

THE (COGNITIVE) “KEY TO THE HEARTS OF MEN”

The Perlocutionary Power of Political Narratives.

CEL | Linguistics Research Center - Corpus, Discourse and Societies – Université Lyon 3 Jean Moulin

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Operating within the prolific fields of narrative studies and discourse analysis, this one-day conference aims to contribute to our understanding of how narratives frame the political debate in today’s democracies. As “one verbal technique for recapitulating past experience” (Labov & Waletzky 1967: 13) narratives constitute a cognitive activity (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2012: 5) that is partly subjective and may have an emotional (Reisigl 2021) and persuasive (Polletta 2006) effect on the story recipient. This perlocutionary effect of the narrative format makes it highly relevant to the study of political discourse.

Scholars have long recognised the special relationship between narratives and politics (De Fina 2017; Seargeant 2020). Atkins and Finlayson (2012) explain that, over the past 40 years or so, narratives have become ubiquitous in political rhetoric. Shenhav (2006) defines a “political narrative” as “one that emerges from a formal political forum, such as a parliament, a cabinet, party meetings or political demonstrations, or as narrative produced by politicians and public officials in the course of their duties”. De Fina (2017) claims there are two main trends for the study of such narratives, and these will constitute the main axes of the conference, though other approaches can be envisaged:

- One approach is interested in the “master narratives” underpinning political discourse, which reveal the “overarching structures that underlie and organize discourse and interpretation”. These narratives help influence the way our brains interpret important political issues and thus frame the way we perceive reality (Seargeant 2020). Political debate can be envisaged as a battle of narratives (Spencer and Oppermann, 2020) in which the ultimate goal is to effectively “control the narrative”. Papers dealing with the construction of such narratives, with ways of assessing their influence, or with specific methodologies for their study as well as the integration of the concept of narrative into existing discourse analysis frameworks, as proposed by Forchtner (2020) for instance, are welcome. The analysis of narrative boundaries (Cordero and Frei 2024) and the creation of discursive identities, by celebrating the in-group and denigrating the out-group (Wodak 2015), are also of great interest to this conference.

- The other approach deals with political narratives as “a set of everyday discourse practices” (De Fina 2017: 233), or anecdotes, which are favoured in political discourse today because they are “seen as representing a non-argumentative, more common-sense and therefore more grass-roots inspired mode of conveying political views” (Ibid: 239). We invite contributors to discuss the discursive and emotional influence of such narratives on political communication in general but also on the construction of a powerful ethos for leaders who can depict themselves as caring about the lives of other people, or as having overcome difficulties – and learned from them – and thus as being entitled to the status of hero/ leader/ guide of a community.

In addition, many linguists (Wehling 2016; Richardson 2004; Reddy 1993; Palmer 1981) have contributed to our understanding of how political narratives make use of captivating metaphors that shape both thought and communication in the political realm. Their works are fundamental for anyone interested in the intersection between linguistics, cognitive science, and political science, which is why all these topics may be addressed as well under the aegis of “perlocutionary power”. In their classic study *Metaphors We Live By* (1980) Lakoff and Johnson highlighted how metaphors structure our understanding of complex political concepts. A generation later, Charteris-Black (2005; 2007) analyzed how political figures resort to metaphorical language to influence voters by “telling the right story”. Thus, conference papers may wish to examine how metaphors nurture political narratives in salient examples of “master narratives”, “anecdotes”, and political life-writing (memoir and biography) in the Internet age.

In line with the research interests of the CEL’s “Socio-political discourse analysis” branch, this one-day conference intends to question the persuasive power of political narratives and we therefore welcome theoretical as well as methodological proposals, but also case studies (UK and US 2024 elections, European elections, populist discourses in Spain, Italy, Germany, etc.), which will broaden our understanding of this holistic and ubiquitous rhetorical device, and how they might constitute important conveyors of political ideologies, often unnoticed or underestimated because of the narrative format. A selection of papers will be published in a special issue of the journal ELAD – SILDA (Studies in Linguistics and Discourse Analysis).

Submissions should include an abstract (up to 500 words, excluding references) as well as a short biography and should be sent to:

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Key dates:

Submission: September 23 to December 15, 2024

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Registration: March 2025

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Language: English or French

Selected bibliography

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