

# **The Linguistic Construction of Person and Solidarity in North Carolina Political Advertisements**

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## **1. Introduction**

While all of the United States focused on the intense pursuit for the presidential office in November 2004, North Carolinians found themselves looking not only at a close presidential race, but also, and surprisingly, at a neck-and-neck senatorial race. Although Erskine Bowles, the candidate for the Democratic Party, enjoyed the lead in the polls for most of the summer, by the time autumn approached, his opponent, Republican Congressman Richard Burr, had tied Bowles' lead and went on to beat him in the election (Berman, Kaplan, and O'Driscoll, 2004). Why was Richard Burr so successful? To win this vote, he had to show that he not only belonged to, but also represented the same ideological community as that of the majority of the audience.

Advertising strategists purposefully planned the utterances Burr made in each ad from his campaign to persuade the population at large to support his cause. While political advertisements of this type do not represent what is traditionally thought of as a conversation, the tone they employed was indeed conversational, and it, along with other linguistic techniques, allowed him as a candidate to represent himself in a personal way to the people whose votes he sought. To understand how a candidate such as Richard Burr came so swiftly from behind to win the race, it is necessary to examine the content of his commercials under the scrutiny of linguistic theoretical models.

Richard Burr effectively ousted his opponent because he was *linguistically* able to build solidarity with his constituency through the construction of positive face. I contend that Burr's linguistic performance enabled him to utter and substantiate claims about his opponent as a means to defeat him. His use of casual conversation in his ads also enabled him to draw conclusions for his audience where these claims were not entailed by his utterances. In addition, Burr's ads employed the use of phatic communication as a means to build solidarity with the audience. Finally, I employ Strauss's model of cultural standing to indicate how Burr's polite advertisements hide controversial meaning. Linguistic analysis of the transcripts of both television and radio advertisements for the Burr campaign will demonstrate the tactics he employed to procure such a rapid victory.

## 2. Poetic Construction of Ideology

Gail Shuck (2004) in her analysis of Americans' treatment of non-native English speakers argues that "speakers perform ideologies; they do not merely carry their beliefs around unaltered and let them leak out in moments of unmonitored indiscretion" (p. 199). That is to say, the ideas a person possesses not only influence their beliefs, but also become unconsciously inculcated into their *habitus* (Bourdieu, 1977, 1990) and are borne out in the way they act and the utterances they make. How this is achieved is made evident in five relations that Shuck sums up as follows:

1. Performances index existing ideological models.
2. The relatively limited set of discourse patterns (metaphors, themes, narratives, argument strategies, etc.) entailed by a given ideology are readily available, and are drawn upon, as resources for aesthetic displays.
3. The framing of talk as performance opens up a discursive space for constructing ideological extremes and stereotypes and, more important, for momentarily rendering them acceptable.
4. The collaboration that performances invite creates opportunities for the proliferation of ideological extremes.
5. Performances' capacity for recontextualization allows ideologies to be shaped by greater numbers of speakers and therefore to be subjected to multiple transformations. (pp. 199-200)

Shuck's (2004) intent in outlining these relations is to explain how it is that xenophobia is accepted into the discourse of college students who have had interactions with non-native English speakers. She gives the example of a female college student she interviewed in 1997 who narrates a story about scary man she encountered on a long flight. The student, by indexing what Shuck labels "the ideology of nativeness," drew upon the readily accessible notion that foreigners are scary and used this idea to flavor her storytelling. Her narrative continued with details of how she awoke on the plane to find her mother missing and how it was logical to assume that this scary foreigner had therefore murdered her mother. For Shuck, the performative nature of the student's narration lends an air of truthiness to her story and thereby makes her extreme characterization of the man on the airplane acceptable. The presence of a friend of the student at the interview not only allowed the first student's narration to be accepted, but the interaction between the two students encouraged development of the xenophobic ideology in a co-performative manner. Ultimately, the performance of this type of ideology can be retransmitted to later audiences who hear reports of the student's narrative. A future relation of this story then serves to propagate the ideology of nativeness and confirms that xenophobia is a socially acceptable stance.

Advertisements in support of Richard Burr bear resemblance to this situation in that they use the same steps taken by this speaker to draw inferences about Burr's opponent's character. One ad displayed the same xenophobia over immigration issues. Gardner and Bauerline (2004, October 24) of *The News and Observer* of Raleigh, NC, in a report that immigration had become a hot topic in the NC Senatorial race, published that the National Republican Senatorial Committee paid for an ad in support of Richard Burr:

The TV spot begins with an image of Asian workers on a city street. An announcer says, 'Around the world, they sell a guide on how to move to America and get on welfare.' The ad then accuses Democrat Erskine Bowles of favoring a plan to pay tuition for some immigrants. It also says Bowles worked with President Clinton to put \$10 billion toward welfare for immigrants. (pp. 1-6B)

While there is no partner to remark on the statement put forth by the announcer, the intent of this advertisement otherwise falls right in line with Shuck's (2004) relations. For the first relation, the performance initiated by the announcer in the ad indexes the ideology that "foreigners are bad" as soon as the guide to gaining access to American public money is mentioned. Next, a discourse pattern soon emerges as the logical step to explain how they are bad. Namely, the trope of immigration is expressed as a source of woe to Americans. Much in the same way that Shuck's respondent makes the leap from indexing xenophobia to assuming that since her mother is no longer near her on the plane that the foreign passenger has killed her, the pro-Burr ad makes the outlandish statement that Bowles, as a friend of President Clinton, wanted to pay for welfare for immigrants just because there is a 'purported' guide for coming to America. In spite of the absence of a collaborating partner, the audience hears the message that is implied by this ad because the performance effectively picked up on a portrayal of "nonwhites and/or non-Americans as 'bad guys'" (Shuck, p. 202), a pervasive current in the beliefs of many Americans, and one that has been performed in front of the eyes of millions of viewers.

### 3. Casual Conversation

Rudolf Gaudio (2003) in his discussion of how casual conversation has become fused with commercialized rituals, brings up points about casual conversation which bear on the subject of ads supporting Burr. Gaudio sets out "to show how both the material practice of conversation and participants' understandings of it reflect and reproduce the political, economic and ideological hierarchies that inform social life in the contemporary United States..." (p. 662). That is to say, he contends that conversation has not only been interpreted as "unmarked" by those who engage in it, but has also been viewed as such by theorists and scholars to the detriment of study in this field. Indeed, he is critical of "certain practitioners of Conversation Analysis (CA) who view (ordinary) conversation not as a genre but as a 'naturally occurring' phenomenon that is ontologically prior to other modes of talk" (p. 663).

Gaudio's (2003) problem with this point of view is that it postulates all conversations as being 'equal' in that they are the starting point for all talk. He contests this view because so-called casual conversations in establishments such as Starbucks are engineered as a means to keep customers within their walls, talking over a cup of coffee. Starbucks trades on the long history of coffeehouses and the 'safe' public environment for private talk. It provides this to its customers as a way of invoking an ideological notion of conversation to its own economic ends. The very fact that the conversation at Starbucks (or anywhere) is seen as "ordinary" or "unmarked" does not have to do so much with the actual conversation, "but rather seems that way because it conforms with their HABITUS [author's emphasis] the practices, norms and expectations that constitute customary lived experience" (p. 660). His main point is to demonstrate that casual conversations are not a given, but "...are constrained in terms of where, when, with whom, under what conditions, and at what cost people get together to talk" (p. 685).

In exposing the assumed “naturalness” of conversation on the part of its participants and its analysts, Gaudio (2003) hits on a vein that has also been discovered by the engineers behind Burr’s ad campaign. The assumed naturalness is a key concept behind a radio ad that was, according to Morrill (2004, October 12) of the *Charlotte Observer*, broadcast only in the eastern part of North Carolina, “...one of the state’s most socially conservative regions” (p. 4B). A partial transcript of the ad follows:

Transcript 1:

*(Partial Radio Ad)* The ad starts with two women who are dining in a restaurant and discussing the upcoming election. Woman 1 states that she will not vote for Erskine Bowles. To which, Woman 2 asks why she will not:

Woman 1:       The Bowles’ campaign told The Charlotte Observer that he would vote against a constitutional amendment that protects traditional marriage between one man and one woman, and then a month later Bowles told the New Bern Sun Journal that he was against gay marriage.

Woman 2:       It seems to me Erskine Bowles is trying to have it both ways. It’s a shame that he doesn’t have the courage to stand up for traditional marriage.

Richard Burr:   I authorized this message because our values and beliefs are under assault by the liberal elite in Washington. Our families deserve better...I promise that I’ll fight for traditional marriage between one man and one woman.

By the use of paralinguistic features, the women are heard to be engaged in casual conversation while eating at a restaurant. A key feature of this performance is that it comes across as objective. That is, the restaurant sounds are purposefully intended to evoke an image similar to the Starbucks described by Gaudio (2003). The situation is engineered to make the listener of the ad feel he or she is hearing an “unmarked” conversation in the same way that a participant at Starbucks would assume that casual conversation is ordinary. It is important, however, to point out that the intent is not to ‘fool’ the listeners into thinking that are hearing an actual conversation. However, since this is a radio ad, the spot targets listeners who are only peripherally listening to the ad while doing another activity, such as driving. It is especially important that this ad is designed for the radio in that the listener hears the content of the ad, and although it is a staged conversation, he or she is likely to recall the content of the advertisement as something they ‘heard somewhere.’ Also, it is important to note that the female speakers in the advertisement are likely to be trusted by the targeted audience because they sound like white, middle-class women with noticeable ‘Downeast’ North Carolina accents. These characteristics help underscore the fact that a staged conversation can be interpreted by listeners as casual conversation.

In framing the ad in the genre of casual conversation, the campaign attempts to draw the listener’s attention away from the fact that an ideological bias is being indexed by this ad in order to promote the political intent of the message. In that way, what seems like an overheard conversation is actually a performance designed to index the ideology that

Bowles' is two-faced. Indeed, the intent of the ad is to ensure that by the time Richard Burr speaks, the audience will have focused on Bowles' vacillations from telling Charlotte that he would not support a constitutional amendment to ban gay marriage to then explaining to New Bern that he is against gay marriage. The audience members are now ready to turn to embrace Richard Burr as the one who will fight for them.

Shuck (2004) would argue that this instance has created another performance of an ideological extreme: Bowles' record has been substantiated as against traditional marriage. The performance of the women in the ad can now be decontextualized by anyone who happened to be listening in on the conversation in the ad and afterwards, recontextualized in their own casual conversation. But is this a fair depiction of the facts? The Charlotte Observer (2004, October 12) states that a spokeswoman from Bowles' campaign claimed the ad misrepresented Bowles' position as he indeed "opposes gay marriage, which is against the law in North Carolina. She said he supports the federal Defense of Marriage Act, which ensures the state does not have to recognize other state's decisions on gay marriage. ...[Bowles] would vote for a constitutional amendment as 'a last resort'" (p. 4B). However, most of the people in the eastern portion of the state had apparently already made up their minds.

#### **4. Solidarity and Phatic Communication**

Maria E. Placencia (2004) explores the interactions between shopkeepers and customers in Quito, Ecuador in order to understand their conversations in terms of the solidarity or rapport that they build instead of the information that is exchanged between them. She refers to phatic communication as a term coined by Malinowski to refer to small talk. However, unlike Malinowski who emphasized the "meaninglessness" of this type of communication, Placencia uses the term to refer to "creative uses of language" (p. 216). She states that traditionally phatic communication has been seen to serve "...relational purposes...[and]...stands in contrast to talk that is geared toward the transmission and reception of information" (p. 218). Indeed, Placencia does not see the need for these issues to be in contrast as more recent work has demonstrated the "...centrality of phatic communication in task-oriented interactions, and not only on the fringes of the interactions" (p. 219). She argues that in the corner shops of Quito, "...phatic communication is not limited to the openings and closings but can extend to the entire interaction, in some cases making relational goals more prominent than transactional ones" (p. 219). Placencia's data rests mainly within examples of chitchat between customers and shopkeepers, but her conclusion is that throughout the transactions, the exchange of goods might be seen as the main intent, but is really secondary to the relations that are built within the community.

In much the same way that Placencia (2004) describes, Burr also uses phatic language to build relations between himself and prospective supporters. As is shown below in Transcript 2, Richard Burr closes his advertisement with an ending that differs from most typical political ads in that it includes what might be considered superfluous information:

Transcript 2:

Rudolph Giuliani: Hello. I'm Rudy Giuliani. Our whole world changed after September 11<sup>th</sup>. Now, we face the threat of terrorism at home. As a member of the House Intelligence Committee, Richard Burr understands that

law enforcement and our first responders must have the equipment and technology to deal with any crisis. Our nation can count on Richard Burr in these challenging times Richard Burr is a leader we can trust.

Richard Burr: I'm Congressman Richard Burr. Brooke and I approved this message.

Instead of the customary, "I'm Richard Burr and I approved this message," he closes with "I'm Congressman Richard Burr. Brooke and I approved this message." As a tagline that must be uttered in any political ad in order to avoid any confusion regarding the author of the message, this phrase has become heard so often that even though it imparts information, it is generally left to be uttered at the very end of the ad much like an afterthought. Burr's play on this line, which includes the addition of Brooke, the name of his wife, exhibits many of the same qualities of Placencia's (2004) interpretation of phatic communication. Much in the same way that customers will play with the customary forms of making purchases, Burr's linguistic play serves to add depth to his relation with the audience. It establishes him as a family man through the inclusion of his wife and is intended to leave the audience with a increased sense of solidarity with him and his wife.

## 5. Cultural Standing

Approaching discourse from a Bakhtinian stance, Claudia Strauss (2004) calls for the need to properly identify the "cultural standing" of an opinion as it is uttered. Cultural standing is her "label for the location of a view on a continuum that ranges from highly controversial to completely taken for granted in the relevant opinion community" (p. 161). She contends that "...a Bakhtinian perspective that looks at how speakers respond not only to evidence and to the immediate addressee, but also to previous social commentary on a given topic" (pp. 161-2) is needed to effectively identify cultural standing. Identification of cultural standing is needed, per Strauss, because "[w]hen a view is thought to have high cultural standing, so that it is generally considered to be the opinion that most people hold, it can be more powerful than the views that most people truly do hold, and the views that everyone thinks are controversial will be uttered only furtively if at all, reinforcing the view that no one holds them" (p. 162). In this way, cultural standing would, she argues, be of use to the study of both culture and language. In fact, it is highly complementary to politeness theory because whereas politeness theory looks at the "social" side of Face Threatening Acts, cultural standing looks at the "cultural" side of them:

Cultural standing considerations affect speakers' judgments about what would be considered a possible FTA in the expression of opinions, and negative and positive politeness strategies for mitigating FTAs, while politeness markers reflect the interpersonal relations of the speaker and addressee, cultural standing markers reflect the background of values and beliefs in a community. (p. 166)

One aspect of cultural standing which bears importance to the analysis of political ads is as Strauss states: "If there is no widespread awareness of what the state of discussion has been, speakers who confidently express a point of view as if it were the common opinion can lead everyone else to treat that view as the common opinion" (2004, p. 171).

Indeed, this is the case with two different political ads, one in support of Richard Burr and the other in opposition to him.

In the first, Senator Elizabeth Dole speaks in favor of Richard Burr as opposed to Erskine Bowles. The transcript follows:

Transcript 3:

Senator

Elizabeth Dole: Two years ago, Erskine Bowles spent millions of dollars attacking me. He even called me callous. Now, he's attacking Richard Burr. I've worked with Richard Burr. Richard's a strong leader. I admire his passion to help North Carolinians. Whether it's fighting for life-saving medicine for children, helping women in their fight against breast cancer or protecting Medicare for our seniors, Richard Burr has the compassion and the right experience to be a great United States Senator.

Richard Burr: I'm Richard Burr, and I approved this message.

In the second portion of her statement, Senator Dole begins to praise Richard Burr for his work in several tough areas. However, she does exactly as Strauss warns because she does not cite the cultural standing of her claim. She states it as if it were accepted opinion that Richard Burr has fought against breast cancer. Indeed this could be seen as a ploy to convince viewers who are unaware of the cultural standing of the breast cancer issue that Richard Burr is on the "right" side. However, in an ad that supports Erskine Bowles' position, the issue is presented in a different light.

Transcript 4:

Mary Barker: I've seen Richard Burr's bragging about his work on breast cancer and I'm outraged. I'm Mary Barker, a breast cancer survivor. Richard Burr took thousands from insurance companies, then voted to let companies deny coverage to breast cancer. In fact, Burr scored a zero from the National Breast Cancer Coalition. We deserve a senator who will put us first, not the special interests. That's why I am supporting Erskine Bowles.

Erskine Bowles: I'm Erskine Bowles and I approved this message.

Mary Barker presents a very different picture of Richard Burr, but her framing device of "I'm outraged" informs the audience that not only is this a statement imbued with the cultural standing of "controversial opinion," it is also a face threatening act because it goes directly against what Burr's campaign has been saying. In this case, we see very different strategies applied to the presentation of opinion. Part of Burr's success lay in the fact that his messages obfuscated the cultural standing. For this reason, Bakhtinian analysis of the

cultural standing of the transcripts shows how the difference in political language can be exposed.

## 6. Conclusion

The analysis of the transcript material from advertisements supporting Burr's campaign all indicate that his bid for US Senator was successful in large part due to the obfuscating nature of his advertisements or advertisements that supported him. In the case of the poetic construction of ideology, the link between the ideology of xenophobia and Bowles' actual record was tenuous at best, but was effective because it played out in tropes of a commonly held, though perhaps not explicitly stated, belief. Invoking an example of casual conversation also served Burr's campaign well in a radio ad because the implied wavering on Bowles' part was easily executed through the use of an apparently "unmarked" conversation. Phatic communication also served Burr well in achieving relations with his audience. Rapport-building techniques such as this helped to establish his personhood in the public sphere as a likeable man without adding any additional information to the exchange. Finally, Senator Dole's utterance of opinions that were actually debatable as widely held beliefs also helped to build rapport for Burr among the body of voters.

What seems to characterize his effective technique is the fact in most of his ads, no real information was imparted. Fact-providing articles from the *News and Observer* and the *Charlotte Observer* showed that most of what was relayed in the ads was conjecture displayed as fact. Perhaps Burr's greatest achievement was to provide an image onscreen and over the airwaves that seemed airtight and unflinching. In the end, it served him well as he has been a member of the US Senate since January 2005.

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