A discourse analytic investigation into politicians’ use of rhetorical and persuasive strategies: The case of US election speeches

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Abstract: The current study investigated the ways in which two major U.S. political arena social actors, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, presented themselves to capture the audience’s attention in the 2012 election campaign speeches. The data consisted of 30 speeches delivered by Obama as the representative of the Democratic Party and Romney as the Republican Party representative from 2011 to 2012. Through the resources of Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA), common strategies in the speeches, most notably positive self-representation, others’ negative representation, legitimization, delegitimization, and persuasion which are commonly used in political discourse to win voters’ attention, were identified. The findings revealed that Obama frequently focused on evoking the myth of the “American dream”, whereas Romney mostly used the others’ negative representation strategy. In conclusion, it seems that Obama was successful in implementing and conveying his message through rhetorical devices. However, Romney’s excessive use of others’ negative representation seemed to be unsuccessful in attaining his goals.

1. Introduction

Janoschka (2010) holds that politicians always try to convince people of their actions in order to achieve their political goals. Several strategies are used in political discourses proving intricacy and complexity of this area. One of the strategies that politicians use to persuade people is to provide
people with some justifications for their prior performances, especially in areas that they have not
functioned in an efficient manner. To exemplify the point, Hobbs (2008) enumerates many cases in
which Bush used metaphors to legitimize his actions in Iraq in terms of increasing the number of
American soldiers there. As another example, in a study on televised election campaign interviews,
Ekström (2012) shows the effect of body language, especially “gaze”, in the claiming floor and
stance-taking. This shows that even very minute details are considered in political discourse. Of
course, it must be noted that it cannot be claimed with certainty that all words, pronouns, or body
language gestures used by politicians are deliberately or consciously targeted at influencing
people. Rather, it can be maintained that any actions or words will be likely to bring about intended
or unintended consequences. Benoit et al. (2003) put it this way: “Political campaign discourse
possesses one encompassing goal: to win the election by convincing enough citizens to cast their
votes for one candidate” (p. x). This view is shared by approximately all discourse analysts.
Politicians, in addition, are quite careful to control or manipulate the effects of their speeches
delivered in campaigns. One of the main realizations of the political discourse can be seen in
election campaigns.

In terms of the language functions that should be considered in political discourse, Jalilifar and
Alavi-Nia (2012) hold that “[i]n order to defeat their political adversaries and win the largest
number of votes, presidential candidates are expected to verbalize their ideological positions
and socio-economic policy proposals in a way that seems persuasive to voters” (p. 136). This
justifies the overwhelming use of persuasive discourse by politicians in general and election
candidates in particular.

It is the aim of the current study to present an analysis of the ways in which Barack Obama and
Mitt Romney presented themselves in order to capture their audience’s attention in the 2012
election campaign. More specifically, the study strives to investigate which strategies they used
and to reveal possible differences between them in terms of discourse devices used. To the best of
knowledge of the researchers of this study, the studies scrutinizing the 2012 U.S. presidential
campaign, especially the speeches of the two figures representing the two political parties, are few
and far between and seem to tackle the issue by tracing the use of a very limited number of
representational resources (Putri & Kurniawan, 2015; Wong & Yap, 2015 are two notable excep-
tions). The present study seeks to approach the discursive strategies utilized by the two political
figures in hammering home their points from a more comprehensive perspective. In doing so, it
discusses a wider range of such strategies deployed by the major campaigners.

Despite recent studies’ focus on the discursive strategies used by Trump at the level of data in
the U.S. political arena (Khan et al., 2019; Liu & Lei, 2018; Waikar, 2018; Wang & Liu, 2018, to
mention a few), the present study is an attempt at building upon the rather wide range of linguistic
and rhetorical resources deployed by politicians in general and American statesmen in particular in
giving a positive image of themselves and a negative one of their political opponents. As such, it is
a small-scale study of how language is used for political meaning-making at a specific significant
period in contemporary U.S. history. In such a broad context, which has been approached via
various disciplinary lenses, the study is bound to contribute to further clarification of the linguistic
and rhetorical modes through which politicians try to win the public’s attention and, ultimately,
their vote and support.

1.1. Discourse analysis and presidential campaign studies
Political discourse heavily relies on persuasive and manipulative functions of language. This has
been echoed well by Chilton (p. x) when he maintains that “[T]he analysis of political discourse is
scarcely new. The western classical tradition of rhetoric was in its various guises a means of
codifying the way public orators used language for persuasive and other purposes”. Although
politicians use a variety of modalities to channel their views and shape public opinion,
The spoken language is the primary mode of communication in the gentle arts of persuasion and impression management because it projects shared social beliefs about what is right and wrong so that alliances can be formed around these beliefs. Spoken strategies include humor, metaphor and the telling of myth. (Charteris-Black, 2011, p. 2)

Politicians draw widely on these strategies to persuade the audience and win the election. Competent politicians have a strong ability in using persuasive language in different situations since it is critical for them and the party they represent to be successful (Chilton & Schäffner, 2002).

Given the importance attached to elections in many societies, considerable research has been conducted on the various dimensions involved in an election. As far as the U.S. election is concerned, several studies have been carried out regarding various presidential elections held and the campaigns run by the Democrat and Republican candidates. In his book, Don’t Think of an Elephant! (2004), Lakoff analyzed the “frame-setting” device used in the 2004 US presidential campaigns of Bush and Kerry. He holds that Bush’s performance was more successful and attributes the success of Bush’s party to their priority in developing frames for the subsequent debates. On the other hand, failure on Kerry’s side was attributed to their reactivity to the Bush camp and not bringing their own frame onto the scene. It is axiomatic that there are different factors influential in the occurrence of every phenomenon and one must be cautious when attributing the success or failure of someone to a special event because many factors may be operative including anthropological, political, cultural, and societal factors. In a similar vein, Wodak (2006) looked at the 2004 election campaigns from the angle of “values”, which, as she pointed out, were influential in this campaign. The Bush camp defined their values as “traditional gender roles, religion, nationalism, patriotism, and so forth” (p. 186). It seems that they were successful in defining these values. On the other hand, the Kerry camp could not define their “value frame” in an effective manner. Wodak goes on to suggest that while the Kerry camp set some values as their agenda including “social welfare, National Healthcare, fighting against poverty and more public spending on education” (p. 186), they could not find a good position in society.

More recently, a growing number of studies have been carried out with a special focus on presidential campaigns (e.g. Coe & Reitzes, 2010). Jalilifar and Alavi-Nia (2012) compared the televised presidential campaigns of both the U.S. and Iran in terms of hedges and boosters applied by Obama and Ahmadinejad. The functional analysis of their discourse regarding the debates showed that Obama and Ahmadinejad’s use of hedging and boosting differed significantly in terms of frequency as well as cross-linguistic function. As discourse is related to strings of ideas and language elements, it would also be beneficial to analyze the areas related to language qualitatively. In this way, it would be possible to delve into the functions of the language that may not be clear from a quantitative perspective. In other words, through qualitative research, a more vivid and deeper picture of the discourse may emerge than would otherwise not be possible.

In line with the CDA studies of presidential campaigns, Morris and Johnson (2011) investigated the debates between McCain and Obama in the 2008 presidential campaign. The candidates’ use of “clash and non-clash argument strategies” as well as their debate strategies were examined. The findings showed that the use of clash and non-clash argument strategies differed significantly between opponents. These differences were suggested to be due to several factors including “political climate”. It was further claimed that debate forms could contribute to the understanding of the public. In the end, it was maintained that the use of non-clash strategies increased notably compared with previous elections.

Some researchers have extensively dealt with how the content of candidates’ messages is at work in rendering a positive self-presentation and other negative-presentation. Benoit (2003), for instance, asserts that the message of candidates in an election campaign can take three forms to captivate the attention of voters: “Accliams praise the candidate (positive message). Attacks
criticize the candidate’s opponent (negative message). When subjected to attack defenses respond or refute attacks” (p. 99). Benoit et al. (2000) investigated acclaiming, attacking and defenses in the keynote speeches of Democrats vs. Republicans from 1960–1996 delivered at nominating conventions. They found that acclaiming was the most extensively used strategy, followed by attacks and defenses, respectively. They attributed the rarity of defense to the fact that speakers do not want the other party to dictate what points will be debated. In addition, it was found that Republicans used acclaims more than attacks in their speeches. However, the opposite was true for the democrats. Benoit (2004) also examined the possible link between election messages and the result of presidential election. The data gathered revealed that the candidates who attacked more on the policies than the character of their opponents were more likely to win the campaign than the other way round.

Martínez and González’s (2012) study utilized Systemic Functional Linguistic meaning-making tools in analyzing U.S. presidential campaign speeches. The authors scrutinized the role of the audience in Bush’s and Obama’s victory speeches. The elements of Halliday’s transitivity structures were used as the basis of the analysis of the relationship between the speaker and the audience and the effects that they mutually had on each other. They concluded that Obama’s speech focused on the audience as he linked his success to the people. On the other hand, Bush’s speech was the discourse of punishment and failure for the audience which was attributed to the result of election in which Bush was a loser. This study leads to a number of questions for further study, including that if this pattern is generalizable to other situations or countries, winners and losers should target their audiences differently depending on the results of elections or strive to keep their previous positions such as praising people perhaps to keep their proponents for the future campaigns.

The plethora of investigations on the issue of U.S. presidential campaigns in general notwithstanding, as previously stated, the scholarly treatment of the 2012 campaign from a discourse analytic perspective is rather thin in bulk. One notable exception is the investigation reported by Putri and Kurniawan (2015) in which the authors analyzed the frequency and nature of personal deixis in the speeches of Obama and Romney. The study showcases the efficiency of the use of pronouns in promoting individuals running for elections and painting a rosy picture of their actions and intentions. Another research related to the current one, yet tackling the issue from a different linguistic angle i.e., the use of rhetorical questions in the speeches of Romney, is the study conducted by Wong and Yap (2015).

Despite the paucity of high-quality research tapping, in a comparative fashion, into how Obama and his major presidential campaign rival, Romney, attack and counterattack each other verbally and rhetorically, the number of studies dealing with Obama’s skillful rhetoric is notable. Kienpointner (2013), for instance, collected and analyzed a corpus of his speeches and books in attempt to evaluate the rationality and efficiency of Obama’s “strategic maneuvering”.

Along similar lines, two studies have examined Obama’s inaugural speech as far as rhetorical resources is concerned. One is the study conducted by Ebunoluwa (2011), where the researcher examined the persuasive strategies used in president Obama’s inaugural address speech. This analysis was based on Norman Fairclough’s assumptions in CDA, claiming that ideologies reside in texts, that it is not possible to remove or ignore ideologies from texts, and that texts are open to diverse interpretations. In addition, the key ideological components of Obama’s speech were summarized in the following concepts: “pragmatism, liberalism, inclusiveness, acceptance of religious and ethnic diversity, and unity” (p. 37). It can be inferred that Obama touches on the prevalent issues that are being discussed in American society so as to captivate the attention of Americans. It is quite necessary for a candidate to know which issues to focus on in order to be of interest to a large number of addressees. This will increase the degree of acceptability by individuals. The second notable study was carried out by Frank (2011), who, by looking into Obama’s
inaugural speech, found that he has been able to develop his own “rhetorical signature” as a president.

All in all, most of the studies mentioned sought to approach political discourse, especially election campaigns, from different angles. This shows that the discourse of political campaigns are not detached, rather they involve many aspects which should be carefully considered. In keeping with all this, the current investigation seeks to contribute to the overall puzzle-building of politicians’ use of discursive strategies in the type of political discourse they embark on.

1.2. The present study

The present study set out to investigate the ways in which social actors, Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, presented themselves to capture the people's attention in the 2012 election campaign. In particular, this study strove to investigate which strategies they used and reveal possible differences between them in terms of discourse devices used.

2. Corpus

The corpus consisted of 30 speeches delivered by Obama as the representative of the Democratic Party and Romney as the Republican Party representative from 2011 to 2012. The transcriptions of these speeches were found at http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/2012_election_speeches.php?candidate=44&doctype=1150. As they were delivered during the presidential campaign, there were many instances of discourse related to the elections. The speeches ranged from June, 2011 through election night, November 6th, 2012. Therefore, it can be claimed that the corpus is sufficiently comprehensive for the purpose of the study.

3. Method

Actor/action representational tools have already been sufficiently conceptualized by the major figures working within various CDA approaches to the analysis of text and talk (Van Dijk, 1988, 2013; Van Leeuwen, 2008; Reisigl & Wodak, 2005, to name a few). Such approaches are based, inter alia, on the assumptions that discourse in its meaning-making function render certain (marginalized) groups as weak, ineffective, or perhaps harmful, and other powerful dominant groups as worth talking about and as privileged to the blessings of/within a society. In keeping with this, and since the intent of the present research was to see to what extent, if any, the aforementioned political personages were portrayed as positive or negative through their own speeches as well as those of their rival, first a pilot study of the larger investigation was conducted. The purpose of this stage was to determine which salient representational categories of note a reading of a random portion of the data under analysis might yield or guide the future course of data analysis.

First and foremost, ten percent (in this particular case, three speeches) of the larger corpus i.e., the aggregate of 30 speeches, were read and reread in search of and with a focus mostly on actor representational resources mentioned in Van Leeuwen’s (2008) extensive framework of actor analysis (activization, passivization, identification, individualization, etc.) and his as well as Reyes (2011) (de)legitimation discursive strategies (i.e., authorization, moral legitimation, rationalization, as well as mythopoesis). Authorization signifies legitimation of a specific behavior or course of action by reference to an already established custom, the remarks of an expert or “authority” (hence the term, authorization), etc. Moral legitimation is the use of moral attributes with regard to a certain action which cannot be easily challenged. Rationalization is rendering an action as right by focusing on its uses or the purposes it claims to achieve. Finally, mythopoesis is legitimation of a course of action by relating it to a story frame already in place and probably familiar to the individuals.

The results of data analysis at this preliminary stage yielded a list of several categories of some occurrence. At the next level of data analysis, the remaining 27 speeches were (re)read, with the
list of salient features already developed driving the analysis to the end. Based on the critical discourse analysis of the data, some relevant findings emerged.

4. Findings

4.1. Social actor representation
A closer look at the data under investigation revealed several noteworthy representational categories. Such categories, generally speaking, render actors involved in a given activity in a particular positive or negative way. Spatialization is a form of objectivation in which social actors are represented by means of reference to a place with which they are, in the given context, closely associated (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 46).

But know this, America—our problems can be solved (Applause). Our challenges can be met. The path we offer may be harder, but it leads to a better place. And I’m asking you to choose that future (Applause). (Obama, 6 September 2012)

Here, the American people have been represented, as mentioned by Van Leeuwen, with reference to the place they live. This inspires a sense of collectivism and shared concerns which can contribute to arousing the sense of the American people’s integrity to allot their votes to the speaker. The speaker continues with the hope of a better life but reminds people of the challenges that they should face. This is liable to give a realistic sense to the expectations of the addressees. It can also be regarded as a legitimation strategy for difficulties which people may face in the future. Additionally, via the use of instances of collectivization (realized through plural pronouns our, we, you), the speaker, in this particular case Obama, arouses a sense of solidarity and unity among the people he aspires to gain their support in the presidential elections campaign. Other examples of spatialization in the corpus include:

Hello, Parma! Hello, Ohio (Obama, 5 July 2012)

Well, Pittsburgh, I want you to know I’ve got a different theory. I’ve got a different idea. And let me be honest, it’s not a silver bullet. It’s not going to change things completely in the next day or the next week. (Obama, 6 July 2012)

In this example, there is the same example of spatialization. That is, “Ohio” and “Pittsburgh” refer to the people who live there, not the place itself. These are the openings of the speeches as well as a means of addressing the audience. The main referents are the people of those places who have given their roles to a place. This type of actor representation is quite common in political speeches. Furthermore, there are many instances of this type of rhetorical address in political discourse. For example:

I will insist that Washington learns to respect the Constitution, including the 10th Amendment. (Romney, 2012)

Another way of representing social actors is indetermination occurring when social actors are represented as unspecified, “anonymous” individuals or groups. On the other hand, determination occurs when their identity is, one way or another, specified” (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 51). For example:

We’ve seen progress. When some were saying, let’s let Detroit go bankrupt, I said let’s bet on the American worker. And now that Chrysler plant is churning out some of the best cars in the world. And GM is back on top. And Ford is on the move.

So what I’ve said is, look, we’re going to get rid of programs that don’t work. We don’t want to waste money. We can’t afford it; we don’t have enough. And by the way, I’m not somebody who believes that every government program works. (Obama, 5 July 2012)
These are two examples of indetermination in which the social actors are anonymous. The purpose of this anonymous phrasing is to focus on the message not the person who is mentioned. Another advantage of this strategy is that it helps foreground “us” as well as backgrounding “them” (i.e., the rival or rival group) who is not worth mentioning or paying attention to.

*Functionalisation* is another frequently used representational tool in the speeches. It occurs when social actors are referred to in terms of an activity, in terms of something they do, for instance, an occupation or role (Van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 54).

My opponent’s entire plan, his whole plan for economic renewal, is more tax cuts for the wealthy. (Obama, 23 July 2012)

Referring to social actors in this way connotes the view that Obama has toward Romney as a rival. Also the opponent has been referred in other ways too.

That’s what *Mitt Romney* believes. That’s what his allies in Washington believe. (Obama, 23 July 2012)

This phrase is an example of Nomination in Van Leeuwen’s (2008) socio-semantic framework of social actors; however, it is not as common in political discourse as compared with previous ways of presenting social actors.

4.2. Positive self-representation and negative other-representation

4.2.1. Legitamation through a hypothetical future

Politicians often go a long way to render the actions and decisions taken by them as right and legitimate and to show those of their opponents as malfunctioning. One way, from among several ones, they seek to achieve such aims is through projecting an image of future calling their supposedly immediate attention and action. This is aptly put by Reyes (2011) when he says, Political actors display the present time as a period that requires crucial decision making related to taking action. These actions are related to a cause (which occurred in the past) and a consequence (which may occur in the future). In other words, the cause of our present problem is in the past, and it now triggers imminent action in order to avoid the same problem repeating itself in the future. Only in this way can we enjoy a successful future (p. 793).

Also, as Antonova (2011) rightly mentions, there is an element of promise in the election speeches. This can be seen in the positive-self representation of speeches.

This country we love is in peril. And that, my friends, is why we are here today. (Romney, 2012)

And the peril of this mismanagement may even be more imminent. We stand near a threshold of profound economic misery. Four more years on the same political path could prove disastrous. (Romney, 30 August 2011)

This would be a troubling and threatening world for America. But it is not unrealistic. These are only some of the very real dangers that America faces, if we continue with the feckless policies of the past three years. (Romney, 7 October 2011)

Turning around a crisis takes experienced leadership and bold action. For millions of Americans, the economy is in crisis today, and unless we change course, it will be in crisis for all of us tomorrow. (Romney, 2 September 2011)
In the above excerpts, Romney tries to lead the listeners to believe that a danger is imminent for America and it is necessary to avoid this situation by rejecting Obama and voting for Romney. This is one strategy for delegitimizing the vote for the opponent which consequently leads to others’ negative-representation.

I have said over and over that this campaign is about more than just replacing a President—it’s about saving the soul of America. We all know in our hearts that soul is corrupted by a Washington culture of reckless spending, voting to raise your own pay, and saying you support term limits but always running for re-election. It’s that Washington that we must change. (Romney, 7 February 2012)

In this extract, Romney introduces himself as the savior of America. He believes that Washington, which stands for the president, has corrupted the American soul. In many speeches, directly or indirectly, he refers to himself as one who is going to bring America back to the place it deserves as the leader of the world. This is an example of a range of strategies of what Van Dijk (1988) calls positive self-representation.

That’s what’s at stake, Virginia. That’s why I’m asking you for your vote. I believe in you. I need you to keep believing in me. I want to finish the job. And if you’re willing to stand with me and make some phone calls with me and knock on some doors with me, get your friends to vote for me, we will win Fairfax County again. We will win Virginia again. We’ll finish what we started. And we’ll remind the world why the United States of America is the greatest nation on Earth. (Romney, 5 October 2012)

The reiteration of different words and phrases is not random. This repetition has clear goals. In this example, “with me” has been repeated several times as well as “for me, in me”. Then we have the repetition of “will win”. The speaker tries to lead the audience to believe that if they vote for him, they will win. In the last move, the speaker sees being accepted as the president as a way of showing the world that America is the greatest country in the world. “Rhetorical force is achieved by the strategy of combining reiteration with contrast”. (Charteris-Black, 2011, p. 57).

President Obama promised to bring us together, but at every turn, he has sought to divide and demonize. He promised to cut the deficit in half, but he doubled it. And his budget? It failed to win a single vote, Republican or Democrat, in either the House or the Senate. He said he would reform Medicare and Social Security and save them from pending insolvency, but he shrank from proposing any solution at all. (Romney, 26 October 2012)

What this requires is change, change from the course of the last four years. It requires that we put aside the small and the petty, and demand the scale of change we deserve: we need real change, big change. (Romney, October, 2012)

These two examples clearly show the mixing of repetition and antithesis. The use of contrasting words is a rhetorical device. In this example, Romney wants to convey that Obama has not been successful in attaining what he promised to do and, in fact, has made the condition even worse. Then he continues with the repetitive use of change to convey that a change is necessary. In particular, through the use of “real change” at the end, he wants to say that what Obama purports to do is not a real change and what Romney wants to do would be.

Our campaign is about big things, because we happen to believe that America faces big challenges. We recognize this is a year with a big choice, and the American people want to see big changes. And together we can bring real change to this country. (Romney, October, 2012)

This extract is another example of repetition to accentuate an idea. The use of “big” connotes the importance of the situation and the challenges which people will face. Also we are presented with an order of events: first, we have a challenge, then a choice and lastly, a big or real change which is
dependent on the suitable choice. The effect of repetition and reiteration is to convey persistence and obduracy that sounds right because it is based on conviction (Charteris-Black, 2011, p. 56).

When he took office, the economy was in **recession**. He made it worse. And he made it last longer. **Three years later**, over 16 million Americans are **out of work** or have just quit looking. Millions more are **underemployed**. **Three years later**, unemployment is still above 8%, a figure he said his stimulus would keep from happening. **Three years later**, **foreclosures** are still at record levels. **Three years later** the **prices of homes** continue to **fall**. **Three years later**, our **national debt** has grown nearly as large as our entire economy. (Romney, 2 June 2011)

In this example, the repetition of “Three years later” aims at focusing on the term period of Obama’s presidency. Romney tries to persuade the audience through documentation that Obama has not been successful and has actually made the situation worse. He reiterates his ideas to show his conviction. Also, words such as recession, prices, national debt, etc. give a sense of fiscal problems which are attributed to Obama’s administration.

My opponent has been trying to do a two-step and reposition—[laughter]—and got an extreme makeover. [Laughter] ... ... ... if we get rid of more regulations on Wall Street, then our problems will be solved. **Jobs and prosperity will rain down from the sky**. The deficits will **magically disappear**. **We will live happily ever after**. [Laughter] (Obama, 5 October 2012)

When he was asked what he’d actually do to cut spending and reduce the deficit, his big example is to go after public television. [Laughter] So for all you moms and kids out there, don’t worry: **someone is finally getting tough on Big Bird**. [Laughter] Rounding him up. **Elmo has got to watch out too**. [Laughter] (Obama, 5 October 2012)

In these two examples, sarcasm is used to achieve others’ negative representation. For example, the use of “lived happily ever after” and the reference to cartoon characters aims to show that the speaker believes that what his opponent says is imaginary. The same phrase repetitively used in stories’ denouements serves to achieve delegitimation of Romney’s not unsuitable suggestions through what Van Leeuwen (2008) calls mythopoesis, or rendering some course of action by relating it to a story. In fact, Obama shows that Romney’s plans are not practical or reliable. This is in line with the strategies of others’ negative representation.

When it comes to the economy, it’s **bad** enough that our **opponents** want to **take us back** to the **failed policies** of the last decade. When it comes to a woman’s right to make her own health care choices, they want to **take us back** to the policies of the **1950s**. (Obama, October, 2012)

Using the above bold words together gives a negative sense to traditional, useless ideas especially when it comes to the 1950s, which hints that the old ideas will not work. For example, taking back conveys to the listener a sense of recession.

**First their neighbors started losing their jobs ... and then their homes. And all around them now are abandoned houses ... and abandoned dreams.** (Romney, 2 June 2011)

This example first draws on people losing jobs, which leads to losing their homes. The speaker concludes that these abandoned homes lead to abandoned dreams which creates a sense of disappointment.

We’re going to see more money spent on negative ads than we’ve ever seen before. You’ve got folks writing 10 USD million checks. And the message in all these ads is going to be the same. There will be variations on it, but it’s all going to be the same message, which basically is: The economy is still struggling, and it’s Obama’s fault. It’s a very succinct message. (Obama, 25 July 2012)
4.2.2. Metaphor analysis

Politicians use metaphors to negatively represent a state of affairs that are construed as problematic, and positively represent future scenarios that are seen as solutions to problems. They also use them to negatively and positively represent out-groups (i.e. opponents) and in-groups (i.e. supporters), respectively.

And I ran for the President because I saw that basic bargain slipping away. I began my career helping people in the shadow of a shuttered steel mill at a time when too many good jobs were starting to move overseas. And by 2008, we had seen nearly a decade in which families struggled with costs that kept rising but paychecks that didn’t. Folks racking up more and more debt just to make mortgage or pay tuition, put gas in the car or food on the table. (Obama, 7 September 2012)

In this excerpt from Obama’s speech, there are instances of the use of metaphor to convey the message and to influence the people. Here we can see two examples of legitimation and delegitimation; by saying, struggled, the speaker alludes to the bad situation that existed before taking over the presidency from George Bush, Republican, and the difficulties they encountered at that time. Here, American families’ incessant efforts to make the ends meet has been likened to as an act of war. This metaphor is very influential in that it depicts a disastrous situation in a skillful manner. Then he continues with a metaphor belonging to the field of agriculture (i.e. rack) again to highlight the hardship experienced by the aforementioned families. This shows that people had problems providing their basic needs. This is a strong example of others’ negative—representation as it shows the inefficiency of the former president.

We are at a point in history, as Dwight indicated, that I think is as important, if not more important, than where we were back in 2008. I’m obviously a little grayer than I was then. I’ve got some bumps and bruises from some tough political battles in this town. But what we’ve been able to accomplish over the last three years I’m extraordinary proud of. (Obama, 7 November 2011)

Here, Obama employs metaphors from the domain of war and hard or bumpy surfaces to showcase the hard times he has been through during his first term approaching to an end. Battle is literally a physical conflict. However, here it is used to refer to politicians’ arguments and conflicts. In other words, the speaker tries to convey this message: POLITICAL ARGUMENT IS A BATTLE.

The quiet heroes who have fought for our country come from the most diverse backgrounds imaginable: from farmers and subway riders, Ph.D.’s and high school graduates, and from every ethnic background of the American melting pot. But they are united by far more than what divides them. (Romney, August, 2011)

The metaphoric use of melting pot to stand for America is going to convey that America is a nation of intertwined nations. The use of melting is intended to transfer integrity and unity of the American nation in the face of diversity. When something melts it is not distinguishable from other parts. The conceptual metaphor is AMERICA IS UNITED. The central aim of the speaker is to attract the attention of all ethnicities.

So those are the choices that we have in this election, and you’re going to be the tiebreaker. You will break the stalemate. (Obama, 25 July 2012)

Here we have the sports-related metaphoric use of tiebreaker, i.e. this word in line with stalemate refers to a competition. Obama uses them to convey the message that if the candidates were tied, one state or vote would break the tie.

So if I saw an elderly couple, they’d remind me of my grandparents. And I’d think about my grandfather, who fought in World War II and then came home. My grandmother, during the
war, worked on a bomber assembly line, like Rosie the Riveter. But when my grandfather came back he was able to get a college education because of the GI bill, and they were able to buy their first home with the help of an FHA loan. And I’d think about the journey they had traveled and everything that that generation had done for America, but also what America had done for them. (Obama, 25 July 2012)

And sometimes, I’d meet a single mom, and I’d think about my mom. My dad left, and I didn’t know him. So my mother didn’t have a lot of money. She had to work, put herself through school, but with the help of scholarships and grants, she was able to get ahead, and then she was able to pass on a great education to me and my sister. And I’d think about how in America, unlike a lot of other countries, she could make something out of herself even in those circumstances. (Obama, 24 July 2012)

This story is repeated in almost all of Obama’s speeches. As Charteris-Black (2011) rightly mentions, the aim of this story is to implement the idea of the “American Dream”, taken up in the subsequent section.

4.2.3. Exceptionality motto

Emotions have the power to arouse the public and to galvanize them into action. More specifically, in election seasons they aim to make the public buy into the idea that one candidate is superior to his or her political rivals. Analysis of the present data showed both Republican and Democrat candidates’ obsessive use of the idea of American Dream:

And we will grow this middle class, and we will strengthen America, and we’ll remind the world just why it is that we live in the greatest nation on Earth. That’s what makes America great. We are innovators and risk takers. We live in the most powerful nation that ever existed. I refuse to believe that America is just another place on the map with a flag. (Romney, 2 June 2011)

God did not create this country to be a nation of followers. America is not destined to be one of several equally balanced global powers. America must lead the world, or someone else will. (Romney, 7 October 2011)

As can be seen, the above excerpts accentuate the statement promulgated by the U.S. politicians that “America is exceptional”. This phenomenon is abundant in the speeches of Obama and Romney. They aim to arouse the national feelings of the audience in order to use the emotional side of the speech to affect people. The speakers mainly refer to the power of America, people, land, or values that, as they claim, make it different from other nations. This can also be regarded as a populist device for changing the attitudes of voters in favor of the candidate as these types of eulogies are more common in election speeches than in international events. For example, in the following we can see traces of populist devices as it does not seem to be accepted at least by “the world”.

There was a time—not so long ago—when each of us could walk a little taller and stand a little straighter because we had a gift that no one else in the world shared. We were Americans. That meant something different to each of us but it meant something special to all of us. We knew it without question. And so did the world. (Romney, 2012)

Obama’s speeches are replete with the “direction metaphor” i.e. he wants to convey the message that by his administration America is moving forward and is making progress in different aspects. The connotative meaning of it is that moving in the same direction should continue to bring prosperity too Americans.

What we wanted to do was make sure that we started moving in the right direction: moving forward, not moving backwards. And we’ve been able to do that. We’ve been moving forwards. And frankly, we’ve been moving forwards without a lot of help from the
other side. We've been kind of yanking them. They've been on our ankles and pulling us back—[laughter]—but we've been moving forward. But the truth is, there is so much more we could be doing. And the reason I'm so glad you're here today is because the only way we are going to keep moving forward is with you. (Obama, 5 July 2012)

The aim of the repetitive use of “moving forward” is to reiterate the idea of progress. At the beginning, we have moving in the right direction, which ends up with keep moving forward. This is a type of positive self-representation. He also uses others’ negative representation with the phrase “They've been on our ankles and pulling us back” to show that the Republicans have prevented them from moving forward; however, they have managed to move forward anyway.

4.2.4. Myth development

As Charteris-Black (2011) asserts, politicians try to devise some myths to contribute to their success. Myths are usually formulated by a narrative which leads to a conceptual meaning. Romney narrates this type of story in many of his talks in order to convey the message that, as he is a competent businessman, he knows how to lead the country to success. Indirectly he claims that this experience can build America from the bottom up.

Twenty-seven years ago, I left a steady job to join with some friends to start a business. Like many of you, it had been a dream of mine to try and build a business from the ground up. We started in a small office a couple of hours from here and over the years, we were able to grow from ten employees to hundreds.

My work led me to become deeply involved in helping other businesses, from innovative startups to large companies going through tough times. Sometimes I was successful and helped create jobs, other times I was not. I learned how America competes with companies in other countries, what works in the real world and what doesn’t. (Romney, 2 June 2011)

In response to this myth, Obama sarcastically mentions that, “Governor Romney his main calling card in this election is, ‘I’ve got private sector experience.’” This is also a kind of sarcasm implying that Romney has no experience in politics. On the other hand, Obama, as mentioned before, presents his idea of the “American Dream” with reference to the story of his grandfather, grandmother and mother, who in spite of all their problems, could help America progress. Then he generalizes his history to all Americans, saying:

And as I traveled around the State of Illinois, it was clear to me that my story wasn’t unique and the stories of people I was meeting weren’t unique. It was the American story. It was this idea that here in this country, we don’t believe in handouts, we don’t believe in bailouts, we believe in people earning what they get. We believe in people working hard, we believe in people looking after their own families and taking responsibility and taking initiative. But we also believe that in this country, hard work should pay off, that responsibility should be rewarded. And we believe that in this country, no matter what you look like, no matter where you come from, you should be able to make it if you try (Obama, 25 July 2012)

In this way, he could create a rapport with the audience which could lead to popularity and the success of his American dream.

5. Conclusion

This paper explored several different strategies that Obama and Romney employed to direct votes to themselves in presidential election campaigns. It was revealed that Obama mostly focused on implementing the myth of the American Dream (Charteris-Black, 2011), whereas Romney mostly used the strategy of others’ negative representation. That is because Obama was already the president running for a second term and had a record. Romney tried to document the weaknesses of Obama’s performance to prove his inefficiency to hold the presidency position for a second time. Furthermore, both candidates referred to America as an exceptional country in the world having
exceptional citizens. There were traces of populist devices in their speeches, especially in regard to national identity and the place of America in the world. For example, singularity phenomenon was used widely to show that America was an exceptional country with exceptional people making it number one in the world. One interesting point about the study was the abundant use of rhetorical devices such as metaphor, which politicians apply to convey their messages. Metaphors have the capacity to inject ideas in an efficient manner. It seems that these politicians used indirect strategies of influencing voters through the use of metaphors. Also, repetition of special words and ideas was another strategy used by the candidates to inject their views. In addition, the two strategies of positive self-representation and negative others representation were the main tactics used by them in their election speeches.

The study has some pedagogical implications for teaching political science courses. In fact, the students can become familiar with some effective strategies politicians use in persuading others and achieving their goals. This study can be used as a sample for conducting political speech analysis. Also it can be a source of understanding in critical pedagogy. The analysis frameworks used in this study can be applied to similar data as practice sessions for students. In addition, the findings can be source of inspiration with regard to critical pedagogy accentuating the power of ideology and how it can influence peoples’ lives.

Further studies exploring the use of different rhetorical devices and their effects on audiences could be rewarding. While the study has investigated the strategies used by these politicians, there are many other aspects which can be further explored. Culture, for example, is an area conducive to further study in relation to political discourse. Furthermore, by examining the strategies candidates use for campaign speeches, intercultural differences between politicians from different countries are areas where further research is warranted. For the sake of triangulation, exploring these areas using other frameworks and models may shed light on political discourse and trigger new areas for research.

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