

“You are there to serve us”: Social Positioning through Pronoun Use in Televised Political Debate

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Introduction

It has been argued that politics can be defined as “text and talk” and that the “doing of politics is predominantly constituted in language” (Chilton and Schaffner, 2002: 3). Political discourse and the media exist in a symbiotic relationship (Fetzer and Weizman, 2006) and most people’s experience of politics occurs through the various discourses of politicians as they appear in the media (Lauerbach and Fetzer, 2007; Harris, 1991). This reflects the constitutive role that the media play in British politics (Garton, Montgomery and Tolson, 1991) and the influential position of the media in modern, developed societies in general (Fairclough, 2002b). The importance of the media is such that media events are themselves sometimes newsworthy (Pateman, 1974), including the Leaders’ Debates which were broadcast prior to the 2010 General Election in Britain and which form the focus of analysis in this paper. Politicians use the media as a source of propaganda (Harris, 1991) and “podium events” (Goffman, 1974) through which to influence the public and construct an identity for themselves.

Theoretical background

According to social constructivist thinking we do not *have* an identity, it is attributed to us (Goffman, 1959) and constructed through “socially conditioned semiotic work” (Blommaert, 2005: 205), including the use of language. Lantolf (2000:

1) states that one of the key motivations for using semiotic tools such as language is to “mediate and regulate our relationships with others and with ourselves and thus change the nature of those relationships”. Questions of relations are intrinsically bound up with questions of identity, and these relations as they are constructed in political discourse in the media reflect wider societal relations of domination (Fairclough, 2002b). Language use not only helps to construct our social identities and relationships with others, but it also indexes these identities and relationships, so that “personality is expressed through a configuration of linguistic choices” (Fairclough, 2002b: 273) and “differences in the relationships pertaining among participants can be seen reflected in local linguistic choice” (McCarthy, 1998: 41). Identities and relations are continuously being constructed in texts, and a study of the linguistic choices made by participants, as well as the properties of the interaction, may reveal something of the social positioning of politicians (van Dijk, 2000).

Research question

This paper aims to understand some of the discursive mechanisms with which politicians’ identities are constructed and positioned socially and politically by discourse-analyzing the final Leaders’ Debate broadcast by the BBC just prior to the 2010 General Election in Britain. In particular, the paper will focus on one question asked by a member of the audience and the answers and subsequent debate of the politicians. The particular question concerns the relationship between politicians and the general public, as well as immigration. These topics seemed especially relevant to my concern with the way in which politicians are positioned socially. Media and political discourse are complex phenomena, so “to avoid getting lost in the jungle of a multitude of discursive structures and strategies” (van Dijk, 2000: 86) discourse properties relevant to the specific research questions and aims of the

project need to be chosen, rather than an arbitrary analysis of discourse features. Features of discourse that are used when constructing or maintaining social relations and group membership, such as pronouns, will be particularly important. According to Pennycook (1994: 175) pronouns “are always political in the sense that they always imply relations of power”. They present an opposition between in-groups and out-groups and position speakers in relation to others. For example, the use of “we” may be problematic, as it could refer to “we in this political party” (as opposed to members of other political parties) or “we in this country” (as opposed to foreigners). “We” may imply power relations, such as when a politician speaks of “we politicians” (in opposition to “you voters”), and an assumed ability to speak on the behalf of others. This paper will primarily focus on pronoun use, but will also draw on other formal and semantic structures (such as interaction patterns, sentence syntax and implicitness).

Methodology

This paper will reject a straight-forward Conversation Analytical approach that limits itself to describing the surface level features of the text, but will instead take a critical approach to the analysis. In advocating a critical approach Fairclough (2002a) argues against a descriptivism that simply describes a text, suggesting analysis should also be concerned with how texts are produced and interpreted. A critical perspective suggests that social conditions help to determine the properties of discourse, and that discourse is constitutive in creating these social conditions (Fairclough, 2002a). Rather than static objects of inquiry, discourses are social processes produced through interaction between people (Lauerbach and Fetzer, 2007). Texts “are patterned traces of social activities” (McCarthy, 1998: 32) and a descriptive analysis of a text must go together with an interpretation of the processes

of interaction through which it was made (Fairclough, 2002a). And As social conditions determine the properties of discourse, the analysis must also consider the wider social context in which the text was produced. Analysis should therefore include a description of the features of the text, an interpretation of the process(es) of interaction, and an explanation of the wider social context.

According to Toolan (2006), a critical approach to discourse analysis suggests that discourses are manipulated in such ways that benefit some, but not others. Toolan also suggests that it is the job of CDA to expose these inequities and specify how they can be “corrected” (2006: 89). However, this implies an ideological stance which I feel should not be a part my analysis. As “analysts cannot prevent themselves engaging with human products in a human, and therefore interpretive way” (Fairclough, 2002a: 9), it is important that the investigator makes choices in a transparent manner (Wodak, 2002). There should be no attempt to make value judgements about discourse and interpretations should be carefully justified. What is required is “a reflexive understanding of the historical and social positioning of the researcher’s own activity” (Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999: 35).

Analysis

Due to the constraints of the mass media, the presentation of politics (Sarcinelli, 1987 referenced in Lauerbach and Fetzer, 2007) has become a “ritualized, formatted and schematized” form of institutional and mediated discourse (Lauerbach and Fetzer, 2007: 5). The data collected for study in this paper displays a number of features which distinguish it from everyday conversation (see Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974). As in most formal television debates turn-taking is “mechanistic or almost completely predetermined” (Hirsch, 1989: 118) and managed by the presenter (David Dimpleby). Turn types are distributed asymmetrically (the audience members

“You are there to serve us” : Social Positioning
through Pronoun Use in Televised Political Debate

ask questions, the presenter may not ask questions that he is the author of, and the politicians must answer the questions).

The data was collected from the official BBC transcription of the debate. I checked the transcription for inconsistencies against a video recording of the debate and made slight changes to represent latched utterances (marked with ‘=’) and overlapping talk (marked with ‘[‘). I haven’t shown such details as inhalations and pauses in my data, as I do not feel these will be relevant to my analysis. I will start my analysis by looking at the audience member’s question. (AM = Audience Member, DD = David Dimbleby, GB = Gordon Brown).

AM: Are the politicians aware that they have become removed from the concerns of the real people especially on immigration and why don’t you remember that you are there to serve us not ignore us?

DD: Gordon Brown.

GB: The only reason I came into politics was because I saw what was happening in my local community. I’ve got the good fortune of being the member of parliament for the people I grew up with and the people I went to school with.

In the first half of the question, the audience member seems to be addressing David Dimbleby when speaking of “the politicians” and “they”, before switching to “you” in the second half of the question as he addresses the politicians directly. He is constructing an opposition between “us” and “them”, defining “us” as “the

real people” and “them” as “the politicians”. He also seems to be claiming authority to speak on behalf of “the real people” by explicitly naming them (as opposed to simply saying “removed from our concerns”, which would leave group membership only implied). This creates a seemingly homogeneous group of people who, we assume, share the ideological beliefs of the audience member. The second half of the question switches to a more accusatory tone (“why don’t you remember”) with the presupposition of a power relation; it is the job of politicians to serve “the real people”. In his response Gordon Brown doesn’t challenge the presupposition that politicians have become removed from the concerns of “real people” (none of the politicians do this, as it is difficult to challenge a presupposition (White, 2003)), but rather tries to construct ties between himself and the “lifeworld” of these “real people” (“my local community”, “the people I went to school with”). However, while doing this, he also maintains a power relation by constructing his identity as “the member of parliament for the people I grew up with”. In this way, he is constructing a complex identity that is both authoritative and ordinary.

Once Brown’s turn is completed, David Cameron (DC) responds to the question:

DC: I agree with the questioner. I mean immigration in this country has been too high for too long. And that's why we have a very clear approach to cut it and cut it substantially.

Cameron claims to agree with the audience member (and, therefore, with “the real people”). Politicians need to legitimate their acts and policies as “consistent with prevalent norms” and representing the will of the people (van Dijk, 2000: 101). Here Cameron attempts to establish a direct causal link between (what he

assumes are) the views of the audience member (and presumably the wider viewing public) and the policies of the Conservative Party. As “shared perceptions of values define political associations” (Chilton and Schaffner, 2002: 2) he is also probably attempting to create a political connection between his views and the views of the audience member. The questioner didn’t in fact say that immigration had been “too high for too long”; this was assumed common knowledge (part of the participants’ “mental model” (van Dijk, 2000: 91)) about the topic of immigration made explicit by Cameron. Cameron seems to be representing immigration (and, therefore, immigrants) as a problem, while attempting to present himself and the Conservative Party positively.

Van Dijk (2000) argues the importance of establishing who “we” refers to. When Cameron speaks of “we” here he is claiming group membership of the Conservative Party, thus creating an opposition not only with “real people”, but also with the other political parties. Throughout his turn, Cameron frequently speaks as a member of “we in the conservative party”. When he does this it is often with verbs that serve an epistemic function, such as *believe* and *say*. For example:

DC: We say you need to control it properly. That's
why we say that new countries that join the
European Union they um should have transitional
controls

By stating that “you need to control it properly”, Cameron is not specifying who this “you” actually is. However, it is possibly not the Conservative Party (he doesn’t say “we need to control it properly”). When he states that there should be transitional controls for new countries that join the European Union, he does this by putting

some of the information “up front” to emphasise that it is the new member countries of the European Union that require transitional controls (again, not “us”). During this turn, each use of *we + epistemic verb* is followed by a clause that doesn’t attribute agency to the Conservative Party. The final example is “We believe there needs to be a cap”. Here, by using passive voice, David Cameron hides agency (van Dijk, 2000) and consequently avoids attributing responsibility to the Conservative Party.

As media discourse is public discourse and claims and promises may be challenged at a later date (van Dijk, 2000) extra care needs to be taken when speaking. One of the most important aspects for both the content and form of media discourse is that it is produced for recipients who are not present (Lauerbach and Fetzer, 2007). The watching audience is unable to negotiate meaning and can only react indirectly to political texts (Fetzer and Weizman, 2006), through voting for example. This means that first-frame participants (those actually present and taking part in the discourse) must take great care in designing their discourse for second-frame participants (that is, the audience at home) (Lauerbach and Fetzer, 2007). Cameron is avoiding making a promise ‘on the record’, while perhaps recognising his role as the leader of the opposition (speaking about the way things should or need to be if they were done properly). In his turn, Gordon Brown indexes his role as the current Prime Minister and member of the ruling party by following “we” (as in “we in the Labour Party”) with action verbs such as *have* and *are* which claim agency (“we have banned”, “we are cutting” and “we are doing”).

Nick Clegg’s role as leader of the Liberal Democrats, widely considered to be the third party, is reflected in him being given the last turn to answer the question.

NC: Where is Radley? I could hear his voice
(inaudible) ah there you are. I got this I had

“You are there to serve us” : Social Positioning
through Pronoun Use in Televised Political Debate

this problem last time. Of course you're right.

We are there to serve you.

In calling the questioner by his first name Nick Clegg is following a trend in media discourse towards a more conversational language style. Most media discourse is received in a domestic environment where a casual, conversational style is the norm, and media discourse increasingly attempts to approximate to this (Scannell, 1991). The politicians use first names occasionally throughout the debate, and seem to be trying to construct “complex and potentially contradictory” identities (Fairclough, 2002b: 264) that are both authoritative and ‘ordinary’ at the same time. By actively seeking out the audience member Clegg is possibly attempting to address the audience at home (the homogeneous group of “real people” who the audience member is assumed to represent), as politicians are not usually permitted to directly address the watching audience by talking to the camera (Fairclough, 2002b: 262). The “you” in “of course you’re right” refers to the audience member, while “we are there to serve you” (with its presupposed power relationship) is addressed to the wider audience watching at home. “Of course” acknowledges the speaker’s views as self evident and demonstrates that Clegg and the audience member share the same assumptions (Simon-Vandenberg, et al, 2007), but this only seems to apply to the second half of the question (agreeing with the first part of the question would be to present himself in a negative light, as removed from the concerns of people).

Clegg also engages in negative other presentation (van Dijk, 2000), as we will see in the subsequent example. Here, Clegg positions himself in opposition to the other parties (who he names, making party membership relevant to the context (van Dijk, 2006: 166)) in an attempt to portray himself in a favourable light.

NC: I think there is a problem. It's a problem I didn't create you didn't create they created. It was Conservative and Labour Governments that created chaos in your immigration system so that lots of people came here illegally. Now they're here whether we like it or not.

By using the epistemic verb *think*, Clegg is expressing his attitude to the truth of his proposition (Simon-Vandenberg, et al, 2007). Here, Clegg's textual voice is engaging with other voices and positioning him in relation to other viewpoints (White, 2003), those that don't think there is a problem. In doing this he uses pronouns to create an opposition between the Labour and Conservative parties (they), himself (I) and the general public (you). In apportioning blame for the presupposed chaos in the immigration system he uses the actual names of the political parties, while giving ownership of the immigration system to the general public at home. This obscures power relations by suggesting that the public has ownership of the immigration system, when in fact they have little control over how it is run. Also, this utterance ignores the possibility of other viewpoints by closing the dialogic space open to other voices in the discourse (Simon-Vandenberg, et al, 2007). That there is chaos in the immigration system is a potentially controversial statement, and politicians tend to present controversial statements in a monoglossic way (Simon-Vandenberg, et al, 2007) as it is more difficult to question something that is communicated implicitly (Caffi, 1998). This kind of monoglossic statement is often found in contexts where the textual voice "constructs itself as being in solidarity with a readership which holds the same ... views" (White 2003: 264).

Panel interviews, which the Leaders' debate closely resembles, often provoke

“You are there to serve us” : Social Positioning
through Pronoun Use in Televised Political Debate

livelier debate once the question-answer format is abandoned (Simon-Vandenberg, et al, 2007), as can be seen in the following example:

NC: I'm not wriggling I'm not wriggling. I just want I just want a response. Yes or no do 80% of immigrants come from the European Union which wouldn't be affected by your cap? Yes or no?

DC: It's affected by having transitional controls. Now I've [answered your question. You should answer mine.

NC: [no no no no no no no no

The genre, by bringing together people from different viewpoints or political parties, invites disagreement (Clayman and Heritage, 2002: 309). Here, the two politicians accuse each other of being evasive (a quality generically attributed to politicians (Harris, 1991)), while at the same time being evasive themselves. They are constructing themselves as political opponents by committing a series of Face Threatening Acts (FTAs) (Brown and Levinson, 1987). By claiming he's “not wriggling”, Clegg contradicts an earlier claim made by Cameron, before challenging Cameron to answer his question. Cameron doesn't give the “yes” or “no” answer which would be the preferred response to Clegg's question, and then himself challenges Clegg to answer his own question. Clegg and Cameron are both performing the same roles (politician and interviewee) and exist in a roughly equivalent power relationship. It is not until David Dimbley, who has the power to allocate turns, intervenes later in the interaction that the debate can move forward again.

Conclusion

This paper has briefly investigated the ways in which politicians' identities are constructed and represented in relation to others by primarily looking at the use of pronouns. I have suggested that pronoun use indexes power relations and group membership and constructs oppositions between groups of people. Pronouns also represent people with multiple and varied personalities and opinions as homogeneous social groups. I have also looked at how sentence structure can emphasise information about certain groups and hide agency. I have argued that politicians create complex identities for themselves and obscure power relations by looking at the ways in which they attempt to construct links with the lifeworld of the watching audience and use conversationalized language. I have also looked at the use of implicit meanings to construct ties with others and suggested that the use of FTAs represents politicians as opponents. Due to the limitations of the paper, I wasn't able to look at the ways in which the politicians semantically represent immigrants and the topic of immigration in their discourse (Brown focussed on jobs, Cameron on controlling immigration, and Clegg on the plight of immigrants). This could be an interesting future research project.

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“You are there to serve us” : Social Positioning
through Pronoun Use in Televised Political Debate

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“You are there to serve us” : Social Positioning
through Pronoun Use in Televised Political Debate

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Appendix

Full Transcription

AM = Audience Member

DD = David Dimbleby

GB = Gordon Brown

DC = David Cameron

NC = Nick Clegg

Part One (Initial question and responses)

AM: Are the politicians aware that they have become removed from the concerns of the real people especially on immigration and why don't you remember that you are there to serve us not ignore us?

DD: Gordon Brown.

GB: The only reason I came into politics was because I saw what was happening in my local community. And I've got the good fortune of being the member of parliament for the people I grew up with and the people I went to

school with. And the reason I want to be in politics is to create jobs. When it comes to immigration I want to see a situation where we increase the number of jobs that people trained in Britain can take as we lower the numbers of people coming into this country. That's why we have banned unskilled workers from outside Europe from coming into Britain. That's also why we're cutting the numbers of semi-skilled and skilled workers who can come in. That's why we have a list of occupations we now want to reserve for people in Britain and not for people coming from abroad. But what we are doing at the moment is training up people so that in the next few years as we move forward out of this recession the jobs will go to people trained in Britain who have got the skills in Britain and that goes right across from chefs and care assistants to nurses and of course teachers. That's where we want to be by training people up for the future.

DD: David Cameron.

DC: I agree with the questioner. I mean immigration in this country has been too high for too long. And that's why we have a very clear approach to cut it and cut it substantially. I mean in these last 13 year over a million extra people have been given citizenship. That's like another city of Birmingham all over again. We say you need to control it properly. That's why we say that new countries that join the European Union they um should

“You are there to serve us” : Social Positioning
through Pronoun Use in Televised Political Debate

have transitional controls so not everyone can come here at once and when it comes to immigration from outside the European Union for economic reasons we believe there needs to be a cap. I want us to get back to a situation where the net number of people coming into our country is in the tens of thousands not as it's been in recent years in the hundreds of thousands. One of the benefits of that and it is an important benefit is that we can better integrate people into our country build a stronger society and we wouldn't hear on the doorstep or on the streets as we go about this election campaign people worried about immigration because they'd know their government had listened to them gripped it and got it under control. [That's exactly what I'll do.

DD: [Let me just let me just remind viewers and listeners of Radley Russell's question. Are politicians aware they've become removed from the concerns of real people especially on immigration and why don't you remember you're there to serve us not ignore us? Nick Clegg?

NC: Where is Radley? I could hear his voice (inaudible) ah there you are. I got this I had this problem last time. Of course you're right. We are there to serve you. And of course, we are there to respond to people's concerns. I hear people's concerns about immigration all the time. The reason I think people have become so anxious is because the immigration system itself the way it works

has become utterly chaotic under a succession of Labour and Conservative Governments who talked tough about immigration but for instance it was Conservative and Labour Governments that removed the exit controls which I want to see re-introduced so we don't know only who's coming in but who should be leaving as well. I think there are additional things we need to do. I do think we need to have a dedicated border police force. I think we have to have a regional approach so that if people come and work here they don't work and they're not allowed to work in regions where there isn't work for them to do or there will be an unreasonable strain on public services. And we need to deal with the criminal gangs who've been exploiting the illegal immigrants who came in because of the chaos in the system. That is a fair effective workable approach dealing with something which is of immense public concern.

Part Two (Subsequent debate about the audience member's question)

NC: Maybe I should explain rather than having David Cameron and Gordon Brown very much in the style of old politics making misleading claims. I think there is a problem. It's a problem I didn't create, you didn't create they created. It was Conservative and Labour Governments that created chaos in your immigration system so that lots

“You are there to serve us” : Social Positioning
through Pronoun Use in Televised Political Debate

of people came here illegally. Now they're here OK it's a problem. They're here whether we like it or not. So I think we have to deal with it. I'm saying that for those who've been here for a decade, who speak English who want to play by the rules who want to pay taxes who want to come out of the shadows do community service to make up for what they've wrong it's better to get them out of the hands of the criminals so we can go after the criminals and in the hands of the taxman. You can pretend as much as you like David Cameron and Gordon Brown that somehow you can deport people when you don't even know where they are. I'm coming up with a proposal. It might be controversial but it's dealing with the way the world is. Get real. This is a problem you created. We now need to sort it on a one-off basis. It's a one-off problem which needs a solution.

DC: I think it is profoundly misguided. I mean Nick has talked not tonight but has talked about 600,000 people er having this amnesty being able to stay. And they would be able to bring over a relative each so that's 1.2 million potentially. And all of those people would have access to to welfare and to housing. I think this could make [er

NC: [Why don't we save time?

DC: This could make the [immigrants

NC: [Why don't we save some [time?

DC: [Well Nick

you explain the number then.

NC: Why don't we save time? Instead of making endlessly misleading eh comments you know let's just save time and assume every time you talk about our policy it's just wrong. What I'm saying is there is a layer of illegal [immigrants because we

DC: [well give us a number

NC: have to no we have to deal with it. We have to get them out of the hands of criminals. And you say numbers. Can you now tell me is it am I right or wrong that 80% of people who come here come from the European Union, and your cap would make no difference to that whatsoever? Is that right? Yes or no.

DC: We have said=

NC: =Yes or no.=

DC: =new EU countries [should have transitional controls.

NC: [Yes or no.

DC: We all remember what happened when Poland joined the European Union. We were told=

NC: =yes or no=

DC: =13,000 people would come, and in fact it was closer to a million. Now Nick Clegg and the Liberal Democrats cannot wriggle on this. They have spoken about 600,000 people. If that's the number they should come clean about that [(inaudible)

NC: [I'm not wriggling I'm not wriggling. I just want I just

“You are there to serve us” : Social Positioning
through Pronoun Use in Televised Political Debate

want a response. Yes or no do 80% of immigrants come from the European Union which wouldn't be affected by your cap? Yes or no?

DC: It's affected by having transitional controls. Now I've [answered your question.

NC:[no no no no no no no no

DC: You should answer mine

DD: I think we should [perhaps bring Mr Brown in because he's

DC: [Is it 600,000?