

Social actors caught acting : what a force- dynamic approach to political discourse can teach us

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ABSTRACT

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Force dynamics is a gestalt approach to cognitive linguistics that was developed by Leonard Talmy. As such, the gestalt present in force dynamics is a combination of semantic structures based primarily (but not exclusively) on closed-class grammatical structures whose properties make the cognitive representation of an event or image more substantial than the total of their constituent parts. The model used by Talmy (1988, 2000) can be transposed not only on to the physical domain, but also on to the psychosocial domain and discursive structures. This makes it very suited to the analysis of political discourse and indeed the analysis of interaction between ‘sentient entities’ – who may be politicians (in power and in opposition), campaigners, legislators, journalists or members of the public. Force dynamics illustrates how social actors interact with one another through discourse, thus enhancing the ‘social actors’ models put forward by van Leeuwen (2008) and Mulderrig (2011). Our focus is on the language used by politicians, and our corpus comes more specifically from the *Liberal Democrats* in the United Kingdom. The corpus of transcribed oral discourse is based on ten hours of publicly available material from *YouTube*. Our approach fits into the discourse-society model proposed by van Dijk (2002, 2008a, 2008b) in which discourse, cognition and societal factors come together. In other words, it invites us to consider discourse in relation not only to specific linguistic markers, but also with regard to societal factors. Moreover, the presence of gestures in the audio-visual corpus enhances the level of analysis available to us in the cognitive domain. This lecture will address some of the ways in which politicians can be observed as fulfilling some of the roles open to them as social actors, and how a force-dynamic analysis can reveal a complex web of power available to politicians through language.

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