Should liberals use conservatives' metaphors?
Cognitive Linguistics meets Sociolinguistics

Theorists agree that in order to 'take back America' liberals need to adopt some of the conservatives' successful rhetorical strategies[1,4]. Yet, many liberals resist these rhetorical changes, protesting that some of the proposed framing techniques sound deceptive, even Orwellian[2]. A series of experiments investigates how liberals can promote their political agenda within the constraints of linguistic authenticity.

Lakoff emphasizes the importance of *moral authenticity* for winning the hearts and minds of voters: to win, 'progressives' must "use language in service of their deepest convictions" (2006, pg. 9). Here we expand this notion to include the sociolinguistic principle of *linguistic authenticity*. Perhaps in order to communicate effectively, progressives must not only say what they believe, they must say it in a way that is believable coming from their mouths: that is, they must use only those linguistic resources that are consistent with their social and political identity.

How can liberals become more politically persuasive while staying true to their linguistic identity? To address this question, we examined two fundamental Conceptual Metaphors speakers use to discuss values and other emotionally charged issues: DARK IS BAD and DOWN IS BAD.

DARK and DOWN can both serve as source domains for describing abstract concepts with negative valence, but liberals and conservatives may not use them the same way. A survey of Bush and Kerry's speeches revealed that while Bush uses predominantly DARK IS BAD metaphors, Kerry uses mostly DOWN IS BAD metaphors. Does this reflect how liberals and conservatives use these metaphors, how they expect others to use them, and what implicit social meaning they carry?

The studies used minimally paired dark and down metaphors like those in (1) below:

(1) a. There's a dark side to entering politics.
b. There's a down side to entering politics.

We showed undergraduates both sentences in the pairs and asked them to rate how 'metaphorical' the sentences were, and which made the bad event sound worse. Sign tests showed that sentences using *dark* were rated significantly more 'metaphorical' (34 vs. 12, $p < 0.002$) and also more extreme than those using *down* (37 vs. 9, $p < 0.001$).

A second questionnaire study showed that conservatives are more likely than liberals to attribute DARK metaphors to other speakers. We showed participants one of the sentences from each minimal pair and asked them to rate how likely speakers were to have said them. A two-way mixed ANOVA showed a significant interaction of metaphor type by political orientation of participants ($F(1,258)=4.77$, $p=0.03$). Conservatives significantly preferred DARK metaphors over DOWN metaphors, while liberals showed the opposite pattern, preferring down metaphors over dark metaphors.

A third study showed that speakers believe the 'more extreme' DARK metaphors to be more conservative than DOWN metaphors, and that conservatives are more sensitive to this difference than liberals. A two-way mixed ANOVA showed a significant interaction of metaphor type by political orientation ($F(2,62)=3.34$, $p=0.04$).

To be authentic, speakers' rhetoric must respect such implicit and explicit differences in the language ideologies of liberals and conservatives as we demonstrate here. Lakoff asserts that what's good for the goose is good for the gander[3] – what works for conservatives will work for liberals. However, these results suggest that cognitive linguists interested in applications of Metaphor Theory to promote social change must consider the effects of linguistic authenticity, since inauthentic speech can communicate the opposite of the intended message.

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2. Lakoff, George. 2004. *Don't think of an elephant! Know your values and frame the debate.* White River Junction, Vermont: Chelsea Green Publishing.

3. Lakoff, George. 2006. *Thinking Points: Communicating our American Values and Vision*. Berkeley, CA: The Rockridge Institute.

4. Nunberg, Geoffrey. 2006. *Talking Right: How Conservatives Turned Liberalism into a Tax-Raising, Latte-Drinking, Sushi-Eating, Volvo-Driving, New York Times-Reading, Body-Piercing, Hollywood-Loving, Left-Wing Freak Show*. New York: Public Affairs.