The Dialogic Emergence of 'Truth' in Politics: Reproduction and Subversion of the 'War on Terror' Discourse

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Truth claims in political discourse are implicated in a dialogic process whereby political actors "assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate" prior discourse (Bakhtin 1986:89). While political actors themselves may view truth as an object to be discovered, I argue that discourse analysts are best served by viewing truth as an emergent property of this dialogic process. In this paper, I examine how intertextual connections are integral to both the reproduction and subversion of established truth claims (such as the claim that Saddam Hussein possessed weapons of mass destruction). My data draw from George W. Bush's speech on May 1, 2003 to declare the end of "major combat operations" in Iraq, the first presidential debate between John F. Kerry and George W. Bush in September 2004, and Joseph Lowery's speech during the Coretta Scott King funeral in February 2006. My analysis examines these data in light of key phrases (e.g. "weapons of mass destruction") that form intertextual series across these contexts, as well as the role of reported speech in connecting one discursive encounter with another.

1. Introduction

In American political discourse, debates are often framed around issues of truth. In recent years, questions surrounding the possession of weapons of mass destruction by Saddam Hussein or the culpability of Iraq in the events of 9/11 have taken center stage. Political actors wield facts to show that they have uncovered what they claim to be the 'real' truth as they counter their opponents' truth claims. Yet, as widely recognized by postmodern philosophers, truth in these debates is not so much discovered as enacted. That is, truth is not simply an object external to the debate; but rather, a form of knowledge emergent from the debate.[1]

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[1] Not surprisingly, opposing sides in debates both feel they have 'truth' on their side. When our side believes we have the truth, but our opponents do not, we usually say one of two things: Either our opponents simply lack appropriate information—that is, they haven't seen all the facts yet. Or to be less generous, we might accuse them of knowing the truth (like we do) but of obscuring it because it is damaging to their cause—that is, they must be lying (cf. Jervis 2006). In either case, political actors still orient to truth as an object. Truth is an object wielded in political

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While political actors themselves may view truth as an object to be discovered, I argue that discourse analysts are best served by viewing truth as an emergent property of a dialogic process. In describing Austin's (1962) work on performative utterances, Duranti (1993) notes that "Words do not simply describe the world, they also change it" (235). To take this further, words do not simply describe a pre-existing truth; words in political discourse effectively help realize it. So as analysts, we need to place our focus on "the emergent, interactive nature of the process" (Duranti 1993: 227).

In this paper, I examine political discourse as a dialogic process through a framework that draws upon the Bakhtinian-inspired idea of intertextuality (Bakhtin 1981, 1986; Kristeva 1980). Social actors do not formulate utterances in a vacuum; nor do individual "speech events" (Jakobson 1960; Hymes 1974) take place in isolation from one another. Rather, as Bauman and Briggs (1990) note, "A given performance is tied to a number of speech events that precede and succeed it" (60). Discourse, according to Bakhtin, "cannot fail to be oriented toward the 'already uttered,' the 'already known,' the 'common opinion' and so forth" (Bakhtin 1981: 279).[2]

2. Repetition and Variation on a Theme

The concept of intertextuality is important in understanding the dialogic emergence of truth because it allows the analyst to do more than describe the structure of discourse in isolation, and instead to connect it with the larger interpretive web in which it is embedded. The interconnectivity of discourse is central to both the reproduction of truth claims as well as the subversion of truth claims. For truth claims to become widely accepted as valid and credible versions of reality, they must enter into the public domain where they are repeated, reaffirmed, and reified. Even in the challenging of established truth claims, political actors do not create utterances completely from scratch, but rather construct their utterances out of a reservoir of prior discourse. Therefore, political actors involved in either the reproduction or subversion of truth claims draw from previously uttered words, which, as Bakhtin (1986) describes, they "assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate" (89).

In the examples that follow, I focus on the way key phrases are reiterated across different types of contexts by both George W. Bush and his political opponents. As Kristeva (1980) points out, the repetition of prior text may be done "seriously, claiming and appropriating it without relativizing it" or the process of

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debate, but it is an object that is seen as separate from (outside of) political debate itself. (See also Duranti 1993 for a discussion of truth and intentionality).

[2] As Mannheim and Tedlock (1995) state, "any and all present discourse is already replete with echoes, allusions, paraphrases, and outright quotations of prior discourse" (7).

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recontextualization may introduce "a signification opposed to that of the other's word" (73). In its extreme, resignification may move into the realm of parody (Bakhtin 1981: 340; cf. Álvarez-Cácamo 1996: 38). I explore each of these dimensions in turn.

3. Establishing and Reinforcing an Intertextual Series

The following two examples illustrate the use of talking points to reinforce the Bush 'war on terror' narrative, a narrative that forwards a powerful set of assumptions and explanations about America's struggle against terrorism since 9/11 (Hodges 2007). Central to this narrative is the truth claim surrounding the presence of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) in Iraq. Saddam Hussein's supposed possession of WMDs is made doubly worrisome in the narrative due to a second truth claim about his putative ties to terrorist organizations.

Excerpts (1) and (2) are both taken from George W. Bush's speech on May 1, 2003 aboard an aircraft carrier off the coast of San Diego. In that speech, he declared that "major combat operations in Iraq have ended." In these examples, we see the reiteration of talking points that reinforce the truth claims in the 'war on terror' narrative. In particular, we see the key phrase "weapons of mass destruction" embedded in this discourse (underlined in the examples).

1) *From Bush's speech on the end of major combat operations in Iraq, May 1, 2003*

   The liberation of Iraq is a crucial advance in the campaign against terror. We've removed an ally of al Qaeda, and cut off a source of terrorist funding. And this much is certain: No terrorist network will gain **weapons of mass destruction** from the Iraqi regime, because the regime is no more. ((applause))

2) *From Bush's speech on the end of major combat operations in Iraq, May 1, 2003*

   Any outlaw regime that has ties to terrorist groups and seeks or possesses **weapons of mass destruction** is a grave danger to the civilized world -- and will be confronted. ((applause))

The phrase "weapons of mass destruction" forms part of an intertextual series (Hanks 1986; cf. Hill 2005). As it enters into subsequent contexts, it points back to the prior contexts where it has been previously uttered. Namely, this includes numerous presidential speeches prior to and after the invasion of Iraq where the phrase is embedded in truth claims about the threat posed by Saddam Hussein. Moreover, the diachronic repetition (Tannen 1989)[3] of this phrase occurs in sound bites from these speeches that are recontextualized in media reportage that reiterates these truth claims. In this way, an important indexical association is

[3] Tannen (1989) use the term 'diachronic repetition' to refer to intertextuality, as opposed to 'synchronic repetition,' or intratextuality (i.e. repetition within a text).

formed between this key phrase and the contexts where the 'war on terror' narrative is articulated.

As developed by Charles Peirce and further refined by Ochs (1992, inter alia), Silverstein (1976, 1985, inter alia) and others, the notion of *indexicality* "is the semiotic operation of juxtaposition" (Bucholtz and Hall 2004: 378) whereby contiguity is established between a sign and its meaning. As Bauman reminds us, indexicality is important in intertextual connections. He notes that:

> Bakhtin's abiding concern was with dimensions and dynamics of speech indexicality—ways that the now-said reaches back to and somehow incorporates or resonates with the already-said and reaches ahead to, anticipates, and somehow incorporates the to-be-said. (Bauman 2005: 145)

In sum, the repeated juxtaposition of the phrase "weapons of mass destruction" in contexts where Bush reiterates the truth claims in the 'war on terror' narrative allows this phrase to effectively operate as an index for those claims.

In excerpt (3), taken from the first presidential debate between Bush and John F. Kerry before the 2004 election, we again see the repetition of this key phrase as Bush reiterates elements of his narrative.

3) From the first Presidential Debate, September 30, 2004

BUSH: We're facing a group of folks who have such hatred in their heart they'll strike anywhere, with any means. And that's why it's essential that we have strong alliances, and we do. That's why it's essential that we make sure that we keep **weapons of mass destruction** out of the hands of people like Al Qaeda, which we are.

In these first three examples, we see repetition of an intertext done in a manner that, as Kristeva (1980: 73) points out, takes what is repeated seriously, without relativizing it. In fact, the recontextualization of the phrase "weapons of mass destruction," lifted by Bush out of prior presidential speeches and placed into subsequent contexts such as the debate, merely works to reinforce its previously established social meaning. In other words, the phrase indexes and attempts to bolster the truth claims espoused by the administration. Even in contexts such as the debate where the entire Bush 'war on terror' narrative may not be told in full detail, the invocation of the key phrase may be sufficient to point to it and thereby work to reinforce, or at least remind an audience of its claims.

4. Recontextualization and the Reshaping of Prior Text

The process of lifting key phrases out of one context and moving them to another allows social actors to bring with the text varying degrees of the earlier context while also transforming the text in the new setting (cf. Gal 2006: 178;

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Voloshinov 1971). While the indexical associations between a key phrase and its contextual significance may draw on already established meanings—what Silverstein (2003) terms *presupposed indexicality*—new indexical links may also be created—what Silverstein terms *creative or entailed indexicality*.[4] Put another way, the social meanings associated with an indexical sign are both partly pre-established and partly recalibrated when that sign is brought into a new context.[5] In this way, prior text is always open to reinterpretation and reshaping as it enters into new settings.

Political discourse, in particular, is effectively a struggle over entextualization. It is a struggle over whose "preferred reading" of a prior text will be accepted as more valid (cf. Blommaert 2005: 47). Control over the process of entextualization is frequently achieved through the use of reported speech. Voloshinov (1973) provides a significant discussion on the topic where he characterizes reported speech as "speech within speech, utterance within utterance, and at the same time also *speech about speech, utterance about utterance*" (115; italics in original). Voloshinov's comments highlight the capacity of reported speech to not just represent pieces of previously uttered discourse, but to *re-present* what has been said elsewhere by others—that is, to effectively recontextualize a prior utterance with "varying degrees of reinterpretation" (Bakhtin 1986: 91). Voloshinov (1973) explains that the use of reported speech "imposes upon the reported utterance its own accents, which collide and interfere with the accents in the reported utterance" (154). As Buttny (1997) summarizes, "Reporting speech is not a neutral, disinterested activity. Persons report speech along with assessing or evaluating it" (484).

5. Reported Speech in the Challenging of Truth Claims

The next example also comes from the first 2004 presidential debate. In (4), Kerry uses a reported speech frame to attribute and re-present words previously uttered by Bush. (The quotatives are highlighted in bold and the reported words are underlined.)

[4] As Silverstein (2003) explains, "any socially conventional indexical" sign is "dialectically balanced between" what he calls *indexical presupposition* and *indexical entailment* (195).

[5] We might think of this recalibration in terms of social meanings as emergent properties of interaction: the meanings that emerge may simply reaffirm established ones or may involve significant modifications made within the current context. Social meanings are never fixed once and for all, but are subject to continual renewal through micro-level discursive encounters; and therein exists the potential for shifts in indexical associations, which in turn contribute to changes in macro-level social categories and forms of knowledge. Silverstein (2003) stresses that indexicality should not be misconstrued "as being micro-contextually deterministic" (197).

4) From the first Presidential Debate, September 30, 2004

> KERRY: Now, I'd like to come back for a quick moment if I can to that issue about China and the talks because that's one of the most critical issues here -- North Korea. Just because the president says it can't be done, that you'd lose China, doesn't mean it can't be done. I mean- This is **the president** who **said** there were weapons of mass destruction, **said** mission accomplished, **said** we could fight the war on the cheap, *none of which were true*. We can have bilateral talks with Kim Jong Il and we can get those weapons at the same time as we get China because China has an interest in the outcome too.

In the highlighted portion of this example, Kerry begins by reanimating the phrase "weapons of mass destruction" that we have already seen in Bush's discourse. By bringing this phrase into the context of the debate, Kerry invokes the truth claims forwarded by Bush. Yet Kerry does not bring these words into the new setting to simply maintain fidelity to the way these words have been used previously by Bush. Rather, the reported speech frame allows Kerry to reshape the words in line with a different interpretation. In his metapragmatic comments about these reported words (italicized in the example), Kerry provides his own interpretation about their larger significance in the debate over Iraq and terrorism.

As Sacks (1992) points out, the reported speech frame works to convey to listeners "how to read what they're being told" (274; cited in Buttny 1998: 49). In other words, reported speech frames can recontextualize another's words in line with the present speaker's desired interpretations. Importantly, this reshaping of prior text works to recalibrate the larger social meanings associated with the phrase "weapons of mass destruction." Instead of simply indexing the truth claims espoused by Bush, the phrase now begins to form an association with an alternative narrative which undermines the veracity of those claims and links the phrase "weapons of mass destruction" with a deceptive policy put forth by the administration.

Next, Kerry reiterates another key phrase from Bush's prior discourse: "mission accomplished." This phrase stands metonymically for the event aboard the aircraft carrier on May 1, 2003 where Bush declared the end of major combat operations in Iraq. (Recall that the first two examples were drawn from this speech.) The phrase "mission accomplished" was prominently displayed on a banner behind the podium where Bush spoke, pictured in (5).

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5) *Bush's declaration of the end of major combat operations in Iraq, May 1, 2003*

One might compare these economical references to Keith Basso's description of the way Apaches speak with place-names. As Basso (1996) describes, Apaches often invoke a particular place-name in the midst of conversation to conjure up a shared narrative associated with that place. Without reiterating the narrative itself, mentioning the place-name is sufficient to set interlocutors into the proper position from which they can view the scene and recall the events that took place there. In a similar way, Kerry's use of the phrase "mission accomplished" invokes the narrative articulated by Bush aboard the aircraft carrier. As with the phrase "weapons of mass destruction," the phrase "mission accomplished" is embedded within an evaluative framework that reshapes its meaning. Instead of indexing a valid set of truth claims, it now points to a set of incredulous claims. In turn, Kerry positions himself as someone with a better handle on the 'real' truth; but this stance is made possible by first drawing upon the reservoir of words previously uttered by his opponent.

In the final highlighted portion of this example, Kerry uses the reported speech frame to typify Bush's prior discourse about his administration's desire to streamline the military and wage war with a smaller, more nimble force. Kerry reports the President to have said, "We could fight the war on the cheap." This typifying speech (Parmentier 1993, Irvine 1996) emphasizes the content of Bush's prior discourse rather than its verbatim form. And importantly, the words used to convey this content imbue the message with an implicit evaluation. That is, through these reported words, Kerry provides a preferred interpretation for how the discourse should be read. In particular, the phrase "on the cheap" conveys a negative evaluation of Bush's military policy.

As Bakhtin (1981) notes, prior words are "transmitted with varying degrees of precision and impartiality (or more precisely, partiality)" (330). For this reason, Tannen (1989) prefers the term "constructed dialogue" to reported speech. The key point here is that reported speech frames provide an important means by which speakers reshape prior text, whether explicitly through accompanying metapragmatic commentary or implicitly through constructed dialogue that contains embedded evaluations. In excerpt (4), we see the political struggle over entextualization as political actors engage with their opponents' words in an effort

to recontextualize them authoritatively and imbue them with their own preferred reading.

6. Parody in the Subversion of Truth Claims

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of intertextual connections is the way previously uttered phrases can be reanimated through parody. As Bakhtin (1981) notes, "By manipulating the effects of context […] it is, for instance, very easy to make even the most serious utterance comical" (340). Moreover, parody can be an effective tool of subversion. Not only can it seriously challenge the truth claims of a political opponent, but in doing so, it can give play to an alternative narrative.

I illustrate this with an example from an address given by Rev. Joseph Lowery at the Coretta Scott King funeral in February 2006. With the current and past living presidents sitting behind him on the dais, Lowery lifted the phrase "weapons of mass destruction" out of Bush's prior discourse, and reanimated it in his speech. Part of the power of this example comes from the genre Lowery chose: speaking in poetic verse. I have attempted to capture some of this verse by transcribing the example into lines and stanzas, as seen in (6). (Note especially the underlined portions.)

6) *From Lowery's speech at the Coretta Scott King funeral, February 7, 2006*

She extended Martin's message against poverty, racism and war.
She deplored the terror inflicted by our smart bombs on missions way afar.

We know now there were no **weapons of mass destruction** over there ((23 sec cheers))
but Coretta knew,
and we knew,
that there are **weapons of misdirection**
right down here.

Millions without health insurance,
poverty abounds,
for war billions more,
but no more for the poor.

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This example illustrates how genre can regulate intertextual relations. On the surface, the genre conventions associated with poetic verse allow for greater freedom in reanimating the words, especially for the incorporation of puns. As Bakhtin (1986) notes, "Speech genres in general submit fairly easily to re-accentuation, the sad can be made jocular and gay, but as a result something new is achieved" (87). The recontextualization in this example takes a serious issue and inserts it into a jocular frame that allows it to be transformed with a great deal of partiality. Despite (or perhaps because of) the levity of the frame, the re-accentuation of the words seriously challenges the claims associated with "weapons of mass destruction" in Bush's narrative. Instead of bolstering Bush's story, the pun on the phrase "weapons of mass destruction" undermines it; and it does so without an overly didactic tone. As a result, a serious point is made subversively.

The effect of Lowery's incorporation of these words into his speech is to further a dialogue between alternative perspectives poised against one another in the politics of truth. These perspectives differ on the veracity and sincerity of the Bush administration's truth claims about the possession of weapons of mass destruction by Saddam Hussein. While the truth claim asserted by the Bush administration gained powerful sway in public discourse prior to and immediately after the invasion of Iraq, the opposing side in the debate has been compiling their own talking points to forward an alternative truth claim.

This larger dialogue forms the backdrop to Lowery's address, even though it is a speech made by one person in what might traditionally be characterized as a monologue. As seen earlier, the phrase "weapons of mass destruction" carries indexical links to the narrative espoused by the Bush administration. Incorporation of this short phrase into the current context is sufficient to conjure up that larger text. In this way, as Briggs and Bauman (1992) note, "a crucial part of the process of constructing intertextual relations may be undertaken by the audience" (157). Moreover, this reference to "weapons of mass destruction" and the subsequent play on those words—"weapons of misdirection"—reshapes the meaning of this key phrase in the national dialogue.

Basso's work on Apache moral narratives is useful to further explore Lowery's speech. Recall how the Apache invoke place-names in conversation to conjure up an entire story associated with that place. From that invoked story, a moral is drawn to be applied to the current purposes of the situation (cf. Hanks 1989: 116). In particular, the moral is aimed at a specific individual who is present; and as the Apache describe, the "stories go to work on you like arrows" (Basso 1996: 38). Briggs and Bauman explain it this way:

> The point of the performance [in Apache place narratives] is to induce an individual who is present to link her or his recent behavior—and what community members are saying about it—to the moral transgression committed in the story. (Briggs and Bauman 1992: 157)

The effect of the Lowery example is somewhat similar. With Bush sitting behind Lowery on the dais, Lowery (as the Apache would metaphorically say) "shoots an arrow" at him by incorporating the phrase "weapons of mass destruction" into his verse. In reanimating these words, Lowery turns them against Bush as a reminder of the cumulative evidence against his administration's truth claims. In effect, this works as a reminder directed at Bush of his administration's moral transgression and what critics are saying about it.[6] Lowery thus lodges a rebuttal as part of the larger dialogic struggle over truth in American politics.

Moreover, the words spoken by Lowery in this particular context give play to a narrative in opposition to the one told by Bush. Importantly, this sound bite from Lowery's speech was itself subsequently recontextualized in the media in the weeks that followed; and Lowery made appearances on Fox News as part of the continuing discursive competition over the recontextualization of the phrase "weapons of mass destruction."

7. Conclusion

The different discourse excerpts explored earlier form part of a larger national dialogue. In looking at the recycling of key phrases across different contexts, researchers gain a snapshot of the way intertextual series are drawn upon by political actors to engage in this dialogue and produce differing truth claims. As social actors draw from this reservoir of prior words, they work to reshape the larger social meanings associated with those words.

In short, the process of entextualization is a political act in that lifting words and voices out of a prior context and recontextualizing them in a different setting imbues them with new interpretations. Thus, truth in political discourse should not merely be analyzed as a product of the individual style of the politician to persuade or deceive, but as the confluence of various texts and discourses—as emergent from a dialogic process. Political discourse is, like Bakhtin (1981) says of the novel, "a *system* of languages that mutually and ideologically interanimate each other" (47). The effectiveness of rhetoric, therefore, comes from the interpretive web into which it enters.

[6] This is also a prime example of signifying. That is, as Mitchell-Kernan (1972) describes, it is "a way of encoding messages or meanings in natural conversations which involves, in most cases, an element of indirection. This kind of signifying might be best viewed as an alternative message form, selected for its artistic merit, and may occur embedded in a variety of discourse" (165).

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