Visual Metaphors and the Construction of Political Identities: An Audience-Perception Analysis of the 2012 Hong Kong Legislative Council Election

*Steven Wong & Foong Ha Yap*

*Hong Kong Polytechnic University*

Presented at the RaAM Conference 2016
July 2
To elucidate how politicians compete for votes in election by using visual metaphors as an effective rhetorical strategy to construct and reinforce political identities during the 2012 Hong Kong LegCo election:

- **positive** identities for oneself
- **negative** identities for one’s opponent
Overview

1. Introduction
   - Constructing political identities & mitigate face-threats through narration and metaphors
2. Research design & methodology
3. Preliminary data analysis
4. Use of visual metaphors in Hong Kong political discourse
   - The ladder metaphor
5. Conclusion
During election campaigns, politicians often try to accomplish the following two tasks:

- To **promote** themselves and their policies (self-praising);
- to **challenge** and discredit their political rivals (other-dispraising).

- To maintain such a **delicate balance** between attracting audience attention and engaging in face-threatening acts (FTAs) to others, candidates frequently rely on **verbal indirectness strategies**.
Metaphors:

To establish common ground with the public
- they add a touch of novelty and wit to what is said, and thus greatly enhance the speaker’s positive self-image;

To criticize their rivals, and thus indirectly promote themselves.
- they can mitigate potential face-threats to both speaker and addressee. (Kuo 2003; Obeng 1997; Wilson 1990)

Visual metaphors are “innovative and creative; they do not stem from pre-existing similarities, but induce similarities between different objects”.

In this way, they help trigger a sense of wonder and delight in us and “contribute to our new understanding and perception of the world”. (Yeung, Yung & Fan 2013: 7; citing Hausman 1989)

Research Question:
How do politicians use metaphors – in particular, visual metaphors – in electoral discourse?
Constructing political identities through narration/renarration during election campaign events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Trump</th>
<th>Rubio</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Construction of political identities</td>
<td>For <strong>self</strong>: successful entrepreneur For <strong>rival</strong>: inexperienced politician</td>
<td>For <strong>rival</strong>: untrustworthy and failed businessman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narration/ Renarration</td>
<td>“I’ve <strong>hired</strong> tens of thousands of people over at my job. You’ve <strong>hired</strong> nobody. You’ve had nothing but problems with your credit cards, etc.” (00:16-00:21)</td>
<td>“You’ve hired a thousand people from another country… People can look it up… ‘Trump Polish workers’, you’ll see a million dollars for <strong>hiring illegal workers</strong>.” (00:17-00:45)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“I took $1 million and <strong>I turned into $10 billion</strong>, more than $10 billion.” (3:04-3:08)</td>
<td>“Here is the guy who <strong>inherited $200 million dollars</strong>. If he hadn’t inherited two hundred million dollars, you know where Donald Trump would be right now? <strong>Selling watches in Manhattan!</strong>” (2:40-2:48)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Database: 5 televised debates hosted by RTHK

Period: 18th August – 1st September 2012

50-60 minutes each
Total minutes of data: 290 minutes

Total no. of metaphors: 48 (visual and non-visual ones)

Gift-giving session (送大禮環節) inside the debate:
Candidates can present gifts, either to the public or to particular rivals. Most of the candidates would make use of this chance to attack the opponents.
Objectives & design of the computerized questionnaire

- To examine how politicians’ use of visual metaphors help them to construct positive image for themselves and negative ones for their rivals when aggressively campaigning for votes

- Pre-test and post-test computerized questionnaire
  - 43 participants were asked to indicate their impression of the public image of each candidate using a 10-point Likert scale
  - Participants were then shown videos of political candidates using visual metaphors to compete against each other and rated again
1st time rating:

2nd time rating:
# Preliminary data analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Candidate</th>
<th>Difference between 1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; and 2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; rating</th>
<th>Statistically significant?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chan Han Pang</td>
<td>2.58 $\rightarrow$ 4.67 $\uparrow$ 2.09</td>
<td>$P$-value (0.000003015) Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lau Kin Yin</td>
<td>3.55 $\rightarrow$ 4.64 $\uparrow$ 1.09</td>
<td>$P$-value (0.01148) Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandy Tam</td>
<td>3.88 $\rightarrow$ 4.91 $\uparrow$ 1.03</td>
<td>$P$-value (0.0333) Yes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wong Yeung Tat</td>
<td>3.71 $\rightarrow$ 3.76 $\uparrow$ 0.05</td>
<td>$P$-value (0.8571) No.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Macro level:** focus on the ideologies of rival parties

**Personal level:** character defamation of individual rivals

All increased
Constructing political identities through narration/renarration during election campaign events

USING VISUAL METAPHORS

The Ladder Metaphor

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HXMZhpdHsn4
我们今天在这里送上一张梯子给全港的市民。

'We are here today to present a ladder for all Hong Kong citizens,'
‘hoping that our housing policy is the ladder for (solving) our housing (problems), so that those who live in sub-divided units can move into public housing estates more quickly.’
(We also hope that) the next generation can afford to own a house, (while) the middle class do not need to be the slaves of housing.
亦都係要送畀全港畀青年人，

(I would) also give it to all youngsters in Hong Kong, hoping that there will be a way (lit. ladder) for upward mobility in terms of home ownership, studies, career opportunities and business entrepreneurships.
‘(I) should also present this gift to (the members) of the third tier of the Democratic Party, hoping that you have a chance to climb up (i.e. enter the Legislative Council).’
Democratic Alliance for the Betterment and Progress of Hong Kong vs. League of Social Democrats

TSANG KIN SHING (TKS) 曾健成
- Left-wing
- Pro-democracy
- Pro-labour

Mocking DAB by using the ladder metaphor but invoking a different source domain – the ladder as the jumping-site for suicides

Meaning:
DAB is not helping HK people but sending them to death.
民建聨 送 呢 張 梯 呢
DAB give this CL ladder PRT

係 逼 港人 呢 喂 喺 天棚 擒 高一啲 跳樓
COP force Hong.Kong.people PRT at roof climb higher jump.off.building

因為 梁振英 上場 之後 呢，
because Leung.Chun.Ying come.to.power after PRT

樓價 再 升 多 一 成。
housing.price again go.up more one tenth

‘DAB presented this ladder so as to force Hong Kong people to climb up higher and jump to death from the roof. It is because the housing price has gone up by ten percent since Leung Chun Ying came to power.’
What the visual ‘ladder’ metaphor does?

A ladder can be used to symbolise the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>by Chan (metaphor)</th>
<th>by Tsang (rebuttal)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The progress of the housing policy</td>
<td>The current stagnant housing policy (tragic inducement for some who despair to end their life)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Upward mobility:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- a better life for the general public</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- career development opportunities for the younger generation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Encouragement to rival party – seen as ‘fake goodwill’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
What the visual ‘ladder’ metaphor does

- Provide a visual cue to make a more lasting impact in the memory of the audience
- Create negative images of rivals through verbal indirectness
- How political identities are constructed and reconstructed by rival parties
- Symbolic representations behind a given metaphor can be interpreted differently by different political parties to compete for the audience’s attention.
Politicians often engage in adversarial talk with their opponents.
Yet at the same time, they often deploy verbal indirectness strategies to mitigate face threats through witty talk.
This often includes the use of narrations and metaphors.
Among the skills needed is the ability to ‘attack’ and ‘counter-attack’.

The subtle and skillful use of verbal indirectness strategies including characterization metaphors is useful in creating positive political identities for selves and negative ones for others.
Acknowledgments

Funding from the Hong Kong Polytechnic University (Internal Competitive Research Grant 2012-2014, HKPU G-YK85) for the research project entitled “Establishing Common Ground in Public Discourse: An Analysis of Electoral Speeches, Press Conferences and Q&A Sessions in Hong Kong”.

PI: Dr. Foong Ha Yap

Research team members:
Steven Wong, Serena Deng, and Ariel Chan, Brian Wai, Tak-Sum Wong and Vivien Yang.

We also wish to thank our friends and colleagues for valuable feedback: Francis Low, I-wen Su, Phoebe Lin, Dennis Tay
References


Thank you~