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Australian Political Discourse: pragmatic analysis of the Federal Election Campaign, 2004

Political discourse (Australian); pragmatics; discourse analysis

Along with studies by practitioners of political science, political philosophy and critical theory, Chilton and Schäffner (2002) and Chilton (2004) support a linguistic analysis of political discourse, based on the premise that politics consists largely of language. Work by English-speaking linguists analyzing politicians' use of language began in the mid 1980s (e.g. Chilton 1985; Geis 1987) and a number of analytical frameworks have been used including political-cognitive, functional-pragmatic, and Critical Discourse Analysis. Much has been written internationally on language use by politicians, however comparatively little work in this field has been done to date by linguists in an Australian context (e.g. Luke 1997; Clyne 1998; Bramley 2001; Augoustinos, Lecouteur et al. 2002).

The intention behind language used by candidates during an election campaign is to persuade voters to vote for a particular political party. I start with the assumption that each political candidate will provide unified, cohesive messages in order to present their case for being elected and that all forms of communication during the course of the campaign present consistent messages to the voting public. Fundamental to the political arena is construction of identity, group membership and ways of talking about self, and the polarizing categories of us and them. This presentation will investigate the pragmatics of pronominal choice and the way in which politicians construct and convey their own identities and those of their parties within political speeches. I look at six speeches by John Howard and Mark Latham across the course of the campaign and the ways in which pronominal choice indicates a shifting scope of reference to create pragmatic effects.

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