

## Frame Semantics and the Presidential Debates

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The presentation seeks to propose a cognitive linguistic approach to the problem of political manipulation. Manipulative strategies in political discourse are a fairly well-researched topic. Numerous studies examined and classified politicians' devices of deception: from rhetorical analysis of logical fallacies to the inspection of the role of context in turning an utterance into manipulative. Our project approached the problem from another angle: we looked for differences on the conceptual level. The application of frame semantics allowed us to pinpoint manipulation where other approaches might not have spotted it.

The study material consists of transcripts of presidential debates of 2004 between G. W. Bush and J. Kerry, 2008 between J. McCain and B. Obama, and 2012 between B. Obama and M. Romney. The analysis traced the evolution on the concept of "WAR" in those debates while this country was going through years of conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan. We started by identifying the conventional framework of this concept based on the information from such renowned projects as FrameNet and WordNet, and several dictionaries. We then examined the manifestation of that concept in the discourse of the presidential candidates during the debates under study.

The analysis included examination of what frame elements were presented in the candidates' versions of "WAR", what lexical units were used to embody / evoke them, and the rate of occurrence of those lexical units in the debates. We also looked at the network of connections the frame elements had with each other and with other concepts. Those were important for our analysis because they helped recreate unique conceptual maps the candidates drew for their electorate.

The observation that the concept of "WAR" from the central in the debates of 2004 was reduced to less prominent in the debates of 2008 and shrank to almost nothing in the debates of 2012 is not a surprise to anybody. However, the results of the project also uncovered the candidates' manipulation in the presentation of that concept. The frames of "WAR" and the connections between the frame elements in the discourse of the candidates exhibited significant differences. The speakers filled some frame elements but left the others empty, focused on the aspects they considered advantageous to them and ignored the ones they didn't want the audience to notice. The resulting structures could be viewed as unique personalized versions of the same concept.

The most elaborate configuration of "WAR" was presented in J. Kerry's discourse, with the majority of frame elements filled, with numerous connections between the elements and links to the other concepts. By 2012 Obama-Romney debates, the "WAR" was reduced to only such aspects as its agents, duration, location, cost, and tools, and the networks of the individual frames lost their complexity. The poster will contain detailed charts of the personalized versions of the frame of "WAR" depicted by the candidates during the debates and will analyze the manipulative nature of the individual variation of those frames configured consciously to benefit the individual candidates.

### References

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