

PLENARY PROPOSAL: “Battling armies of metaphors: understanding and contesting the constitutive power of contemporary anti-Latino political discourse”

I wrote a book, *Brown Tide Rising: Metaphors of Latinos in contemporary American public discourse*, in which I analyze the public discourse of California’s latest three anti-Latino referenda. I explain how public discourse is central to the on-going political attacks against the Latino community. While policy analysts will acknowledge the advantage of a well-turned political slogan, they tend to favor traditional interest group analysis involving structural factors (money, contending interest group organization and state structures) rather than the role of discourse in the social construction of political interests. With the most salient findings and the implication of my research, I offer an explanation of the power of discourse to constitute public opinion. In these days of aggressive conservatism, it is not difficult to illustrate how such discourse is being used to disempower our communities. I argue that with a fuller understanding of its key element, public discourse can be harnessed to better represent communities of color to the larger body politic, and to promote the valuable political programs which are being targeted for elimination.

Metaphor is the linguistic unit, or trope, that I analyze. It turns out that metaphoric thinking, as revealed by recent cognitive science research, may be a central means by which humans organize most of their operative conceptual schema. Thus to study the prose metaphors that Americans unthinkingly use in legitimate public discourse to describe a thing, a concept, an event or a people offers a window into the American public’s operative world view of, in this case, Latinos and Latino issues in California. That metaphor organizes human conceptualization may not be a revelation to humanists, but within the positivist linguistic research paradigm, I have had to address the standing criticisms of such a claim, e.g. selection bias, representativeness and validity of the interpretation. The result is an empirically rigorous method which involves intersubjective cataloguing of all the metaphor tokens—not just a select few—from a public discourse source.

I focused this method on the public discourse on California's three anti-Latino referenda: Proposition 187, the 'SOS' (Save-Our-State) anti-immigrant initiative, which was made law by a wide electoral margin. Proposition 209 followed, the 'California Civil Rights Initiative', which eliminated Affirmative Action programs in government's statewide purview. And the 'English for the children' initiative, Proposition 227, which will outlaw the best method for providing a solid academic foundation for California's 4.5 million non-English speaking children, bilingual education. With the support of the Ford Fellowship, a team of undergraduates and I have catalogued all the metaphors published by the *Los Angeles Times* (articles, editorials, letters to the editor, etc.) on these referenda; over 1000 articles and 10,000 metaphors make up the database of the analysis.

The two major immigration metaphors drawn from the *Los Angeles Times* database are the racist IMMIGRANTS ARE ANIMALS (*•Beaten-down INS agents catch a third of their quarry , •employers hungering for really cheap labor hunt out the foreign workers*) and IMMIGRATION IS DANGEROUS WATERS (*like waves on a beach, these human flows are literally remaking the face of America, •an influx had flooded the city*), among others, (e.g. *•Latino immigrants are a burden on the economy, •I don't like this Third World takeover. It is literally an invasion* , etc.).

A systematic review of the metaphors on education reveals that *language* is a radial concept, the spokes of which are OBSTACLE, FOREIGN, PRISON. The attribute shared among the spokes is that language is foreign and unnatural. In the discourse of education then, the public notion 'language' does not correspond to the linguistic scientific notion. A cardinal ontological principle of the American discourse on education can be described in terms of a dichotomy: English is a 'natural' communication system while Spanish and other 'languages' are foreign and unnatural. Thus non-English languages are falsely assumed to be obstacle in the path of education of bilingual children. Metaphors such as LANGUAGE AS PRISON actively reflect a shared understanding of the domain of LANGUAGE in terms of the domain of PRISON: (*•The track record for English acquisition among non-fluent speakers, •blamed bilingual education for marooning tens of thousands of California students in bilingual programs , •they consider English fluency the key to unlock the handcuffs of poverty, •English-only instruction is a vote to toss children into*

*the proverbial ocean without a life vest, •Without help to bridge the language barrier, these bilingual students cannot possibly succeed, •the academic and linguistic odyssey of the District's bilingual education program, etc.).*

Classic affirmative action metaphors characterize WHITE RACISM AS DISEASE and AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AS REMEDY: (*•deep-seated social pathologies such as racism, •to heal our racial wounds, •Dole called the Affirmative Action a 'Band-Aid'*). Note that these are metonyms of a NATION AS BODY metaphor. Conservative critics of affirmative action subvert the classic metaphor by claiming that AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AS DISEASE: (*•Affirmative action is a prescription for racial consciousness and conflict, • Affirmative action takes the form of racism, nurtures racism, and infects every facet of public life with racial criteria whose counterproductivity is matched only by their immorality, etc.*). These thousands of text metaphors reveal a dismal portrayal of California Latinos that is confirmed in today's political cartooning . Moreover the prevailing public discourse on citizen vs. immigrant, native vs. foreign, legal vs. illegal, English vs. other languages, discrimination vs. fairness, merit and desert, race and racism, among others are disclosed in this analysis. From this, the boundaries of legitimate action and discourse, the social construction of interests, and the electorate's moral expectations (not rational interests) in California politics can be interpreted.

The conceptual cohesiveness of the discourses was a striking finding; all these disparate discourses are linked to only two constitutive metaphors for the US: NATION AS BODY and AS PROPERTY. The vast sum of metaphor tokens are thus metonyms (part to whole) of the NATION AS BODY . However, the relation of Latinos to our country is metaphorically unintegrated. To put it bluntly, even more than African Americans, Latinos are never the metaphoric arms or heart of the US body, but external burdens or diseases that are imposed on that body. Likewise the Latinos and their culture (e.g. the Spanish language) are most often characterized as foreigners that invade the NATION AS PROPERTY.

Although the tone of the analysis of American discourse is often severe, metaphor has a saving grace. The socially-divisive metaphors, which are common currency today, are by no means natural ways of conceptualizing Latino community political issues.

These have been developed and promulgated by groups with political views at most times antithetical to the social advancement of Latinos. Alternative affirmative metaphors can be constructed and disseminated to replace intolerant ones. And this can and should be a central aspect of the development of a well-articulated political posture that can be both faithful to the principles of social justice and appealing to the wider electorate. In the final chapter of the book this will be presented.