

**Spoken language framing in televised political discourse:
A comparison from the 2008 elections in Italy and the United States**

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Alan Cienki

Vrije Universiteit (VU), Amsterdam

Gianluca Giansante

Sapienza – Università di Roma

Frame analysis has played a foundational role in cognitive linguistics (e.g., Fillmore 1975, 1982). While this work has focused on language as it is written, there is increasing attention to how spoken language frames information in fundamentally different ways. For example, intonation units have been shown to be structures around which lexical and syntactic patterns (Croft 1995; Du Bois 2003) as well as co-verbal behaviors, such as eye gaze movements (Streeck 1993), align themselves.

By using conversational linguistic structures and behaviors in other discourse contexts, speakers can frame themselves as virtual conversation partners. The hypothesis here is that ‘populist’ politicians are more likely than other kinds to frame their televised talk as a conversational encounter, given that this could facilitate a particularly desirable goal for them, namely ‘fictive interaction’ (Pascual 2008) with their viewing audience.

The present study compares two national politicians in the U.S. and Italy known as ‘populist’ – Sarah Palin and Silvio Berlusconi – with their respective main competitors: Joseph Biden and Walter Veltroni. The video data analyzed are prominent pre-election television appearances by them in 2008 – the debate between Palin and Biden and the interviews with Berlusconi and Veltroni on the talk show ‘Matrix’. For each speaker, a set of behaviors is being analyzed in quantitative and qualitative terms, including:

- use of ‘local’ pronouns (1st and 2nd person) versus 3rd person
- word length of intonation units
- syntactic structure of intonation units
- eye gaze direction pattern within intonation units.

The analysis will provide a basis in empirical linguistic research for assessing the validity of (subjective) claims made in the media about the presentation style of these politicians. The study also puts forth new theoretical arguments about framing in terms of linguistic performance, including consideration of the potential cognitive/affective implications that can have on an audience.

References

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