

Positioning and Stance in Political Discourse

The Individual, the Party,
and the Party Line

Edited by

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Series in Politics



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Introduction

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Positioning and Stance in Political Discourse: The Individual, the Party, and the Party Line includes original research, some of which was first presented at the 15th International Pragmatics Conference at Ulster University in Belfast, Northern Ireland in July 2017. The chapters by Berlin (this volume), Prieto-Mendoza (this volume), Ibaños, Behle, and Penz (this volume), Parini and Granato (this volume), and Martín de la Rosa, Domínguez Romero, Pérez Blanco, and Marín-Arrese (this volume), in earlier forms, were part of a panel on the same combined theme of positioning and stance. Elder, who had also presented at the conference in Belfast, was invited to contribute a chapter (Elder, this volume). Finally, the chapter by Ausderan (this volume) emerged as the result of a call for contributors organized by the publishers. The authors live and work in different countries and contexts and represent different perspectives, all of which combine to provide a broad interpretation of the topics.

The aim of this book is to present two related constructs, positioning and stance, within the framework of political discourse, primarily that of leaders. In so doing, it will be necessary not only to tease apart the two constructs, but also to relate them to the type of pragmatic work that these political actors do in presenting themselves, their respective parties, and the ideologies inherent in the platforms those parties represent.

Within the political sphere, image is crucial. A politician, like any other human being, is an individual with a lifetime of experiences and actions which combine to form the totality of his identity, both inside and outside of the political arena. The difference, however, is that, as a public figure, he renders himself open to scrutiny for the totality of those experiences and actions; and regardless of whether something occurred during his political career or before, he may be called upon to answer for it. Furthermore, a political actor is judged not only by what he does, but also by what he says and the way he says it. In many cases, verbal performance is often perceived as representative of the individual actor, standing for the outward expression of his thoughts and beliefs. Maintenance of the political public persona, then, requires active engagement on the part of the political actor. To that end, his

¹ Thanks to Ana Patricia Muñoz Restrepo for her help in revising the introduction.

words and deeds inform, but can also undermine his aspirations in gaining political capital (Bourdieu, 1986).

Political actors do not exist in isolation, however; they are members and, at times, potential candidates for a particular political party with its own ideology and agenda. The platform of the party, in turn, causes political actors to modify their “personal” speech to align with espoused policies of the party; if they are to gain acceptance within the party, it must become part of their discourse. But this work is not done in isolation; career politicians often have a team—coaches, speechwriters, strategists—that helps them rehearse and prepare for public presentations. And, as actors become more powerful and gain importance within the party, they may help to shape that ideology, as much as they might have previously been shaped by it. Part of the multifaceted nature of politicians, then, is that they represent themselves dually as individuals and as political actors (e.g., candidates, incumbents), as well as members and, simultaneously, representatives of a political party.

Herein, pragmatics provides a framework for analyzing the politician. As the convergence of speaking and acting (cf. Mey, 2001), pragmatics enables us to understand the intentions of the political actor by examining what he says in context. Accordingly, the aim of this book is to explore the discourse of political leaders through a pragmatic lens, enabling the unraveling of multiple layers of language use and its various contexts within the political arena. In order to accomplish this task, contributors have opted to take either a macro (top-down with the discourse as the starting point) or micro (bottom-up with the language as the starting point) approach. Beyond the approach chosen by the individual contributor or contributors, a choice has been made to foreground either positioning or stance. As this volume focuses on political leaders, the use of language in discourse for positioning or for defining stance emerges as even more accomplished than that of the average politician.

So what is the difference between positioning and stance? The contributors to this volume, as a working definition, use the notion that positioning refers to the way speakers position themselves and others—their interlocutors and their audiences—*vis-à-vis* their choice of words. Those choices are made “with respect to a context that they simultaneously respond to and construct linguistically” (Jaffe, 2009, p. 4). As such, positioning is dynamic and interactive, emerging at the volition of the speaker in response to changing circumstances or needs. By definition, then, positioning is a pragmatic act as it brings together language use in context as it is intended by the speaker and interpreted by the hearer.

Stance, by contrast, refers to the way a speaker appears in relation to an object (i.e., the physical position, mental attitude, personal belief, and/or the social morality espoused at the institutional level). It is a public act, which is

recognizable, interpretable, and subject to evaluation by others (cf. Englebretson, 2007, pp. 14-15). Furthermore, stance has been conceived of as including positioning subjects (the self and others), as well as evaluating objects and aligning or disaligning with the content and, consequently, other subjects. In this volume, stance is manifest in the politician as he is represented as an individual, as a candidate, and/or as a member of a political party.

1. Positioning

The original construct of “positioning” emerged in gender studies (Feminist Theory, Queer Theory) in order to conceptualize the interface through which social and political contexts create identity as it relates to status along the lines of race, gender, class, etc. These positionings, in turn, can influence how one perceives the world and develops a corresponding worldview. Formalized as Positioning Theory by Davies and Harré (1990), and elaborated by Harré and van Langenhove (1991, 1999), positioning was conceived of in response to a more traditional way of looking at language from a linguistic perspective. Instead of a purely semantic notion of language (cf. Chilton, 2004, for a discussion of “representation”), they define positioning as “immanent” (Harris, 1980) in the sense that “language exists only as concrete occasions of language in use” (Davies & Harré, 1999, p. 32). Thus, positioning is conceived of as socially constructed rather than inherent. They have suggested that Saussure’s notion of “*la langue* is an intellectualizing myth—only *la parole* is psychologically and socially real” (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 43).

Moving into the realm of discourse, positioning is not only influenced by social and political contexts, but it constructs them and is constructed by them (cf. Alcoff, 1988). Situated within a social constructionist framework, the act of creating discourse itself is the act of positioning, “whereby selves are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced story lines” (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 48). By making contributions to an interaction, then, an individual simultaneously positions himself and others through language. As such, positioning is dynamic: it is constantly evolving throughout the discourse and within the interactions by and between actors and their audiences. Moreover, through his positioning, a speaker not only presents an identity, but potentially wields influence on hearers. This is particularly relevant in politics as political actors seek to influence others through their discourse.

The act of positioning can be divided into two primary levels: self- and other positioning (Harré & van Langenhove, 1999). Self-positioning can also be referred to as first order positioning while other positioning can be divided into second or third order. Whether in the context of a speech, debate, town

hall, or some other manifestation of political discourse, a politician will engage in self-positioning, often in the form of self-promotion or promotion of the party and/or its tenets. Although no pronominal² is required, a political actor will most often utilize some form of accompanying first-person referent, either singular or plural, as an indicator of first order positioning. On occasion, however, the politician may refer to himself in the third person, as in “A vote for John Smith is a vote for progress.”

Other positioning as second order positioning is always relational and can occur directly—by having the speaker direct his speech to the person in question—or indirectly—where the speaker’s self-positioning positions the other, either inadvertently or deliberately. In the former case of second order positioning (i.e., direct), the relationship exists between the speaker and the individual being spoken to; that is, the speaker positions a person or persons to whom his speech is directed (e.g., an interlocutor or an audience). Similar to first order positioning, second order positioning is often associated with a stated or inferred second person–singular or plural–referent, although the occurrence of a pronominal is not essential.

The other type of other positioning is third order positioning. Third order positioning corresponds to individuals outside the immediate interaction between the speaker and targeted hearer; that is, the speaker refers to an individual for whom the communication is not intended or who is not present at the time the discourse is taking place. Please note, however, that in some forms of political discourse—a debate, for instance—the individual being spoken about may be present, and the hearing of the utterance in such cases will indeed be intentional. Nevertheless, the presence or absence of the “other” does not alter the classification of third order positioning as the key rests in whether the speech is targeted *about* versus *to* the signified individual. Consequent to the other orders of positioning, too, third order positioning can often co-occur with a stated or inferred third person pronominal referent.

Harré and van Langenhove (1999) state that much of first order positioning performed by the average speaker is tacit rather than intentional. In other words, a speaker presents himself through verbal means that are not inherent, but arrived at through the discursive practices in which he engages. Contrastively, politicians do not typically fall into the same category conceived of by the authors; as public actors who are aware of their audience, they do much of their positioning work *intentionally*, knowing that image is a critical piece of the political persona which must be maintained at all times (cf. Appraisal Theory by Martin & White, 2003; Parini & Granato, this volume).

² While the term “pronominal” is used here, the notion is being applied widely to include the inflection of verbs for person and number.

Performative positioning of the self, or deliberate self-positioning, then, is a tool in the politician's craft, a major part of the ontological work of the political actor. Furthermore, as these actors seek to curry favor among voters in order to increase their influence (e.g., by winning votes), their manipulation of language in use is part and parcel of their performance whereby shifts in positions "involve shifts in power, access, or blocking of access, to certain features of claimed or desired identities" (Davies & Harré, 1990, p. 49).

In the chapter by Berlin (this volume), "The Positioning of Post-Truth Politics," positioning is integrated within a Critical Discourse Analysis to explore the presidential debates between Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump in their race to the White House in 2016. As one of the lenses used to unpack the concept of "post-truth" within political discourse, positioning is conceptualized as dynamic, evolving throughout the interaction. In the investigation, Berlin demonstrates how the use of first, second, and third order positioning aligns with speakers' discursive attempts to influence their presumptive audience to elect their side in this political battle.

The subsequent chapter by Prieto-Mendoza (this volume), "Positioning in the Peace Process," also uses positioning. Once again, positioning is presented as one of the tools used in a thorough exploration of the multiple layers of context and their interfaces. In particular, positioning comes into play for the analysis of the discourse (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999), where the linguistic context and the interactional context merge. Looking at three separate moments during the Peace Dialogues between the Colombian government and the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), the chapter presents the performance according to the proportional use of the three orders of positioning in an effort to track any changes over time. Though the verbal performance of the two sides in the negotiation for peace proceeds as expected, representative of their distinct ideologies, the shifts in their first order positioning toward an apparent alignment occur with the concurrent progress of the dialogues toward the signing of a peace agreement.

The final chapter focusing exclusively on positioning looks at the concept from a more expansive perspective. In "Oh, That's Just Crazy Talk," Ausderan (this volume) presents a survey of leaders who have been perceived as "crazy," delving into the question of discourse choices made by the leaders to evoke a specific reaction in their opponents. In moments where a dispute could result in all-out war, the positioning of the leader who positioned himself as insane, or "ready to go all the way," has led to a willingness to negotiate on the part of an opposing leader who theretofore may have been unwilling. Thus, this chapter also considers positioning as a pragmatic tactic employed consciously (i.e., the manipulation of language) to achieve certain ends.

2. Stance

Connecting positioning to stance, it has been postulated that positioning exists within stance as a component that serves to establish the speaker's relationship to an object under consideration (Al-Shunnag, 2014; DuBois, 2007; Hunston, 2011). From this perspective, positioning represents the pragmalinguistic performance, which sets the stage for the understanding of the stance. In addition, this performance act of positioning, when combined with the speaker's evaluation of that object and his alignment toward or away from it, as well as other potential subjects in the communicative space, aids in the hearer's (and analyst's) interpretation. This "act of stancetaking," which falls on a scale of epistemic or attitudinal meanings, expresses a value within "presupposed systems of sociocultural value" (DuBois, 2007, p. 173). As such, the interpretation of stance is also highly dependent on context, once again underscoring the relevance of pragmatics. Until the language in use is revealed in context, meaning cannot be derived regarding the speaker's stance toward an object, the value he assigns to it, or the possible interpretation of the stakeholders and this alignment or disalignment to them.

While positioning focuses on the language use with an emphasis on the speaker's role in manipulating the input, stance focuses more on the output of an overall image, leading to the interpretation of the hearer/receiver. As seen in the first three chapters of this volume, positioning is integrated into the study of discourse as one of the tools used to yield a broader analysis. Stance, by contrast, has been studied primarily through the exploration of linguistic features to ground the analysis to the verbal performance. Among the typical linguistic features studied in the investigation of stance are modals and semi-modal verbs, adverbs of stance, and complement clauses which signify semantic categories, such as epistemic stance, attitudinal stance, and style of speaking stance (cf. Biber, 2006; Biber & Finegan, 1989).

In "Trump vs. Clinton: Implicatures as Public Stance Acts," Elder (this volume) defines stance as "the public act of positioning oneself with respect to the content of what is said, and/or with respect to one's interlocutors" (p. 73). Yet, at the risk of conflating stance and positioning, the author goes on to specify that the identification of stance markers, such as adverbials, have played an important role in identifying "the overt expression of an author's or speaker's attitudes, feelings, judgments, or commitment concerning the message" (Biber & Finegan, 1988, p. 1). Elder does, nonetheless, warn against the assumption that stance can or should be reduced to the expression of linguistic forms alone, requiring a "contextual calibration in view of [those linguistic forms] being expressed in a particular context of utterance" (p. 75). Going on to explain that stance is a public act that can also be achieved interactionally, the author demonstrates how the expression of propositional

content can be expressed, negotiated, and manipulated in an attempt to achieve one's own political aims, in this case, during the 2016 US Presidential Debates between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton.

In the following chapter by Ibaños, Behle, and Penz (this volume), stance is explored in relation to the use of expressions shared on Twitter to refer to Trump and Clinton immediately following the 2016 presidential debates. The active use of “referring expressions” (i.e., adjective or adjective-like markers used in place of proper names) in tweets as a form of expression of stance is the starting point. By offering an expression other than “Trump” or “Clinton” to refer to the candidates in the original tweet, the interactive nature of stancetaking becomes apparent as subsequent contributors respond. Thus, in the chain of communications that follow, contributors express their own stances through (a) their evaluation of the object—the characterization of the candidate given in the initial tweet’s referring expression—(b) their own positioning, and (c) their alignment or disalignment with the content of the original tweet and, subsequently, the stance of the initial contributor.

Parini and Granato (this volume) in “Stance in Casting the Identity of a New Political Leader” give perhaps the most comprehensive explanation of stance. They begin by dividing the field into two perspectives, the sociolinguistic and the dialogic. Looking at the sociolinguistic perspective, the authors identify Jaffe (2009) as essentially equating stancetaking with positioning. Identifying the active and conscious construction engaged in by individual speakers, they highlight the multiple levels of contextual awareness required—target and potential audience, shared historical references—necessary to produce an effective text. The dialogic perspective, as already seen in Chapters 4 and 5, is achieved “through overt communicative means of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (selves and others) and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field” (DuBois, 2007, p. 163). Focusing on the former President of Argentina, Mauricio Macri, the authors integrate Appraisal Theory (Martin & White, 2005) as a framework which explores the adoption of stance. Looking at interviews conducted during the early days of his presidency, Macri can be seen attempting to construct a self-image in contrast to his predecessor and in relation to the people of Argentina.

Finally, in “Epistemic and Effective Stance in Political Discourse” by Martín de la Rosa, Domínguez Romero, Pérez Blanco, and Marín-Arrese (this volume), stance is posited along two lines: the epistemic and the effective. The former is expressed in speaker/writer statements of belief, knowledge, or evidence, while the latter emerges in expressed attitudes toward an action. Starting with the manifestos of three political parties within the United Kingdom, the authors conceptualize stance as a form of social action. They

move from an exploration of “individual” political actors to the party line presented as “collective.” Using a framework developed by Marín-Arrese (2011) to investigate the use of the two types of stance markers, the parties’ ideologies (right, center-right, and center-left) are revealed as they adopt political positionings in their attempts to legitimize their own stances and persuade hearers/readers to support them.

The contributions contained in this volume explore various forms of political discourse and the multiple positioning and/or stances political actors present or negotiate. Utilizing clearly defined theoretical perspectives and specified social practices, the authors shed light on the ways political actors can situate themselves, their party, and/or their opponents toward their ostensive public. In so doing, the hypotheses generated and conclusions drawn demonstrate how espoused perspectives relate to or reflect on the nature of the individual political actor and his truth, the party he represents and its ideology, and/or the pandering to popular public opinion in order to curry favor.

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