, 318). In fact, McCain’s accusatory, “finger-pointing” other-depiction is reinforced through the repeated use of the second person pronoun with no vocative appellative. Interestingly, (2) ends with a rather transparent metaphorical reference to the SF morality model, *the American Dream*, through which McCain implies that Obama’s tax plan would make it impossible for JTP to employ people and, consequently, to realize such a dream. It should be recalled that the SF model places great importance in the virtues of self-discipline and hard work as the basis of this myth.
In the same turn, as illustrated in (3) below, McCain later switches back to the more distancing third person proper noun Senator Obama, making his opponent the referent once again, thus allowing him to directly address Joe with the “audience-engaging”, familiar vocative form:

(3) [McCain] 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.

This switch also allows McCain to create an extended imaginary dialogue with Joe; in fact, McCain uses the first person singular I so that he can directly address the second person you. Although ostensibly speaking to Joe, the meaning can clearly be extended to include the wider audience(s), as we can see at the end of the turn, when Joe the Plumber is coupled with millions more like him. Here, once again the accusatory, deictic you is used with prominent stress and with no vocative form to create a negative contrast between Obama and the expanded Joe addressee group. It is at this point in the debate that JTP comes to represent all working-class Americans. The repetition of the third person plural possessive demonstrative their further strengthens the extended Joe group as representing all Americans. Moreover, the American Dream is repeated with a negative verb to stress the immorality of Obama’s tax plan (and, consequently, the superiority and morality of his own). This, in turn, reinforces the American Dream Myth and the importance that it gives to the virtue of self-discipline, as well as that of industry and perseverance (Lakoff 2002).

At this point in the debate, Obama has no choice but to respond to McCain’s criticisms, which we can find in (4). Although his turns about JTP are much shorter, a number of elements of the NP morality still emerge. Firstly, even though he was the one to meet the real Joe Wurzelbacher, Obama also makes use of an extended Joe the Plumber epithet. Moreover, he recontextualizes his original conversation to provide a sense of both familiarity and legitimacy:

(4) [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 fire-fighter, 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.
By reproducing his conversation he can directly address Joe with the less distancing second person you. In the following sentence, he extends the metonymy “Joe the Plumber” to include other professions, opening his message to workers and young professionals alike. The repetition of the particularizing synecdoches such as the plumber and the nurse with the definite article and singular noun form serve a “leveling” function (Reisigl 2006, 603). This particular use can also be analyzed as an example of what Fairclough calls “synthetic personalization” (2001, 52) because it gives people the impression that they are being treated as individuals, and, at the same time, it helps Obama to extend his message of unity to everyone (Boyd 2009a; Suleiman and O’Connell 2008). By focusing on diverse yet equally important members of the American public, JTP becomes a template for all working Americans. This message is further reinforced through the use of the third person plural object pronoun them, which, however, is immediately contrasted with an inclusive “we” form (us). It is also interesting to note the repeated use of the first person singular pronoun I, rather than Obama’s preferred we. In fact, in a corpus-based study about Obama’s 2008 campaign discourse, Boyd (2009b) notes the high incidence of “we” in both the presidential debates and election speeches.7 Such usage of “I” instead, I would argue, can be attributed to the simulated dialogue and face-saving strategy. By the end of (4) Obama has returned to the plural pronoun: that requires us to make some important choices. It should also be noted that when referring to JTP, Obama rarely includes McCain in the conversation for delegitimization purposes. I would argue that the absence of another referee in his personal pronominal paradigm allows him to focus more on his underlying message.

The strategic use of the inclusive “we” continues in what follows, as in (5):

(5) [Obama] 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 per cent credit so that you will actually be able to afford it.

In the following, however, there is a slight hesitation between an object and vocative Joe due to the fact that Obama evidently wants to make a direct appeal to JTP and the various audiences. Nevertheless, Obama continues with the repetition of the second person pronoun you, so that he can directly address the extended Joe group and, therefore, metonymically all Americans.

This strategy is exemplified in (6), in which Obama also addresses McCain using the rather neutral first name John. This example also illustrates oscillation between the first person singular and plural pronouns. In this example Obama switches to I so that he can engage in a rare direct exchange with McCain. As we can see, however, he soon switches back to the safer inclusive “we”, which, once
again, is paired with the vocative + second person pronoun to address directly the expanded Joe group:⁸

(6) [Obama] 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 per cent credit so that you will actually be able to afford it.

As mentioned above, the conceptualization of moral action as fair distribution and immoral action as unfair distribution is influenced by different versions of what constitutes fairness in the SF and NP models. Example (7) strikingly represents the differences in the two models:

(7) [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. 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. […]

Here, Obama is portrayed by McCain as an immoral actor or “meddling parent” who, unfairly and immorally, wants “to spread the wealth around” thereby “restricting freedom and posing a threat to the moral order” (Lakoff 2002, 95). Such a notion fits in perfectly with the SF model of morality that sees socialism, communism or anything that smacks of a controlled market economy as immoral. The moral division is further highlighted through pronominal use: the exclusive we in we need to spread the wealth around and we’re going to take Joe’s money creates a mocking tone, most likely to mimic Obama’s prevalent use of we as an inclusive strategy. The mocking tone is further reinforced by the continued use of the third person proper noun Senator Obama and the distancing him, which are eventually abandoned in favor of the more direct second person pronoun, which allows McCain, once again, to attack Obama directly. The turn ends with further moral criticism of Obama’s tax plan by comparing it to “class warfare”, another important metaphor.

The final example, provided in (8), further demonstrates McCain’s recontextualization of JTP:
(8) [McCain] 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.

In this example McCain continues to adopt an accusatory tone against Obama through the repeated use of the second person you without a vocative. This use also underlines Obama’s agency while extending it to others who are against SF morality with the indefinite pronoun anyone. Thus, Obama metonymically comes to represent a demon for SF morality, as he, and everyone like him, are the ones who want to take the money away from JTP and spread the wealth around. On the other hand, JTP is grouped with these small business people who are going to create jobs, thereby propagating the SF model bases on prosperity, hardworking self-discipline and self-reliance. The metaphorical use of pronouns, in fact, reinforces these underlying moral systems.

5. Discussion and conclusion

As we have seen in the discussion of the examples in the previous section, through various recontextualization strategies employed by both candidates, JTP comes to represent – both metaphorically and metonymically – working Americans. Both candidates use various means to appropriate JTP into their own moral worldviews, which are clearly moulded by the SF and NP models, as proposed by Lakoff (2002). The analysis has provided further empirical data to support the existence of these two models and, more importantly, in the context of presidential debates, where both points of view clearly emerge. It has also demonstrated that the hybrid nature of the genre of debates, which allows the candidates to express themselves on many different levels both spontaneously and not, tends to favor the emergence of different worldviews. From a theoretical perspective, then, the work provides insight into both Conceptual Metaphor Theory and the genre of political debate.

The most salient metaphor in the discussions about JTP appears to be Morality As Fair Distribution, and, consequently, this metaphor determines the conservative and progressive metaphorical ways of thinking and morality in regard to fair distribution. The analysis demonstrates that McCain exploited the SF model more extensively, which can be explained due to a number of reasons. First of all, it was McCain who first recontextualized JTP in the debate and continued to refer to him, which points to a pre-determined plan that was most likely
well studied and prepared by his campaign team. Secondly, as noted by Lakoff (2002; 2004), conservatives are more aware of their underlying family model and, therefore, consciously exploit it to frame the important issues, such as taxes and health care. It can be assumed, then, that the choice of Joe Wurzelbacher to become JTP and, consequently, a representative of working class Americans, was also strategic. We can further postulate that his home state (Ohio), his race and his profession also influenced this choice: Ohio has recently become an important swing state in presidential elections, the issue of Obama’s race was considered to be an important factor in the elections, although often overlooked by the two candidates in the 2008 elections (see, for example, Boyd 2009a, 77, 80), and Joe was a self-employed citizen trying to realize the American Dream. Thus, Joe Wurzelbacher could more easily become a representative of the Americans most likely to support the SF model and hence vote for McCain. This was achieved, in part, by the use of the Morality As Fair Distribution metaphor. On the one hand, taxation is depicted by McCain and his supporters as an unfair form of punishment for hard-working Americans like JTP and a way for a meddling NP-model supporter like Obama to assert his moral authority by unfairly redistributing hard-earned wealth and prosperity. On the other hand, through this metaphor Obama portrays taxation as an investment for the future and for all hard-working, responsible and caring Americans like JTP. Obama, however, does not use JTP strategically to demonize the SF model, while McCain’s disparaging use of such phrases as *we’re going to spread the wealth around* serve not only to condemn the NP principles of fair distribution but also to mimic Obama’s frequent use of inclusive—“we” as part of his message of unity. This last example also demonstrates further use of recontextualization to enhance the values underlying the SF model. Nevertheless, both of the candidates use metonymy The Part For The Whole to create a cognitive shift so that one person (Joe Wurzelbacher) comes to represent two distinct extended JTP groups, which embody the relevant model-based qualities.

The analysis also calls attention to the strategic use of pronouns, which are often employed metaphorically and metonymically to reinforce the underlying moral models. The examples presented in the previous section reveal certain alignments that are maintained or avoided by the use of specific pronominal strategies. As far as the first person pronouns are concerned, although “we” is used by both speakers, Obama tends to prefer “we” over “I” for cohesive purposes thereby reinforcing the notions of group identity and unity. As noted in example (7), this use is mimicked by McCain as a way to demonize NP morality, also providing an insightful example of the truly shifting nature of the first person plural pronoun. At the same time, however, McCain uses inclusive “we” to frame JTP and others like him within the SF worldview. Thus, Obama appears to use “we” more with a
positive function, while McCain uses it for both positive self- and negative other-referencing. Furthermore, both speakers oscillate between the third and second persons when addressing JTP stressing both the importance of pronouns in the construction of the ongoing discourse world (Wales 1996), and the instability of third person pronouns as a marker of deixis. Moreover, the examples provided appear to contradict Malone's (1997, 73) claim that the meaning of third person pronouns is established by exclusion from direct address. In this case, in fact, the third person singular pronoun is mostly used metonymically to appeal to the various audiences, and it is also for this reason that JTP is an addressee rather than a referent. Due to both grammatical and pragmatic pressures he is often transformed into Joe with a second person pronoun. However, the third person pronoun is still used quite often with a second person pragmatic meaning, which appears to provide evidence for a deictic rather than purely anaphoric third person singular pronoun. At the same time, McCain generally uses the third person pronoun for exclusionary purposes in referring to Obama and he often uses the formal term of address, Senator Obama. By transforming Obama into the referent, he places him further away from himself (the speaker) and from JTP (the addressee) on the distancing scale. If we analyze this in terms of Chilton's space axes, then I is at the center of the s axis, at self, while he and you are indexed closer or further to the self depending on who the addressee is and who the referent is. All of these distinctions, it is argued, come to the fore in the genre of the political debate.

To conclude, the various discourses dealing with JTP in the final 2008 presidential debate, and, more generally, in the genre of presidential debates, represent a useful test case for the existence of Lakoff’s family-based models in the US political system. By concentrating on a limited set of data with a common theme afforded, crucially, by the genre of political debate, evidence of underlying metaphors and moral priorities can be better ascertained and tested. The data presented in this work appear to provide further empirical evidence for the existence of two different models of morality. The analysis was particularly concerned with the different conceptualizations of moral action as fair distribution and immoral action as unfair distribution enacted by the two models, and the data appear to provide evidence demonstrating two fundamentally different ways of thinking metaphorically about taxes and taxation. However, the paper is focused on how certain linguistic realizations are used in relation to the underlying family-based moral models. Specifically, pronominal choice and use are seen as being closely tied to the moral values inherent in the models. Finally, the paper demonstrates the various ways that recontextualization is used to frame discourses about JTP, thereby offering further evidence for a wider understanding of recontextualization.
In hindsight, it is probably safe to assume that McCain’s many references to JTP in the debate, although closely tied to the values embodied by SF morality, did not make him the stronger, or more persuasive candidate. Thus, while McCain may have been more successful in applying SF morals to his recontextualization of JTP, this did not ultimately lead to his victory. The real winners of the debate were, of course, Barack Obama, who less than three weeks later became the 44th President of the United States, and, to a lesser extent, Joe Wurzelbacher. In fact, after the debate, Joe Wurzelbacher was transformed into a media and political personality. Interestingly, however, he recently claimed that McCain had ruined his life by using him for political gains, while Obama was “un-American, but […] one of the more honest politicians. At least he told us what he wanted to do” (Zimmerman 2010).

Notes

1. Another important distinction, but beyond the scope of this work, is that between metonymy and synecdoche, which Wodak et al. (2009, 43) see as having more to do with semantic “widening or narrowing” (or generalizing vs. particularizing), such as when the name of the referent is replaced by “the name of an entity which is closely associated with it in either concrete or abstract terms” (see also Reisigl 2006; Wodak et al. 2009, 43).

2. The term originally comes from Jespersen (1922).

3. The term originally comes from Bernstein (1981, 1986), who applied the notion of recontextualization to educational practices (Van Leeuwen 2008).


5. The podcast was downloaded using iTunes, but was also available at the time of writing (January 2010) in streaming at www.cbsnews.com and on YouTube.

6. I wish to thank an anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

7. In all three debates Obama’s total “we” frequency was 4.4% vs. McCain’s 3.0% (Boyd 2009b).

8. Obama’s preference of we over I has been noted in the literature. See Boyd (2009a, b) and Suleiman and O’Connell (2008).

References

Chapter 9. Reframing the American Dream


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